

I am a Cat – Chapter 6b

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

"In those days I was, when it came to eating, an eccentric among eccentrics. Having eaten my fill of grasshoppers, slugs, and brown frogs, snake stew was refreshingly novel. 'By all means. Let's have some,' I answered the old man. The old man set a kettle on the fire and put some rice to cooking. Interestingly, across the kettle's lid were ten or so openings of various sizes. I watched in admiration as steam billowed from the openings, thinking it a clever creation these country folk had devised. The old man popped to his feet and left the room. He reappeared shortly with a large basket under his arm. Without fanfare, he set it by the hearth, so I peeked inside - and there they were. Long ones. Coiling together to guard against the cold." "Please, enough of this talk. It's giving me the creeps." The wife protests through knitted brows. "Bear with me. This all leads up to my heartbreak. I have to tell it. The old man removes the lid with his left hand, seizes the mess of snakes in his right hand, proceeds to hurl the lot of them into the kettle, and immediately sets the lid back in place. I skipped a breath as I looked on aghast." "No more please. It's all too revolting." The wife is horrified.

"Bear with me just a bit longer, if you will. We're coming to the part where my heart breaks. Not a minute had passed when, from one of the holes in the lid, out pops a long neck. As I'm looking on in astonishment, out pops another from the neighboring hole. Before I know it, necks are popping out left and right. The whole lid of the kettle, at this point, is seething with snake heads." "Why would they all stick their necks out?" "The kettle is hot, and they're desperate to wriggle free. Finally, the old man declares that it's time. 'Yank 'em out,' he calls. The old woman and the young lady acknowledge his cue. Each grabs a head and gives it a sharp tug. The flesh remains in the kettle, while the bones slide cleanly free, dangling off the extracted heads, while I look on in amazement." "Snake deboning?" Kangetsu asks with grin. "Precisely! A shrewd contrivance, wouldn't you say? From there, they remove the lid and stir vigorously, mixing rice and flesh with a wooden ladle, and serve it up." "Did you eat it?" the master asks with an air of detachment, drawing a sour look from the wife. "Please do stop. You're making me queasy. I'll never eat again after this," the wife complains. "That's because you've never had snake stew. If you tried it but once, you'd eat your words. It's a taste one doesn't forget." "No thank you. Who would try such a thing?" "At any rate, I ate my fill. The chill of the day was forgotten, and the young lady's countenance, which I drank in with my eyes, also warmed my heart. All was well in the world. They suggested I get some rest, and I was indeed fatigued from my travels, so I took their advice and laid myself down. I was out the instant my head hit the pillow. Regretfully, I can tell you no more of that evening." "What happened next?" Now the wife is eager for more. "When I woke the next morning, my heart broke." "Something happened to you?" "Actually, no. I woke up and was having a smoke by the window. Out back, washing up by the water pipe, was a head bald as a kettle, turned away from me and splashing in the water." "The old man. Or was it the old woman?" the master asks.

"To tell the truth, I couldn't make out who it was. So I kept watching, and after a while the kettle head turned my way. Imagine my shock when I saw it was the same young lady who'd captured my heart the evening before." "Didn't you tell us her hair was done up in shimada style?" "The evening before, yes. And exquisitely. Yet the very next morning, bald as a kettle." "You've got to be kidding!" The master, per habit, diverts his gaze to the ceiling. "I found the whole thing strange, and even a little unnerving, so I kept my watch from the distance. She finally finished washing her face, picked up a shimada-style wig that she'd placed on a nearby rock, casually slipped it on over her kettle-bald head, and sauntered back in as though nothing were amiss. Now I knew her secret. I knew her secret, but was forlorn and brokenhearted. I resigned myself to a lonely existence." "That's rubbish! What do you think, Kangetsu, does that even qualify as heartbreak? And look at him today, ever jovial and energetic." The master critiques Meitei's heartbreak and turns to Kangetsu for support. "I don't know. Suppose the young lady hadn't been bald and he'd brought her back to Tōkyō? Might he not be happier still? It's most regretful, I would say, to meet one's soulmate only to learn that she has no hair. Why on earth, though, would a young lady lose all her hair?" "I've thought that over at length, and I can only conclude that she over-indulged in snake stew. That snake stew gives one a rush. Blood flows straight to the head." "You seem to have come through unscathed." "It didn't take my hair, but as you can see, it did leave me nearsighted." With that, Meitei removes his gold-rimmed glasses and wipes them carefully with his handkerchief. After a while the master, as though remembering something, asks for good measure, "And what is it here that's mystical?" "I can't fathom, to this day, where the young lady could have bought or obtained such a wig. That's what's mystical." Meitei places his glasses back on his nose. "Like something from a professional storyteller," is the wife's reaction.

