

## I am a Cat – Chapter 11c

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

"Dying may be hard, but soldiering on is harder still. To a people with tattered nerves, life is torment, much more so than death. Hence the obsession with mortality. The concern is not with the inevitability of death, or any revulsion to dying, but rather with how best to go. This is where most men, lacking in wisdom, let nature take her course, living on till the world grinds them down. However, there are men among us, an eccentric lot, who refuse to be worn weary. It's these men who are destined, through persistent inquiry into methods of mortality, to bring forth novel designs. In the future then, more men will doubtless decide when and where their own lives end, employing myriad means of doing so."

"We're talking a whole new paradigm."

"Indeed. That's for sure. The playwright Arthur Jones has a work involving a philosopher who advocates for suicide ..."

"Who also takes his own life?"

"Regrettably not, in fact. But give things time. A thousand years from now, suicide will be common practice. In ten thousand years, death and suicide will no doubt be synonymous."

"That would be momentous."

"It will be. Mark my words. In those times, suicide will be well studied, a science unto itself. Middle schools, like Rakuunkan, will stop teaching ethics and adopt end-of-life studies as core curriculum."

"Intriguing to imagine. That's one course I'd love to sit in on. Master Meitei, are you catching this? Master Kushami's brilliant prognostication."

"I am catching it. When those days come, that Rakuunkan ethics teacher will instruct his students something like this. 'Gentlemen, let us not cling to civic virtues and other worn traditions of past and barbarous ages. As youth of this world, your first and foremost obligation is the finer arts of suicide. You should also, of course, do unto others as you would have done to yourselves, so if self-annihilation is your wish, then homicide too is fair game. Take for example that poor and wretched scholar Chinno Kushami who lives cross the way. By all accounts, he's weary of this world. Your obligation, then, is to dispatch him from this life without further delay. Unlike in times past, the present time is a time of enlightenment. Dastardly means, such as spears, the dreaded naginata, or firearms, are not to be employed. Using subtler and nobler techniques, you're to pester the man into his grave. This approach is not only charitable, but brings honor to those clever enough to carry it through. ...'"

"I see. That's quite the lecture."

"Things go further still. Police officers today are charged with safeguarding the life and property of the citizenry. However, in days to come they'll make their rounds with dogcatchers' clubs, beating to death the citizenry far and wide. ..."

"Why is that?"

"I'll tell you why. People today value their lives, and the job of the police is to safeguard those things that folks value. In those days to come, though, when life is a burden, the police will dole out mercy blows with the ends of their clubs. Anyone with any sense will have already taken his own life, so the only ones left for the police to club down will be cowards and invalids. Anyone requesting assistance need only post a signboard out front. The man or woman wishing to die hangs out their sign, and the police make the rounds at their convenience, meting out the desired ends. What of the bodies? The police, I suppose, will pull up a cart, load them on, and haul them away. I could go on. ..."

"Your humor, sir, seems to know no bounds." Young Tōfū expresses his admiration. As he does so, Dokusen takes the opportunity to start a discourse of his own, speaking deliberately while applying a slow series of tugs to his signature goatee.

"It may very well be humor, but could it not just as well be prophecy? Those not versed in the truth are beholden to the physical world in front of their eyes. They're wont to mistake fleeting visions for eternal fixtures. Present them with an unconventional idea, and all they can do is laugh it away."

"Like little sparrows flitting about, oblivious to the schemes and plans of the great birds of prey." Kanetsu voices his endorsement, and Dokusen grants an approving nod as he continues.

"Long ago, there was a place in Spain called Cordoba ..."

"Is there no such place today then?"

"There may well be. But past versus present aside, the custom there was to ring the temple bell each evening as dusk fell. With the sounding of the bell, the womenfolk would emerge from their dwellings to bathe in the river ..."

"Even in winter?"

"That I'm not sure of. But anyway, whether noble or plain, old or young, into the river they went. The men, for their part, did not join in. All they could do was watch from afar. From their distant vantage, in

the fading light, they could just discern the faint forms of white bodies dancing and shifting among the dark waters. ..."

"Superbly poetic. Demands to be set down in verse. What did you say was the name of the place?" Tōfū's mind races with images of women bathers and bare flesh.

"Cordoba. Now the young men of the region thought themselves unfortunate. Not only could they not join the women, but they were kept at a distance. Between distance and dusk, the female forms were vague at best. So they hatched themselves a scheme ..."

"Really? What sort of scheme?" Even the slightest hint of mischief brings Meitei to life.

"They bribed the bell-ringer and had him sound the sundown bell an hour early. The womenfolk, foolish creatures that they are, responded accordingly. They gathered on the riverbank and plunged into the water, splashing about in their undershirts and under-garments. They plunged in and splashed about, but unlike other days, the sun was still high in the sky."

"Let me guess. The autumn sun blazing away."

"Up on the bridge, the men were gathered en masse, drinking in the scene. The women's faces went red, flushed for shame, but what could they do?"

