

I am a Cat – Chapter 11b

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

"Was it ten yet?"

"Regrettably, no. -- I continued across Konya Bridge, followed the river upstream to the east, and met a group of three blind masseurs in passing. From off in the distance, the incessant howling of a dog carried over the air ..."

"Duly theatrical. An endless autumn evening, on the bank of a river, the far-off howling of a dog. And you the fugitive warrior, defeated and fleeing."

"It's not as if I'm on the run from anything."

"Not anything you've done, but it's what you're planning."

"The unfortunate conclusion then, if buying a violin is so wrong, is that students of music are all transgressors."

"If others don't approve, then any action, however virtuous it might be, marks one a transgressor. That's why there's nothing in this world so fickle as transgression. Even Jesus Christ, in the time and place he lived, was a transgressor. Likewise, our good and fair Kangetsu, if he buys a violin in such a setting, numbers among the transgressors."

"I'll concede, in that case, that I indeed had transgression on the brain. Be that as it may though, the problem at hand was waiting out the hours till ten."

"Let's just traipse through town again, ticking off each district. If that doesn't do it, then we'll let the autumn sun blaze anew. If it's still not time, then down the hatch with three dozen drying persimmons. We're with you, so do what you will to get us to ten."

Kangetsu couldn't help grinning.

"Since you've preempted my narrative, I'd just as well capitulate. We'll skip ahead and let the hour be ten. At that prescribed hour, I made my way back toward Kanezen. The chill of night had settled in. The main thoroughfare of Ryōgae-chō was largely deserted, so much so that the clack of geta echoed forlornly. At Kanezen, the main shutter had been drawn, and only the smaller side door was open. I felt a sense of disquiet as I slid inside, as though dogs were on my tail, tracking my every move ..."

At this point, the master diverts his gaze from the pages of his soiled and tattered tome. "Have you bought your violin yet?" he asks. "He's just about to," replies Tōfū. "Still not there yet? On and on it goes," the master comments half to himself. Dokusen, off in his own silent space, continues to fill in the go board with black and white stones.

"Mustering my resolve, I burst into the shop, hood drawn over my head, and asked for a violin. Four or five shop boys were seated round the brazier, where they'd been conversing. Startled by my appearance, they all turned my way, as if on cue, and gazed at my face. Instinctively, I raised my right hand and pulled my hood lower over my eyes. I asked again for a violin. The closest boy, scrutinizing my face, gave a vague answer, rose to his feet, and took down the violins that were hung in the shop front. I asked how much they were, and was told they were five yen twenty ..."

"A violin for that cheap? Are you sure they weren't toys?"

"On further inquiry, they were all the same price, each and every one purportedly well-crafted. I produced a five-yen note and twenty sen coin from my purse, chose a violin, and wrapped it up in the large furoshiki I'd brought along for the purpose. All this while, the shop boys had ceased their conversation and glued their eyes on me. My hood was low, so there was little chance I'd be recognized, but nevertheless I was anxious to beat a hasty retreat. When at long last I'd secured the wrapped bundle under my coat and prepared to exit the shop, the clerks called out loudly in unison to thank me for my patronage. A chill raced down my spine. Stepping out onto the road, I quickly looked about. To my great relief, the coast was clear. However, from some hundred meters distant came several lads, reciting Chinese poems in booming voices that echoed through the quarter. Afraid they could be trouble, I slipped around the Kanezen corner and headed west, following the moat to Yakuōji Street, emerging from Kimura, and skirting Mount Kōshin on a long trek back to my lodgings. When I arrived back home, the hour was ten till two."

"You were on your feet from dusk to nearly dawn," Tōfū notes with great sympathy. "Thank heaven it's over. Like Dōchū Sugoroku played on an endless board." Meitei breathes a sigh of relief.

"The best is yet to come. Up to now was merely the prologue."

"There more still? This is no simple affair. Rare is the man who can suffer such a telling."

"Suffering aside, to stop here would be akin to baking a cake and neglecting to ice it. Let me continue just a bit further."

"You're free of course to continue at will. We're all ears."

"How about it, old teacher? I've bought my violin now. Will you listen a bit?"

"Let me guess. Next you're going to sell it? Count me out."

"I'm nowhere near to selling it."

"In that case, count me double out."

"How utterly awful. Tōfū, you're the only one here listening with any sincerity. My enthusiasm's a bit damped, but what can I do? I'll soldier on and make it brief."

"No need for brevity. Please, take your time. It's all quite fascinating."

"Now that I finally had my violin, just as planned, my first problem was where to stow it. I had frequent visitors dropping by, so hanging it out or standing it up meant instant exposure. I could dig a hole and bury it, but then I'd have to dig it back up to play it."