One might have thought that Meitei, having brought his prattle to a natural stopping point, was finished. Unless the man was muzzled, though, he was incapable of holding his tongue. He started anew, relating as follows.

"While my heartbreak was indeed bitter, consider the alternative. Had I unknowingly taken that kettle head as my bride, I'd have doomed myself, for all my days, to suffer the sight of her hairless head. One can't be too careful. When it comes to marriage, hidden faults, in the most unanticipated places, are often discovered too late. My advice, Kangetsu, is to stop tormenting yourself with the highs and lows of courtship. Take charge of your emotions, and focus your efforts on grinding your spheres." Meitei's words ring ripe with dissuasion. "I'd just as soon grind away wholeheartedly, but the other party is unrelenting," Kangetsu replies with a sheepish look. "True enough. In your case, the other party is stirring the pot. There've been some cases, though, that border on comical. Remember Rōbai, the fellow who stopped in at the library to take a pee? His story is most unusual." "What's his story?" the master eagerly bites on Meitei's line. "Let me tell you then. Rōbai, long ago now, had occasion to stop at the Tōzai Inn in Shizuoka. -- Only for one night. -- Even so, on that very night he proposed to the maidservant. I'm a bit of a freewheeler myself, but Rōbai takes the cake. There was, however, in those days, a renowned beauty

named Onatsu at that inn. It was Onatsu who waited on Rōbai, so who can fault him?" "Fault him or not, he's no different from you at your such-and-such pass in those mountains." "There are some similarities. Truth be told, Rōbai and I are not so very different. At any rate, he proposed to Onatsu. Then, while waiting on her reply, he was struck with a craving for watermelon." "For what?" The master looks incredulous. And it's not only the master. The wife and Kangetsu, as if on cue, also respond with puzzled looks. Meitei, oblivious to his listeners' dubious looks, continues undaunted with his story.

"So he calls for Onatsu and asks if watermelon can be had in Shizuoka. She informs him that sure enough, even in Shizuoka they have watermelon, and she proceeds to bring him a heaping tray. Rōbai, as it's told, digs in. While waiting for Onatsu to respond to his proposal, he polishes off the whole stack. As he's still waiting, his belly begins to ache. He moans and groans, but to no avail, so he calls for Onatsu anew and this time asks if a doctor can be found in Shizuoka. She informs him that sure enough, even in Shizuoka they have doctors, and she proceeds to fetch him one. The doctor's name is Tenchi Genkō, like something straight out of the Thousand Character Classic. At any rate, thanks to the doctor's good services, Rōbai's bellyache is gone by the next morning. Shortly before his departure, he calls for Onatsu again and presses for an answer to his marriage proposal of the day prior. She grins and tells him, 'Watermelon can be had in Shizuoka, and a doctor can be found in Shizuoka, but an overnight bride is another thing altogether.' And with that she makes her exit. Since that day, Rōbai, like myself, is a brokenhearted man, one who only ever visits the library to pee. When one thinks about it, women are creatures most cruel." The master finds rare occasion to ally himself with Meitei. "Right you are. The other day I was reading a script by Musset. In it, one of the characters quotes a Roman poet as follows. -- What's lighter than a feather is dust. What's lighter than dust is a breeze. What's lighter than a breeze is a woman. What's lighter than a woman is nothing in this world. -- Hit's the mark, does it not? Womankind is a lost cause." The master picks a curious place to stop and swagger. The wife is not about to let this pass. "You take issue with the lightness of women, but what about the heaviness of men?" "Heaviness? What's that supposed to mean?" "Heaviness means heaviness. Like you." "How am I heavy?" "You are, are you not?" The oddest of disputes is taking shape. Meitei listens with amusement before finally chiming in. "This is the essence of married life, husband and wife lashing out at each other till both are red in the face. Married couples of old have nothing on you two." It's unclear whether Meitei is chiding or praising the pair. As usual, though, he's not content to hold his tongue and elaborates as follows.