"And then?"

"That was that. The moral of the story is that when folks adhere to pre-conditioned routine, forgetting the fundamentals, they do so at their own peril."

"Point well made. Can I share another story about blind adherence to routine? I came across this tale of a trickster the other day in one of my journals. Imagine, if you will, that I deal in artwork and collectibles and I've opened up a shop. I decorate the shopfront with masterwork scrolls and various handicrafts from renowned artists. No imitations or funny stuff, mind you. Only the finest articles, honest and authentic. These fine articles, it goes without saying, come at a high price. In walks a customer, who fancies himself a connoisseur, and enquires about a Motonobu scroll. It's priced at six hundred yen, and I tell him as much. He would love to own this scroll, he says, but six hundred yen is beyond his means. Regrettably, he'll have to refrain."

"How can you know that's what he'll say?" The master, as per habit, can't but question the flow of the narrative. Meitei, with a knowing look, puts things back on track.

"It's a story. Being such, let's say that's what he says. I tell him he needn't worry over the price. If he likes it that much, he can take it home. He can't very well just walk out with it, so of course he hesitates. I then suggest he could pay in monthly installments, spreading his purchase out over time. I look forward to his continued patronage -- and no, it's no imposition at all. How would ten yen per month be. Or if he likes, five yen per month is fine too, I offer most assuredly. We talk a bit further, and in the end I've sold him a six hundred-yen scroll by the great master Kanō Motonobu, payable in monthly installments."

"Like The Times and their encyclopedia sets."

"But The Times is on the level. I'm not. Here, at last, comes the swindler's hook, so listen up. At ten yen per month, how many years would you reckon it takes to pay down six hundred yen? How 'bout you, Kangetsu."

"It takes, of course, five years."

"Right you are. Now tell me, Dokusen, does five years seem a long time, or not so long."

"A moment lasts an eternity. Eternity lasts but a moment. Five years' time is short enough, yet also not so short."

"What on earth is that? If it's an adage, it's a nonsensical adage. At any rate, for five years, month upon month, ten yen is paid. In other words, the buyer pays up sixty times. Here's the rub though. Habit's a frightening thing. After making the same payment sixty times, month after month, one's inclined to continue. One makes the sixty first payment and is then inclined to make the sixty second. Then the sixty third. One's conditioned, and when the appointed date rolls around each month, one feels inclined to pay. Human beings are clever, but they also have serious shortcomings. Blinded by habit, they become ungrounded and lose touch with the why and the how. Capitalizing on this shortcoming, I pad my pocket to the tune of ten yen per month."

"Ha ha! I don't think so. No one's that forgetful." Kangetsu dismisses Meitei's narrative. The master, with a somewhat more sober look, chimes in next.

"Such things do, in fact, happen. In paying off my student loan, month after month, I soon enough lost track. In the end, the other party declined to accept any more payments." The master airs his own failing as though it were universal.

"There you have it! Before your eyes sits living proof. To those who dismissed my prognostication of civilization's future just now as a jest, among you numbers one who, owing a mere sixty installments, is

content to pay on for life. Kangetsu and Tōfū in particular, as young men just starting out in the world, would do well to heed these words, lest ye be deceived."

"Duly noted. Rest assured, my sixtieth payment will be my last."

"It may all seem borderline comical, but there's more to this story than meets the eye." Dokusen turns to address Kangetsu directly. "Let's take an example. Suppose your good teacher Kushami, or Meitei for that matter, points out to you that running off and marrying without notice was improper. He advises you to go and apologize to this Kaneda fellow. What do you think? Would you do it?"

"I'm afraid I'd have to beg off on that one. Anyone's welcome to go and apologize on my behalf, of course, but I personally see no need to go."

"Suppose, then, a police officer comes round and insists you apologize."

"I'd beg off all the more."

"How about a government minister or member of the peerage?"

"Then I'd really have to beg off."

"There you have it. See how the times have changed. In the past, the power of authority was absolute. Then came an age when the power of authority found limits. In today's world, even the title of Highness or Excellency gives no license to encroach on the rights of an individual. Conversely, greater authority only invites greater resentment and opposition. To men of old, what passes for proper and reasonable in this day and age would have been utterly unthinkable. The extent to which social norms change over time is truly remarkable. Meitei's vision of the future may, in fact, be somewhat far-fetched, but insofar as it captures the tide of the times, it could as well prove profound."