"That would be a problem. Did you hide it up in the ceiling then?" Tōfū suggests the obvious solution.

"There was no ceiling. Farmhouses have open rafters."

"I suppose that rules that out. Where did you think to hide it?"

"Take another guess."

"No idea. Did you stow it in a shutter box?"

"Nope."

"Did you wrap it in bedding and stuff it into the closet?"

"Nope."

While Tōfū and Kangetsu are thus exchanging thoughts on where one hides a violin, the master and Meitei begin a side discussion in earnest.

"What do you make of this?" the master asks.

"Of what?"

"These two lines."

"Let's see. { *Quid aliud est mulier nisi amicitiae inimica* } ... It's Latin, is it not?"

"I know it's Latin, but what do you make of it?"

"I thought you were expert in Latin." Meitei, wary of what's in store, sidesteps the master's query.

"I'm trained in Latin, and could of course read it myself, but in this case I'm asking you."

"If you can read it yourself, then why ask me?"

"Go on and try. Render it in English."

"This feels like some cross-examination."

"In any case, give it a go."

"Tell you what, let's save the Latin for later and give Kangetsu's tale its due attention. It's nearing its pivotal moment. The suspense is building. Will he or will he not be found out. -- Tell us more, good man. What did you do?" Meitei is suddenly re-invested in Kangetsu's trials and tribulations. The master, unhappily, is expeditiously abandoned. Kangetsu, drawing energy from Meitei's renewed interest, explains where he stowed his violin.

"In the end, I hid it in an old wicker basket. This was a basket given to me by my grandmother when I left home, who in turn, I'm told, brought it with her when she first came as a bride."

"That's quite the relic. Not the best match to a brand new violin, though. Wouldn't you say, Tōfū?"

"I'd have to agree. A bit incongruous."

"No less so than the back side of a ceiling." Kangetsu pushes back against young master Tōfū.

"It may be ill-matched, but rest assured, it lends itself to verse. 'A lone violin, in the cold of autumn, sleeps in an old wicker basket.' How about that, gentlemen?"

"You're on a roll today with your Haiku."

"Not just today. Any and every day. Verses constantly well in my mind. The late great Shiki, in fact, was blown away by my prowess in verse."

"You were acquainted with Shiki?" Tōfū, in all sincerity, can't but pose the question.

"Not so much a direct acquaintance, I have to say, but more like kindred souls on the same wavelength." As Meitei's answer borders on the nonsensical, Tōfū leaves it at that. Kangetsu grins and continues his tale.

"So I had a place to stow it, but taking it out was the problem. If it was just a matter of taking it out, I could of course take it out and look at it without mishap, but where was the point in that? I'd bought it to play it. If I played it, it would sound. If it sounded, I'd be found out. Just to the south of me, separated by a mere Rose-of-Sharon hedge, lodged the ringleader of the Bottom Dwellers. I shuddered at that thought."

"That's rough." Tōfū voices his sympathy.

"I see. Rough indeed. The proof is in the pudding, as they say. And just such proof was the downfall of Court Lady Kogō. When it comes to snitching food, or even forging bank notes for that matter, one may well pull it off, but songs and melodies are not so easily hidden."

"In absence of sound, all can be concealed, but ..."

"Hold on now. You speak of absence of sound, but even such absence holds no guarantees. Back in the day, a number of us lodged in a temple, where we took turns in the kitchen. Among our temple-mates was a certain Suzuki Tō. This Tō was fond of mirin. He would go out and buy it, bringing it back in a long-necked beer bottle, and indulge with relish, sharing not a drop. One day, as Suzuki was out strolling, Kushami here, acting against better judgment, helped himself to a first sip ..."

"That's not like me, now, is it? It was you who went for Suzuki's mirin."

"Well well. I assumed I was safe here, as you seemed engrossed in your book. Watch out for this one, he's all eyes and ears. Now that you mention it, I may have had some too. I may have had some too, but it was you who got caught. -- Listen good, gentlemen. Our esteemed Kushami is no drinker. Nevertheless, this mirin was there for the taking, so he followed sip with sip. His face turned beet red and puffed up to unsightly proportion. It was dreadful ..."

"Enough already. Hadn't you best refresh your Latin?"

"Ha ha ha ha. Then Suzuki comes home, picks up the bottle, and finds it half empty. Certain someone drank some, he surveys the room. Pressed into the corner, like some frozen figurine fired from red clay, is our esteemed master Kushami ..."

The three of them, no longer able to contain themselves, burst into laughter. Even the master, ostensibly immersed in his reading, can't suppress a grin. Dokusen, as the lone exception, seems to have overplayed

his hand at the go board and worn himself out. At some point he's slumped over forward and is now dozing soundly.

