

Literature

A Grave of Fireflies

Nosaka Akiyuki

HE leaned stoop-shouldered against a bare concrete pillar—its mosaic tile now peeled off—inside the San’nomiya station of the public intercity line shoreside exit, sitting on the floor, both legs stretched straight out; he was burnt to a crisp by the sun, had not washed himself for nearly a month, but the color of Seita’s emaciated cheeks was yet pale, sunken. At night he gazed at the silhouettes of men huddled around their bonfires like pirates, puffed up with self-importance? abusing each other in loud voices, as if nothing had ever happened in the morning girls on their way to school; though all wore the same pantaloons he picked out through the shape of the collars of their middy blouses Kobe No. 1 Middle, khaki colored dress carrying white cloth wrappers, Ichiritsu Middle, knapsacks on their backs, Ken’ichi, Shinwa, Shōin, Yamate, and the crowds, feet passing continuously by his side, no need to take notice of him, but suddenly dropping their eyes at the strange smell they hastily jumped aside to avoid Seita—Seita had already lost the power to crawl to the toilet right before his eyes and nose.

Finding motherlike solace in the solid three-foot-square pillars, against each pillar a war orphan was planted, having gathered at the station perhaps because it was the only place

they could get into, perhaps from a certain yearning for the ever-present crowds, or that there they had water to drink, or yet from the expectation of some capricious handout; soon into September first it was burnt sugar dissolved in water poured into drum cans, one full cup for 50 *sen* that started the black market in the underpass of San’nomiya, in no time steamed potatoes, potato meal dump-lings, rice balls, bean paste rice cake, fried rice, red bean soup, bean jam buns, noodles, bowls of rice and fried fish, rice curry—then cake, rice, barley, sugar, *tempura*, beef, milk, canned goods, fish, cheap spirits, whisky, pears, oranges—rubber boots, tire tubes, matches, tobacco, rubber soled *tabi*, diapers—military blankets, army boots, uniforms, half-length boots—along with men who thrust out just as their wives had packed them that morning alumite lunch boxes stuffed with barley rice, “OK 10 yen, OK 10 yen,” then those holding out, dangling on the fingers of one hand, the worn-out shoes they were wearing, “how about 20 yen, 20 yen”—Seita, attracted solely to the smell of food, straying aimlessly about, by selling at a used clothing booth consisting of one laid out straw mat a long woman’s undergarment, an *obi*, a collar for the undergarment, a waistband, keepsakes from his mother, all soaked in water in an air-

raid shelter, their color bleached out, he had managed to keep eating for half a month; next his staple fiber middle school uniform, his leggings, his shoes had disappeared, as he thus hesitated about selling even his trousers he became accustomed to passing the nights inside the station—families, parents and children, dressed in full regalia, probably coming back from evacuation in the country, the hoods for warding off sparks still neatly folded, hanging from their canvas bags, rice mess kits, tea kettles, iron helmets dangling from the rucksacks on their backs, in the sense of relief of having made it to their destination would give him as if throwing off their excess baggage the half-rotten rice bran dumplings presumably prepared as emergency rations for the train ride, or he gratefully accepted from the sympathy of a repatriated soldier or the pity of an old lady who had a grandchild of about the same age some left-over bread or parched soybean curd twisted into paper wraps, always laid stealthily in more or less out-of-the-way places as if an offering to Buddha—at times he was chased out by the station employees, but the supplementary military police standing guard at the ticket gate on the contrary drove them away, protecting him, at least there was plenty of water, settling there he became rooted, after half a month he had lost the ability to move.

Merciless onslaughts of diarrhea continued, he crossed back and forth to the toilet, once having crouched down his legs trembled in the act of rising, pressing his body against the door, its handle already wrenched off, he stood, supporting himself with one hand on the wall he walked; finally with his back propped up against the pillar he like a deflated balloon reached a state where he could no longer move his hips, still the diarrhea attacked relentlessly, in an instant staining yellow the area around his bottom, the flustered boy was overwhelmed with shame, his body unresponding to his desire to flee, with nothing else to do he tried to conceal the color, raking together the little sand and dust

on the floor to cover himself, but the circumference of his hands reach was limited, and people looking at him probably thought a war orphan crazed by hunger, playing with his own running shit.

The hunger was already gone, there was no more thirst, his chin lay heavily on his chest, “oh my, he’s so dirty,” “looks dead to me,” “shameful isn’t it, with the American army arriving any minute, such a sight in the station,” his ears alone remained alive, distinguishing the various sounds around him, a sudden period of silence—night—the sound of *geta* echoing through the building, the clatter of a train passing over his head, the noise of feet suddenly breaking into a run, a child calling for its mother, the low whisper of men directly by his side, the clamor of station employees roughly flinging buckets, “today, what day?” what day is it, how long have I been here? his sense reviving he became aware of his body, in the very V-shape of his sitting posture sinking sideways to the floor, looking fixedly at the faint dust of the floor quivering in response to his weak breath, while thinking only what day is it? what day is it? Seita died.

Deep in the night of September 21, 1945—it was the previous day that the “General Plan for the Protection of War Orphans” had been formulated—a station employee gingerly examining Seita’s lice covered clothing found inside his waistband a small candy drops can; he tried to open the lid, but perhaps because of the rust it would not budge, “whadya think this is?” “leave it, leave it, oughta get rid of it,” “this guy too’s about had it . . . they get that empty lookin’ stare in their eyes, it’s all over,” said a companion peering at the drooping face of an orphan even younger than Seita, sitting near Seita’s corpse, which remained there, uncovered by matting, until the ward office would come to take it away. Nervous from holding the can of drops he shook it, a rattling sound, then the station man with a pitcher’s windup hurled it into the darkness of the burnt out ruins in

front of the station, the lid popped off, a white powder spilled out, the fragments of three small bones rolled away, waking the fireflies hidden within the grass, in a flurry 20, 30 of them flying back and forth, flashing on and off, then quiet.