"With such enthusiastic backing, I'm all the more inclined to expound further on my vision of our collective future. As Dokusen has convincingly articulated, wielding the power of authority, pressing one's point with rank upon rank of soldiers armed with bamboo spears, for example, is backward behind the times. No less so than driving one's palanquin bearers to somehow, by hook or by crook, outrace a steam train. -- Reminds me of a certain loan-sharking bandit boss, but let's leave that aside for now. -- My vision of the future, after all, extends beyond such immediate and trifling concerns. It touches on fundamental societal issues and the fate of all humanity. Careful scrutiny of civilization's current arc, coupled with a longer view of future trends, renders the concept of marriage utterly untenable. You heard correctly, marriage is untenable. I'll tell you why. As I've already stated, today's world revolves around individuality. In past ages, where the husband represented his household, the governor represented his district, and the

lord represented his domain, all others were devoid of defining character. Whatever defining traits they may have possessed were kept under wraps. Turn that all on its head and suddenly each and every individual is asserting his individuality. To any and all he meets, his manner of engagement all but shouts out, 'You are you, and I am me.' Two men meet along the way and pass each other by with an air of defiance, each asserting he's no less a man than the other. That's how strong the individual has become. All individuals, across the board, have grown stronger, and in the same sense, all have grown weaker. To the extent that a man is less prone to exploitation by others, his position is improved, but at the same time he's less able to effect change in those around him, and this clearly renders him less potent. All men welcome an increase in their own autonomy, but no man welcomes the waning of his own authority. It follows, then, that men seek to preserve their newfound security while scrutinizing their neighbors for even the slightest compromising flaw. At this point, there's no more margin for error, and life becomes a burden. It's all about puffing and strutting, soldiering on for sake of show. When it all becomes too much, there's no option but to disengage. Reaping what he's sown, and suffering as a consequence, man now seeks relief. The dismantling of the extended family comes first and foremost."

"Even in Japan, just venture into the countryside. Each and every house is packed with family members, all teeming together under one roof. There's no individuality per se to assert itself, or if there is it's kept in check, so folks get by. Not so with the cultured set. Each indulges his own whims, to the greatest extent possible, even to the detriment of parent-child relations. In the end, to preserve their sanity, a family has no choice but to disengage into separate households. The countries of Europe, further advanced in the march of civilization than Japan, have fully arrived at this state. Should children on occasion remain with their parents, they do so as paying boarders, with interest accrued on any funds advanced. Through this dignified arrangement, the parent acknowledges the individuality of the child and duly respects it. Japan, in time, should by all means follow suit. With the extended family already largely disbanded, and with parents and children starting to take up separate houses, individuality is now free to flourish, and as it flourishes it gains and gains in prestige, till again it requires more space. That being said, having already freed itself of parents and siblings, there are no more bonds to break. All that's left to break is the marital bond. There's a notion these days that husband and wife must reside in common quarters. Nothing is further from the truth. To reside together in harmony, a certain like-mindedness is required. In times past, this was never a problem. Husband and wife were kindred spirits, so to speak, appearing as two yet acting as one. 'Till death do us part' was the mantra, and even after death they would rest together under a quiet hill. Those were the dark ages. We know better now. The husband, at the end of the day, is his own man, and the wife, when all's said and done, is her own woman. Said wife marches through girls' school in her pleated hakama, emerges with a firm sense of self, comes into the marriage with her hair tied tight in a bun, and is not about to yield to her husband's will. Should she choose to yield, then she's no qualified wife but merely some plaything. The sharper her mind, the greater her sense of self, and the greater her

sense of self, the less she relies on her man. Independence breeds contempt and confrontation. The clever wife, as matter of course, is a constant thorn in her husband's side. Cleverness is fine in and of itself, but the cleverer the wife, the greater and greater the mutual strain. Like oil and water, husband and wife are side by side yet distinct. In times of calm, one supports the other through a straight and level line of demarcation. Leave them to their own devices, though, and undulations arise. The household heaves and shudders, as if in the throes of a major quake. At this point, it's only too evident that their shared life as husband and wife is benefiting neither. ..."

"Do they separate then? Seems a shame," Kangetsu notes.

"They separate. Absolutely. All couples, across the land, go their separate ways. Up until now, being a couple meant being together. In the future, though, being together will preclude qualification as a couple."

"My new bride and I, it would seem, will number among the unqualified." Kangetsu has no intention of forsaking his new bride.

"Happily for you, you were born in this reign of the Emperor Meiji. As for myself, I'm a visionary, ahead of the curve, so to speak, and that's why I've never married. Folks are wont to assign my bachelorhood to past heartbreak, but nothing's so shallow, nor so pathetic, as men with myopic minds. Be that as it may, let me continue with more of my vision. In days to come, a great philosopher will appear among us, preaching audacious truths. Here's what he'll say. Man is a solitary creature. Strip away man's individuality, and you've just as good as stripped away the man. On the other hand, when it comes to bringing man closer to perfection, no price is too high to pay. His individuality must not only be preserved, but steadfastly nurtured. This antiquated custom of marriage, where men and women adhere to pernicious precedences, contrary to their natures and against all better judgement, is utterly barbaric. We can except men of old, of unenlightened ages gone by, when concepts of individuality were still evolving, but under no circumstances can we turn a blind eye and allow such maladies to persist into this modern age, an age in which civilization has firmly planted its roots. There's no reason whatsoever to even imagine that two disparate individuals, in this modern age of brilliant enlightenment, should connect with a bond so strong as to warrant intimacy and merit wedlock. Only absence of intellect and moral depravity could cause a young man and woman, in the face of such argument, to give in to passion and raise their glasses in nuptial toast. For the sake of humanity, for the sake of civilization, and for the preservation of these young men and women's individual dignities, we must do all in our power to stamp out such barbarous practice ..."

