

## I am a Cat – Chapter 9a

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

The master's face is pockmarked. Such pockmarking, they say, was prevalent in times past, before the Restoration. In these modern times of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, however, they're highly anachronistic. Our medical experts assure us, based on detailed statistical studies, that pockmarked faces are now declining at a rate inversely proportional to growth in the population, and before much longer they'll be altogether gone. This is well-accepted fact, and far be it for this humble cat to question its veracity. I don't know how many humans on this earth sport such pockmarks, but I can comment on my own sphere of association. Not a single cat I know is pockmarked. Of humans, there's only one. That one human, needless to say, is none other than the master. It's a terrible pity.

The master's face always sets me to wondering. How is it that such an odd face can live and breathe, unapologetically, the modern air of this new twentieth century? Unlike days of old, when pockmarks ruled supreme, they've now been relegated to upper-arm inoculation sites. Not only do they no longer boast the higher ground on tips of noses and cheeks, but their status in whole is largely diminished. The time is ripe to deliver, were it possible, a merciful coup de grâce. The pockmarks themselves must no doubt feel forlorn. Then again, perhaps they hang on as they do, haughtily crowding the rare face, in hope of reversal of fortune - a setting sun, as day is fading to night, restored once more to its zenith. If such is the case, then premature dismissal or disdain is fully unwarranted. These assemblies of antiquated voids, stubbornly resisting the fast-rising tides of change, are worthy of due respect. Their enduring fault, though, is how filthy they look.

When the master was just a child, there resided in Ushigome, in the Yamabushi section, a renowned master of Chinese medicine named Asada Sōhaku. This old man, when he made the rounds to his patients' homes, as it's told, always rode in a litter, carried quietly on the shoulders of attendants. When the old man passed away, and his successor took his place, the litter was immediately abandoned in favor of a rickshaw. When this successor passes away and is in turn succeeded again, his herbal teas may well give way to antipyrine. Even in Sōhaku's day, being carried about Tōkyō in a litter was not viewed with favor. Such choice of travel mode was limited to hold-outs from feudal times, pigs transported by train, and old Sōhaku.

The master's pockmarks are no more in vogue than old Sōhaku's litter, and the objective observer would look upon either with pity. The master, however, when it comes to stubborn, will not be outdone by some doctor of Chinese herbs. Every day he marches off to school, displaying his forlorn and singular pockmarks to the world, and teaches his English Readers.

As he stands on his platform, his entire face contoured with vestiges of the previous century, he no doubt bestows on his students, apart from the standard instruction, a cautionary tale of utmost import. More so

than drilling "The ape has hands" in English, he elucidates with ease the important topic of "Life with a pockmarked face." Speaking nary a word, he nevertheless enlightens his charges. Were it not for instructors like the master, these same students, to understand this topic, would have to resort to libraries or museums. In terms of required effort, it would be no less strenuous than our work today to portray ancient Egyptians through the study of mummies. Seen in this light, the master's pockmarks provide, oddly enough and through no conscious intent, a service of no small merit.

The master, of course, did not invite smallpox to overrun his face with any such merit in mind. He was a recipient, in fact, of the smallpox vaccine. Regrettably, what was put in his arm found its way to his face. Being still just a child, and lacking his present vanity, he scratch and scratched at the itchy pox. Like an active volcano, his skin erupted in response, laying waste to the face he'd been born with. The master tells the wife, on occasion, what a handsome young boy he'd been before the vaccine. So lovely was his appearance, he likes to boast, that Westerners at Asakusa Shrine did a double take. Who's to say such wasn't the case? Unfortunately, though, there are none to attest to these claims.