"Here's another case where silence failed in thwarting detection. Some years ago, I traveled to Ubako Onsen. During my stay there, I shared a room with an elderly man. He was retired, having worked in Tōkyō in the fabric trade or some such. We merely shared a room, so who cares what he worked in, be it fabrics, second-hand apparel, or what not. At any rate, a problem arose. On my third day there, I ran out of smokes. As you may be aware, Ubako sits alone in the mountains. You can soak in the springs and take your meals, but not much else. It's an out-of-the-way place. Running out of smokes, in a place like that, is a minor crisis. Things in short supply are coveted most, and the thought that I had no smokes set me suddenly, and much more than otherwise, craving a smoke. To make matters worse, my elderly roommate, who was trekking place to place, had a separate bundle stocked with smokes. He'd pull out a few, seat himself on a cushion, and puff away, as if almost to taunt me. If he'd merely smoked, I could have let it pass, but he'd blow out smoke rings, stand up smoke columns, send his smoke sideways, sculpt inverted acrobatics in the very air, and play games with his nostrils, making the smoke appear and retreat. To put it short, he flaunted his smoke."

"What do you mean, flaunted his smoke?"

"No different than folks who flaunt their lavish dress, this man flaunted his copious smoke."

"I see. If it bothered you so, then why not beg a few for yourself?"

"Call it stubborn male pride, if you like, but I wasn't about to beg a smoke."

"Is it unbecoming to beg a few smokes?"

"Perhaps not, but I wasn't about to."

"What did you do then?"

"Instead of begging, I simply helped myself."

"Goodness!"

"I saw the old fellow grab his washcloth and head off for the baths, so I reckoned now was the chance. I started in and smoked for all I was worth. Just as my cravings were washing away into smoke-infused bliss, the shōji slid open. As I turned to look, who did I see but the owner of the smokes."

"He didn't go and bathe?"

"He'd thought to, but then, realizing his purse was still in the room, he'd doubled back to retrieve it. He needn't have bothered himself. Who would've touched it? Not exactly a trusting soul."

"Could you really blame him? After all, you were into his smokes in short order."

"Ha ha ha ha. Maybe I triggered his defenses. Purse aside, though, what he met on return was two days' pent up craving, unleashed in a frenzy of heavy smoke, clouding the room from ceiling to floor. News of one's misdeeds, they say, travels fast. To be sure, my transgression was bared on the spot."

"Did he call you out?"

"Wise as he was in his years, he said not a thing. Instead, he produced a sheet of paper, rolled up fifty or sixty smokes in it, and offered it my way, apologizing for the poor quality of his stock. After that, he headed back to the baths."

"Is that an example of the old Edo comportment?"

"Whether Edo comportment, or fabric trade comportment, I couldn't say. What I can say, though, is that from then on we were best of friends. I stayed for two more weeks and enjoyed myself immensely."

"All the while smoking the old man's smokes?"

"As it turned out, yes."

"Are we done with the violin?" The master finally turns his book face down on the floor, signaling his surrender, and pulls himself up to a seated position.

"Not yet. We're just getting to the best part, so come and listen. And while you're at it, bring master what's-his-name, dozing there on the go board. Ah yes, master Dokusen -- Dokusen should hear this too. What do you think? Sleeping like that will put one out of sorts. Time we roused him."

"Hey, Dokusen! Up and at 'em! Come and hear the story, it's just getting good. Wake up. Excessive dozing's toxic, they say. Your wife would be appalled."

"Huh?" Dokusen lifts his head. A thin stream of saliva, having driveled from his mouth, glistens sharply down the length of his goatee, like a shiny fresh snail track.

"Oh was I tired. Drifted straight to Neverland, like high white clouds resting 'gainst lofty peaks. Don't know when I've slept so soundly."

"We saw you were out. Now how 'bout waking up?"

"I'm awake, I'm awake. The story's getting good?"

"Kangetsu's got his violin and is finally about to -- what was it, Kushami? Where was he at?"

"How would I know? Don't ask me."

"I'm finally ready to give it a play. Come listen."

"Still the violin? I was afraid of that."

"You and your ilk pluck at the stringless qin, so your sounds don't carry, but Kangetsu's strings squeak and whine, sounding their way through neighboring walls. That presents a conundrum."

"I see. He's not versed, then, it would seem, in the silent method."

"That I'm not. If you'd be so kind as to share, I'm all ears."

"No need to ask or tell. Rather, witness the pure white cow in the pristine pasture," is Dokusen's offbeat reply. Kangetsu, attributing these cryptic words to some Zen-like dream state of the speaker, judiciously disregards them and returns to the topic at hand.