"With all due respect sir, I'm not buying this." Tōfū slaps his knee to punctuate his objection. "When I consider all that's noble or sacred in this world, what's more noble or sacred than love and beauty? It's love and beauty that comfort us, complete us, and render us content. They refine our sentiments, elevate our

natures, and fuel our compassions. Regardless of the time or place into which we're born, we must never forget this. Love manifests itself among us as marital affection between man and wife, while beauty manifests itself as poetry and music. As long as humanity walks on this earth, it's my firm conviction that come what may, marriage and the arts will endure."

"We can hope they endure, but as our philosopher so rightly noted, they're on the wane and there's no saving them. They're a lost cause. After all, what are the arts? The arts are the same as husbands and wives, and the same fate awaits them. The development of individuality means freedom of individual expression, does it not? And freedom of individual expression means I'm me and you're you. What of the arts then? For the arts to flourish, the artist's spirit must stir the soul of his patrons. Strive as you might as a new-age poet, if your poems resonate with no one then your readership, regrettably, will be you and you alone. Compose Lovebird's Verses to your heart's content. It's all for naught. Happily, you're a child of Meiji, and the world beats a path to your verse ..."

"I'm afraid that's overstating things."

"If your readers are sparse even now, imagine a future where culture has further advanced. In other words, the times of our great philosopher who rails against the institution of marriage. You'll have readers not a one. Don't get me wrong, it won't be on you. Each and every one of us will distinguish himself through his own idiosyncrasies. That being the case, another man's verse will fall flat on one's ears. We see this trend already today in England. Look at George Meredith or Henry James, contemporary writers worlds ahead of their peers in innovative expression. Their readership is all but nonexistent. And no wonder. Their works appeal to none other than like-minded eccentrics. Time will march on, matrimony will fall into disfavor, and the arts will wither and die. Think about it. When your words don't resonate with me, any more than my words resonate with you, the arts will be powerless to connect us."

"I follow your logic, but my gut tells me you're wrong."

"Your gut can say what it likes. My belly tells me I'm right."

"Your belly may be on to something." This time it's Dokusen who speaks up. "At any rate, it's clear that individuality, given unfettered license, pulls men apart. Nietzsche's philosophy, and his introduction of the Übermensch, is nothing more or less than a last-ditch effort to tame his growing sense of alienation. On the surface, the Übermensch appears to be an ideal, but it's no such thing. It's grievance made manifest. As the 19th century progressed, and individuality flourished, Nietzsche sensed the walls closing in from all sides. Finally, with barely room to breathe, he lashed out desperately with pen on paper. Reading his work, one's left not with a sense of elation, but rather of wretchedness. The voice of the writer is not the voice of undaunted devotion but rather the mournful sound of resentful indignation. And rightfully so. In times of



old, all the world would coalesce under the banner of a larger-than-life leader, and all was accordingly well. Such being the case, there was no need for a Nietzsche to take up the pen and set the scene in prose. Read Homer, or the ballad of Chevy Chase, and the same sort of Übermensch appears, but the impression is wholly different. It's joyous. It's uplifting. The Übermensch of old was in fact uplifting, and the writings of those times reflect this. Bitterness is nowhere to be seen. Not so in Nietzsche's time, though. No heroes emerge. And should a hero emerge, his fellow men won't fete him. Confucius, in his day, was one of a kind and towered above his peers. Nowadays, there are any number of such men. In fact, it might even be said that all men are Confucius. Consequently, if I strut about asserting that I'm Confucius, it carries no sway. It carries no sway, so I'm left to my discontent. In my discontent, I unleash the Übermensch with pen on paper. We've obtained the freedoms we sought, and they've left us destitute. Thus the culture of the West, which looks so enticing, is in fact everything but. In the East, by contrast, from ancient times the focus has been inward. This is the right approach. Take a look. When individuality carries the day, and when men's nerves are frayed to the point of debilitation, then the weight of the expression 'calm citizenry under the monarch's firm hand' will at last be acknowledged. It will be realized that Lao Tzu's concept of 'change through absence of action' is not to be lightly dismissed. This realization, though, will come too late. Like the alcoholic who, upon reflection, rues the day he first took a drink."

"You studied men seem all so dark and weary in your view of the world. Curiously, though, I hear what you say but don't share your sentiment. Why do you suppose that is?" Kangetsu questions.

"You're a newly-wed man," is Meitei's ready reply. Taking that as a cue, the master steers the conversation in a new direction.

