

I am a Cat – Chapter 8b

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

I'll start by describing the bees' battle formation. Some may question my use of the term "battle formation" with respect to this conflict, so let me address such doubt first off. Most folks, when they hear the word "battle," think of Shaka, Hōten, Ryojun, or other such pivotal sites where Japan confronted the Russian Empire's armies. Those schooled in Western verse might imagine Achilles dragging Hector's corpse round the walls of Troy. Others, again in grandiose fashion, may call to mind Zhang Fei of Yan, planted on Chōhan Bridge with his long serpentine lance, defying the advance of Cao Cao's hordes. To each his own when it comes to visions of battle, but one mustn't be overly restrictive. Our unenlightened past may be punctuated with profligate wars, but in this present day, secure in the middle of Greater Japan's imperial capital, such savage acts are utterly out of the question. Should trouble arise, a few police box burnings, as witnessed in Hibiya, is about as far as things go. That being the case, this battle taking shape between master Kushami of Garyōkutsu and some eight hundred stalwart youths of Rakuunkan has to number among the epic battles that the city of Tōkyō has witnessed since its founding. The Zuo Zhang, in recording the Battle of Yiling, begins with a sizing up of respective forces. From times of old, any and all skilled narratives adopt this same approach. Such being the case, the reader should have no objection to my leading off with the bees' battle formation. First to note is that one company of bees formed a column just outside of the lattice fence. Their duty, it seemed, was to mark off a battle line and goad the master on to engage them. "Does he know he's lost?" "Not yet. Not yet." "We've got him. He can't win." "Where is he?" "Does he know what he's up against?" "How could he not know?" "Let's make some noise." "Wan! Wan!" "Wan! Wan!" "Wan! Wan! Wan! Wan!" This was followed by a great battle cry from the full company. A bit to the right of this company, and further into the grounds, a gunnery crew had taken up strategic position. Their general, armed with a giant pestle, was turned toward Garyōkutsu and stood ready to fire. Another stood off at ten or so meters' distance, facing the first. There was one more, in back of the one with the pestle, crouched in place, also facing Garyōkutsu.

Thus these three, facing each other in a straight line, constituted the gunnery crew. According to some, this is "baseball" practice and has nothing to do with preparing for war. When it comes to baseball, I have to confess complete ignorance. However, I'm told it's an American game, introduced into Japan and taking athletic fields by storm, from middle school and up. Each American contrivance, in keeping with America's national character, is more outlandish than the last, so to view the whole formation as a gunnery crew is no great leap. It may be no more than a game, albeit a game that disturbs the entire neighborhood, that the Americans have been kind enough to share with Japan. And the Americans, accordingly, regard it in all honesty as pure athletics. That being said, this particular form of pure athletics, in malevolent hands, is a thinly-veiled pretense for shelling one's neighbors. From what I've seen, I can only conclude that through this game they're honing their arts of assault. This world turns under many guises. Frauds are perpetrated under the guise of charity. Hotheadedness is embraced under the guise of poetic inspiration.

Likewise, warfare under the guise of baseball is by no stretch improbable. Some may see baseball as baseball and nothing more. The account to follow differs, regarding baseball as advanced gunnery whose aim is nothing less than territorial gain. I'll describe first the launching of the dumdummy projectile. One man in the gunnery line grasps the projectile in his right hand and hurls it toward his comrade holding the pestle. As an outsider, I'm not privy to the construction of this projectile. Something hard and round, like a dumpling-size rock, has been covered with neatly-stitched hide. As I was saying, this projectile leaves the first man's hand and flies through the air toward the second man, who brandishes his pestle and knocks it back in the direction whence it came. Sometimes his swing misses, and the projectile sails on past, but most of the time he connects with a loud crack and sends it soaring. The force of the impact is stunning.