"At long last, I struck upon a plan. The next day was the Emperor's Birthday holiday, and I spent the day at home. Restlessly, I'd take the lid off the old wicker basket, only to set it back in place. Finally, as the sun went down, the crickets set to chirping, some even in and under the basket. In that moment, mustering my resolve, I pulled out the violin and bow."

"Finally produced." Tōfū is following eagerly. "Take care now. Don't do anything rash," is Meitei's advice.

"First I picked up the bow, running my eyes from tip to frog ..."

"Now don't get carried away. It's not like you're dealing in swords." Meitei can't resist a jab.

"I felt in that bow a piece of my own soul, no less so than the samurai who, in the light of a cold night's fire, unsheathes and admires his honed and trusted blade. As I held that bow, a chill ran up my spine."

"I knew it. Pure prodigy," Tōfū remarks. "And I knew it. Pure profligacy," Meitei counters. "Can we not just play already?" the master asks. Dokusen stays silent, an air of consternation on his brow.

"Happily, all was well with the bow. Next, I placed the violin under the lamplight and inspected it front to back. Imagine, if you will, that during these five or so minutes the crickets continued to chirp ..."

"We'll imagine as directed, so rest assured and play the thing."

"In due time. -- Fortunately, there was no damage to the violin either. Satisfied, I rose to my feet ..."

"You were off to somewhere?"

"Listen quietly, please, and you'll know soon enough. The way you interrupt after every few words, I can hardly relate my tale. ..."

"You heard the man, gentlemen. No more interruptions. Now shush."

"It's you alone who keeps interrupting."

"I see. In that case, apologies. From here on, I'm zipping my lips."

"I tucked the violin under my arm, pushed on my sandals, took several steps outside, then stopped in my tracks ..."

"Here we go again. I knew it! Just when things start progressing, he yanks the plug and kills the power."

"You can turn back if you like, but not for a drying persimmon. They're all gone."

"It's most regrettable that one can't tell a story in the presence of two respected scholars without dodging barbs and darts. I soldier on, but only for Tōfū's sake. -- I tell you, Tōfū, after several steps I circled back and grabbed my red blanket, one that I'd bought for three yen twenty before leaving home, and draped it over my head. I extinguished the lamp, after which it was so dark that I struggled to locate my sandals."

"But where were you off to?"

"Listen, and I'll tell you. After finally finding my sandals, I'm outside. The sky is filled with stars, the ground carpeted with fallen red persimmon leaves. The red blanket's over my head, and I've got my violin. Around and up to the right, a path rises on its way toward Mount Kōshin. As I made my way up this path, the bell at Tōreiiji sounded out with a long slow bong. Its sound penetrated the blanket covering my head, swept through my ear canals, and echoed in my head. What do you suppose the hour was?"

"I've no idea."

"It was nine. I set out on my own, as the long autumn night fell, up the mountain path, a kilometer or so in length, that led to a flat known as Ōdaira. I'm a timid man by nature, and places like this frighten me to no end. Interestingly, however, when one's focused, heart and soul, on a single task, all thoughts of fear are swept from the mind. This Ōdaira flat is on the south flank of Mount Kōshin, and on a clear day it affords

an unparalleled view, through gaps in the red pines, of the castle town below -- how to describe the place? A clearing of some several hundred square meters, with a large slab of stone in its center, some ten or more square meters in size. On the north end of the clearing is a series of ponds, collectively known as Cormorant's Marsh, with camphor trees growing round the edge, many reaching three arm spans in circumference. The terrain is rugged, and the only sign of human habitation is a single camphor roaster's hut. The vicinity of the marsh is foreboding even in daylight. Fortunately, engineers from the army corps clear and maintain the path for training purposes, so the climb up is not a difficult one. After slowly making my way to the stone slab, the first thing I did was spread my blanket and seat myself. I'd never ventured up there on such a cold night before. After situating myself I slowly took in my surroundings. Bit by bit, the solitude of the place sunk in, deeper and deeper, to the depths of my being. In such a place, feelings of fear can disturb and cloud the mind. Cast aside fear, though, and what remains is clarity, brightness, and tranquility. After twenty minutes of quiet contemplation, I imagined myself the sole inhabitant of a palace formed of natural crystal. Not only that, but I felt my body -- not just my body, but my heart and soul as well, were one with the frigid air, acquiring a certain translucence as the chill set in. I lost all sense of being. Did a crystal palace house me, or was I myself becoming a palace of crystal ..."

"I'm not sure I like where this is going." Meitei's banter takes a somber turn. "Most intriguing," Dokusen comments, seeming to be, at least to some small degree, sincerely impressed.