"In the old days, they say, a wife didn't talk back to her husband. If that's the case, then why not just marry a mute. I see no virtue in this. Better to be called out as heavy or such, as in the present case. If one's going to live with the same wife, then one needs an occasional quarrel to break the monotony. My own mother, in the presence of my father, was the picture of subservience. In twenty years together, they say she never once ventured out, save to pay homage at the temple. Terrible, really. On the upside, of course, she could recite from memory the posthumous names of all our ancestors. Even in my day, men and women didn't interact socially. The kinds of things Kangetsu enjoys, making music with one's sweetheart, exchanging

deepest thoughts, musing on fanciful trysts, were out of the question." "That's a shame." Kangetsu bows his head in deference. "A shame indeed. And worse yet, it can't be said that young ladies of old were cast from a better mold. They lament, ma'am, the moral corruption of today's schoolgirls. Take it from me, though, the girls of my day were no saints." "Is that a fact?" The wife is intently engaged. "It is a fact. I kid you not. I've seen it with my own eyes. You'll probably recall, Kushami, how when we were young they put little girls in baskets, placed them on shoulder poles, and sold them around like pumpkins. Remember?" "I can't say I remember that." "I don't know about your home region, but that's how it was in Shizuoka." "Really now," the wife gasps in surprise. "Is that the truth?" Kangetsu, not believing his ears, gives Meitei a questioning look.

"It is the truth. In fact, my father once bargained for one. I must have been about six at the time. We were walking from Abura-machi toward Tōri-chō when a vendor approached from the opposite direction. 'Girls for sale! Girls for sale!' he sang out in a loud voice. Just as we reached the 2-chōme corner, where the Isegen drapery stands, we met up with the man. Isegen has a block-long storefront and five warehouses. It's the foremost drapery in all of Shizuoka. Next time you're there, you must stop and see it. It's little changed from back in the day. A grand establishment. The head clerk was Jinbei. He was always there at the front desk, and always with a sullen look, as though he'd just lost his mother. Next to Jinbei sat Hatsu-san, a younger companion in his mid twenties. Hatsu-san was pale in complexion. One imagined him a disciple of Unshō Risshi who, in accordance with the 37 Practices of Bodhisattva, ate nothing but soba broth for 21 days at a time. Next to Hatsu-san was Chōdon, hunched over his abacus with a sorrowful air, as though he'd just been burned out of house and home. Along with Chōdon ..." "What's the topic here, the drapery or the selling of girls?" "Ah, yes. It's the selling of girls, isn't it? I've got some Isegen stories you wouldn't believe, but we'll have to save those for another day. Back to the girls." "You can save all your stories for another day." "Certainly not. We're comparing the character of girls today, in this twentieth century, to the character of those of the early Meiji years. To that end, what I'm relating is highly relevant and can't be easily dispensed with -- so anyway, my father and I are in front of Isegen, and the vendor addresses my father. 'I've several unsold girls, and I'm ready to deal. How 'bout one?' So saying, he lowers his shoulder pole and dabs the sweat from his brow. On his pole are two baskets, one forward and one aft. In each basket is a small girl of two or so. My father tells the vendor he might be interested if the price is right. He asks if there are any others, and the vendor replies that, regrettably, they're all sold out and he's down to these last two. 'Either one is fine, but do take one.' With that, he holds one out to my father, cradling it in both hands like a pumpkin. My father gives it a couple of raps on the head and expresses his satisfaction with the sound. The bargaining begins, and the vendor yields on price. 'I might take one,' my father tells him, 'but how do I know which one's good?' 'I've had my eye on the one in front,' the vendor replies, 'so that one I can vouch for. I don't have eyes in the back of my head, so the one behind may well be no good. I can't vouch for her, so I'll let her go for less.' I still remember this exchange. It occurred to me at the time, in my child's mind, that one can't be too careful when it comes to girls. -- Today, however, in this 38th year of Meiji, we don't suffer the absurdity of girl vendors. Nor do we hear talk that a girl out