As the master already suffers poor digestion, brought on by overwrought nerves, to rile him up is not so hard. The gunners alone would suffice, but around them on all sides is a vast gallery, doubling as reinforcements. The pestle meets the dumpling with a crack, and immediately comes a chorus of whoops and hollers, along with rounds of applause and shouts of encouragement. "What a hit!" "That'll show 'em!" "Show 'em who's boss!" "Had enough?" As if this weren't enough, every third shot comes tumbling onto the master's grounds. This is the necessary culmination of their grand assault. The manufacture of dumdummy projectiles is no longer confined to their namesake arsenal, but nevertheless, the cost is high. Even in times of war, there's no assurance of steady supply. The typical company of gunners has but one, or at most two. Each time the ring of the pestle sends this prized shell flying, it has to be retrieved. To this end, they've formed a separate "fetching" squad and tasked them accordingly. A shell falling on friendly ground is easily fetched, but not so when it lands in tall grass or sails onto private property. One might expect, then, that to spare their efforts they'd launch with an eye toward easy retrieval. In fact, they do just the opposite. This is no sport. It's belligerence. They purposely target the master's grounds. And having hit their mark, they've no option but to rescue and recover. The easiest method of retrieval is to hop the bamboo fence. And once they've hopped the fence, the master is compelled to rant and rave and chase them off. To do any less would constitute surrender. In return for his pains, the hair on his head grows thinner each day.

A single shot launches from the enemy camp with perfect aim. It sails over the lattice fence, clips off several low-hanging paulownia leaves, and strikes the inner rampart, or the bamboo stake fence. The sound of its impact is duly loud. According to Newton's first law, a body set in motion, in absence of intervening force, continues on in a straight line with constant velocity. If this were the sole law governing moving bodies, then the master's head, on this occasion, would have shared the same fate as Aeschylus's. Fortunately, as Newton set forth his first law he also set forth a second, and the master's head, while flirting with disaster, emerged unscathed. According to the second law, the movement of an object changes in proportion to an applied force. Furthermore, the direction of this change is coincident with that of the force applied. I don't claim to fully comprehend all this, but suffice it to say that, owing to Newton, the dumdummy projectile did not tear through the shōji and did not smash into the master's head.

After a short pause, the master's foes, as per plan, come storming onto the grounds. "Over here?" "To the left?" They stir through the grass with sticks. They're always at their most vociferous when storming the master's grounds in pursuit of their prized projectile. To quietly enter and quietly fetch would leave their objectives unmet. Their dum dum projectile might be dear to them, but dearer still is success in provoking the master. On these occasions it's clear enough, even from some distance, where the ball has landed. The signature sound of its striking the fence is known to all. They know where it hit, and they know where it lies. If their wish was to quietly fetch it and go, then they'd quietly fetch it and go. As postulated by Leibniz, spatial relations impart an order to bodies sharing the same moment in time. In the very same way that i-ro-ha-ni-ho-he-to always follow in the same sequence. In the same way that the shade of every willow shelters a loach. In the same way that the evening moon backlights the flight of the bat. A ball by the fence is perhaps a bit less congruous. But that being said, those who launch their ball onto the grounds of another, day in and day out, come to know the lay of the land. They know at a glance where it lies. This thrashing about, then, is clearly directed at the master, defying him and daring him to react.

At this point, the master has no choice but to shake off his usual torpor and rush to retaliate. The same master who, reposing on his living room floor, had listened contently to the lecture on ethics, is on his feet in a flash. With flaming eyes he hurries out, and before one knows it he's clutched his prey. He congratulates himself on a job well done. Congratulations may be in order, but his prey, it seems, is a young lad of no more than fifteen. For the master, a mature man sporting whiskers, it's hardly a worthy foe. Be that as it may, though, the master has what he wants. The pleading lad accompanies the master, under compulsion, back to the veranda. A word here on the enemy's tactics is in order. Having witnessed the master's outrage the day prior, they fully expected his hands-on reaction today. In such case, should one of the older boys fail to escape, there'd surely be consequences. The best course of action, to mitigate such risk, was to send the younger first and second year students in after the ball. Let a youth be detained and berated at length. The repute of Rakuunkan would in no way suffer. On the contrary, the master would be called to question for ill-treating a child. So the enemy reckoned. And this reckoning, where most men are concerned, was perfectly sound. What they neglected to account for, however, was the eccentricity of their present adversary. Had the master been a man of better sense, he'd have exercised restraint the day prior. A man with a burning head is free from the bonds of normalcy and common sense. A man who discriminates, be it between women, children, rickshaw pullers, or packhorse drivers, is no hothead of boastworthy proportion. To number among the great hotheads, one must, like the master, have no qualms about waging war with first-year students and taking one of said students captive. The unfortunate victim of all this was the captive himself. For simply performing his duty, acting on instruction from his upperclassmen to go and retrieve a ball, and for failing to clear the fence in time, he's haplessly ended up in the clutches of a madman, a hothead of epic proportion, and here he languishes, coerced to sit in the madman's garden. The enemy camp, at this point, was not about to turn a blind eye to the indignity visited upon their comrade.