Whatever merit these pockmarks may possess, and whatever cautionary tale they may impart to his charges, filthy and unsightly is filthy and unsightly. Since reaching the age of discretion, the state of the master's face has troubled him greatly, and there's no measure he hasn't tried in his efforts to clear his skin. Unlike old Sōhaku's traveling litter, however, pockmarks are not readily dispatched at the whim of their owner. They're still there, plain as day. They weigh on the master's mind, and as he wanders the streets, he's known to make an accounting of like-marked faces. Entered into his diary each day is a record of such faces. All details are recorded. Whether male or female, for example, or whether sighted in the shopping district at Ogawa or the parks of Ueno. When it comes to knowledge of pockmarks, the master's resolved to be second to none. The other day, when a friend called after traveling to Europe, the master queried him. "Tell me, did you see many pockmarked faces?" "Let me think," his friend replied, and sat pondering for a moment. "Almost none," he finally replied. "When you say 'almost none,' then you mean you did see some?" the master asked in return. "Some, yes, but we're talking beggars or vagrants. Not among the educated classes," the friend replied with evident disinterest. "I see. So not quite like Japan," the master added.

Having desisted from confrontation with Rakuunkan, on the advice of his friend the philosopher, the master has holed himself up in his study, dwelling on who knows what. Accepting the other's admonishment, perhaps he's practicing quiet reflection, training his mind to be calm and aware. Then again, the man's spirit is fundamentally timid and small, and sitting there in his gloom, hands in pockets, is not likely to yield any hoped-for result. It occurs to me he'd do better by far in pawning his foreign books and studying music under a geisha. He's a man of narrow mind, though, and not about to listen to said cat. Deciding he's best left to his own devices, then, I've kept my distance for a number of days.

It's been exactly seven days now. There are Zen practitioners who, through intense force of will, stay in lotus posture a full week and emerge enlightened. Given that, I decide to reconnoiter the master's lair and see how he's doing, if he's breathing or expired, agitated or content. On silent paws, I slip around the veranda, position myself at the study entrance, and survey the room.

The study faces south and is six mats in area. In the best-lit spot sits a large desk. To simply call it a large desk does not do it justice. It's two meters in length, over a meter in width, and proportionately high. It's not, of course, standard fare. It was special ordered from a local cabinetmaker, with the stipulation that it function both as desk and sleeping platform. I've never heard the story of the desk's origins, so I've no idea why the master ordered something so large, or why on earth he ever thought to sleep on it. It may have been some passing fancy, triggered by clouded thoughts. Or perhaps in some moment of madness, where disjointed concepts are often fused together in the mind of the afflicted, the master's mind arbitrarily associated his desk with his bed. In any case, it's a novel creation. While novel, though, it's of no practical use. I did once see the master dozing on top of this desk. He rolled over in his sleep and tumbled off onto the veranda. Ever since, his desk has been strictly his desk.

In front of the desk is a seating cushion of light woolen material. There are three holes on one side, burned there by three cigarettes. The cotton batting, visible through the holes, has been soiled dark. On top of this cushion, with his back to me, sits the master. His sash, worn to a dull gray, is tied in a double knot, with both ends hanging down toward the upturned soles of his feet. Just recently, I lunged at these sash ends and got my head swatted. I know now to stay clear.

Is he still sunk in thought? There's a maxim I can't but recall. A thinker of poor thoughts, they say, might just as well be dreaming. At any rate, as I steal a glance from behind, something on the desk flashes bright light over my eyes. Reflexively, I blink several times in succession. Curiosity gets the better of me in the end, and despite the brightness, I force my eyes to focus on its source. The flashes, I see now, are coming from a mirror being moved about on the desktop. Why on earth has the master brought the mirror to his study, and why is he tipping it this way and that? This mirror belongs to the bathing room. In fact, I saw it there this very morning. It has to be the same mirror, as in the master's home there's only but one. The master, after washing his face each morning, uses this mirror while parting his hair. -- Some may find it surprising that a man like the master should bother to part his hair. However, while he may neglect much else, he takes great care in tending his hair. In all the time I've been here, I've never seen him crop it short, even at the heights of summer heat. It's always a good six centimeters or more in length. Not only does he part it on the left in grand fashion, but he imparts a prim upward kick to the ends that fall to the right. This could well be an outward sign of psychosis. I struggle to reconcile this pretentious parting of his hair with his oddball desk, but at the end of the day he's harming no one, so no one objects. And he takes due pride in his grooming. Setting aside the high-brow parting of his hair, let's return to the question of why he keeps it so long. There is, in fact, a very sound reason. His pockmarks, as I understand it, didn't just

