

I am a Cat – Chapter 8a

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

In my previous description of fence circuit training, I made mention of the bamboo fence that encloses the master's yard. One mustn't imagine, though, that just beyond said fence sits a neighboring house with some friendly, south-flank, neighborly Jiro. The area is low-rent. After all, it's master Kushami. There's no such social interaction, no intimate bonding across a thin backyard fence with a Jiro-chan, a Yot-chan or any other -chan. Beyond the fence, rather, is a length of vacant land, ten meters or so in depth, with a thick stand of cedars marking its far edge. Viewed from the veranda, it looks like dense forest, and the sense one gets is of a lone house in the woods, where an unassuming scholar passes the days with his nameless cat. I'm afraid, however, that I've overstated the thickness of the cedar branches. In fact, visible through gaps in the branches is a two-bit boarding house called Gunkakukan, whose shabby roof belies its grandiose name. This puts the kibosh, of course, on the reclusive scholar narrative. At the same time, though, if this boarding house can be Gunkakukan, then the master's residence could easily be Garyōkutsu. They don't tax names, so why not one-up one's neighbor? At any rate, this east-west strip of vacant land runs for twenty or so meters and then turns a corner to wrap around the north side. It's on this north side that things went awry. Few houses can boast of vacant land on top of vacant land, wrapping two full sides, but neither the master of Garyōkutsu, nor yours truly, his cat most divine, have any real use for such space. Just as the cedars made their mark toward the south, a stand of paulownia backed the lot toward the north. They'd grown to thirty or more centimeters in diameter and would have fetched a fair price from the cobbler for geta planks. The problem with rental property, alas, is that such opportunities, even if known, are not actionable. This was the master's regrettable state. The other day, the school caretaker called and helped himself to a branch on his way home. On his next visit, he sported a new pair of paulownia-wood geta. He was only too happy to volunteer how he'd fashioned them from that pilfered branch. The underhanded rogue. So we have our paulownia stand, yet these paulownia benefit neither me nor the master's family in the least. They say there's no worth in a jewel hidden from sight, and the same can be said of paulownia one can't cut. It's treasure squandered.

The fault here lies not with the master, nor with me, but rather our landlord Denbei. The paulownias all but cry out for the cobbler, yet all Denbei can think to do is come and collect his rent. I harbor no ill will toward Denbei, so I'll refrain from further censure and return to the topic at hand. I intend to explain how troubles arose from this vacant land, but what I relate is not to be shared with the master. We should keep it amongst ourselves. The fundamental problem with this vacant land is that it's open, bounded by neither fence nor hedge. All choosing to pass through, whether windy breeze or wanderer, have free license to do so. In truth, I should rather say "had" free license. To trace the story to its roots, I have to start in the past. A physician, as we all know, cannot prescribe a cure without first probing root cause. Likewise, my story begins, necessarily, in a former time when the master had first moved in. The lot was open, and cool breezes refreshed it the summer long. As for security, where no treasure resides, no thief thinks to enter.

The master's house had no need whatsoever for fence, hedge, stockade, abatis, or any such defense. This determination, of course, is fully contingent on who or what is living cross the way. Accordingly, further comment on the nature of the gentlemen residing nearby is in order. It may seem imprudent to apply the term "gentlemen" before even knowing who or what is involved, but there's no need for concern on this front. Even the term "gentleman burglar" is prevalent, and the gentlemen we're speaking of here are by no means afoul of the law. They're not afoul of the law, but peril lies in the force of their numbers. There's no end to them. A private middle school, called Rakuunkan, collects two yen per month in tuition to turn young gentlemen into gentlemen of the world. The name Rakuunkan may suggest refinement, but a name in itself does not refinement make. By way of point, no cranes in fact alight on Gunrakukan, and Garyōkutsu houses but a common cat. Knowing that master Kushami, crackpot that he is, sports the titles of college graduate and instructor, one can well imagine that not all of Rakuunkan's young gentlemen are indeed so gentle. To any who doubts this, I invite him to come and dwell just three days in master Kushami's house.