of sight, slung back over one's shoulder, is a dubious thing. One can credit Westernization, as I see it, with elevating the character of today's girls over those of yore. Wouldn't you say, Kangetsu?"

Before responding, Kangetsu pauses for effect and deliberately clears his throat. Then, in a composed and quiet voice, he offers his opinion. "Girls today, be it on their way to and from school, at ensemble gatherings, or at garden parties, are out there promoting themselves, all but screaming, 'Look at me! Take me!' The days of greengrocers consigning unsold girls to peddlers are certainly past. As the spirit of independence takes hold, such is the natural outcome. Old folks may fret and grumble, but they're swimming against the current. Civilization has charted its course, and I, for one, am silently yet delightedly cheering it on. Vulgar buyers, who rap on girls' heads and haggle over their worth, are thankfully no more. In this complex world, there are endless facets to probe and assess. Who has time for that? Even at fifty or sixty, women would still be unwed." Kangetsu, as a young man of the twentieth century, is fully contemporary in his thinking. Having expressed his thoughts, he takes a draft from his Shikishima and sends a cloud of smoke Meitei's way. Meitei, of course, is not to be daunted by a mere cloud of smoke. "Just as you say, today's schoolgirls and young ladies, from their bones to their flesh to their hides, are infused with independence and self esteem. In anything and everything, they prove themselves equal to men. I respect them to no end. Take for example the schoolgirls in my neighborhood. They dress in form-fitting outfits and suspend themselves from iron bars. It's quite the sight. I can see their athletic grounds from my second floor window, and I'm reminded every time of the daughters of ancient Greece." "Not Greece again." The master dismisses Meitei with a scoff. "All that invokes of beauty, in some sense or another, relates back to Greece. There's no getting around it. The study of aesthetics leads one back to Greece. -- Especially the sight of tanned schoolgirls training their bodies with abandon. Reminds me of the story of Agnodice." Meitei, assuming an authoritative air, prepares to relate the tale.

"Yet another difficult name," Kangetsu remarks with his signature grin. "Agnodice was a most remarkable woman, truly worthy of admiration. In her day, according to Athenian law, women were forbidden from practicing as midwives. An incommensurable circumstance. Agnodice was only too aware of the hardships this caused." "Agnodice? -- what's this about?" "A woman. It's a woman's name. This woman, having thought at length, was unable to accept the prohibition of midwifery. She wanted somehow, by hook or by crook, to become a midwife. For three days and nights, she sat and pondered. Finally, at the dawning of the third day, the cries of a baby carried from a neighboring house. In a flash it hit her. She knew what she had to do and sprang into action. She cut her hair short, dressed herself as a man, and set out to study under Hierophilus. Having successfully and sufficiently received his instruction, she began her practice. And wouldn't you know it ma'am, her practice thrived. Everywhere she went, the cry of newborns was heard. She attended to myriad births and was duly rewarded. Inscrutable, they say though, are the ways of heaven. Life is full of ups and downs, and when you're down you're down. Her secret came to light, and she was hauled in front of the authorities for violating their edict. She faced severe punishment." "Like something from a professional storyteller." "A good story, don't you think? At any rate, the womenfolk of