encroach on his face, but advanced from day one to the very crown of his head. Should he shear down his hair in the typical manner, to fifteen or even nine millimeters, some tens of pockmarks would show themselves from his lightly covered scalp. Pat, rub, or oil as he might, the pocks would still show. However much they might embellish the scene, like fireflies floating here and there in a cut field, it goes without saying that the wife would disapprove. By keeping his hair cut long, he refrains from deliberately exposing what need not be exposed. If he could, he'd grow long hair over all his face, letting his pockmarks be only his own. Where hair does grow, and grow freely, he sees no need to pay the barber to shear it short and advertise the subjugation of his skull by smallpox. -- This is why the master's hair is long, which is why he parts it, which is why he has need of the mirror. And this mirror, of which there's only one in the whole house, resides in the bathing room.

Given that said mirror, which belongs in the bathing room, and of which there is only one, is now here in the study, it follows that either it walked itself here in some state of delirium or the master went and fetched it. Assuming the master went and fetched it, one has to wonder why. Then again, is it perhaps an essential element in his practice of quiet reflection? Long ago, a certain scholar once called on an esteemed priest, a Chishiki so-and-so. He found the esteemed priest stripped to the waist and polishing a roof tile. When he asked what the other was up to, the priest answered that he was hard at work fashioning a mirror. The scholar was taken aback. Even a renowned priest, he declared, polish though he might, can never produce a mirror from a roof tile. "Is that so?" the priest responded with a laugh. "I'll desist then. I suppose it's like you and your books. Read and read as you might, you'll never awaken your mind." The master, perhaps, having fetched the mirror from the bathing room and triumphantly tilting it this way and that, had taken some cue from this lesson. Concerned where he'll go with it, I quietly sit and watch.

The master, oblivious to my concerns, gazes intently into his prized mirror. Mirrors, by nature, are eerie things. It takes great courage, they say, to sit up late in a candle-lit room, alone with a mirror, and peer into its depths. I remember when the daughter here, for the first time, thrust a mirror in front of my face. Horrified by the sight, I tore round the house three times. Even in the full light of day, to gaze and gaze at one's own reflected face, as the master is doing, has to be unsettling. To begin with, it's hardly a sightly face. "Indeed, an off-putting face," the master finally mutters to himself. I have to give the man credit for acknowledging his own ugliness. While his actions seem over the edge, his words ring true. One step further, and his own ugliness will begin to appall him. No man, until he fully recognizes in himself the terrible wretch that he is, can be said to be wise in the ways of the world. And unless he gets wise in the ways of the world, his soul is good as lost. "The horror," should be the next words out of his mouth, but they don't emerge. After "Indeed, an off-putting face," thinking who-knows-what, he draws in a breath and puffs up his cheeks. He brings the flats of his hands to his puffed-up cheeks, patting them two or three times. I've no idea what this rite is about. I can't but feel though, in this moment, that this face before me is familiar. On further reflection, it comes to me. It's Osan's face. A little bit on Osan here, if I may be allowed to digress. Her face is terribly puffy. The other day, a certain caller brought the master a paper

lantern, in the form of a puffer fish, from the Anamori Inari Shrine. Osan's face is no less puffy than that lantern. It's so puffy, in fact, that the eyes are all but absent. Whereas the puffer fish inflates to a perfectly round form, however, when it comes to Osan, whose underlying facial structure is multi-planar, her puffiness is far from uniform. Imagine a six-sided clock face afflicted by dropsy. Osan would take great exception to all this, so I'll leave off here and return to the master. As I was noting, the master has drawn in his maximum breath, puffed his cheeks full of air, and patted them over with the flats of his hands. "With the skin this taut, who would notice these marks?" His words, again, are directed at himself.

