

## I am a Cat – Chapter 3b

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

This, finally, is something Hanako can agree to, and she starts in with her questions. Her speech, quite crass just a moment before, is civil again as she addresses Meitei. "I understand Kangetsu holds a bachelor of science degree, but what specifically is his area of expertise?" "His graduate work was on the earth's magnetic field." The master provides a straight response. The significance of this subject area, regrettably, is beyond Hanako. She offers a cursory response, but her expression remains one of doubt. "Does such research lead to a doctorate degree?" she asks. "Are you suggesting that the degree motivates the research?" the master asks in return with a sour look. "Yes. There's nothing special about a bachelor's degree. Lots of men hold them," she replies coolly. The master turns to Meitei, with a look grown even more disagreeable. "It's not for us to say who earns a doctorate or who doesn't. Let's move on to another question." Meitei, too, is a bit peeved. "Of late, is he still researching the earth's -- whatever it was?" "Several days ago he addressed the Society for Physical Sciences, presenting his research results on the mechanics of hanging," the master offers without hesitation. "Good gracious! Hanging? He's really out there, isn't he? He won't be earning his doctorate with a topic like hanging." "Not if he's the one hanging. But the mechanics of hanging is another matter. I wouldn't count him out." "Really now?" This time she turns to the master, looking to read his face. Sadly, the meaning of "mechanics" eludes her. All her queries are for naught. Believing, perhaps, that a basic question is beneath the dignity of Madam Kaneda, she resorts to scrutiny of the men's faces, hoping to glean some insight. The master's expression is anything but accommodating. "Does he ever produce anything that the average person might understand?" "Indeed. The other day he authored a paper on the structural stability of acorns and how it relates to the dance of celestial bodies." "Are acorns really worthy of university research?" "As an outsider, I wouldn't know. But at any rate, if Kangetsu is working on it, then they must deem it worthwhile." Meitei brushes her off with cool composure.

Hanako, realizing she's out of her element, abandons talk of scholarship for a new subject. "On an unrelated topic -- I understand that over New Year's he damaged a front tooth eating mushrooms." "He did. I can picture him still with mochi stuck in the gap." Meitei, deciding he should field this particular inquiry, was suddenly re-engaged. "Isn't that rather repulsive? Why can't he cut his mochi first with the skewer?" "Next time he's here I'll caution him," the master replies with a chuckle. "He must have poor teeth to begin with, if mushrooms can do such harm. What do you think?" "They can't be the best of teeth -- wouldn't you agree, Meitei?" "Certainly not strong teeth, but a bit endearing. Curious that he hasn't had it tended to. He'll snare another mochi there yet. It's quite a feature." "Can he not afford to have his tooth tended to, or does he somehow fancy this gap?" "Rest assured, I don't expect he'll be making the rounds as Mr. Absent Incisor for long." Meitei is back in high spirits. Hanako moves on to a new topic. "If you have a sample of his writing, perhaps a letter he's written you, I'd like to take a look." "I've plenty of postcards." The master retrieves some thirty or forty from his study. "I don't need to see so many -- just two or three of

those ..." "Let's see them. I'll help you choose," Meitei offers. "Here's a good one." He produces a picture postcard. "He does artwork too? A man of many talents. Let's have a look." Hanako takes it in. "Good lord, a tanuki! Of all the thing to draw -- even at that, it's not half bad." She acknowledges the quality of the work. "Read what he wrote," the master suggests with a grin. Like a maidservant reading the newspaper, Hanako tackles the text. "It's the close of the year, by the old calendar. The mountain tanuki, gathered for a garden party, dance to their hearts' content. 'Suppoko-pon-no-pon. 'tis the evening of the year's end, and no one this way comes,' echoes their song." "What nonsense is this? Mischief and mockery?" Hanako voices her discontent. "How about a heavenly nymph?" Meitei offers another card. A nymph, adorned in celestial raiment, is strumming a lute.