As I've already mentioned, when the master first moved in, this vacant land was unfenced, and the gentlemen of Rakuunkan, just like Kurumaya no Kuro, could wander among the paulownia trees at will. They would sprawl themselves about on the bamboo grass, shooting the breeze, eating their lunches, or doing whatnot. In their wake were lunch box remains, bamboo sheaves, and old newspapers to mention a few. This land, it seemed, also attracted their old zōri, old geta, or anything else deemed old and worn. The master, surprisingly, carried on in total and complete indifference, neither expressing concern nor raising any particular objection. I can't say whether he wasn't aware or whether he was aware and just chose not to engage. Our young gentlemen, however, growing into bonafide gentlemen as their schooling progressed, with time abandoned this north quarter, only to set their sights on infiltrating the south. Perhaps the word "infiltrating" is inappropriate when describing the movement of gentlemen, but there's no other apt word. Like a wandering desert tribe, breaking camp to seek out the next oasis, they quit the paulownias and advanced upon the cedars. The cedars grow just off the living room. Only the boldest of gentlemen would advance with such audacity. It was clear in the course of days, however, that audacity breeds audacity. There's nothing worse than schooled gentlemen. Not only did they camp outside of the living room, but they chose this spot to let loose with song. What song it was, I can't recall, but it was certainly no tanka. It was a lively tune, drawing on the common vernacular. The master, in spite of himself, was duly impressed with their musical talents, and I have to confess that I too was impressed. We couldn't help but lend them an ear. That being said, I'm sure the reader will appreciate that the same thing can be, on occasion, both wonder and scourge at the same time. Most regrettably, this was one such occasion where these disparate attributes met. The master, I believe, regretted this too. More than once, he felt compelled to break from his work in the study, rush forth, admonish the students, remind them they didn't belong there, and shoo them away.

We're talking of schooled gentlemen here, however, who are not so easily warned off. No sooner were they chased away, than they regrouped and reappeared. On reappearing, they broke back out in song. They jawed away in excited voices. Their chatter was peculiar, punctuated by phrases like "yous" and "beats me." Such expressions, they say, were in pre-Restoration times the exclusive realm of squires, palanquin bearers, and bathhouse helpers. Now however, in this twentieth century, they mark the speech of schooled young men. Much as it was with physical activity, what once was frowned on is now in vogue. On one occasion, the master flew from his study, grabbed the most ardent practitioner of this new speech, and grilled him as to what he was doing there. Flustered, the other party forgot his "yous" and "beats me" and lapsed back into the common tongue. "We took this for the school's botanical grounds," he replied. The master administered a stern warning and let him go. The term "let him go" is a little odd, as though the lad were a caught turtle, but in fact the master had been clutching his shirt sleeve the whole time. The master, as I hear it told, believed with this he'd won the day. As far back as the ages of gods and goddesses, however, it's a simple truth that expectations go unmet. The master had miscalculated. Their next move was to approach from the north, traverse the grounds, and pass out through the main gate. They would open the gate with a clang. Just as one thought a caller had come, laughter would echo from the stand of paulownias. The situation had gone from bad to worse. The power of education was, at last, asserting itself. My poor master, acknowledging that he was in over his head, retreated to his study and penned a careful letter to the principal of Rakuunkan, entreating him to intervene. The principal, writing back in cordial fashion, promised to erect a fence in due time. After some days, workmen appeared, and in half a day's time a lattice bamboo fence, a meter in height, partitioned the school property from the master's grounds. The master was elated, resting assured that all was now well. The master was a fool. These young gentlemen were not about to be daunted by the presence of a mere fence.