Athens united in her favor and petitioned the magistrate. He dared not dismiss their appeal, so he ended up acquitting her. Not only that, but he proclaimed, to the great joy of all, that from that day forth the practice of midwifery was accepted under the law." "It never ceases to amaze me, the things you're versed in." "I'm versed in a lot, yet blind to my own follies." "Ho ho ho ho. Amusing as ever ..." The wife, dispensing with formality, allows herself a good laugh. Just as she's doing so, the entryway bell rings out with its characteristic clang. "My, another caller." The wife withdraws to the living room and is replaced in the parlor by none other than Ochi Tōfū.

With Tōfū arrived, the eccentrics who frequent the master's house are more or less assembled. If not all, then at least enough of them to break the monotony for a while. To ask for more would be asking too much. Had I by some misfortune ended up elsewhere, I might well have, to the end of my days, never have known even one such scholar to exist among all of humanity. Happily, as master Kushami's prized cat, I pass my days in the service of these nobles. It's a rare honor to observe, in comfortable repose, the words and deeds of a company of great men. There's the master, of course, then also Meitei, Kangetsu, and even Tōfū, the likes of which are unrivaled and few and far between in this vast expanse that's Tōkyō. Owing to these men, I can forget for the moment the heat of the day and this stifling layer of fur. Owing to their presence, an agreeable half day awaits. With this company assembled, there's no telling what may arise. In humble anticipation, I survey the scene, half hidden by the fusuma.

"It's been a while. Forgive me for not calling sooner," Tōfū offers his greeting with a slight bow. His face is ever handsome and radiant. Judging him from the neck up, he could well be some second-tier actor. Then again, the overt formality of his stiffly-starched white Kokura-weave hakama suggests an apprenticeship to the master swordsman Sakakibara Kenkichi. In summary, only from shoulders to waist is he unassuming in appearance. "Good of you to brave this heat. Come in and make yourself at home." Meitei plays the host, as if the place were his own. "I haven't seen you in a good spell." "How long's it been? I believe it was the spring recital. Speaking of recitals, how's that going? Are you still playing the courtier? You were most impressive. I hope you noticed my hearty applause." "I did indeed. Your encouragement carried me through." "When is your next event?" the master chimes in to query Tōfū.

"We're taking July and August off but planning to make a big splash with something come September. We need an intriguing story. Any suggestions?" "I'll have to think ..." The master's reply is less than enthusiastic. "Tōfū, how about using my work?" This time it's Kangetsu who engages. "Coming from you, I'm sure it's first-rate, but what exactly is it you've produced?" "A screenplay," Kangetsu boldly declares. As anticipated, he catches his comrades fully off guard. As if on cue, they turn to gaze his way. "A screenplay's quite something. Is it a comedy or a tragedy?" It's Tōfū who pushes the dialog forward. Kangetsu replies with measured composure. "It's neither comedy nor tragedy. There's too much debate these days on classical drama versus new-wave theater and such. I've broken the mold. I've gone and composed a poetic vignette." "What's a poetic vignette?" "It's theater in the vein of haiku. I've coined the

term 'poetic vignette' to describe it." The master and Meitei remain in befuddled silence. It's Tōfū again who queries further. "What's the storyline?" "It's rooted in the haiku tradition, so it's not overly lengthy, and there's no hero or villain. It's a one-act play." "I see." "Let me set the scene for you. Simplicity sets it apart. In the middle of the stage is a single large willow. From the willow's trunk, a lone branch extends to the right, and on that branch sits a solitary raven." "That's fine if the raven stays put." The master, half as though talking to himself, voices some concern. "That's easily handled. You bind the ravens feet to the branch with thread. Now down below is a bathing tub. A beauty, seen by the audience in profile, is bathing herself with a soft cloth." "This is bordering on decadence. First of all, where do you find such a gal?" Meitei interjects. "That's easily arranged. Just hire a model from the art school." "The local police may have something to say about that." The master again is concerned.