Next he turns to the side, letting the light strike his face in profile, and views the result in the mirror. "Only makes them all the more prominent. Looks clearer when facing the light. Curious thing." He seems to be fully engrossed. He extends his right hand, holding the mirror as far from his face as possible, and quietly studies the reflection. "Not so bad at a distance. Close up is the problem. -- Same can be said of anything, not just faces." He speaks as though citing some newly-discovered truth. Next he flips the mirror onto its side. Putting the base of his nose at the center of the frame, he scrunches his eyes, cheeks, and brows in closer to his nose. Immediately unhappy with the outcome, he mutters, "Nope. No good," and promptly desists. "How can a face be so unsightly?" He draws the mirror in closer, as if doubting his own eyes. With his right index finger, he rubs the flat of his nose. Then he presses the tip of that same finger against a sheet of blotting paper on his desktop. A circle appears where oil has been transferred from nose to finger to paper. He's just getting started. He turns over his fingertip, still daubed with oil from his nose, and draws down the lower lid of his right eye, executing to perfection a common gesture of contempt. At this point, it's no longer clear whether he's examining his pockmarks or merely facing off against the mirror. It would appear, on the surface at least, that the master's short attention span has the better of him, but such is not the case. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, one could interpret his actions as a path, albeit a meandering one, to self awareness through dialog with one's own gestures and expressions as reflected in the mirror. All human studies are studies of the self. Study of heaven and earth, of mountains and streams, of the sun and the moon, of celestial bodies, are all but proxies for study of self. No man is capable of setting aside his own self in the interest of other entities. The moment he jumps outside of himself is the moment he loses himself. To liberate another from his self, or be to be liberated by another, however much wished for, is simply not an option. Back to antiquity, it naturally follows, all great men have been self made. It's no more possible to know oneself through the good offices of others than it is to taste and judge the quality of beef through the chewing and swallowing of another. Morning sermons, evening lectures, and books read by lamplight are all but implements, tools to spur the process of self discovery. One's true self can never be found in the words of a sermon, the teachings of a sage, or the pages in heaps of moth-eaten tomes. What seems to be self is merely an apparition. Even an apparition, though, is preferable to a blank void. Chasing shadows is not necessarily futile, as a shadow tends to fall in proximity to its source. Most shadows, as it turns out, connect to their sources. In this vein, the master's twisting and turning of his mirror is not so far off base. Better this course than putting on scholarly airs and regurgitating Epictetus.

The mirror, while known to incubate conceit, can also serve to tamp down pride. For those who are shallow and vain, there's no greater means to inciting further folly. Through history's long legacy of harm arisen from foolish pride, afflicted both on self and on others, the majority has its roots in the mirror. Just as the inventive physician Dr. Guillotine transgressed terribly in facilitating the chopping of heads during the French Revolution, so too must the inventor of the first mirror have an unsettled conscience. On the other hand, when self esteem is on the wane, or the ego has withered, there's no better salve than a mirror. Beauty and ugliness both come to light. One has to wonder how one bungled along thus far, with head held high in the world of men, while sporting such a face. This moment of honesty, of all the moments in life, is a moment most gratifying. Man's noblest moment is that in which he recognizes his own folly. Those still steeped in conceit should bow their heads in humble deference to the self-aware fool. The conceited may strut proudly, spreading contempt and reveling in ridicule, but these in fact are but veiled forms of submission. The master lacks the wisdom to recognize in the mirror his own folly, but he is able to see, and objectively assess, the pockmarks dotting his face. Recognition of physical flaws is a step on the path toward awareness of moral corruption. There's hope for the master yet. That discourse with his friend the philosopher, perhaps, has yielded good effect.