Provoking others, after all, is great fun. Even a cat such as myself will, on occasion, take pleasure in provoking the young ladies of the household. It's only natural, then, that the gentlemen of Rakuunkan should seek to provoke my none-too-brilliant master Kushami. The master alone, it's safe to say, takes exception to this arrangement. The psychology of provocation can be broken down into two key elements. First of all, the target of the provocation must demonstrate due reaction. Secondly, the provoking party must, by force or by numbers, overpower the object of provocation. The other day, for example, the master returned from the zoological gardens in great excitement. He'd witnessed an enthralling altercation, as he told it, between a small dog and a camel. The small dog, barking up a frenzy, had raced round the camel like a whirlwind. The camel, for its part, took not the least notice. It stood there stock still, lump and all fixed in place. The dog went wild, yapping for all it was worth, all to no avail. In the end, it tired and called it quits. The master had a good chuckle over the apathetic nature of camels, but here we have a case in point. Even the best of provocations is lost on such as a camel. That being said, too strong a reaction is also no good. A lion or a tiger, for example, at the slightest provocation will rip its provocateur to shreds. In the ideal provocation, the provoked party will bare its teeth in anger, yet however angry it may get, have no real power to inflict harm. There are various reasons why the provoking party finds this amusing.

For one thing, it spices up a dull day. To alleviate boredom, a man will resort to counting the whiskers on his own face. And they say that a certain prisoner, in former times, occupied his days scribing row upon row of triangles on the walls down the length of his cell.

In this world of ours there's no greater burden than boredom. Without some stirring of passion, life becomes but drudgery. Provocation serves as a source of both excitement and amusement to the perpetrator. It only works its effects, though, when the other party reacts, to some extent, with anger, annoyance, or frustration. From earliest times, the main perpetrators of provocation have been idle lords incapable of empathy, simpletons with no mind for anything but their own gratification, and young men seeking outlet for pent-up ardor. In addition, provocation provides a convenient means of demonstrating one's ascendancy over another in no uncertain terms. One can also assert ascendancy through murder, maiming, or confinement, but these methods are best reserved for when murder, maiming, and confinement are the primary objective. Ascendancy, in these cases, is nothing more than a natural consequence of the acts involved. When a show of strength is desired, but with no intent to inflict great harm, provocation is the proper course of action. That being said, to substantiate one's superiority, in full and without doubt, some small degree of harm must necessarily be inflicted. Superiority staked out in one's mind is no substitution for superiority made manifest. Humans hunger for self-affirmation. And where self-affirmation falls short, they hunger all the more. It can also be said that truly satisfactory self-affirmation is only ever achieved through outward actions eliciting concrete response in others. Furthermore, it's the lowest of lowbrows, incapable of reason, along with the least self-assured, and hence the most insecure, who most oftentimes seek external affirmation. Take the case of the martial arts practitioner who needs on occasion to throw someone. The worst of them walk the streets with depraved thoughts in their heads, intent on finding someone weaker, even just once, and even if only a layman, to fling about. There are other reasons for provocation, but for sake of brevity I'll stop here. Those wishing to hear more are welcome to come by. Bring a pack of dried bonito, and I'll happily talk at length.

It occurs to me, based on the preceding narrative and my own application of logical thought, that there are no better targets for provocation than the Okuyama monkey and the school instructor. Such comparison is perhaps overly generous -- not overly generous to the monkey, but to the instructor. That being said, the parallels are evident. As you'll know, the Okuyama monkey is restrained by its chain. However fiercely it bares its teeth, however much it screeches, one needn't fear its claws. The school instructor, while not restrained by a chain, is tied and bound by his monthly pay. However much provoked, he'll never jeopardize his post by letting loose on a student. The kind of man with the nerve to unload on a student doesn't sign on as an instructor, charged with those very students' care, in the first place. The master is such an instructor. He's not a Rakuunkan instructor, but an instructor nonetheless. When it comes to provocation, he's highly suitable, exceedingly expedient, and in no position to retaliate. The Rakuunkan students are young men. Provocation serves to boost their egos, and it's also a rite of passage, as they see it, that's part and parcel of their schooling. Furthermore, their bodies and minds are brimming with energy.