"As long as it's not exhibitionist, the police will be just fine. If they're going to take issue with this, then they'll have to take issue with the sketching of nudes too." "But the sketching of nudes is instructive. Voyeurism is something different." "If that's how our scholars think, then Japan has a long way to go. Theater, just like the visual arts, is a form of artistic expression." Kangetsu is becoming quite animated. "Let's table this argument for now. Tell us what happens next?" Tōfū, not altogether disinclined yet, is eager to hear more. "At this point, the haiku poet Takahama Kyoshi appears and approaches the stage via the gangway, cutting his way through the audience, with walking staff in hand. The hems of his Satsuma-patterned kimono are tucked up, and over his kimono is a half-coat of light silk. On his feet are low-cut boots, and on his head is a white pith helmet. His dress could be taken for army issue, but he's a poet, so he proceeds at a leisurely pace, as though absorbed in composing a verse. When he reaches the main stage, he averts his dreamy gaze. To his astonishment, before his eyes is the large willow, with the fair-skinned beauty bathing beneath its canopy. Further raising his eyes, he sees the lone raven, on the long willow branch, looking down on the bathing beauty. Kyoshi is greatly moved. Poetic ardor swells in his breast, and he pauses at great length for effect. 'Behold the raven, smitten by her beauty as she bathes!' he finally exclaims in a resonating voice. With this single verse as cue, clapping sticks ring out in rapid succession as the curtain closes. -- That's the storyline. What do you think? Does it suit your needs? Forget about the courtier. You're better off playing Kyoshi." Tōfū looks a little unsatisfied. "It's all too fleeting. I need something that connects on the human level," he adds in earnest. Meitei, who until now has been relatively quiet, can no longer hold his tongue. "If that's your poetic vignette, I'm afraid to say it's a sorry one. As the writer Ueda Bin once remarked, poetic ardor and comic farce are but uninspired reverberations of national decline. Bin has a way with words. Just try producing that act. Bin will tear you to shreds. First of all, this is just too uninspired. It's either attempted drama or failed charade. Forgive me for being blunt, but your time is better devoted to polishing spheres in the lab. You could write a hundred such vignettes, or two hundred, only to the detriment of civil society." Kangetsu is somewhat indignant. "Is it really so uninspiring? I'd intended it to be touching." Though the work hardly merits defending, he defends it nonetheless.

"Think about Kyoshi. When he declares, 'Behold the raven, smitten by her beauty as she bathes,' he's projecting onto the raven a longing for the woman. This projection invites our empathy." "A novel interpretation. By all means, go on." "As a bachelor of science, the notion that a raven would long for a woman is utterly absurd." "Indeed." "Despite the absurdity, the line rolls readily off one's tongue, without the least hesitation." "I wonder," the master interrupts with a dubious air. Kangetsu pays him no heed. "If we reflect on the psychology of the situation, it's obvious why this is. In actuality, the question of longing, or absence thereof, resides solely with the poet himself and not with the raven. Accordingly, the sense that the raven is smitten, in the end, is not about the raven, but rather reflects the poet's own sentiment. Kyoshi himself, it's clear, from the moment he lays eyes on the bathing beauty, is madly in love. Having fallen madly in love, he sees the raven on the branch, looking down on the object of his affection, and wrongly surmises that the raven too must be smitten. His supposition is mistaken, but therein lies its literary and emotional merit. Is not the extension of one's own feelings, unabashedly and without hesitation, onto a raven, impactful and touching? What would you say?" "Brilliant reasoning. Kyoshi himself would no doubt be impressed. I'm inspired by your thoughtful insights, but try bringing your scene to the stage, and it's guaranteed to fall flat. Wouldn't you agree, Tōfū?" "I have to agree. I'm afraid it fails to connect." Tōfū replies in all earnestness.