"The nymph's nose seems awfully small." "I'd call it average. But forget the nose. Read what he wrote." What he'd written was as follows. "Long ago, in a certain land, there lived an astronomer. One night he ascended his platform, as he did most every night, to study the heavens. A beautiful nymph appeared on high and began to strum a delicate, unearthly tune. The astronomer listened with rapture, taking no notice as the cold crept through his bones. By morning, a pure white frost coated his lifeless body. The old man, who's known as a teller of tales, insists that this one is true." "What rubbish is this? There's no point to it. This is the work of a bachelor of science? He should try reading Bungei Club. Might do him some good." Hanako rips on Kangetsu. Meitei, at this point largely for his own amusement, offers her a third card. This one has a sailboat printed on it, with some lines as usual dashed off below. "Last night's inn. A maiden of sixteen. Alone with no parents. Plovers on wave-swept rocks. She wakes at night and cries to them. Her seafaring parents lost beneath the waves." "Not at all bad. I'm impressed. Fully intelligible." "It is?" "Certainly. I could put the shamisen to it." "In that case, it must be alright. How about this one?" Meitei's still at it. "No, thank you, I've seen enough. He's not entirely uncultured." She seems to have formed her opinion and has no further questions. "You'll pardon, then, my imposition. I'd prefer you not mention to Kangetsu that I called." She demands to know anything and everything about Kangetsu. Then she turns around and seems to expect that, with respect to her own actions, Kangetsu be kept in the dark. "Okaay." The master and Meitei respond with lukewarm affirmation. "I'll see that it's worth your trouble," she adds for assurance as she rises to go. The two of them see her off and return to their seats. "What was that?" Meitei immediately asks. "What was that?" the master echoes the same words. From the inner room they can hear the wife, no longer able to contain herself, laughing audibly. "That, my good lady, was mundanity in the flesh. Mundanity in such abundance, it oozes from every pore. No need to hold back now, treat yourself to a good long laugh."

The master's displeasure still echoes in his voice. "For starters, that face is hideous," he states with revulsion. Meitei picks it up from there, adding, "The way that nose, encamped in the middle, singularly dominates." "And crooked at that." "A bit hunchbacked. A hunchbacked nose is in a rarity indeed." Mirthful laughter follows. "A henpecker's beak. The poor husband," the master's resentment is unabated. "Unsold goods from the last century, warming the shelf in this new one. That's what she looks like."

Meitei contributes an offbeat remark. At this point the wife emerges from her inner room to interject her woman's perspective. "If you keep badmouthing her so, the cartman's wife will report you." "Good medicine for her if she catches this." "You're stooping low, smearing her looks. No one would choose to be born with that nose -- and it's a lady you're talking of. You're too awful." In defending Hanako's nose, she also secures her own features from critique. "Awful's the right word. That's no lady. That's a halfwit ninny. Wouldn't you say, Meitei?" "She may be a halfwit ninny, but watch out. She shredded you but good." "No respect for a teacher. What does she take me for?" "In her eyes, you're no better than the cartman out back. If you want her respect, you'll have to earn your doctorate. If you had more foresight, you'd pursue one. Isn't that right, madam?" Meitei engages the wife with a grin. "A doctorate's out of his reach." The master's own wife has long since written him off. "Who knows? Maybe I'll earn one yet. Don't dismiss me too soon. The likes of you wouldn't know this, but Isocrates, in ancient Greece, penned his magnum opus at ninety four. Sophocles was nearly a hundred when his masterwork took the world by storm. And Simonides produced his best poetry at eighty. Don't count me ..." "Utterly absurd. What man, with a digestive tract like yours, has ever lived that long?" The wife, in her thinking, has factored in the length of his days. "Impudent thing! -- Go yourself and talk to Amaki -- you know why that woman played me for a fool? Because you dress me in patched clothes and this ratty black coat. Starting tomorrow, set out my finer clothes. I'll dress like Meitei." "How can I set out fine clothes? You don't own any. And besides, Madam Kaneda was deferential to Meitei on account of his uncle. It's nothing to do with attire." The wife adroitly deflects all blame.

As if suddenly reminded by the word "uncle," the master queries Meitei. "This today was the first I'd heard of your uncle. You've never mentioned him before. Do you really have such an uncle?" Meitei, who'd clearly been anticipating the question, addresses his answer to husband and wife. "I do. This uncle of mine is stubborn to a fault -- another holdout from the last century, imposing his existence on this new one." "Ho ho! Again an interesting perspective. Where does he live?" "He lives in Shizuoka, but not in any ordinary manner. He sports a topknot and cuts a striking figure. He never wears a hat, and when told to do so boasts that the cold can't touch him -- advised to stay in bed and keep warm, he scoffs that four hours' sleep is enough. To sleep more than four hours is decadence, and each morning he rises before the sun. He goes on, then, about long years of training to cut his sleep to four hours. How he struggled in his youth, yielding at times to fatigue, but can now report, with great satisfaction, that his efforts have borne fruit. At sixty seven anyone takes less sleep. His training's as good as naught, yet he credits his success, entirely, to mind over matter. Another thing - whenever he leaves home he carries an iron-ribbed fan." "Whatever for?" "Who knows what for, but he carries it nonetheless. Maybe in place of a cane. The other day, though, something odd occurred." Meitei directs this last line at the wife. "You don't say?" She spurs him on with minimal interruption. "It was in the spring. A letter arrived one day, requesting that a derby hat and frock coat be sent right away. Not sure what to make of this, I wrote back to confirm. The old man, the answer came, was to wear them himself. They should be procured immediately. There was a victory celebration in Shizuoka, planned for the 23rd, and they must arrive in time."