"Had this situation persisted, I might well have passed the whole night on that slab, lost in thought, never once touching the very violin that led me up there in the first place. ..."

"Were there foxes about?" Tōfū wants to know.

"As I sat there, the line between self and non-self blurred away. All sense of direction left me. I was no longer sure if I even lived and breathed. Just then, from the depths of the marsh came a loud and sudden cry. ..."

"Here we go now!"

"That cry shook the whole mountain, rushing on like a gale, setting the autumn treetops astir. With a start I came to myself."

"Thank Heaven for that." Meitei pats his chest in feigned relief.

"Through trial and tribulation is all renewed." Dokusen gives a knowing look. Kangetsu fails to follow.

"Having regained my senses, I looked around. All Mount Kōshin was steeped in silence. Not the drip of a raindrop was heard. Well then, I thought to myself, what was that? It was too shrill for a man, and too loud

for a bird. Could a monkey -- no, there were no monkeys in these parts. What then? This question set my mind, which was heretofore so calm, to racing wildly. Thoughts swirled, fast, furious, frenzied. Like our crazed townsfolk cheering the Duke of Connaught, such was the scene in my head. The pores in my skin all opened at once. Valor, grit, prudence, and composure all took their leave, like shōchū blown to cool a bare shin, turning to vapor and drifting away. My heart danced the Suteteko in my rib cage. My knees knocked like a kite flapper in a stiff breeze. I couldn't take another moment. I threw my blanket over my head, tucked my violin under my arm, jumped down from the slab, raced down the mountain as fast as my legs would carry me, dashed into my lodgings, jumped under the covers, and slept the night through. I tell you, Tōfū, I've never in my life been so unsettled."

"What then?"

"Nothing. That's it."

"What about the violin?"

"I wanted to play it, but how could I? That cry. Who could play after that?"

"I feel, somehow, your narrative leaves one hanging."

"Feel how you might, I've told it just as it happened. What does everyone else think?" Kangetsu surveys the room, a satisfied look on his face.

"Ha ha ha ha. Touché. You've done your absolute utmost, no doubt, to keep it true to fact. As I followed your tale with great interest, all the way through, it occurred to me that perhaps a male version of Sandra Belloni had graced us all with a visit to these eastern shores." Contrary to expectation, Meitei receives no queries on his reference to Sandra Belloni. Undeterred, he proceeds unprompted to expound. "Sandra Belloni played her harp in the moonlight while singing Italian songs. Your trek up Mount Kōshin, with violin in tow, was similar in intent but quite different in outcome. Sad to say, while the other party impressed the Moon Goddess Chang'e, you were conversely impressed upon by some Boggy Marsh Demon Tanuki. When it comes down to it, it's a simple matter of farcical versus sublime. A most lamentable outcome."

"I see no need to lament." Kangetsu is unexpectedly serene.

"The idea of it, climbing a mountain to play the violin. The whole scene was affected. Serves you right you were frightened off." The master offers a harsh and unsympathetic critique.

"Building a house on sand and dancing with the devil. Tsk, tsk," Dokusen remarks with a sigh. Dokusen's words again are lost on Kangetsu. And not just on Kangetsu. Most certainly lost on all present.

"At any rate, Kangetsu, I suppose you're back these days to polishing spheres in the lab?" Meitei, sensing a lull in the conversation, steers it on to a different course.

"No, as a matter of fact. I took leave to travel home, so I put that work on hold. Those spheres were wearing me down so, I'm thinking I've had enough."

"But no perfected spheres means no doctorate, does it not?" The master knits his brows in concern, but Kangetsu seems, unexpectedly, to take it all in stride.

"Ah yes, the doctorate. At this point, to be honest, I couldn't care less."

"But the wedding date will keep pushing out, leaving both parties in limbo."

"What wedding?"

"Yours."

"My wedding? With whom?"

"Why with the Kaneda daughter, of course."

"Really?"

"Really indeed. After all, a promise is a promise."

"But there is no promise. Whatever you may have heard, you didn't hear it from me."

"Now hold on there. You were witness, weren't you Meitei, to a certain incident that went down here?"

"You mean that incident with the nose? That's a worst-kept secret, known far and wide beyond just you and me. News men hound me constantly. When, they ask, might we have the honor of publicizing this fine young couple in our bride and groom column with a nuptial photo? Then there's Tōfū here, who composed a lovebirds' ballad, already some three months ago now, and is waiting to bring it to light. If you don't finish your doctorate, his toil will all be for naught. His masterpiece, he fears, may languish in obscurity. Isn't that right Tōfū?"