"Having taken a wife, you'd best be on your guard. Don't delude yourself into imagining women virtuous things. I'll read you something you'd best take to heart. Listen and learn." The master picks up the old book he'd retrieved from his study. "This work may be dated, but men of old knew only too well the nefarious nature of womankind."

"I'd no idea. When was it written?" Kangetsu asks.

"A man named Thomas Nashe penned it in the 16th century."

"Now that is old. You mean to tell me that from that far back my wife was under fire?"

"There are various views on women in here, some of which will surely apply to your wife, so listen with care."

"I'm all ears. Please, enlighten me."

"To begin with, we should heed the views of the wise men of antiquity on women,' the author notes. Ready? Are you listening?"

"We're all listening, even this old bachelor."

"According to Aristotle, there's no such thing as a decent woman. If you're going to take a wife, choose a small one over a large one. Small indecencies, in comparison to large indecencies, will minimize your woes ..."

"Tell us Kangetsu, did you take a large or a small wife?"

"I'm afraid I opted for a large indecency."

"Ha ha ha ha. I'm loving this. Let's hear some more."

"A certain man questions, 'What is the greatest of miracles?' The sage replies, 'A faithful wife ...'"

"Who is this sage?"

"It doesn't say."

"Some cuckold sage, no doubt."

"Next is Diogenes. A certain man asks, 'When should one take a wife?' Diogenes answers him. 'A wife taken in youth is a wife taken too soon. A wife taken in latter years is a wife taken too late.'"

"I suppose he thought that up while scrunched down in his wine barrel abode."

"According to Pythagoras, there are three things in this world to fear. One being fire, one being flood, and one being woman."

"Those Greek philosophers were surprisingly lax in their thinking. If you ask me, there's nothing in this world to fear. Fire will burn me not, flood will drown me not, ..." Dokusen gets this far and seems at a loss.

"And woman will charm me not." Meitei comes to his aid. The master continues on.

"Socrates tells us that man's greatest tribulation is the handling of women and children. According to Demosthenes, there's no better way to torment a foe than imparting upon him the burden of a woman. His house, day and night, will have no peace, and he'll succumb to exhaustion, rendering him powerless. Seneca calls out womankind and ignorance as the world's two twin evils. Marcus Aurelius compares

women to vessels on open water, both being equally unwieldy. Plautus tells us that women adorn themselves in fine clothing with devious intent, covering over and disguising their innate ugliness. Valerius once wrote to a friend that there's nothing in this world that requires one suffer womenfolk. 'I pray that Heaven pities you and spares you the treachery of their clutches,' he adds. Then he goes on. 'What is woman but fraternity destroyed, strife incarnate, certain doom, nature's lure, or poison sweet like honey? To cast women away may seem unjust, but failure to shun them invites great torment.' ..."

"I think I've heard enough, if you please. You've lambasted my wife beyond any and all hope of redemption."

"It goes on for four or five pages yet. Might as well hear the rest."

"You'd best leave off. The lady of the house will be home soon, will she not?" Meitei lightly badgers the master. Just then, a sound echoes from the living room.

"Kiyo, Kiyo." It's the wife calling for the maidservant.

"This isn't good. The lady of the house is, indeed, already present."

"Not to worry. Not to worry." The master dismisses the situation with a chuckle.

"Excuse us ma'am, but how long have you been home?"

The living room is quiet. No reply.

"Did you by chance, ma'am, catch our discourse?"

Again, no reply.

"Rest assured, these were not the thoughts of your dear husband. They're the words of one Thomas Nashe, penned in the sixteenth century."

"I wouldn't know," comes a curt and distant response. Kangetsu breaks into a giggle.

"Nor would I. I deny any culpability. Ah ha ha ha." Meitei laughs unreservedly. Just then, the front gate is hastily opened. No greeting is heard, but heavy footsteps resound. The parlor panel slides cleanly open, and Tatara Sanpei appears.

Sanpei today is dressed uncharacteristically in a bright white shirt and brand new frock coat. As if that weren't enough, from his right hand hangs a tied bundle of four large bottles of beer. He lowers the beer

down next to the katsuobushi and, still without comment, plunks himself down as well. He proceeds to make himself comfortable, striking a gallant pose as he commands the attention of the room.

"Tell me, good teacher, how's your digestion these days? If you ask me, your problem is too much time at home."

"I didn't say it's a problem now, did I?"

"No need to say. It's written in your face. You're looking rather sallow. You should try fishing. Go to Shinagawa and hire a small boat for the day -- I went out just this past Sunday."

"Catch anything?"

"Nope. Not a thing."

"You came back empty-handed and would still recommend it?"

"It broadens one's perspective. What do you think? Have you ever been out? It's truly refreshing. A small boat, circling over the surface of the vast sea." Sanpei makes his case to anyone and everyone present.

"I'd prefer a large boat circling over the surface of a small sea." Meitei counters Sanpei's proposition.