"Here's what was funny, though. I was instructed to buy a hat of 'appropriate size.' As for the measurements for the coat, I was to use my best judgment and have it tailored at Daimaru ..." "Are they tailoring coats at Daimaru these days?" "They're not. I'm sure the old gentleman was confused and meant Shirokiya." "How could he expect you to guess his measurements?" "That's my uncle being my uncle." "What did you do?" "What could I do? I took my best shot and mailed them off." "A rash undertaking. Did they make it in time?" "Somehow or other, it seems. I checked out the local paper from the day in question, and there was old Makiyama, decked out in that frock coat, of all things, but still clutching his signature iron-ribbed fan ..." "I guess he couldn't relinquish his fan." "I'll tell you, when his days are up that fan, and that fan alone, goes with him in his casket." "It all went well, then, the hat and the coat." "Not quite. Just as I was congratulating myself for having pulled it off without incident, a small package arrived from Shizuoka. Assuming it was some token of appreciation, I opened it up and found inside the derby hat with a letter. 'Despite your efforts in procuring said hat, I must report it's a shade large. I request you return it to the hat shop, with instruction to alter it down. I'll happily reimburse you, via postal money order, the fee involved.' That's what he wrote." "Rather heedless fellow, if I may say so." The master, it seems, is elated to learn of a man in this world more heedless yet than himself. "What did you do, then?" he finally asks. "There was nothing I could do, so I kept the hat for myself." "That's that hat?" The master exclaims with a chuckle. "This man is a baron?" the wife asks with a dubious tone. "Who's that?" "Your uncle with the iron-ribbed fan." "He's a scholar of Chinese classics. In his younger days at Yushima Seido, he found his passion in neo-Confucian texts and the sort. Even today, under modern electric lamp light, he sports his top knot and reverently peruses old texts. He's set in his ways." Meitei rubs his chin the while as he speaks. "Even so, I could swear you described him to that woman as Baron Makiyama." "That is what you said. I heard it from the other room." The wife, on this point, is in rare agreement with the master. "So I did, perhaps. Ha ha ha ha ha." Meitei laughs easily. "I made that up. If my uncle were a baron, I'd be bureau chief by now," he adds with an unruffled air.

"I did think it all rather odd." The master's face is a mixture of glee and concern. "Well I'll be. And you sounded so sincere. When it comes to spinning tales, you're top notch." The wife is duly impressed. "That woman easily tops me." "You seemed to hold your own just fine." "But here's the thing, madam. The tales I spin are simply tales. In her case, ulterior motives, shady at best, abound. She's wicked at heart. You mustn't confuse conniving schemes with heaven-sent humor. Rueing the dearth of discerning men, the gods of comedy will heave a heavy sigh." "I wonder," the master comments with averted gaze. "There's really no difference," the wife replies with a grin.

Up until now, I'd never set foot in that lane cross the way. And I knew nothing, of course, of the corner residence or the Kaneda folk who dwelled therein. I'd never even heard of them. In the master's house, there was no talk of industrialists. Being the master's cat, living in his house and eating his food, I wasn't just remote from this segment of society, but wholly indifferent to it. Now, however, after Hanako's intrusion, and having listened in on the exchange, my thoughts wandered to this daughter. I imagined her

charms, and her wealth and status intrigued me. Cat though I am, it was time to get up from the veranda. First and foremost, I was spurred forward by a great sympathy for Kangetsu. The other party had bought off a scholar's wife, the cartman's wife, and even that two-string Tenshō-in. They'd sounded him out down to his teeth. There sat Kangetsu, all the while, tugging at his haori ties with a guileless grin. Even for a newly-minted bachelor of science, he was far too naïve. That being said, no common man could contend with this woman, endowed as she was with that overbearing nose. The master, in the case at hand, was lacking both in motivation and means.