"I'm not so concerned just yet, but the work does reflect my heartfelt best wishes. I hope to share it when the time comes."

"See what I mean? So many things, touching on so many folk, hang on this question of your doctorate. Hunker down and get it done. Polish up those spheres."

"Ha ha ha ha. I see now. I appreciate your concern, but that doctorate's of no great consequence."

"How so?"

"I'll tell you how so. I'm already duly wed."

"Oh my! Unbeknownst to all, a secret wedding. What's this world coming to? As you've just heard, Kushami, the man's already with wife and child."

"No child, please. It's not yet been a month, so there could hardly be a child."

"Tell us now then, when and where were you married?" The master questions in an almost judicial tone.

"On my recent trip back home. All was arranged and ready. These dried bonito I brought you were a wedding gift from the relatives."

"A paltry three dried bonito? Stingy lot, I'd say."

"There were lots more. I only brought the three."

"Then I assume your bride hails from your same home town? Dark in complexion?"

"Yes, same home town, and skin as dark as dark can be, just like my own."

"What about the Kanedas?"

"What about them?"

"You can't just leave them high and dry. That's poor form. Wouldn't you agree, Meitei?"

"I beg to differ. The Kanedas can find themselves another groom. What rhyme or reason is there, anyway, in pairing of husband and wife? Forcing rhyme and reason, where nature requires none, is superfluous meddling. When it comes to superfluous meddling, who gets matched to whom is academic. My only concern is for Tōfū, who's so painstakingly prepared his lovebirds' ballad."

"Not to worry. I can repurpose my lovebirds' ballad. I'll even compose a new one for the Kanedas."

"Spoken as a true poet. Always ready to change with the changing tides."

"Have you even notified the Kanedas?" The master still seems concerned over the Kaneda affair.

"I haven't. There's no need. I never once asked for their young lady's hand, nor did I express any willingness to have her. Let my silence suffice. -- Silence is more than sufficient. The old man's got ten, maybe twenty, private investigators running things down. I can assure you by now he's well informed of any and all particulars."

At the mention of private investigators, the master's face goes suddenly sour.

"In that case, then, let silence reign," he emphatically declares. Not content to leave it at that, he expounds as follows on the subject of private investigators.

"It's a pickpocket who filches a man's purse in a moment of inattention, and it's a private investigator who plucks a man's thoughts in a moment of diversion. It's a thief who unnoticed slides aside the storm shutter and makes off with a man's possessions, and it's a private investigator who subtly loosens a man's tongue and reads off his intentions. It's a bandit who thrusts a broadsword into the tatami and demands a man's coin, and it's a private investigator who wields threats to hijack a man's volition. These fellows who call themselves private investigators, it follows, are akin to and no better than pickpockets, thieves, and bandits, the worst examples of humanity. Caution is in order. We mustn't let them run amok."

"Don't you worry 'bout me. Bring on a thousand, or two thousand. Let them strike from the air in squadrons. I'll not be shaken. After all, I'm Mizushima Kangetsu, bachelor of science and master of polished spheres."

"That's the spirit! Bravo! The unbridled vigor of a college graduate newly wed. One question, though, for you Kushami. If the private investigator is in the same company as pickpockets, thieves, and bandits, then what about old man Kaneda, who puts them in his service. In whose company is he?"

"I'd have to say Kumasaka Chōhan, for starters."

"Kumasaka's a good fit. As legend has it, he was quite the one, until he was two, and then he was no more. However, that Chōhan cross the way, who's built a fortune on usury, who's a hard-headed money grubber, shows no sign at all of nearing his demise. Let one like that set his sights on you and you'll rue it till the end of your days. Heed my words, young Kangetsu."

"Not to worry. That ostentatious swindler best learn who he's dealing with. If it's a fight he's after, though, it's a fight and more he'll get." Drawing on cues from the Hōshō school, Kangetsu blusters back with confident swagger and melodramatic flair.

"On the topic of private investigators, it seems to me that twentieth century man is more and more prone to snooping and spying. I wonder why that is." Dokusen, as Dokusen does, distances himself from the problem at hand and poses an abstract question.

"It's all about economic insecurity." Kangetsu is first to answer.

"It's failure to embrace the arts," is Tōfū's response.

"Civilization has resulted in men sprouting horns. Like spiked konpeitō, they butt their rumpled heads and perturb one another." This from Meitei.

Next up is the master. With an air of solemn importance, he prepares to lay out a line of argument.

"I've given this subject a great deal of thought. The way I see it, this contemporary tendency toward snooping and spying all starts with the individual's inflated sense of self. What I mean by 'sense of self' here is not the self awareness of Dokusen's world, where reflection leads to enlightenment, or where the self strives to unite itself with the physical universe. ..."