Vying to outrace each other, they spill over the bamboo fence and file in through the wicket gate. Numbering a dozen or so, they array themselves in the inner garden, facing the master. For the most part, they're without their jackets or vests. One, in a white shirt with rolled up sleeves, stands with his arms crossed. Another has a tattered cotton shirt slung over his shoulder. In contrast, another wears a white sailcloth shirt with black hems. Across the chest, in the same black color, his initials are artfully embroidered. They're a sturdy and stalwart bunch, each and every one. As if just in from Tanba, having clambered down from Sasayama the evening prior, they're tanned and muscular. It seemed a shame to send such lads to school for book work. From the looks of them, they'd serve their country better as fishermen or ferry pilots. All are barefoot with rolled up trouser legs, clearly the favored form for their sport, though they call to mind a fire brigade. They stand and eye the master, uttering not a word. The master, too, is silent. Thus they remain for some time, sizing each other up with palpable animosity.

"What's this? An army of thieves?" The master takes the first swing. His nostrils flare in anger, as though he's worked his spite into burning flame and is forcing it out through his nose. The nose of the Echigo Lion, that signature mask donned by street performers for show of ferocity, must be modeled on this very human nose. How else could it impart such fright to lookers-on?

"We're not thieves. We're students from Rakuunkan."

"A likely story. Since when do Rakuunkan students steal into others' yards?"

"Look at our caps. That's the Rakuunkan insignia."

"Easily forged. If you're really students, then why the incursion?"

"Our ball flew over the fence."

"You launched it over the fence."

"That's just how it flew."

"Insolent scoundrels!"

"We'll be more careful going forward. Just this one time, please, excuse the incursion."

"A group of fellows, from who knows where, clamber over my fence and steal onto my grounds. This isn't something to dismiss lightly."

"I can assure you we're Rakuunkan students."

"If that's the case, what year are you?"

"Third year."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

The master looks back toward the house and calls out for assistance. The maidservant Osan, who hails from Saitama, slides open the fusuma and pokes her head out in response.

"Go get someone from Rakuunkan."

"Get whom?"

"Anyone. Just go."

"Okaay."

The maidservant answers but doesn't move. Puzzled by the scene before her, unsure of the errand, and suspecting the whole affair is asinine, she wavers in place and fails to suppress a grin. As the master sees it, he's waging all-out war. He's wielding his rage in grand fashion. In spite of all this, his loyal servant, who of course should have his back, not only fails to grasp the gravity of the situation, but wavers and grins when enlisted to help. He flies off the handle.

"I don't care who, just get someone! Got it? The school principal will do, the chief administrator will do, the head instructor will do, ..."

"The school principal ..." Of the titles reeled off by the master, only the school principal resonates with the maidservant.

"The school principal, or the chief administrator, or the head instructor. Is that not clear?"

"What if no one's there? Shall I fetch the custodian?"

"Don't be stupid! What good's the custodian?"

At this point the maidservant, having no other recourse, quietly acknowledges her errand and sets off. Even so, its purpose still eludes her. I watch with concern, fearing she may, in fact, return with the custodian. Contrary to my fears, though, the ethics instructor comes marching in through the front gate. After calmly waiting on him to take a seat, the master lays in.

"Just a short while prior, these persons, exhibited here before us, saw fit to intrude onto these premises ..."
His phrasing is archaic, as though channeling the narrative of the Forty-seven Rōnin. "... Could such as these be students, really and truly, hailing from your esteemed school?" He ends with a touch of sarcasm.

The ethics instructor, with full composure, calmly surveys the entire line of intrepid warriors arrayed across the garden. Having completed his survey, he returns his gaze to the master and responds as follows.

"Yes, these are indeed our students. To guard against untoward behavior, we instruct and admonish them daily... I'm afraid in this case we've fallen short ... What were you lads doing on the wrong side of the fence?"

The scrutiny of their ethics instructor seems to render the students speechless. No one utters a word. Like sheep beset by swirling snow, they cowered together in silence.

"I suppose they were after their ball," the master concedes. "When one lives next door to a school, the occasional errant ball is not to be unexpected. However ... the ruckus they make. If they quietly crossed the fence, quietly pickup up their ball, and quietly went their way, I'd be less inclined to object ..."