"Go big or go home, I say. Fish for whales or mermaids." Kangetsu offers his two cents.

"That's entirely, of course, out of the question. You literary types are ever impractical."

"I'm not a literary type."

"Is that right? What is your field? At any rate, for a businessman like myself, it's all about sensing the tide of the times. I'll tell you, I've never been more in tune than I am right now. Given my position, and the men I work with, it's only natural, I suppose. One picks things up."

"Things like what?"

"Take smokes, for example. Asahi and Shikishima are commonplace and trite." Thus saying, Sanpei produces a pack of Egyptian Cigarettes, with gold foil filters, lights one up, and begins puffing away.

"Are you sure you can afford those?"

"At present, no, but soon enough. Smoke smokes like these, and the world's your oyster."

"An easier way to the top than polishing spheres, wouldn't you say, Kangetsu? Instant prestige." Meitei addresses Kangetsu. Before Kangetsu can reply, Sanpei jumps back in.

"So you're Kangetsu? Is it true you've given up on your doctorate? Since you're no longer on track, I've been compelled to step in."

"Step in to earn a doctorate?"

"No, to take the Kaneda daughter. I couldn't but think it a shame. At the same time, the other party insisted and insisted, so I finally acquiesced. I can't help feeling, though, that I may have done wrong by Kangetsu."

"No need to hold back on my account," Kangetsu assures him.

"If you want her, take her." The master responds rather ambiguously.

"I'd say congratulations are in order. One needn't fret, it seems, when it comes to marrying off a daughter. Suitors appear, as I've said, and before you know it a splendid gentleman groom arrives on the scene. Tōfū, this warrants new verse. Fetch your brush and set to it." Meitei, true to form, is quick to seize the moment and grab the reins.

"So you're Tōfū? Would you be so good as to compose something for us? I'll have it printed for the guests. I'll even see it gets published in Taiyō."

"Certainly. I can write something up. By when do you need it?"

"Whenever. It can even be a piece you've already written. In return, I'd like you to attend the festivities. You can drink champagne. Have you ever tried it? It's delicious. -- We're going to have an orchestra too. What do you think, teacher, of setting Tōfū's piece to music and having it performed?"

"It's your wedding. Do as you like."

"Would you be so kind as to score it?"

"Me? You've got to be kidding."

"How about the rest of you? Is there no composer here?"

"Kangetsu, our failed suitor, is a violin virtuoso. Perhaps he'll oblige. Be warned though, he's not one to be bought off with a mere glass of champagne."

"There's champagne and then there's champagne. The stuff they sell for four or five yen per bottle's no good. Rest assured I'll not be serving anything cheap. How bout it? Would you compose a score for me?"

"Gladly. I'd do it for twenty-sen champagne. I'd even do it for free."

"I won't have you laboring for free. If champagne's not your thing, then how about these." Thus saying, Sanpei produces a handful of photographs from his coat pocket and lays them out on the mat. Some are half portraits, and some are full. Some are standing, and some are seated. Some are in hakama, and some in kimono. Some have their hair formally done, in takashimada style. All are young ladies in the prime of their youth.

"These young ladies, good teacher, are all looking to be married off. Should any strike Kangetsu or Tōfū's fancy, I'll happily broker an introduction. How about this one?" Sanpei pushes one of the photos in Kangetsu's direction.

"Very nice. Introduce me, please."

"This one, too, is quite nice." Sanpei pushes forward another photo.

"Nice indeed. Introduce me, please."

"Which do you prefer?"

"Whichever."

"Don't let your thoughts go wild. This one here, teacher, is the niece of a doctor."

"I see."

"This one has the kindest of temperaments. She's young, too. Just seventeen. -- This one comes with a dowry of a thousand yen. -- This one's the daughter of a provincial governor." Sanpei prattles on, promoting his wares.

"Can I have more than one?"

"More than one? That's overreaching a bit, is it not? Or do you somehow subscribe to polygamy?"

"I'm no polygamist, I assure you, but I'm quite the carnivore."

"Let's put those photos away already," the master scolds Sanpei.

"Then you've really no interest?" Sanpei asks again for confirmation as he picks up his photos, one by one, and returns them to his pocket.

"What's with the beer?"

"A small gift, to celebrate my betrothal. I picked these up at the corner shop. Let's drink."

The master claps his hands to summon the maidservant and has her open the bottles. The master, Meitei, Dokusen, Kangetsu, and Tōfū all raise their cups to toast Sanpei's success in love and marriage. Sanpei himself is all smiles.

"I'd like to invite you all to my reception. You'll all come, won't you?"

"Not me," the master quickly responds.

"Whyever not? It's the biggest day of my life, and you won't be there? Isn't that rather unkind?"

"No unkindness intended, but I won't be going."

"Is it a question of attire? Any manner of haori and hakama will do. You really should get out and mingle. A number of notable men will be there. I'll introduce you."

"Now I'm even less inclined."

"It might help your digestion."