"This seems to be going deep. If you, Kushami, tend to roll such grand arguments off your tongue, then allow your humble servant Meitei too to follow on with a bold critique of modern civilization."

"You're free to speak as you like, though I doubt you've much to say."

"Oh, but I do. I do have much to say. Just look at yourself. The other day you were kowtowing to that police detective, and today you're likening private investigators to pickpockets and thieves. You're hopelessly conflicted. I, on the other hand, am constant as the Northern Star. My view on this matter, from well before my birth and up to this very day, has changed not one iota."

"Detectives are detectives, and private investigators are private investigators. The other day was the other day, and today is today. The fact that you've changed not one iota merely means you've progressed not the least. A fool once is a fool always, they say, and they're talking 'bout you."

"That's rather scathing. Even a snoop, when he's full-on honest, is somehow endearing."

"You're calling me a snoop?"

"On the contrary. Hence your candor. Now, let's not waste our words quarreling. Tell us more on your thoughts."

"What I mean by modern man's sense of self is an acute awareness of the gulf between self and others, along with the evident corollary that one man's loss is another man's gain. This sense of self grows keener day by day as civilization advances. In the end, a man is divorced from any and all innate and intuitive behavior. A man named Henley once remarked on Stevenson, noting how he was so conscious of his own appearance that on entering a room with a mirror, he felt compelled to scrutinize his own reflection on each and every pass before it. Henley's remarks express to a tee this obsession with self that defines our times. Whether sleeping or awake, one's sense of self pervades all thought, rendering any and all words and deeds forced and contrived. One feels oneself confined. The world becomes a wearisome place. It's like the angst of a young man and woman, brought face to face as prospective marriage partners, but it's day after day from morning to night. Words like calm and tranquil may still be written, but their meaning is lost. Modern man, ever thus on edge, comports himself like a snoop or a thief. The work of the snoop, who exercises stealth for his own personal gain, necessarily requires a strong sense of self. The actions of the thief too, who constantly fears discovery or capture, also require a heightened sense of self. Modern man, whether sleeping or awake, is ever concerned with maximizing personal gain while dodging associated pitfalls. To this end, just as in the case of the snoop or the thief, a heightened sense of self becomes paramount. A soul today, stealthy and vigilant at all times, knows no peace till the day it rests in its grave. Such is the scourge of civilized man. It's all so asinine."

"Indeed. An intriguing take on things." Dokusen is first to react. When it comes to such subjects, he's never one to refrain. "I must say I fully agree. In times of old, suppression of self was woven into our ethics. Nowadays, folks are taught to look out for number one, the complete and utter opposite. Everything, day and night, is all about me. That's why, day and night, a soul knows no peace. The fires of hell constantly lick at one's heels. In this whole wide world, nothing soothes the soul like selflessness. 'In the midnight hour, under soft moonlight, the self dissolves away.' The poet lauds this ultimate state of consciousness. Even kindness, where modern man is concerned, wants for spontaneity. Look closely at those acts of kindness the British take pride in, for example, and you'll find, to your surprise, a pervasive sense of self. The English Crown Prince once visited India and dined with the Indian nobility. One of the Indians, forgetting himself for a moment, grabbed a potato with his fingers in the local manner and dropped it onto his plate. Immediately realizing his misstep, his face went red for shame. The crown prince, as it's told, casually followed suit, grabbing a potato for himself with his own two fingers ..."

"Is that what they mean by British civility?" Kangetsu asks.

"Here's something I heard." The master jumps in with a story of his own. "In England, a large group of regiment officers, housed together in the barracks, honored a petty officer with a lavish dinner. After the meal, hand rinsing water was placed on the table in glass bowls. The petty officer, unfamiliar with this practice, brought a bowl to his lips and proceeded to drink it empty. The regiment commander responded

by toasting the young man's health and downing the contents of a second such finger bowl. The other officers arrayed round the table, not to be outdone, raised their bowls with due ceremony and drank in turn to the young man's health."

"Here's another one." Meitei, who would rather be hog-tied than hold his tongue, has more to add. "Carlyle had an audience with the queen. Being an eccentric, the etiquette of the royal court was utterly alien to him. What did the old scholar do, then, but promptly plop himself down in a chair. The myriad chamberlains and court ladies, standing in back of the queen, began to snicker -- or at least were about to begin. The queen, glancing back, gave a sign. In an instant, the entire gallery were themselves seated. Carlyle, thanks to the queen's kind and thoughtful intervention, was spared any embarrassment."

"If it's Carlyle we're talking about, he may have been oblivious to who was or wasn't standing." Kangetsu throws in his two cents' worth.