"Right you are. I exhort them, day in and day out, but with so many students, there's always a few ... All of you heed my words. Should your ball fly over that fence, you're to circle round to the front and announce yourselves before retrieving it. Is that clear? ... It's a big school. Try as we might, we can't always be minding all our charges. And with physical fitness an essential part of the curriculum, we can't well hold them indoors. Given we allow this activity, it will no doubt disturb your peace. I ask in advance for your understanding. For my part, I can offer my assurance that from here on they'll only come for their ball through the front gate, and only after announcing themselves."

"Your assurance will suffice. Let them play ball as they like. As long as they come round front and announce themselves, I'll not object. I entrust these students to your good care. You're free to lead them back to your own grounds. It's a shame this had to involve you." The master, as ever and always, engages with a roar and ends with a whimper. The ethics instructor, his Tanba monkeys in tow, withdraws to Rakuunkan. What I referred to as the major altercation has at this point, for the time being, run its course. Some may scoff at my billing of this as a major altercation. Let them scoff. The gravity of said altercation is not theirs to decide. In the master's eyes, this constitutes an altercation of grand proportion, and accordingly I've described it thus. What it means or doesn't mean to others is beside the point. The fact that it fizzled, like a swift arrow shot from a strong bow that slows to a harmless stop, is valid critique. One must remember, however, that such is the master's nature. Bear in mind too, that it's this very nature that feeds my narrative and renders it comical. Some may argue that a grown man chasing down and seizing a young lad of no more than fifteen is asinine. I don't disagree. As Ōmachi Keigetsu would state it, the master himself, in spite of his years, has yet to progress from child to man.

I related the minor altercation involving the master, which led to what I've now detailed as the major altercation. All that remains then, in wrapping up this narrative, is to touch on the repercussions that followed. Some readers may feel I'm merely rambling, but let me assure you, there's method to my madness. In every word, and in every phrase, I assure you, are grand and eloquent universal truths. And every word and phrase, as these pages progress, though things may at first seem tedious and haphazard, will in time reveal itself as cohesive and coherent, quickly coalescing into a sermon most profound. Take heed, then, to read with due respect. Don't slouch, don't kick up your feet, and by all means, do not skim through. Ryū Sōgen, as it's told, purified his hands with rose water before reading Kan Taishi's texts. In a similar vein, when it comes to reading the words of yours truly, be so good as to purchase your own volume, rather than waiting on a friend's worn copy to make the rounds. What I'm about to relate I've labeled as repercussions, but those assuming repercussions have little significance, and therefore aren't worth reading, will come to regret it acutely. By all means, read to the end and read with care.

On the day following the major altercation, I set out for a short stroll. On the corner that turns onto the alleyway, who do I see but Master Kaneda, stopped in the street and conversing with Suzuki. Kaneda, heading home in his cart, had run into Suzuki, who'd come calling in his absence and was walking back in the opposite direction. There was nothing new happening at the Kaneda's these days, so I seldom bothered to frequent their grounds. Master Kaneda though, seen for the first time in a while, was somehow a welcome sight. Suzuki, too, I had not seen in a while, so I thought I'd treat myself to the honor of their company, if even from some distance. Thus decided, I drew near to where the two gentlemen had stopped to converse. Their conversation, of course, carried to my ears. I was in no way at fault here. They were the ones talking. If Kaneda, after all, had seen fit to assemble a web of informants to report on my master's movements, then he should certainly take no issue with me, by pure chance, happening to overhear his own conversation. At any rate, I listened as the two of them talked, but not through any purposeful intent. It was their words, in fact, which I was making no special effort to intercept, that intruded upon my ears.

"I was just calling at your place. I'm glad we found each other." Suzuki bows his head politely.

"Indeed. I'd been hoping to talk with you too, in fact. This is most fortunate."

"Fortunate indeed. Is there something I can help you with?"

"It's nothing, really. Nothing of great import, but without your help I can't get it done."

"I'm happy to be of service. What is it I can do?"

"Well, actually ..." Kaneda seems to hesitate.

"Shall I call again at a better time? What would suit your schedule?"

"It's really not worth the trouble. -- Well anyway, since we're here together, perhaps I could make a request."

"By all means ..."

"It's that crank. That old acquaintance of yours. I believe he goes by Kushami or some such?"

"Yes, Kushami. What's he into now?"

"Nothing new. It's the other day still. It just doesn't sit well with me."

"Perfectly understandable. Kushami on his high horse ... Master of his own small world. If he'd only open his eyes a bit, he'd see where he stands in the order of things."