The master, unaware of my observations and contemplations, continues to yank at his eyelids, making faces into the mirror. Finally satiated, his attention turns to the state of his eyes. "Thoroughly bloodshot. Must be chronic conjunctivitis." So remarking, he rubs his bloodshot eyelids, in a circular motion, with the flats of his index fingers. They may very well be itchy, but they're red enough already, without this added agitation. Much more of this, and he'll wear them down to nothing, like the sunken eyes of a salted sea bream. It's no surprise that when he finally re-opens his eyes and turns them back toward the mirror, they're cloudy and dull, like the winter skies of northern climes. They've never been bright to begin with. To describe them in the extreme, they're disarrayed, lacking delineation between the whites and the darker pupils and irises. Just as his soul dwells in vague obscurity, his eyes float lost in the depths of their sockets. This was long attributed to congenital eczema or the after-effects of smallpox, and they say that the master, from his earliest days, was administered home remedies, whether ground from insects plucked off willow trees or concocted from brown frog parts. For all his mother's efforts, however, and contrary to all her hopes, his eyes, to this day, are dull as the day he was born. In my opinion, the master's dull eyes have nothing to do with congenital eczema or smallpox. The sad state of his listless eyes, as I see it, owes itself to nothing other than the murky constitution of the brain in his head. The workings of a dull mind, over time and as matter of course, are bound to manifest themselves somewhere. His mother, unaware of all this, subjected herself to needless concern. Where there's smoke, there's fire, and where there are dull eyes, there's a mind steeped in folly. The master's eyes are a window into his soul, and his soul, like a Tenpō-era one-sen piece, is empty at its core. His eyes, also like the Tenpō one-sen piece, are oversized with respect to their efficacy.

Now he's twisting his mustache. It's always been an unruly thing, with hairs growing this way and that. Individualism may be in vogue of late, but all these facial hairs dancing to their own tune is clearly a source of consternation for their proprietor. The master, duly concerned with this state of affairs, is doing his utmost to restore order. He's implemented a strict regimen, working at length to train and condition each and every strand. His passionate efforts have not been in vain, for a hint of unity has of late emerged. While it used to be that his mustache just grew, he can now boast that he's growing his mustache. Passion feeds on its own success, and the master, sensing now that there's hope for his whiskers, is on them morning and night, whenever his hands are free, prodding and cajoling. He aspires to the grandest of whiskers, no less than those sported by the esteemed Kaiser Wilhelm II. Heedless of how his whiskers grow, be it sideways or downward, he grasps them in bundles and draws them skyward. The whiskers themselves are surely under duress, and the master himself, the owner of said whiskers, is seen on occasion to wince a bit. But there's no gain without pain. Like it or not, these whiskers will learn to stand on their heads. To the uninformed, all this fuss is hard to fathom, but to those in the know, it all makes perfect sense. In an age when educators revel in bending their charges to their will and bragging on their exploits, the subjugation of whiskers too is praiseworthy.

As the master is thus engrossed in the forming of his mustache, the polygon-faced Osan calls from the kitchen that the mail's arrived. Shortly after, her signature ruddy hands appear in the study entrance. The master, with his right hand twisting his whiskers and his left hand holding the mirror, pivots to look her way. One glance at his mustache, with its tails coerced skyward, and Miss Polygon beats a hasty retreat to the kitchen, where she grips the kettle lid for support as she laughs a hearty laugh. The master pays her no heed. He calmly sets down his mirror and takes up the first piece of mail. It's printed in typeset with imposing characters and reads as follows.

Greetings good sir. I hope this finds you well. Riding a succession of victories over these past months, our military has triumphed over their Russian foes, and peace has been restored. Our brave and noble men in uniform, to the delight of all citizens everywhere, sing songs of jubilation. Let us never forget the dedication of those officers and men who, responding to the Emperor's call, enlisted in the armed forces, shipped off to faraway lands, endured hot sun and frigid cold in devoted prosecution of the battle, and even laid down their lives in service to their country. This month marks the return of their comrades, and our association will be hosting a grand celebration on the 25th in their honor. Over one thousand of our local commissioned officers, non-commissioned officers, and rank-and-file soldiers will take part. In addition, we believe it only proper to express our heartfelt gratitude to the families of the fallen. To celebrate our fighting men in due fashion, with the enthusiastic backing of our citizenry, is our association's ultimate mission. It's my sincere hope that you'll donate generously to this grand cause. Yours most sincerely.