Sit them down for ten minutes, and they'll all but explode. The situation being what it is, it goes without saying that the master, as a matter of course, is going to be provoked, and the students, as a matter of course, are going to provoke him. The master's angry reactions then, are the height of folly, stemming from his utter lack of sophistication. In the following account, I'll describe in some detail the extent to which the Rakuunkan students provoked the master, and the extent to which the master's response was wanting.

I trust that all are familiar with the bamboo lattice fence. It's the simplest of fences, open and airy. One like myself can pass at will through its openings. Its presence in no way hinders me. Then again, the principal of Rakuunkan did not build his bamboo fence on account of us cats. He brought in his workers, rather, to restrict the wanderings of the young gentlemen under his charge. And that it does. While breezes pass easily through, human beings do not. Even Chōseison himself, the great Chinese illusionist, would struggle to slip through its squares, tied off as they are with stiff bamboo at twelve or so centimeters on a side. Where humans are concerned, the lattice fence is effective and functional. It's understandable, then, that the master would gaze with joyful satisfaction on the finished fence, believing his problems behind him. However, there was a tremendous gap in the master's reasoning. A gap larger than the fence itself. A gap through which even the famed colossal fish, large enough to swallow a boat, could easily slip. The master supposed that fences are not to be breached. He supposed that any fence worth calling a fence, even of simplest build, sufficed to mark a boundary. And he supposed that any student worth calling a student would respect such boundary and refrain from intrusion. Supposing for the moment one did wish to intrude, he assured himself that all was still well. The bamboo lattice was tight enough to thwart even the smallest of boys. Therefore, he concluded in his haste, the fear of intrusion was nil. Rightly enough, unless they were cats there was no way they'd pass through that fence. Much as they'd like to, it just wasn't possible. At the same time, though, to hop it or climb it was easy enough. To do so, in fact, was great sport.

The day after the fence was built, they came dropping into the north-side lot, just as they'd done before. However, they no longer encroached on the living room. If pursued, their escape time was greater now, and they took this into account, limiting their incursions to a safe distance. The master, of course, could not see them from the east wing of the house. To gage their movements on the north side, he had to either open the wicket gate and circle round the house or go to the toilet window and peer across the hedge. From the toilet window he could spot any intruders at a glance but was powerless to act. All he could do was rant and rave from within. If he went out through the gate and circled round, they'd flee at the sound of his steps, dropping back to their own side before he came near. They were just like seals, sunning themselves till the hunter drifts near and then slipping into the water. The master couldn't spend his days on the toilet staking them out. And he wasn't about to leave the gate open and dash out at every slightest sound. If it came to that, it would command all his time, and his teaching days would be done. The master found himself at a severe disadvantage. Working in his study, he could hear their voices but couldn't see

them. From the toilet window, he could see them but take no action. Realizing his predicament, the students made the most of it. When they sensed the master was holed up in his study, they raised up their voices. One could catch in their chatter, on occasion, what seemed to be gibes at the master. To make matters worse, the source of the sounds was not at all clear. Should the master go out, they would quickly retreat. Or, as the case may be, they'd been on their own side from the start and hence showed no concern. Then again, when the master was in the toilet -- Let me apologize here for all this toilet talk. I don't relish dwelling on the toilet, and I'm sorry if the reader finds it unsavory, but in describing this conflict it can't be helped. -- At any rate, when the master was in the toilet they were sure to be loitering among the paulownias, deliberately drawing his attention. If the master called them out, raising his voice so all the world could hear, they simply sauntered back, at full leisure, to their own property. These tactics had the master at his wit's end. Sensing their presence, he'd grab his walking stick and rush out, only to find no one there. Thinking they were gone, he'd peek through the toilet window, always to find one or two intruding. He'd go round back, then peek through the toilet window. He'd peek through the toilet window, then go round back. I could go on, but it's all the same. Over and over, again and again. It became, in the end, a war of attrition. The master's duties as combatant were no less demanding than his duties as instructor. His world was descending into disarray, and at the height of it all, a particular altercation occurred, which I'll proceed to describe.