"Exactly. No respect for wealth, and disdain for those of us who create it -- impertinent through and through. I thought I'd give him a taste of who he's dealing with. I put the screws to him good, but he still doesn't yield. He's holding out, headstrong as ever. I can't say I'm unimpressed."

"He doesn't know what's good for him. Prefers to go down swinging. Hasn't changed from back in the day. He's only harming himself, but he'll never admit it. The man's utterly incorrigible."

"Ah ha ha ha. Incorrigible's the word. Let it never be said I didn't give it my best. I've thrown the kitchen sink at him. Finally, I let some students loose on him."

"Now there's a novel ploy. Did it work?"

"We'll see. I think I've got him on the ropes. Before much longer he's bound to throw in the towel."

"That's good to hear. Swagger though he may, he's one against the world."

"Exactly. He's in it alone and over his head. We're wearing him down. That's where you come in. I'd like you to call and scope things out."

"Understood. That's easy enough. I'll go over now and pay him a call. On my way home I'll let you know what I've found. The thought of it intrigues me - the stubborn one brought to his knees."

"Please do stop in on your way home. I'll look forward to your report."

Oh my. Ulterior motives abound. Men of industry, it would seem, are not to be taken lightly. At the wave of a hand, they can send my master, charred old lump of coal that he is, twirling into the deep end. They can rile and vex him till his hair falls out, consigning him to the same sad fate as Aeschylus. I can't say what force it was that set the earth to spinning on its axis, but I can say that, in these present times, it's

money that moves the world. And its none other than men of enterprise who grasp the efficacy of money and wield its power to their own ends. Owing to these men, the sun rises in the east each day without incident and duly sets in the west. Having been brought up in the house of a scholar of meager means, I must confess I've been woefully ignorant of wealth's allure. In any event, it's my hardheaded and unenlightened master who'd best get wise. His hardheaded and unenlightened notions have put him in great peril. His very life, which he values most dearly, is at stake here. I've no idea how the master will receive Suzuki. To what extent he understands the situation he's in should, however, in due course reveal itself. There's no time to waste. As my master's cat, I'm invested greatly in his welfare. Without delay, I rush past Suzuki, reaching home in advance of his call.

Suzuki, true to form, is in high spirits. Making no reference to the Kanedas on this particular occasion, he confines himself to routine small talk, which he advances with great relish.

"You don't look so well. Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing worth noting."

"But you seem pale. Best to take care, the season being what it is. Are you sleeping well?"

"Well enough."

"Worries weighing you down? I'm happy to help in any way I can. All you have to do is ask."

"What kind of worries would I have?"

"I don't know, just in case. I thought it best to offer my services. Worries, more than anything else, will grind a body down. Best to walk through this world with laughter as your guide. You strike me as far too melancholy."

"Laughter, too, can be toxic. In excess, it can even be deadly."

"You're pulling my leg. Fortune calls, they say, at the house where laughter dwells."

"In ancient Greece, there was a philosopher named Chrysippus. I don't suppose you've heard of him."

"Can't say I have. What of him?"

"He died in a fit of laughter."

"Really? What a curious thing. That was long ago though ..."

"Long ago or present day, is anything really changed? He saw a donkey eating figs from a silver bowl. It struck him as funny and started him laughing. Once set to laughing, he couldn't stop. In the end, he laughed himself to death."

"Ha ha ha. Well I'm not suggesting to laugh uncontrollably. But laugh modestly -- in good measure -- a little laughter cleanses the soul."

Suzuki, all the while, is scrutinizing the master's mood. Just then, the front gate opens with a rattle. One imagines it might be a caller, but such is not the case.

"Our ball's in the yard. May we please go get it?"

"Help yourselves," the maidservant calls back from the kitchen. The students make their way round back. Suzuki, a curious look on his face, asks the master what's up.

"The students from out back. Their ball's landed in the yard."

"Students from out back? There are students out back?"

"Rakuunkan. That's the name of their school."

"I see. A school, huh? Must be noisy at times."

"Noisy or whatever, the real problem is lack of scholarship. If I were Minister of Education, I'd shut that place down in a flash."

"Ha ha ha. They seem to have stoked your ire. Is it something they've done?"

"Not something, everything. Dawn to dusk they're a constant pain."

"If they bother you so, why not just move?"

"Why should I have to move? How dare you even suggest it?"

"Don't take it out on me. They're just youngsters. Let them enjoy their youth."

"Easy for you to say. Just yesterday, in fact, I summoned their instructor and gave him a piece of my mind."