The signatory is a member of the peerage. The master, after reading it through, folds it up and returns it to its envelope with a look of indifference. Most likely he won't be contributing. From a while back now, after giving several yen for famine relief in the Tōhoku region, he complains to any and all how he was shaken down. As he clearly donated of his own free will, it's hard to see how he was shaken down. His recounting is entirely off base. After all, no one held a gun to his head. Nevertheless, the master feels he was robbed, and no finely printed letter, even for the sake of returning soldiers, and even at the behest of the peerage, will pry further funds from his grasp. As the master sees it, his obligations lie with himself first and returning soldiers second. Once his own needs are met, he's happy to lend a hand, but as things stand, with each day a struggle, the peerage can fend for themselves in fêting soldiers. The master takes up the second piece of mail. "Another one in typeset," he remarks.

As we enter into these cooler days of autumn, I trust that you and your family are well and prosperous. Cutting straight to the chase, you're no doubt aware that our institute for learning, since its founding several years prior, has been greatly hindered in its mission by a small number of unscrupulous men. I, your humble servant Shinsaku, fully attribute this situation to my own personal shortcomings. I accept all responsibility for this course of events and now, after much soul searching and lengthy endeavor, have finally arrived at a means of setting things right, while also funding construction of a building worthy of my vision for our institute. I've taken it upon myself to compile a volume of work titled "Insights into the Lesser-Known Arts of Needlework." Through long years of study, and through great effort to distill these arts to their essence, I've poured my heart and soul into the writing of this work. Accordingly, I hope to sell this work, offered at cost-to-publish plus a modest margin, into every household far and wide. Doing so not only serves to advance the knowledge of these arts but will also bring in funds for the construction of our new building. I entreat you, therefore, with greatest humility, to purchase a copy of "Insights into the Lesser-Known Arts of Needlework" without delay, knowing that your doing so supports a noble cause. A copy ordered for your maidservant, I believe, will prove to be money well spent. I look forward to the honor of your favorable response. With due brevity and full sincerity.

Greater Japan Institute of Women's Advanced Needlework

Your humble servant Nuida Shinsaku, Headmaster

Such is the content. The master promptly wads up this deferentially-composed missive and tosses it into the trash. Poor Shinsaku's great toil and impassioned appeal, I'm afraid, have fallen on deaf ears. The master takes up the third piece of mail. This one radiates a strange splendor. The envelope is decorated with red and white candy stripes, and in their midst is written, in bold brush strokes, "To the esteemed scholar Chinno Kushami." I can't vouch for what might be inside, but its outer surface makes quite the impression.



If I were master over heaven and earth, I should swallow the River Xi in a single gulp. If heaven and earth were the master of me, then what would I be but dust on the wayside? Tell me then, which is it? Where do I stand with respect to heaven and earth? ... We don't know who first ate sea slug, but we have to respect his courage. We don't know which brave man first indulged in fugu, but we have to praise his valor. The man who first ate sea slugs harbors the spirit of Shinran, and he who first indulged in fugu is Nichiren reborn. A man like you, dearest Kushami, knows only dried gourd pickled with miso. We've yet to see, in this whole wide world, a great man raised from dried gourd and miso. ...

Your closest friends will sell you out. Your parents too will put their own interests first. Lovers will cast you aside. Riches and honor are fickle friends. Status and stipend are here and then gone. That treasured learning, which you've packed inside your head, erodes away with time. What is left to rely on? Under heaven and earth, where do you place your faith? In the gods? The gods are but clay figurines, crafted by desperate men. Reeking hulls of excrement, they fail to hold their form. Relying on the unreliable, men purport to be comforted. Frustrated drunkards one and all, they spout out dubious truths as they totter toward their graves. A lamp, run out of oil, goes dark of its own accord. When your destiny's run its course, what then will remain? My dearest Kushami, perhaps it's time for a cup of tea. ...

If you hold other men in contempt, then you've no need to fear them. Those who hold others in contempt, though, must shore their own selves 'gainst the world's disdain. Gentlemen of power, wealth, and fame revel in contempt for others. Disdain in return, however, is met at once with angry indignation. Leave them to their seething, such blasted idiots! ...