Meitei had the means but was ever the Coincidental Child, unlikely to proffer any real assistance. That left our poor man of letters, who spoke in public on hanging and its mechanics, alone and in the lurch. It was up to me, then, to infiltrate the enemy camp, surveil their movements, and level the crooked field. I may be a cat, but I reside with a scholar, a scholar no less who reads Epictetus and slams it shut on his desk. I'm not your run-of-the-mill know-nothing cat, but stand, rather, in a class of my own. There's chivalry enough in me, even just in the tip of my tail, that I can't but answer this venture's call. In no way am I beholden to Kangetsu. My passion in this moment, in fact, transcends the plight of any single man. If I may be so bold, my mission is noble and divine - the restoration of heaven's justice and reverence for the Middle Path. The Azumabashi incident was usurped and misused. Hounds were loosed to steal near and eavesdrop, their ill-gotten gains paraded in triumph. Cartmen, stable hands, scallywags, rogue lodging students, hired hags, midwives, hoary witches, foolish dolts, all manner of folk had been corrupted into shameless service against a worthy son of our land -- A cat can only stand so much. Fortunately, the weather was fair. The thawing frost put me off a bit, but principle trumped bodily concern. Muddy paws, and the plum blossom prints they might track across the veranda, would annoy Osan but were nothing to me. Invested thus with a valorous heart, filled with devotion and roused to grand resolve, there was no waiting till the morrow. I hurried to the kitchen, prepared to depart at once, then caught myself. "Wait a moment," I thought. I'm the evolutionary pinnacle of my species, the intellectual equal of any human middle schooler. Unfortunately, though, my throat is the throat of a cat, and I can't form human words. Even if I pull this off, sneaking into the Kaneda residence and thoroughly reconnoitering the rival camp, the all-important Kangetsu will remain in the dark. Nor can I talk to the master or Meitei. Without speech, I'm a diamond in the dirt, emitting no sparkle for want of the sun. The intelligence I've garnered will all be for naught. What folly, then. Why even go? I lingered thus in the starting block.

Then again, to refrain having once committed is somehow dissatisfying, like watching an anticipated rainfall, dark clouds and all, pass on to a neighboring land. It would be one thing if my intent were iniquity, but justice and benevolence are at stake here. Any duty-loving man would gladly champion their defense, even at risk of dying in vain. It's only proper, then, for a cat to invest some exertion or muddy his feet, even to no avail. As a cat, I lack the faculty to debate learned men like Kangetsu, Meitei, and the master. I can't engage in exchange of ideas. What I can do, and far better than any scholar, is exercise stealth. To do what others cannot is, in and of itself, most satisfying. And better that I alone be privy to the

Kaneda secrets than no one at all. I can't relate what I know, but I can make it known that I know, and that too is something. More and more, the pendulum swings in favor of action. It's decided - I'll go.

I make my way to the lane cross the way, and sure enough, on the corner lot stands a Western-style house, looming over its neighbors. It occurs to me, as I pass through the gate and survey the structure, that its owners, likewise, must lord it over their neighbors. The two-story height serves no useful function, other than to impose its presence on its surroundings. Was this not Meitei's so-called "mundanity?" The entryway back to my right, I creep through the shrubs and circle round to the kitchen door. The kitchen is duly large, ten times that of the master's place. The other day, the Japan News ran a story on Count Ōkuma and described his kitchen in detail. This kitchen, tidy and sparkling, is no less impressive. I steal my way into this "kitchen exemplar." In a small ante room with plastered floor stands the aforementioned cartman's wife, in spirited conversation with a kitchen helper and rickshaw man. My senses on high alert, I advance as far as the water tank and hide myself in back.

"Did that teacher really not know who the boss is?" asked the kitchen helper. "How could he not know? Everyone round here knows the Kanedas. He must be blind, deaf, and dull-witted to boot." This from the Kaneda's rickshaw man. "What can I say? He's an odd one, lost in his books. Just an inkling of who the boss is, and he'd know enough to show some respect. Hopeless case. Doesn't even know his own children's ages," replied the cartman's wife. "No regard for the Kanedas, huh? Bothersome lout. What say we put some fear into him? He's no match for us." "Let's do. Insulting the madam's looks, calling out her nose -- how dare he? Look at his own mug, Imado-ware tanuki -- worse yet, purports to be accomplished." "It's not just his face. He saunters off to the baths, towel in hand, like an arrogant prig. Fancies himself above us." The kitchen helper takes great issue with master Kushami. "Anyhow, we'll go in numbers, right up to the fenceline, and let him hear it good." "Teach him who's who." "Best if we're heard but not seen. Impose our voices onto his studies, taunt him to no end. That's what Madam wishes." "Count me in." The cartman's wife allies herself as a fellow heckler. So this was the party, then, that was coming to taunt the master. Slipping softly past them, I proceed further in.