"My digestion's just fine as it is."

"If you're going to be so adamant, then I guess that's that. How bout you?" Sanpei turns to Meitei.

"Me? You can bet I'll be there. I'll even act as intermediary, should the honor be offered my way. Champagne, toasts all around, the warmth of a spring evening -- What's that? Suzuki Tōjūrō? I might have known. Regrettably, I'm late to the show. No point, I suppose, in multiple intermediaries. I'll attend nonetheless, to be sure, one among many."

"And how about you?" Sanpei questions Dokusen.

"The beauty of nature, tending a simple rod, a man fishing at leisure, nestled among the pale and crimson reeds."

"What on earth is that? Tang-era poetry?"

"I'm not really sure what it is."

"What kind of answer is that then, if you're not really sure what it is? How about you, Kangetsu? You'll attend, won't you? After all, you're known to the family."

"Indeed, I'll be there. If an orchestra's going to interpret and render my musical score, then I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"It should be grand. And you, Tōfū?"

"Me? Nothing would honor me more than the chance to read aloud my poetry, in person, before the bride and groom."

"Wonderful! Let me tell you, good teacher, I've never in my life been so delighted. Permit me another drink." With that, Sanpei pours himself glass after glass of the beer he brought, till his face is flushed beet red.

The short autumn day finally draws to a close. The hibachi is littered with cigarette butts, and its coals have long gone cold. The lively ensemble of leisurely men has seemingly exhausted the day's topics. "It's getting late. I suppose I'd best be going." Dokusen is first to rise and take his leave. "I'd best be going too." One by one, each guest takes his leave and files out through the entryway. Like an emptied theater, the parlor falls silent and still.

The master takes his dinner and withdraws to his study. The wife, her collar pulled tight against the evening chill, works with her needle to mend a faded garment. The children are asleep, their pillows arrayed in a row. The maidservant has headed off to the baths.

All these men and women saunter about, seemingly carefree. Wrap on the depths of their souls, though, and a mournful echo resonates from somewhere within. Dokusen may fancy himself enlightened, but his feet still tread the earth. Meitei may be at leisure, but he's nowhere close to reposing in the painted worlds he so fancies. Kangetsu's given up on polishing spheres and fetched a bride from home. Such was only matter-of-course. Persistent matter-of-course, however, is bound to result in monotony. Tōfū, in ten years' time, will rue the rash dedication of his poetic works. As for Sanpei, who can say whether he'll thrive on the hill or be washed into the sea. If he somehow manages, year upon year, to drown his confidants in champagne, then he'll walk through life with head held high. Suzuki will roll with the tide like a stone. He'll roll through mire on occasion, but he'll roll nonetheless, making his mark on the land. I was born a cat but have lived among men more than two years now. I was beginning to imagine myself unparalleled in my scrutiny of the human condition when the other day, out of the blue, I was shocked to learn of one Kater Murr, a fellow feline who talks big and swaggers even bigger. On further inquiry, this Kater Murr's



been gone some hundred years yet seems to have decided, on some curious whim and prayer, to return in spirit, from whatever distant realm of the dead, to haunt and taunt me. This cat, as it's told, was hardly the dutiful son. On one occasion, as he journeyed to visit his mother he carried in his mouth, by way of greeting, a fish. Along the way, unable to restrain himself, he stopped and devoured it. He was clever as any human, and is rumored to have impressed his master once by even composing a poem. If such a noteworthy cat has already appeared on the scene, and a full century prior, then perhaps it's time for the likes of me to gracefully bow out and exit into obscurity, living out my remaining days in some blissful land of warm and sunny meadows.

The master's digestion, sooner or later, is sure to be the death of him. Old man Kaneda, mired in his own avarice, is already dead to the world. The autumn leaves, for the most part, have withered and fallen. Death is the fate of all living things, and for those that have outlived their usefulness, an early death is perhaps the preferable course. According to our small circle of scholars, man's destiny is to limit the length of his days by his own hand. We cats too, if we're not careful, will condemn ourselves to the very same fate. Frightful to imagine. My spirit is sinking low. Perhaps a taste of Sanpei's beer might serve to lighten my mood.