Holding other men in high regard, yet being met in return with disdain, breeds fitful bouts of discontent. These fitful bouts are the basis of rebellion. The spark of rebellion, though, cannot be found in the fitful bouts of malcontents. Rebellion is willfully sparked by gentlemen of power, wealth, and fame. There's ample ginseng in Korea. Won't you try some, dear sir?

Most sincerely yours,

Tendō Kōhei (Sugamo)

Shinsaku offered all of his due respect, but this fellow only offers his sincerity. His lesser servility may stem from the fact that he's not seeking donations. While it's clear he's not after a donation, it's not at all clear what he is after. Such rambling prose would be due grounds for rejection by any worthy editor, so one might expect the master, lacking the intellectual horsepower to unpack it, would tear it up and throw it in the trash. Contrary to expectation, though, he reads it through several times over. He imagines there's meaning in this madness and is determined, perhaps, to chase it to ground. Between the heavens and the

earth, there's much that's not understood, yet nothing that defies explanation. Prose too, no matter how abstruse, lends itself freely to creative interpretation. Human beings, as another example, are as easily seen as fools as as sages. And why stop there? The assertion that men are dogs, or that men are pigs, is not so hard to defend. Mountains can be called small rises, and the cosmos can be called cramped and confined. Why not assert crows are white, and why not label the town belle an ugly hag? Master Kushami a noble gentleman? Why not? This muddled letter too then, rationalized with a proper dose of logic, is bound to yield up truths. A fellow like the master, in particular, who's made a career of elucidating English prose that's over his head, is wont to draw out meaning. This is a man who, questioned by a student on the use of "good morning" on days when the weather is anything but good, racked his mind for seven days. When asked the Japanese word for "Columbus," he agonized for three days and three nights to fashion an answer. To such a man, an association between dried gourd pickled with miso and great men, or an association between rebellion and ginseng is by no stretch a bridge too far. Just as he pondered and pondered "good morning," he slowly digests the demanding prose before him, and confusion gives way to insight. "Most profound. No doubt the work of a great intellect. Brilliantly composed." The master is duly impressed.

This series of utterances epitomizes the master's folly, but at the same time, there's a vestige of truth here too. The master is invariably drawn to things he can't comprehend, and in this respect he's by no means unique. The incomprehensible commands respect. Failure to fathom conjures up, somehow, a sense of the sublime. For this very reason, while laymen are wont to expound on things they don't understand, feigning some level of proficiency, learned scholars are wont to pepper their lectures with obfuscation. In university lecture halls, incomprehensible expositions are duly revered, while straightforward explanations are dismissed as uninspired. The master's admiration for this prose lies not in its clarity of purpose. Its objective, in fact, is a complete mystery. The out-of-the-blue introduction of sea slugs and ephemeral excrement only add to its mystique. The sole reason the master holds this prose in high regard is that he can't comprehend it. Just as disciples of Lao Tzu can't comprehend the Tao Te Ching, Confucianists can't comprehend the Book of Changes, and Zen priests can't comprehend the Rinzaïroku analects. However, for the sake of appearance if nothing else, all are compelled to contrive and attach some fancied sense of meaning. Revering the incomprehensible, while connecting significance to it, is an endless source of intellectual delight. -- The master carefully returns this finely-crafted writing to its envelope, sets it on his desk, places his hands in his pockets, and sinks into quiet contemplation.

"Hello there! Anyone home?" A loud voice calls out from the entryway, requesting admittance. It would seem to be Meitei, but when has Meitei ever requested admittance? The master in his study hears the calls, yet stirs not the least. His hands remain in his pockets. It's not his role to go and receive callers, and he's never once answered a caller from his spot in study. The maidservant is out buying laundry soap. The wife is in the privy. The role of receiving callers defaults to yours truly, who chooses not to oblige. The caller finally steps up into the house and resolutely opens the shōji. The master acts the master, and the caller

acts the caller. There are sounds from the parlor as several fusuma are slid open and slid shut before the caller turns to the study.