Altercations, for the most part, are born of disarray. And disarray, as the word itself suggests, is things out of place. On this point, all great physicians would agree, from Galen to Paracelsus to the ancient *Bien Que*. The problem of what's out of place and where it belongs, however, is open to debate. In the European medical tradition, there were four humors that circulate through the body. First is the yellow bile of anger, which flowing too freely results in rage. Next is the substance phlegm, which in overabundance dulls the nerves. Then there's black bile, the source of melancholy. Finally there's blood, which energizes the four limbs. Over time, with the advance of human knowledge, yellow bile, phlegm, and black bile have fallen out of favor, and now it's only blood, they tell us, that courses through the body. It follows then, that what's out of place must be blood. Each of us, it should also be noted, has a fixed volume of blood. We each have ten liters, give or take a bit depending on the individual. Accordingly, when these ten liters go rushing to some single part of the body, that single part is over-energized while other parts are left cold. It's like the Hibiya Incendiary Incident, where the police were forced back to headquarters and the streets left unpatrolled. From the medical perspective, the diagnosis would be a policing imbalance. To alleviate a rush, blood must be dispersed back out through the body, restoring to each part its due measure. There are various methods to bring this about. The master's forebears, back in their day, had sworn by a damp cloth to cool the head and *kotatsu* to warm the feet. According to the *Shanghan Lun*, a cooled head and warm feet are secrets to long life. Application of a damp cloth to the head is essential, not to be skipped for even a single day. As an alternative, one can follow the Buddhist priest's example. The wandering Zen monk, winding his way through myriad lands and never putting down roots, always sleeps out of doors. This sleeping out of doors is by no means just hardship for hardship's sake.

In fact, it's the secret to calming one's head, a secret that came to the Sixth Patriarch while threshing rice. Go and sit on a rock. Your haunches, as a matter of course, will cool. As the haunches cool, hot blood is drawn from the head. This is all a natural sequence of events, of that there can be no doubt. In like fashion, an abundance of varied methods have been contrived for cooling the head. Regrettably, though, no good method has been devised for exciting the head. At first glance, one might conclude that nothing good ever comes from a hot head, but to conclude so in haste is to widely miss the mark. Certain professions demand a hot head, without which nothing gets done. The best example of this is the poet. A hot head for the poet is no less essential than coal to fuel a steamer. Cut off the flow of hot blood, even for a day, and the poet's touch is gone. He bides his time, leisurely taking his meals, but produces no verse. When it comes down to it, hot-headedness is really just another name for madness, but madness as a prerequisite to plying one's trade is indecorous, so poets refrain from calling their madness "madness." Instead, by mutual consent, they apply the high-sounding term "inspiration." This is simply a term they've concocted to delude the populace. In truth, inspiration and madness are one and the same. Plato was with the poets in this, referring to poetic passion as divine madness. However divine, though, madmen are shunned by their peers. At the end of the day, inventing the new term "inspiration" and peddling it like a patent medicine is the poets' wisest play. That being said, just as kamaboko is made from yam paste, just as the "found Kannon" is nothing more than a rotten chunk of wood, just as duck noodles are prepared with crow meat, and just as the beef served in lodging house stew is horse meat, inspiration is, in fact, madness. A rush of blood to the head is only temporary madness. It comes and goes, and for this sole reason confinement in Sugamo is not called for.