A cat's paws are everywhere yet nowhere, with never an untoward sound. Like footsteps on air, like motion through mist, like stone on stone in water, like strings strummed deep in the earth, an exquisite taste of ultimate truth, experienced first hand, in absence of spoken words. Never mind this mundane Western house, never mind its model kitchen, never mind the cartman's wife, the manservant, the kitchen helper, the daughter, the hired hands, Madam Hanako or her husband. I go where I like, listen as I please, stick out my tongue, shake my tail, set my whiskers taut, then quietly take my leave. When it comes to such technique, none in this land can match me. That nekomata demon cat of yore, I've begun to suspect, may well yet coarse through these veins. They say that toads carry, embedded in their foreheads, a noctilucous gem. Likewise, I carry in my tail not just the gods of heaven and earth, not just the Buddha, not just life's allures and transience, but a miracle elixir for all man's afflictions down through the ages. To

stalk the Kaneda's corridors unnoticed, for me, is like Niō crushing jelly underfoot. In this moment, humbled by the height of my own powers, all stemming from this prized tail, I couldn't help but pause out of reverence. I lowered my head in deference to the great tail deity, adding a prayer for eternal feline fortune. It occurred to me, though, that my bearings were off. To laud the tail, one faces the tail. As I turned my body, my tail followed suit. I twisted my head to compensate, but my tail jumped by the same degree, still a step ahead. An object so divine, housing heaven and earth in its shortest span, was ever beyond my grasp. Exhausted after seven turns or more, I duly abandoned the chase. My head was swimming. I'd lost track of which way was which. Caring not, I stumbled on my way. Hanako's voice, from behind a shōji, stopped me in my tracks. I perked my ears and stilled my breath. "Penniless teacher, and disrespectful to boot." Her shrill voice rose up in ire.

"A real wise guy, huh? Let's take him down a notch. I know some folks at that school. We go way back." "Who's that?" "Tsuki Pinsuke and Fukachi Kishago. They'll help us." From which region this Kaneda fellow hails, I cannot say, but I was taken aback by the odd names of his fellows. He continued on. "The guy teaches English, does he?" "Yes, that's what the cartman's wife says. His specialty is English Readers or some such." "Poor excuse for a teacher, I reckon." I was struck by his use of "reck'n." "The other day, when I last saw Pinsuke, he mentioned an odd fellow on the staff. A student asked this fellow what 'bancha' was in English, and the fellow replied, in all seriousness, 'savage tea.' Among the staff, he still can't live it down. One teacher like that, Pinsuke lamented, puts the whole school to shame. Most likely it's this same guy." "I'm sure it's him. It shows in his face. Even through those pretentious whiskers." "Shameful lout." If whiskers make for a shameful lout then where does that leave us cats? "Then there's that Meitei, spewing incoherence. Preposterous wag if ever there was one." "You mustn't let yourself swallow some charlatan's line." "Who would've thought he was fibbing through and through?" Madam Kaneda seems to still be kicking herself. Curiously, not a word is said of Kangetsu. Perhaps I stole in late and missed it. It could be, too, that they've written him off and purged him from their thoughts. This was foremost in my mind, but I could garner no insight. As I lingered there, a bell sounded in a room down the way. Something was up. Loathe to miss out, I directed my steps toward the sound.

As I reached the scene, a woman was talking loudly. Judging from the voice, and its resemblance to Hanako's, this was none other than the young lady of the house, the object and inspiration of Kangetsu's thwarted plunge. Regrettably, I was hearing her through the shōji and couldn't view her form. Consequently, I can't confirm that her face enshrines a large nose in its center. However, I could put two and two together. From the tone of her conversation, and the heavy nasal breathing, I was hard pressed to imagine an unassuming nose. She was talking to someone, yet no other voice was heard. This must be, I surmised, the thing they call the telephone. "Is this Yamato? I want seats for tomorrow, Uzura section, third row -- you got that? -- all set? -- You haven't got it? Is it that hard? Uzura section third row. -- What's that? -- There aren't any left? There'd better be some left. Do as I say. -- You think I'm joking? -- No one's laughing. -- Don't you mess with me. Who is this, anyway? Chōkichi? Well Chōkichi, if you can't handle

this I'll speak with the mistress. Put her on. -- What? You're fully capable? -- Insolent wretch! Do you know who I am? Kaneda! -- Ha ha ha. You're well aware, are you? What kind of idiot are you? -- I'm Kaneda! -- What? - You're grateful for our patronage are you? -- Is that so? Well I don't need your gratitude. -- Is something funny? You really are a dimwit, aren't you? -- Exactly so, huh? -- Mess with me and I'm hanging up. Is that what you want? Is that okay? -- Don't go silent now. Answer me!" Chōkichi, perhaps, had had enough. There seemed to be no answer. The daughter flew into a tizzy and ground away on the bell. A small dog at her feet, startled no doubt, yapped up a ruckus. Better safe than sorry, I leapt down from the veranda and stole underneath.