"Sense of self in a kind soul is one thing," Dokusen proposes, "but sense of self in general is no friend of kindness. It's regrettable. As civilization progresses, men veer away from brutality, and by all accounts their social interactions are less and less confrontational. This is all a façade. With today's acute sense of self, how could men be less confrontational? Granted, on the surface all looks calm and unperturbed, but underneath is tussle and strain. It's no different than two wrestlers locked together in combat. There's no observable movement. All seems still, yet the heaving of bellies belies the illusion of calm."

"In the old days, a good quarrel could always be settled with a good thrashing. Refreshingly straightforward and to the point. Nowadays, it's all about craftiness and cleverness. An inflated sense of self only feeds on its own success." This from Meitei, whose turn has come to carry the conversation. "Bacon once proposed that the only way for man to overcome nature is to harness nature's forces. Sure enough, today's quarrels bear out Bacon's proposition. It's the jūjutsu principle. Use your opponent's force against him ..."

"In some sense, it's like hydroelectricity. Instead of resisting the flow of water, harness it to generate power. Bend it to your needs ..." Kangetsu starts in, and Dokusen takes it from there. "It follows, you could say, that in times of need, it's want that ties one's hands. In times of abundance, it's wealth that ties one's hands. In times of sorrow, sadness ties one's hands, and in times of joy, delight ties one's hands. The clever man succumbs to his own talents, the sage succumbs to his own wisdom, and a hothead like Kushami, lured into rash actions through his own quick temper, is caught in the snare of his adversary's racket ..."

"Splendidly put!" Meitei claps his hands in approval. The master, sporting a grin, pushes back a bit on Dokusen's conclusion. "They haven't snared me just yet." The room erupts into laughter.

"Incidentally, what do you suppose'll bring down folks like the Kanedas?"

"The wife'll be toppled by the weight of her own nose. The husband by his own hard heart. Their minions from snooping where they don't belong."

"And the daughter?"

"The daughter -- I've never met her, so I can't say for sure, but she'll likely go broke adorning herself, overdose on rich foods, or maybe imbibe to excess. Romance, it seems, has left her high and dry and won't be coming round to bring her down. Then again, maybe she'll end like the Belle of Sotoba, languishing by the wayside in withered decay."

"Isn't that a bit harsh?" Tōfū, the young poet who dedicated a collection of new-style poems to said daughter, voices his objection.

"Heed what they say. 'Where one's treasure is, there too is one's heart.' Attachment to worldly pleasures, as the sages assure us, is the source of all our travails." Dokusen, presuming himself above the fray, is quick to dole out admonishment.

"Don't get too cocky there. Chances are that you yourself someday, in a 'poof' and a flash of light, may well go tumbling, head over heels, into the great abyss."

"At any rate, when I see where civilization's marching to, I've no wish to stick around and watch it progress." The master asserts his general disdain.

"No one's forcing you to stick around." Meitei promptly declares.

"I like the idea of not sticking around even less." The master obstinately digs in and reverses course.

"When it's time to enter this world, no one thinks much of it, but when it's time to leave, everyone seems to worry and fret." Kangetsu offers his own detached observation.

"Just like with money. One easily takes out a loan, then toils and sweats to pay it back." Meitei, on such occasions, always has an answer at the ready.

"Happy is he who dwells not on his debts. And happy is he who frets not when his time draws nigh." Dokusen floats aloft in the spiritual ether.

"It would seem then, if I follow you, that audacity and enlightenment are two sides of the same coin."

"In a sense, yes. There's a Zen expression. 'The stone-faced ox with steeled heart.'"

"And you, I presume, number among such oxen."

"Not necessarily. But until neurasthenia became commonly diagnosed, life's transient nature was much less cause for angst."

"I see. You and your ilk then, however one slices things, clearly predate neurasthenia."

While Meitei and Dokusen continue their oddball banter, the master occupies the two young gentlemen, Kangestu and Tōfū, with his diatribe against modern life.

"The problem, then, is how to skirt repaying one's debts."

"That's not the problem. Whatever one borrows, one has to repay."

"Sure enough. But humor me, for the sake of argument. Analogous to this problem of shirking one's debt is the problem of cheating death. Or such the problem was. Alchemists long sought workarounds to the debt problem, yet all their efforts came to naught. Likewise, it's become only too evident now that all men must die."

"Death was evident long before alchemy came and went."

"Fair enough. But listen up and let me continue my line of thought. Once it was accepted that all men must die, that gave rise to a second problem."

"Go on."

"If a man has to die, then how best to go? This is the second problem. And once this problem is posed, the formation of 'suicide pacts' is only a question of time."

"I see."