However, this temporary madness is not easily evoked. Life-long lunacy is an easier situation, in some ways, than trying to conjure madness with pen in hand and facing a blank page. Even the greatest of masters, it seems, struggle in this regard. Where nature declines to deliver, a man is left to his own. From times of old to the present, learned men have wrestled greatly with this question of how to flow blood to the brain, and then how to draw it back down. One man, in pursuit of inspiration, ate twelve astringent persimmons each day. Astringent persimmons, so his reasoning went, cause constipation, and constipation results in a rush of blood to the head. Still another man jumped into a piping hot bath with a bottle of warmed saké. Indulgence while steeping, he figured, was sure to push blood to the brain. He was further convinced that if this didn't work then immersion in a bath of hot wine would induce the desired effect. Unfortunately, however, he never in his lifetime mustered the funds to confirm this. Finally, there are men who seek inspiration through the behavior of the old masters. The theory behind this is that imitation of outward demeanor and conduct leads to like mental state. Slur your words a bit, and before you know it you're feeling tipsy. Meditate quietly, as a stick of incense slowly burns, and you'll fancy yourself a Buddhist ascetic. Accordingly, imitation of the great masters, inspired men of old, is sure to excite one's mind. They say that Hugo plotted his stories on the deck of a yacht. Board a boat, gaze at the blue sky above, and inspiration is all but guaranteed. Stevenson, as it's told, wrote while lying on his belly. Take up the pen while lying prone, and blood will course through the brain. In similar manner, many men have

tried many things, but none with marked success. As things currently stand, it's no easy feat for men to self-inspire. Regrettably, there's no known tried and true technique. Sooner or later, though, men will no doubt learn how to summon inspiration at will. For the sake of humanity, I sincerely hope that it's sooner.

Having expounded at length on hot-headedness, it's time now to relate the altercation as it occurred. However, it's always the case that any major altercation is preceded by some number of minor altercations. To focus only on the major altercation, while omitting the minor altercations, is an all too common failing of the chroniclers of history. The master's head grew hotter with each minor altercation, setting the stage for the major altercation to follow. Without some recount of this series of minor altercations, it's hard to understand the state of the master's mind. And without such understanding, the master's hotheadedness, as viewed from the outside world, could well be dismissed as overblown hollow bluster. Having worked oneself into a frenzy, one at least wants due recognition for it from his fellow men. The altercations I'm going to relate, be they minor or major, do the master no honor. While the altercations themselves may in fact be shameful, the master's reactions at least, as I'll endeavor to demonstrate, were both full-fledged and fully genuine. With respect to his peers, the master possesses no other particularly noteworthy characteristics. Were it not for his signature hotheadedness, I'd have nothing at all to feed my narrative.

The enemy camp assembled in Rakuunkan have of late contrived some new sort of dumdummy projectile. Whenever they have a ten-minute break, or after the day's lessons are done, they let loose with multiple shots in sequence, targeting the vacant lot on the north side. They refer to their projectile as a ball, and they launch it at will with the swing of a giant pestle, propelling it toward its intended target. Dumdummy projectile or whatever, they launch it from the Rakuunkan athletic grounds, so the master, holed up in his study, is well out of harm's way. The enemy camp knows full well that their target is out of range, but therein lies their strategy. It's said that peripheral shelling was highly effective in the battle for Ryojun. In like manner this ball, tumbling from the sky and rolling to a stop in the vacant lot, is not without due effect. Each time the ball flies, its flight is accompanied by a chorus of loud and raucous cries from the full array of assembled forces. The master winces, and the veins that run through his arms and legs reflexively tighten. The blood in those veins, in agonized confusion, flows in reverse and races to his head. The enemy's strategy is both well conceived and highly effective.

In ancient Greece, they say, lived a writer named Aeschylus. He had the characteristic head of a scholar or writer. By characteristic head of a scholar or writer, I mean he was bald. The reason for this baldness is without doubt a paucity of nutrients flowing to the scalp, insufficient to support hair growth. Scholars and writers spend their days lost in thought, their brains working overtime. Their pay tends to be meager, so they eat too little to nourish both brain and scalp. Their heads, therefore, owing to this lack of nourishment, go bald. At any rate, Aeschylus was a writer, and as matter of course he lost his hair. His head was shiny like a kumquat. One day, then, the good man took that head -- heads aren't like clothes, of course, with one for outings and one for everyday use -- taking that head and tossing it to and fro, with the

sun beating off it, he made his way through the streets. It was this that invited his downfall. A bald head, exposed to sunlight, reflects intensely and is visible for quite some distance. Just as tall trees attract the winds, a shining head is bound to attract something too. As it happened, a lone eagle was floating in the sky over Aeschylus's head. On closer look, it had in its talons a live turtle, seized from somewhere or other. Turtles and snappers are a delicacy, without doubt, but from times of old, and in ancient Greece as well, they've sported a hard shell. However much of a delicacy may await inside, getting past the hard shell is the first order of business.