In the next moment, footsteps approached down the corridor, and I heard the shōji open. Someone had come, and I strained my ears to listen. "The master and mistress request my lady's presence," a voice, seemingly that of a maid, announced. "What of it!" the daughter fired back in defiance. "They've a matter to discuss and asked me to summon my lady." "To hell with you! Go away!" The daughter unleashed a second shot. "... they say it concerns one Mizushima Kangetsu." The maid took a new tact, hoping to placate the daughter. "Kangetsu, Suigetsu ... who cares? -- Despicable man. Face like a clueless gourd." Poor Kangetsu, in absentia, is the target of her third shot. "Since when have you done up your hair?" The maid drew a cautious breath. "I did it today," she kept her answer short. "Pretentious thing. Don't forget your place." The fourth shot came from a new angle. "And isn't that a new half-collar?" "It is. It's the one my lady gave me, a while back. I'd thought it too fine and put it away with my things, but my old one was soiled, so I brought out the new one." "When did I ever give that to you?" "This past New Year's. My lady purchased it at Shirokiya -- brown fabric, with a touch of green and a sumō banzuke dyed in. If my lady will recall, she decided it was too drab and said I should have it. It's that one." "Well I'll be. It certainly looks good on you. Too good." "I thank you, my lady." "I intended no compliment. It looks too good." "Pardon?" "Why didn't you say something?" "Pardon?" "If it looks that good on you, don't you suppose it might look good on me?" "I'm sure it would, my lady." "You're sure it would look good on me, yet you say nothing and keep it for yourself. Villainous thing!" The daughter's wrath continued to rain on the maid. As I listened closely, wondering how this would end, the voice of Mr. Kaneda resounded through the hall. "Tomiko! Tomiko!" "Coming," the daughter answered reluctantly and exited the telephone room. The small dog, only slightly larger than myself, with eyes and mouth bunched together in the middle of its face, followed behind. Again on stealthy feet, I stole past the kitchen and out onto the road. My expedition a grand success, I hurried back to the master's house.

In returning home my surroundings changed, all of a sudden, from opulent halls to dingy hovel. It was as though I'd exchanged a sunny mountaintop for the dark depths of the earth. My thoughts while exploring had been occupied with other matters, and I hadn't noted the decor of the rooms or the condition of the fusuma and shōji. Now, however, as the crassness of my own abode hit me, I found myself drawn to what those here mocked as "mundanity." The industrialist, it seemed, was indeed above the teacher. Thinking it mustn't be so, I sought the counsel of my eminent tale. "Such is the case. Such is the case," came the

divine answer. Much to my surprise as I re-entered the parlor, Meitei was still there. Myriad cigarette butts, smoked out and thrust into the ashes of the hibachi, formed a honeycomb pattern. Meitei himself, in a cross-legged slouch, was rambling on at length. Kangetsu was there too, having newly arrived on the scene. The master was reclining, head propped on his outstretched arm, scrutinizing the water stains on the ceiling. The men of quiet leisure, once more, were assembled.

"Kangetsu, that woman who spoke of you in delirium. You weren't at liberty to tell us her name before, but how about now?" Meitei is starting in on Kangetsu. "If it just concerned me I'd tell you, but there's the other party to consider." "So you still can't say?" "I gave my word to that wife of a certain scholar." "Promised to tell not a soul, is that it?" "Yes." Kangetsu, per habit, twists at the ties of his haori. The ties are purple, a color not found in the shops. "Those ties, judging by their color, must date from the Tenpō Era," the master comments, still reclined. The Kaneda affair interests him not in the least. "I would say so too. Not from these days of Russian wars. Those ties belong with a hollyhock-crested battle garment. They say Oda Nobunaga tied back his hair on occasion of his marriage. Those are just the ties he might have used." Meitei's remarks are long-winded as always. "Actually, my grandfather wore these on the Chōshū expedition." Kangetsu replies in all earnestness.

"Isn't it high time you passed them off to a museum? The bachelor of science Mizushima Kangetsu, lecturer on the mechanics of hanging, does his reputation no favors in donning the worn threads of some shogun's bygone vassal." "But for a certain someone, I'd gladly heed your counsel. A certain someone says these ties suit me superbly ..." "Who's that? Who could purvey such poor taste?" the master exclaims in a loud voice as he rolls himself over. "It's no one you would know ..." "Known or not, tell us who." "A certain female." "Ha ha ha ha ha. A romantic, have we? Let's guess. Might it be that same young lady who called your name from the bottom of the Sumida River? What say you don your haori and play the perished soul once more?" Meitei butts in with his own two cents. "Heh heh heh. There'll be no more calls from the river bottom. She's back in the world of the pure, northwest of here in fact ..." "Doesn't seem so pure to me. That nose is downright toxic." "Huh?" Kangetsu returns a dubious look. "We were intruded upon by that nose cross the way. Right here. Caught us both off guard. Isn't that right, Kushami?" "Yup." The master, still reclining, sips his tea. "By nose, to whom do you refer?" "That mother of your ever beloved." "Huuuh?" "Mrs. Kaneda came asking about you," the master explains in direct terms. He watches Kangetsu's face for surprise, delight, shame, or any other reaction, but sees none. "I suppose she wants me to wed her daughter." Kangetsu replies in his usual quiet manner. Once again he twists his purple ties. "Far from it, it seems. That mother sports the grandest of noses, and ..." Meitei begins, only to be interrupted by the master. "Listen here. All this while I've been thinking up verses to honor that nose." This from out of left field.