The master decides it's time to steer the conversation onto a different track. "Tell me, Tōfū, how's your own writing coming? Anything brilliant in the works?" he asks. "No, nothing in particular to speak of, but I do have a collection of poems I've been thinking to publish -- I even happen to have the manuscript with me. Perhaps you could give it a look." With that, he produces a purple crepe-wrapped package from his breast pocket. Loosening its ties, he reveals a fifty or sixty-page stack of drafting paper, which he proceeds to place before the master. "Allow me, then," that master states with a serious tone as he casts his eyes on the first page. On it are two lines.

To the exquisite Tomiko

Who graces us with her ever-tending presence

The master, an enigmatic look on his face, stares for a moment in silence. "What do we have, new-style poetry?" Meitei, seated nearby, steals a glance at the page. "Oh my, a dedication. Boldly dedicated to Miss Tomiko. Admirable indeed." His praise is effusive. The master now seems fully puzzled. "Tōfū, Is this 'Tomiko' an actual woman?" "She is. I invited her, along with several others and Meitei, to a previous recital. She lives close by. In fact, I stopped by just now. I was hoping to show her my poems, but regrettably they're away, summering in Ōiso," he reports with a solemn air. "Don't look like that, Kushami. It is the twentieth century. Let's hear a poem. By the way, Tōfū, may I offer a suggestion on your dedication? 'Ever-tending' is elegant diction, but what exactly did you mean by it?" "Something akin to delicate or dainty." "I see. That's one way to read it, but its original connotation is fickle, or wont to invoke misgiving. I wouldn't phrase it so." "Is there a better phrasing, still poetic?" "Here's what I would do. 'To

the exquisite Tomiko, under whose nose we're ever graced.' It's just three words, but this 'under whose nose' makes all the difference." "I see." Tōfū, having no idea what Meitei is alluding to, does his best to feign understanding.

The master says nothing, but flips the page, and after a pause, finally reads out the first work.

Delights of fragrant aroma, your

Soul perchance, lingering wisps of requited affection

Oh, the agony! Ah, the torment! This bitter existence

The sweetly-won warmth of your kiss

"I'm afraid I don't get it." The master, with a sigh, hands the text to Meitei. "It's a bit overblown." Meitei hands it to Kangetsu. "What to make of it?" Kangetsu gives it back to Tōfū.

"I'm not surprised it failed to resonate. The poetry scene is ever-evolving, and the pace of change is faster now than ever. Poetry today is nothing like your poetry of a decade ago. Today's poems are not for bedtime reading or for killing a moment at the station. Even the poet himself, when pressed for explanation, will struggle for an answer. The sole obligation of today's poet is fidelity to his own inspiration. Annotations and assists are for academics, not for us modern writers. The other day, a friend of mine named Souseki penned a short story titled 'Ichiya.' None of us could make heads or tails of it, so I went to him and asked what it was about. He said he couldn't tell me and offered nothing further. That, I believe, is what it means to be a poet." "He may be a poet, but he's also an oddball," the master offers. "He's an idiot." Meitei cuts Souseki down in no uncertain terms. Tōfū is unwilling to let it rest. "Granted Souseki's an anomaly, even among us poets, but it's best if you approach my work with a touch of that same spirit. In particular, notice how I've gone to great length to juxtapose 'bitter existence' with 'sweetly-won warmth.'" "Your efforts have not gone unnoticed." "I love your contrast of bitter and sweet. No less intriguing than eleven secret herbs and spices. Your creativity speaks for itself, and I'm more than a little impressed." Meitei, the lord of banter, has Tōfū, the sincere artist, firmly in his clutches.