"Well done. I assume he was duly chastened."

"He was."

At this moment, the entry gate opens again. "Our ball's in the yard. May we please go get it?" calls a voice.

"Back again are they? Another ball in the yard, eh?"

"Yep. We agreed they should come round front before going back there."

"I see. That's why they keep calling at the gate. Got it."

"Got what?"

"Why they're here so often for their ball."

"This is the sixteenth time today they've been back there."

"Sounds disruptive. Why not keep them out?"

"How can I keep them out? They need their ball back."

"You mustn't always assume that the way things are is the way things have to be. A man with sharp corners, as he rolls through life, is bound to get chipped and banged. Smooth your edges a bit and roll with the flow. Corners restrict movement, and every arduous lunge merely lands with a painful jolt. The world's not yours alone, and others won't bend to your will. How can I put this? Men of wealth will have their way. Stand in defiance, and they'll only grind you down. Your nerves will fray, and your body will weaken away. None will praise your valor, and time is not your friend. The other party is fully at leisure, dispatching agents at will. You're one against many, and there's no way to win. Be obstinate if you like, but not to the detriment of your work, and not to the point of personal dysfunction. To put it bluntly, why toil in vain with no prospect of reward?"

"Excuse us, but our ball's flown into the yard. Can we go round back and get it?"

"Back again already," Suzuki notes with a laugh.

"Insolent things!" The master's face is beet red.

Deciding he's accomplished what he came for, Suzuki excuses himself, invites the master to stop over and see him sometime, and takes his leave.

Coming in to take his place is Dr. Amaki. Instances are few, looking back over time, of a hothead self-diagnosing as a hothead. And in such instances, the realization that one is a hothead comes only after one's frenzy has passed its peak. In the master's case, his frenzy reached its peak in the major altercation of the day prior. While said altercation may have started with a roar and ended with a whimper, it did, in fact, run

its course. The master, reflecting at leisure in his study that same night, with the benefit of hindsight, concluded that all was not right. Whether the fault lay with Rakuunkan, or whether it lay with himself, was open to debate, but clearly something was out of whack. Even living as he did with the ruckus of a middle school right next door, it occurred to the master on reflection, he shouldn't be flying off the handle as he was, day after day the whole year through. When things aren't right, corrections are in order. His only recourse, it seemed, was medication to soothe his nerves, to cut his temper short at its source. With this in mind, he'd decided to ask Dr. Amaki, his long-time family physician, to call and look him over. The wisdom of this course of action aside, the master must at any rate be commended for his insight and lauded for his resolution.

Dr. Amaki, with his signature smile and easy manner, starts by asking the master how he's feeling. This is how most doctors start. For my part, I wouldn't put my faith in any doctor who didn't first ask how I felt.

"I'm afraid, doctor, there's just no hope for me."

"Heh? You don't really mean that, do you?"

"These medicines you give me, do they really do any good?"

Dr. Amaki is a bit taken aback, but his mild manner and gentle nature prevail, and he responds without passion, his voice calm.

"I can't but imagine they're helping."

"My digestion, even with all this medicine, seems no better than before."

"I don't believe that's the case."

"I wonder. Do you think it might be a little improved?" The master is looking for an outside opinion on the state of his own stomach.

"You won't be cured overnight. Give the medicine time to work. You're better now than you were before."

"You really think so?"

"Are you still prone to fits of temper?"

"I am. Even in my dreams, I'm always raging."

"Physical activity might help. Have you tried it?"

"That only sets my blood to boiling all the faster."

Dr. Amaki realizes he's getting nowhere.

"Let's have a look at you." With that, he begins his examination. The master, unable to wait for him to finish, interjects a question.

"Doctor, the other day, in a book I was reading, there was a bit on hypnotism. The author claimed it's been used to treat kleptomaniacs, and that it can also cure various maladies. Any truth to that?"

"There is. It's a recognized form of therapy."

"Is it still practiced?"

"It is."

"How hard is it to hypnotize someone?"

"Not hard at all. I've done it myself a number of times."

"You know how to do it?"

"Sure. Shall we give it a go? It's a perfectly rational procedure. Works on anyone. If you're open to trying, I'll hypnotize you."

"I am interested. Let's try it. I've wondered for a while what it's like. Only one concern, though. Are you sure I'll come back to myself?"

"No need to worry. Let's give it a go, shall we?"