The wife, in the next room, can't suppress a giggle. "You're taking it well in stride. Have you got something?" "A little. The first line goes, 'This face but tribute to its nose.'" "After that?" "Next comes,

'Lift to the nose a sacred cup.'" "Keep going." "That's all so far." "I like it." Kangetsu sports a wide grin. "How about continuing with, 'Murky cavities two.'" Meitei is quick with a line. "'So deep no hairs are seen.' How does that sound?" Kangetsu adds another. As each adds to the nonsense, four or five voices sound from the street near the fence. "Imado-ware Tanuki! Imado-ware Tanuki!" The master and Meitei, startled by the uproar, turn toward the front and peer through the gap in the fence. Laughter rises, followed by the sound of footsteps receding into the distance. "Imado-ware tanuki? What's that about?" Meitei quizzes the master. "No idea," the master replies. "They're really at it." Kangetsu adds his assessment. Meitei, as if recalling something, suddenly jumps to his feet and assumes an orator's pose. "Over many years, drawing on my faculty for aesthetics, I've studied this thing called the nose. If the two of you will indulge me for some moments, I'll share what I've come to know." The master, caught off guard, looks at him dumbfounded. "By all means, let's hear it," Kangetsu says in a soft voice. "Despite much investigation, the origins of the nose remain unclear. First off, if we suppose the nose a tool of practical use, then why the redundant openings? And no need to jut haughtily out from the center. Why then, as you can see, has it come to protrude so?" Meitei grasps his own nose by way of example. "I'd hardly call that protruding." The master interjects, foregoing all flattery. "At any rate, it's not sunken. A word of warning up front. To dismiss the nose as two openings side by side, and nothing more, is to invite misunderstanding. -- Now, in my humble opinion, the development of its present form is the natural culmination of myriad human nasal activities, such as blowing one's nose." "Makes perfect sense." The master inserts his approval.

"As you're well aware, when blowing one's nose, one invariably grasps it. And in grasping it, one stimulates this particular area here. According to the fundamentals of evolutionary theory, this area in turn will respond to said stimulation with disproportionate development. The skin naturally stiffens, the flesh gradually solidifies. Before long they've hardened to bone." "That's a bit -- flesh can't just turn to bone." Kangetsu, as a bachelor of science, can't let this pass unchallenged. Meitei, undeterred, continues on. "Skepticism is duly warranted, but the proof lies in the pudding. There's no denying the bone is there. So the bone forms, yet the nose still runs. One can't ignore a runny nose. Actions follow, the sides of the nose are worn away. In the end, a tall, slender protrusion results -- a marvel to behold. As dripping water cuts stone, as the head of Pindola Bharadjava shines with radiant light, in the vein of wondrous fragrances and curious smells, thus is conjured the ridge of the nose." "But yours is round and puffy." "The speaker's features, lest he fall to their defense, are not up for debate. My wish here is to expound, for your benefit, on the nose possessed by the elder Kaneda, the most developed, the grandest, the rarest specimen in all the land." "Hii ya ya ya!" Kangetsu, despite himself, cheers in approval. "However, while extremes harbor certain magnificence, they're also, in another sense, frightful and repulsive. The ridge of that nose may be quite splendid, but it strikes one as overly precipitous. The great men of old, be they Socrates, Goldsmith, or Thackeray, all fell short in facial form and nasal structure. These shortcomings, though, were endearing. It's not sheer height that endears a nose to us, but rather distinction of form. 'Dumplings rather than noses,'

or so I believe they say. Along those lines, in terms of aesthetic appeal, the Meitei nose is more or less ideal." Kangetsu and the master burst into laughter.