I make my way to the kitchen. The kitchen door swings freely on its hinges, and the autumn breeze seems at some point to have cracked it open, pushed its way in, and extinguished the lamp. The light of the moon, however, is spilling through the window. There are three cups arrayed on the serving tray, two of which are half filled with a light brown fluid. Glass gives any fluid, even if warm, a cold appearance. By the light of the moon, on a chill autumn evening, set quietly next to the cold charcoal jar, all appears even colder yet. My lips, before even nearing the cups, feel a keen and repulsive chill. That being said, nothing is gained where nothing is ventured. I'd witnessed Sanpei, downing this same fluid, beet red and animated, breathing a hot fiery breath. There's no reason then that it shouldn't, in like manner, animate a cat. One can't know the number of one's days. In the time that one has, one had best experience all that one can. Regretful laments, from the shadows of one's grave, are to no avail. With firm resolve, I thrust my muzzle toward the fluid and begin lapping away. Much to my surprise, the sting of a thousand needles assails my tongue. What inspires humans to drink such foul drink is beyond me, but it's no drink for a cat. Cats and beer have zero mutual affinity. Thinking this beer most awful, I withdraw my tongue, but then I stop and think. Humans often say that bitter medicine is the best medicine. When they're ailing from the flu, they'll hold their noses and force down horrid concoctions. I've always wondered whether these concoctions really cure them, or if they in fact get well despite these concoctions. As fortune has it, this beer has presented me an opportunity to explore this question. In the worst case, I'm left with a bitter belly. If, on the other hand, I come alive like Sanpei, shedding all my worries and cares, then I'll know for a fact that beer is a godsend and can spread this new news through my network of local cats. Here goes nothing.

Casting my fate to the wind, I re-engage my tongue with full resolve. It's easier not to look, so I close my eyes and lap away.

Persevering and persevering, I empty the first cup. As I do so, a curious change comes over me. Where my tongue once felt agony, under assault from pricks and pangs, it's now at ease. After the first cup, there's no particular hardship in drinking further. Having cleared this first hurdle, I easily empty the second cup. For good measure, I even lick the tray, lapping up and downing every last drop.

I crouch in place for a while, taking stock of my own evolving condition. My body is growing warm. Blood is racing round my eyes. My ears are hot and tingly. I feel like singing a song. I want to dance the "Neko ja, Neko ja." I feel like telling the master, Meitei, and Dokusen to stick it where the sun doesn't shine. I feel like clawing old man Kaneda. I feel like biting off a chunk of his wife's imposing nose. Myriad feelings rush through my head. Finally, I feel the urge to rise onto my feet, unsteady though they are. Once up, I feel the need to stagger forward. Reveling in new sensations, I feel compelled to step outside. Once outside, I give my regard to beaming Mr. Moon. What a wonderful condition!

Thinking this must be what they mean by "tipsy," I let my legs, tottering this way and that, take me where they will. I'm terribly sleepy. I'm not sure I'm even awake anymore, though I seem to be stumbling onward. The weight of my eyelids is tremendous. Let come what may. Neither seas nor mountains can hinder my path. Thus thinking, I throw a front leg forward. As I do so, a loud splash ensues. In that instant, I'm had. By what I'm had I can't yet say. I only know that I'm had. All else is confusion.

As I come to my senses, I'm floating on water. In a state of distress, I lash out with my claws. My claws find nothing but water, and for all my effort I sink in its depths. Having no other recourse, I spring with my hind legs and lash out with my front claws. I stir up a ruckus but gain no solid hold. When I finally right myself, with head above the surface, I look around and see I'm in a large clay pot. This same pot, through the summer months, was thick with pond weed. Then the old crows came, devoured the flowers, and bathed themselves in the water. The more they bathed, the lower the water dropped. When the water dropped too low, they moved on. I'd noted of late the low water and lack of crows, but never had I imagined that I myself, in place of those old crows, would bathe in this very same pot.

From the water's surface to the top edge of the pot is twelve or so centimeters. Even fully extended, my paws won't reach. Thrusting myself upward is no use. And if I stay still, I only sink. Thrashing about, my claws scrape the pot. As they do so, I feel a slight lift, but then the claws slip, and back under I go. Going under is frightful, so I claw out anew. All this wears me down. I'm lashing out in desperation, but my legs are failing me. After a while, it's difficult to say whether I'm clawing at the pot to go under, or going under to claw at the pot.

In the midst of my distress, I reason as follows. My present torment all stems from my wish to climb up and out of this pot. I want more than anything to climb up and out, but I know full well I'm incapable of doing so. My legs measure not even ten centimeters. Floating on the water's surface, and extending my front leg in an optimal manner, a good fifteen centimeters of reach is required to hook a paw over the pot's upper edge. Unless I hook a paw over the edge, I can claw and thrash for all I'm worth, for however long I last, and never extricate myself. Knowing full well I can't get out, why do I persist in my struggle? By flailing in vain, I only increase my duress. What's the point? To torment myself any further, to subject myself to this torture, is sheer folly.

"Enough already. Let come what may. I'm done clawing." With that, I commend my front paws, my hind legs, my head and my tail, to the forces that be. Let nature take her course.

Bit by bit, I'm embraced by calm. I can't say whether I'm distressed still or relieved. It's not clear whether I'm still in the water or lolling in the parlor. Where or what is of no more import. All is calm. Or better said, it's calmer than calm. The sun and moon are drifting away. Heaven and earth are crumbling apart. A wondrous peace is descending. I'm dying. In death is peace. Such peace as this is only for the dying. Hail Amitabha Buddha. Hail Amitabha Buddha. Your thankful servant am I. Your thankful servant am I.