Their conversation concludes, and it's decided that the master will undergo hypnosis. This is something new for me, and with concealed delight I look on from the corner of the parlor, eager to see what will happen. The doctor goes to work on the master's eyes. What he does is to stroke the eyelids in a downward motion. The master's eyes are already closed, yet he continues his strokes, as if seeking to condition a certain response. After some moments, he addresses the master. "As I continue to stroke your lids, can you feel your eyes growing heavy?" he asks. "Yes, they are getting heavy," the master replies. The doctor continues, downward stroke after downward stroke. "Heavier and heavier. Feeling the weight?" The master, lost perhaps in the process, gives no response. For three or four more minutes, the same strokes are repeated. Finally, the doctor speaks. "Your lids are too heavy to open," he announces. The poor master, it seems, has lost the use of his eyes. "They won't open?" "They won't open." The master goes silent, eyes still closed. I wonder, with more than a little concern, if my master is now a blind man. The doctor, after another pause, says, "Try opening your eyes. You'll find that you can't." "Is that so?" No sooner has the master said this, than he opens both eyes, same as always. "It didn't work," he announces with a grin. "It

sure didn't," the doctor concurs, likewise sporting a grin. The master's hypnosis falls utterly flat, and Dr. Amaki takes his leave.

Next to call -- such a succession of callers at the master's place is unprecedented. At the home of a recluse like my master, it's almost unreal. Yet the calls continue. And next to call is an odd one. It's not just due to oddity, though, that he merits mention. As I've already stated, my present objective is to describe the repercussions of the master's major altercation. This odd caller, when it comes to these repercussions, figures decisively. I can't say what his name is, but he's a fellow of forty or so. His face is narrow and long, with a goat-like beard adorning its lower fringe. As I refer to Meitei as the aesthete, I'll refer to this man as the philosopher. Not because he stirs the scene with ballyhoo like Meitei, but simply because, as I watch him engage with the master, he seems to present a philosophical air. They've known each other, it seems, since their student days. Dispensing with all formalities, they drop into comfortable conversation.

"Meitei, eh? Like a flake of goldfish food, floating this way and that, hither and dither, on a pond. The other day, as I hear it, he was out walking with a friend. They happened upon a nobleman's residence, and Meitei, despite having no connection to the place, insisted they impose on the occupants for a cup of tea. Flits his way through this world."

"Did they get their tea?"

"I never bothered asking -- anyway, the man's just quirky. In no way devious or nefarious, though. Light and airy goldfish food. Suzuki, eh? -- calls here, does he? Well I'll be. Not much of an intellect, but savvy in the ways of the world. The gold watch type. No depth, however, and no grounding. 'Smooth your edges,' he says, but does he really understand what it means to lose one's edges. If Meitei's goldfish food, Suzuki's straw-wrapped konnyaku jelly, featureless and shape-shifting."

The master, greatly taken with these witticisms, enjoys a hearty laugh, his first in a good while.

"And what of yourself?"

"Me? Good question. What would I be -- perhaps a Japanese yam. Stretched thin and stuck in the mud."

"I envy you, though, ever calm and self-possessed."

"I'm really just run-of-the-mill. Nothing that merits envy. Happily, though, I'm content with where I am. For that I'm thankful."

"I presume you're well enough off these days."

"Yes and no. Who can really say? At least I can say I'm feeding myself. Certainly nothing remarkable."

"I'm struggling of late. Endless irritations. The whole world, it seems, is out to get me."

"Then take on the world. If you want to fight, fight. It feels good sometimes. Just keep in mind that people come in all types, and try as you might you'll never bend them all to your will. Get creative with chopsticks, and you'll only find it harder to eat, but when it comes to slicing bread, each to his own is best. Go to a top tailor, and he'll bring you a suit that fits to a T from the first wearing. Order from a second-rate shop, on the other hand, and you'll have to wear it in. The world is a wondrous place, though, and the longer you wear a suit the better it matches your frame. Happy is the child of masterful parents who bear him just right and deftly raise him in line with the times. When such is not the case, however, one perseveres. What can one do but shoulder the world and wear it in?"

"This world, I'm afraid, will never suit me. I've no hope."

"Force yourself into an ill-made suit, and you'll tear it apart at its seams. That means quarrels, strife, and even suicide. You voice your discontent, but you're not suicidal, of course, and when was the last time you quarreled? Things really aren't so bad."

"But I do quarrel. Constantly. If not in open conflict and face to face, then seething and fuming inside. That, too, constitutes a quarrel."