Meitei himself, in high spirits, joins the laughter. "Now, what I've talked on thus far --" "Excuse me, good doctor, but 'talk' is a storyteller's term. Let's have something more polished, shall we?" Kangetsu hits Meitei with his own medicine. "Duly noted. Allow me to start anew. -- yes -- I propose to touch next on the topic of nose-face balance. If we focus solely on the nose, in isolation, then the elder Kaneda indeed possesses a noteworthy specimen -- placed on exhibition on Mount Kurama, it would likely win first place. It's that distinguished. Sadly, though, it was planted in place with no regard for the eyes, mouth, or other faculties. Imagine Caesar's nose, snipped off with shears and fused to the face of this cat. Wouldn't that be a sight? Even if we moved it to the cat's roomier forehead, its noble bridge would soar too high, like Nara's giant Buddha on a go board. All sense of proportion would be lost, and with it I believe, any and all aesthetic merit. The elder Kaneda's nose is, in truth, no less dashing than Caesar's. But what of the facial elements laid out around it? Granted, they're a cut above those of this cat. That being said, it is true that the eyebrows march up sharply, carving out homely, spasmodic furrows. These furrows, in turn, hoist up narrow eyes. Is not the pairing of said nose with said face then, gentlemen, most unfortunate?" As Meitei pauses for a moment, a voice sounds from out back. "Still going on about noses. Obstinate knuckleheads!" "That's the cartman's wife," the master informs Meitei.

Meitei starts in again. "The speaker is most honored to learn that, against all expectation, a new listener of the fairer sex has chosen to join in the back. As an unanticipated delight, a fluid and charming voice has injected a bit of luster into an otherwise drab lecture. I would hope to retain the lady's favor by continuing in a non-technical vein, but I'm afraid I must touch on the subject of mechanics. This will necessarily challenge a lady listener, so I ask in advance for forbearance." Kangetsu, at the mention of mechanics, is beaming again. "What I'll now substantiate is that this nose and face are mutually incompatible. I shall demonstrate, through rigorous application of mechanical principles, that they stand in violation of Zeising's golden ratio. First, let  $H$  denote the nose's height.  $\alpha$  is the angle formed by the intersection of the plane of the face with the nose. And please recognize  $W$ , of course, as the nose's weight. Are you following so far? ..." "Who could follow that?" the master objects. "What do you say, Kangetsu?" "I'm afraid you've lost me too." "Oh my. That's not good. I thought I might lose Kushami, but never a bachelor of science. These formulas are pivotal to my thesis. Without them all is for naught -- Ah well, I guess it can't be helped. I'll skip the formulas and jump to my conclusion." "You've drawn a conclusion?" the master interjects with a questioning look. "Of course I have a conclusion. A talk without a conclusion is like Western cuisine sans dessert. -- Now pay attention, gentlemen, here it comes. -- Given the preceding formulae, and in light of the theories of Virchow and Weismann, one must absolutely acknowledge the hereditary nature of innate physical traits. One must also accept, despite the prevailing argument for acquired traits independent of heredity, that mental condition, to some extent, is also tied to said physical

traits. I follows then, that the progeny of one possessing so ill-suited a nose be likewise fated to nasal aberration."

"Kangetsu here is a young man, and perhaps has yet to recognize any special abnormality in the young miss Kaneda's nasal structure. The genes at work may long lie dormant till suddenly, with a shift in the weather, they spring into action. The nose then swells, and may even match the mother's. Therefore, it would seem most prudent, based on Meitei's scholarly analysis, to cease at once all thoughts of said union. I expect you'll hear from the master of this house, as well from as the esteemed nekomata asleep over there, no difference of opinion." The master slowly props himself back up. "Absolutely! Who in his right mind would take that thing's daughter? By all means desist." He makes his case in no uncertain terms. For my part, I mew twice to signal my concurrence. Kangetsu shows no particular indication of distress. "If that's the opinion of my gentlemen friends then I'm happy enough calling it quits. I worry, though, for the other party. If my actions affect her health then I'll find myself in the wrong --" "Ha ha ha ha ha. A crime of passion, so to speak." The master alone is fully serious. "Utter rubbish! That thing's daughter's not worth a second look. Comes barging in here to take me to task in my own home. Insolent cow!" Just as he works himself into a stew, three or four voices call out anew from the fence line. "Wa ha ha ha ha ha!" "Arrogant clod!" yells one. "Must be wanting a bigger house!" yells another. "Poor thing - all bark and no bite!" yells a third. The master, not to be outdone, bellows back from the veranda. "Stuff it! And get away from my fence!" "Wa ha ha ha ha ha! Savage tea! Savage tea!" The voices throw it back at him. The master jumps to his feet, indignant with anger, grabs his walking stick, and rushes out to the road. Meitei claps his hands. "That's the spirit! Go get 'em!" he yells. Kangetsu floats a grin as he twists his haori ties. I follow the master out through the break in the fence, only to find him alone in the middle of the road, brandishing his stick at no one. Not a soul's in sight. The master stands befuddled.