Shrimp are often stewed in the shell, but to this day there's no equivalent method of preparing turtle. It goes without saying then, that in ancient Greece there was also no such practice. Just as the eagle was struggling with this predicament, a shiny object, far down below, caught his eye. "That's it," the eagle thought to itself. "If I drop this turtle onto that shiny object, its shell is sure to break. After the shell breaks, I'll float down and feast. It's all too simple." Having chosen a plan of action, the eagle proceeded, without further ado, to release the turtle, dropping it from a great height toward the head below. Regrettably, a writer's head is softer than a turtle's shell. The bald crown shattered, and the renowned Aeschylus met his tragic end. That was that, but what's still unclear is the eagle's intent. Did the eagle recognize the head in question as that of a writer, or did it merely mistake it for bare rock. Depending on interpretation, the master's Rakuunkan adversaries may or may not be much like this eagle. The master's head is not, like the head of Aeschylus and other notable men, bald and shiny. However, he does possess a modest study, where he dozes away, planting his face on the pages of difficult works. He qualifies, in this sense, as numbered among the company of scholars and writers. He still has his hair because he hasn't yet earned a shiny head, but in due course he'll no doubt get there. One must admit then, that the Rakuunkan students' concentration of fire toward the master's head is, given the situation, a highly appropriate plan. Just two weeks of continued shelling, and the master's head, starved of nourishment by constant worry and dread, is bound to resemble a kumquat, smooth like a teapot, and shiny like a copper kettle. Furthermore, what kumquat can withstand two weeks' shelling? What teapot can hold its water? What copper kettle can resist cracking? It's only master Kushami who fails to grasp this obvious outcome and hence soldiers on in facing down his foes.

One afternoon, as I indulged in my customary nap on the veranda, I fell into a dream and dreamed I was a tiger. I ordered the master to bring me fowl. With some trepidation, he promptly complied. Meitei dropped by. I said I wanted goose and told him to go to The Goose Pot and get me an order. Meitei, up to his usual shenanigans, assured me that pickled radish, if eaten on seasoned rice crackers, tastes just like goose. I stretched my jaws wide and shook him head to foot with a mighty roar. His face lost its color. He informed me that The Goose Pot in Yamashita had shut its doors, then asked how best to proceed. In that case, I replied, I'd settle for beef. I ordered him off to Nishikawa's for a cut of sirloin on the double. I threatened to devour him on the spot if he didn't hurry, and he bolted off with his tail between his legs. My body was large now, filling the veranda as I sprawled myself out. As I waited on Meitei's return, a loud voice rang

through the house. I woke from my dream and returned to myself, missing out on beef in the process. Just in that moment the master, instead of cowering timidly before me, comes flying out of the bathroom, planting his foot into my ribs in the process. Before I know what's happened, he's slipped on his garden clogs, dashed through the wicket gate, and is off toward Rakuunkan. Having suddenly shrunk from tiger back to cat, I feel small and awkward. With the master's menacing scowl and the throbbing pain in my ribs, my tiger illusion readily crumbles away. At the same time, if the master is finally engaging his foes in all-out battle, I'm not about to miss it. Ignoring my aches, I slip out the back and follow in his wake. "Stop! Thief!" I hear him bellow at the top of his voice. Up ahead, a sturdy lad of eighteen or nineteen, sporting his school cap, is vaulting the lattice fence. "Too late," I think, as the lad flees, with the swiftness of Idaten, toward the safety of his home camp. The master, pleased with the effect of his cry of "Thief!," yells out again at the top of his lungs, all the while continuing in hot pursuit. However, to pursue any further he has to cross the fence. If he crosses the fence and continues on, it will be he himself who's trespassing. As I've already related, the master is a first-rate hothead. Once riled, he's perfectly ready to trespass in pursuit of a trespasser. Showing no sign of relenting, he races as far as the fence. Just one step now from trespassing into the trespasser's domain, his foes dispatch a general. Sporting a poor attempt at a mustache, this general ambles up toward the fence. The two men talk across it. Their exchange, quite mundane in its nature, proceeds as follows.