"I see. Raging against the world. If it suits your mood, then rage away."

"But I hate it."

"Then stop."

"I'll confide in you. My emotions have taken the upper hand. I've lost control."

"What on earth is it, then, that's riling you so?"

Thus prompted, the master pours forth his grievances. Starting with the Rakuunkan altercation, then the Imado-ware tanuki call-outs, then Pinski and Kishago. The list goes on. The philosopher listens patiently. When he finally speaks, he advises the master as follows.

"Does it really matter what Pinsuke or Kishago might say? At the end of the day, it's all just mindless prattle. And why mix it up with middle schoolers? They disturb your peace, do they? Have tongue lashings and confrontations made them any less disruptive? When it comes to matters like this, our Japanese forebears were wiser by far, as I see it, than their Western counterparts. The Western approach is touted as positive and proactive, and to great fanfare of late, but it's profoundly flawed. For one thing, initiative knows no bounds. You can assert your will, for as long and as far as you like, but to what end? When is enough ever enough? Take those cypress trees. You judge them an eyesore and cut them down.

Beyond is that lodging house, newly obstructing your view. Drive away the lodgers, and the next house on stokes your ire. Where does it ever end? This is the Western approach. From Alexander the Great to Napoleon, were they ever satisfied with their conquests? A man provokes you, confrontation ensues, he won't back down, you take him to court and prevail. But don't imagine, even for a moment, that you've put the matter to rest. You can fret and fuss, tying up loose end after loose end, but you'll have no peace till you're in your grave. Men don't like oligarchy, so they establish a representative government. The representative government lets them down, so they clamor for revolution. Rivers are brash, so we tame them with bridges. Mountains hinder us, so we tunnel through them. Traffic is a bother, so we lay down railways. Our satisfaction never lasts long. And anyway, even the most proactive of men can only exert his will so far. Western culture may be proactive and enterprising, but it breeds and feeds on perpetual discontent. In old Japan, on the other hand, satisfaction was not sought through changes external, but rather through inner reflection. Where it departs greatly from Western culture is in its fundamental premise that the world outside one is best left be. Take generational strife within the family. Unlike Europeans, who seek to bring about harmony through relational innovations, Japanese see inter-generational strife as an immutable part of the human experience. Within that context, they work to reign in and placate their passions."

"It's the same between husband and wife, or master and servant, or warrior and merchant. Look at the natural world. It's the same again. -- If mountains hinder travel to neighboring lands, then don't scheme schemes to tear them down. Find a way, rather, to carry on in absence of said travel. Cultivate contentment in your own lands, without venturing abroad. This is the crux of the matter. Think about it. The Buddhists and Confucianists, at the fundamental level, grapple with this problem. No man, however accomplished, can bend the world to his will. The setting sun, at his beck and call, will not reverse its course. No more will the waters of the Kamo River, upon his order, flow back whence they came. The most he can hope to command is his own mind. Learn to still your heart, and the students of Rakuunkan, rant and rage though they may, are of no concern. If folks want to shout out 'Imado-ware tanuki,' then let them shout. Should Pinsuke and company assail you with trite remarks, brush them off as the worthless scoundrels they are. A Buddhist priest of long ago, so the story's told, was set upon by a swordsman. 'A flashing sword but slices the springtime breeze,' he recited with full composure. His artful words disarmed his attacker, sparing his neck from the blade. Train the mind, year upon year, to perfect its detachment, and mind-over-matter will surely rule the day. I'm no expert in these things, but to invest one's faith in the West's incessant call to action, it seems, is more than a bit misguided. Truth be told, no amount of action or effort on your part will keep those students out of your hair. Wouldn't you agree? You don't have the authority to shut down the school, and unless they breach the peace to the point of police intervention, your actions are all for naught. You've no chance of prevailing. And the more you seek to engage, the more resources you'll consume. You're outnumbered and outgunned. In other words, you'll be forced to bow down in financial submission. Hordes of youngsters will put you in your place. You're one man, lacking in means, flailing against the world, and therein lies the seed of your discontent. Think about it. Am I not correct?"

The master, neither agreeing nor disagreeing, simply listens. This final odd caller departs, and the master retreats to his study, not to read but to think.

Suzuki had advised the master to yield to wealth and numbers. Dr. Amaki had counseled the master on calming his nerves, suggesting hypnotism as one possible course. This final odd caller had preached detachment and mastery of the mind. The choice was now the master's. One thing was clear. His present tack had run its course.