The master, as if suddenly remembering something, gets to his feet and heads into his study. A short time later, he emerges with a single sheet of drafting paper in his hand. "We've seen one of your works, Tōfū, so indulge me now as I share a short piece of my own." The master is all business. "If it's your Epitaph to Natural Man then spare me. I've heard it multiple times." "Wait and listen. It's nothing boast-worthy, Tōfū, just some scribblings to pass the time. With that in mind, please give it a listen." "By all means, let's hear it." "Kangetsu, too, if you'll be so good." "I'm happy to listen. I take it it's nothing of any great length." "Just some sixty or so characters." The master, after much ado, begins to read his grand pièce.

'Spirit of Japan!' So cry the men of Japan, straining their lungs to their limit.

"Bold and towering, right from the start." Kangetsu voices his praise.

'Spirit of Japan!' The newspaperman echoes. 'Spirit of Japan!' The petty thief adds his voice. The Spirit of Japan, in one bound, reverberates over the seas. In the lecture halls of England, the Spirit of Japan. On the stages of Germany, the Spirit of Japan.

"This certainly tops your Natural Man." This time it's Meitei who adds his approval, straightening himself on his cushion.

Admiral Tōgō embodies the Spirit of Japan. Gin-san, the fishmonger, embodies the Spirit of Japan. The swindler, the prospector, the murderer all embody the Spirit of Japan.

"Can we add Kangestu to the list too?"

Ask any man what the Spirit of Japan entails. 'The Spirit of Japan is the Spirit of Japan,' he'll answer in passing. Some paces on, you'll hear his scorn as he stops and clears his throat.

"That last line was masterful. You do have a way with words. What's next?"

Is the Spirit of Japan triangular? Is the Spirit of Japan something square? The Spirit of Japan, true to its name, is a spirit. Being a spirit, its form is ever-shifting.

"I love the work, but couldn't you perhaps use 'Spirit of Japan' a little less frequently?" This advice from Tōfū. "Agreed!" Seconded, of course, by Meitei.

No one holds it far from his lips, yet none has ever seen it. All are familiar with it, yet none has gazed on its face. Spirit of Japan, doest thou dwell with the Tengu?

The master, having concluded his reading with a flourish, surveys the company to gage its effect. On account of its brevity, however, its meaning has yet to hit home. All three listeners are waiting, anticipating more. Wait though they might, not a single syllable follows. "Is that all there is?" Kangetsu finally asks. "Yep," the master replies lightly. His reply is almost too light.

Oddly enough, Meitei, perhaps disarmed by the mastery of the work, fails to wield his usual prattle. After a moment he turns to the master and speaks. "You should follow suit and compile your works into a volume. You could even dedicate it to someone." "How about if I dedicate it to you?" the master asks offhandedly. "Thanks, but no thanks," is Meitei's only reply. He takes out his special scissors, the pair he'd showed off to the wife, and sets to work clipping his nails. Kangetsu addresses Tōfū. "Are you really acquainted with the Kaneda daughter?" he asks. "I invited her to our spring recital. Since that time, we've

been on familiar terms. I see her a great deal, and each time I see her, she somehow moves me. Afterward, poems and verses come springing forth with delight. Within my collection are numerous pieces on romance, and it's this nearness to the opposite sex, I'm quite convinced, that's inspired them. I feel a keen sense of gratitude toward this young lady, so I'm taking this opportunity to dedicate my work to her. No great poetry, they say, has ever been written in absence of some form of muse." "Is that so?" Kangetsu, behind his eyes, seems to be sporting a grin. Even in garrulous company, words are not without limit, and the flames of conversation here appear to be burning low. Feeling no obligation to subject myself to endless idle talk, I take my leave and head for the garden, hoping to find a mantis of two. The sumac tree weaves a thick verdure overhead, with splotches of sunlight leaking through as the day draws to a close. The cicadas, perched on its trunk, cry for all they're worth. The evening may well bring showers.