"That's one of our students."

"Why is one of your students stealing into my yard?"

"The ball just happened to land there."

"Is there some reason, then, that he can't announce himself?"

"From now on, I'll see that he does."

"Okay then."

Thus the confrontation, which I'd anticipated as an epic showdown for the ages, ends as nothing more than a quick and subdued exchange. The master is all bark and no bite. When push comes to shove, he backs away. Much like the way I dreamt myself a tiger, only to wake as a common cat. At any rate, this exchange is the minor altercation to which I referred. Having thus related the minor, protocol demands I proceed now to the major.

The master slides open the living room shōji and turns over onto his belly, lost in thought. Most likely, he's contemplating his next line of defense. Over at Rakuunkan, classes are in session, it seems, as the athletic grounds are vacant. From one room in the school building, however, a lecture on ethics carries most

clearly. Focusing in on the voice, it's unmistakably that of yesterday's general, the one who rose from the ranks to exchange words with the master.

"... conducting oneself as a good citizen is of utmost importance. Wherever you go, be it France, Germany, or England, pride of citizenship is front and center. Even among the lowliest castes, civic duties are duly observed. Some of you may imagine, when you hear the word 'citizenship,' that this is some foreign concept. To suppose so is to err most grievously. As the elders will remind you, there were two constants that guided Confucius on his path through this world: sincerity and consideration. Confucius was grounded in compassion, and compassion, and nothing other than compassion, is foundational in the making of a good citizen. As a human being, I love on occasion to break into spirited song. However, when I'm at my studies, and a fellow in the next room let's loose with loud song, my concentration is shot. That's just my nature. Such being my nature, when the urge hits to boost my spirit with an inspired line of Tang poetry, voiced at volume, I stop first and think. Suppose the fellow next door, like myself, is easily disturbed. The last thing I wish to do is inconvenience him, so I hold back. I would hope that all of you too, as conscientious citizens, will refrain from behaviors that, even in any small measure, disturb the public peace ..."

The master, who had stopped what he was doing and been listening attentively to the lecture, at this point breaks into a broad grin. I feel I should explain, if you'll indulge me, the meaning behind this grin. A cynic, on reading this account, might imagine such grin as tinged with derision. The master's heart, however, is not so tainted. His heart is not so tainted, but neither is he wise in the ways of the world. The reason for his grin is nothing other than sheer joy. After such heartfelt admonition from said ethics instructor, the heretofore indiscriminate shelling of the master's grounds is surely a thing of the past. The master's head would keep its hair. His agitation would not dissolve overnight, but given time it should gradually ease. He could dispense with the damp cloth, dispense with the kotatsu, and there was no need to sleep out of doors. It was such thoughts that delighted the master and elicited a grin. It's only natural that this master of mine, who even in this twentieth century still believes that money lent will be money returned, should hear this lecture and place his faith in its words.

Time was up, it seemed, for the lecture suddenly stopped. In the other classrooms too, lessons were over. As if on cue, eight hundred students, who until now had been bottled up in the classrooms, let loose with whoops and hollers, pouring forth from the building. Their vigor called to mind a large beehive, knocked to the ground and abuzz with great fury. Raising a ruckus, the students spilled out from the windows, out from the doors, out from every crack or crevice, darting unceasingly this way and that. Getting back to our altercations, this is where minor escalated to major.