The white bones were those of Seita's younger sister Setsuko, died on August 22 in a cave, their air-raid shelter, in the Manchitani area of Nishinomiya, the cause of death listed as acute inflammation of the intestines but in reality four years old no longer able to get to her feet succumbing as if into a deep sleep, just as her brother she had wasted away from malnutrition.

On June 5 a formation of 350 B29 bombers attacked Kobe—Fukiai, Ikuta, Nada, Suma, and Higashi Kobe, five city areas utterly leveled by fire—Seita, in his third year of middle school, had been mobilized as a laborer and was commuting to Kobe Steel Works, but on that day a suspension of electrical power for conservation purposes; at his family house near the beach of Mikage, after hearing the official alert for the attack, he buried in a hole he had dug in the converted family vegetable garden at the rear of the house—amidst the tomato, eggplant, cucumber, rape seedling—a Seto brazier, following the previously devised plan, garnering up in it from the kitchen rice, eggs, soybeans, dried bonito, butter, dried herring, saccharin, dehydrated eggs, covering it with dirt; in place of his ailing mother he lifted Setsuko on his back—no news from his father a naval first lieutenant aboard a cruiser—and removed from its frame that photograph of his father in full dress uniform, sticking it inside his shirt. From the two air raids of March 17 and May 11 he knew it was absolutely impossible with a woman and child along to put out the incendiary bombs and the shelter dug underneath their house was not to be depended on, first he had made his mother take refuge in the concrete reinforced shelter set up at the back of the fire station by the town block association; as he began to

stuff into his rucksack his father's civilian clothes from the chest of drawers with a queerly bouyant feeling the clang clang of the inspection sentries' bells filled the air with their rings, in the instant he ran out onto the porch he was enveloped by the sound of falling missiles—after the first wave passed there was an illusion because of the horror of that falling sound that a sudden stillness had descended, but the oppressive WOO-N WOO-N rumble of the B29s continued unabated—until then only once, five days before, the day of the Osaka air raid, had he from the shelter of the factory seen the formation, like a school of fish cutting through the gaps in the clouds crossing high in the sky above Osaka Bay, shapes flying toward the east, trailing clouds of exhaust so faint as to merge into nothingness, but now as he looked up that pinpoint had grown past arms' length, he could distinguish even the thick line inscribed on the under side of the fuselage of the low flying machines as they swept from the ocean toward the mountains, abruptly tilted their wings, and vanished into the west; for a second time the sound of descending bombs—as if the density of the air had suddenly thickened his body was straight-jacketed, he stood petrified—with a clattering noise the incendiary bombs, blue color, diameter only two inches, length 24 inches, rolled off the roofs, bouncing up and down the road like inchworms, spewing oil, Seita, his composure gone, for an instant dashed into the entranceway, but black smoke was already streaming slowly out from inside, going out again, but only the row of houses, the same as they had always been, not a shadow of human life, on the wall of the house before him a duster for the fires, a ladder had been left standing, anyway off to mamma's shelter; as he started off, Setsuko riding on his back sobbing convulsively, from the second floor window of the corner house black smoke was gushing out and as if by prearrangement a fire-bomb until then apparently smoldering in the ceiling loft simul-

taneously burst into flames, the splitting sound of trees crackling in the garden, fire flaming up as it ran along the eaves, a sliding door disjointed, falling, his field of vision darkened, the atmosphere was instantly sweltering, Seita as if he had been sent a staggering blow broke into a run; his previous plan had been to escape to the embankment at Ishiya River, and he ran eastward along the elevated line of the Hanshin Railway, but the area was already in a state of chaos with people dashing for shelter, people dragging large full carts, men carrying great bags of bedding, old ladies calling out for people in shrill voices, fretting with impatience he turned toward the sea, still then the sparks were flying, he was still wrapped in the cry of falling missiles, a 30 *koku* (5.4 kiloliters) *sake* vat filled with water broke, submerging everything in water, people trying to carry the sick off by stretcher—one block might be completely deserted while on the next street an uproar like that of spring house cleaning, people carrying out even their *tatami*—he went down the old national road and continued running along narrow streets; in an out-of-the-way city area—had everyone already fled?—not a man or child to be seen, the familiar sight of the black *sake* storage vats of Nada Gogō—coming to this point in the summer the smell of salt water hangs in the air, one catches sight of from between the narrow five-foot intervals of the storage vats the sand beach shining in the summer sun and the sea deep blue rising to a surprisingly high level on the horizon, but today nothing of the kind—no prospect of a shelter in that area of the beach they had reached, just a reflexive movement of escape from the fire to the water, refugees with the same idea were huddled under the fishing boats and their pulleys for hoisting up the nets along the 150-foot wide stretch of sand. Seita walked toward the west, taking refuge in depressions emerging here and there along the upper level of the Ishiya River, since the flood damage of 1938 built into two levels, no cover, but anyway he felt a sense

of security lying concealed in the hole, sitting down his heart was beating furiously, his throat parched, loosening the back strap he took Setsuko, who he had had almost no chance to look back on before, in his arms and set her down, by that effort alone he found his knees tottering, on the verge of collapse, yet Setsuko, her head covered in an air-raid hood of a fine splashed pattern, wearing a white shirt, trousers of the same pattern as the hood, red flannel *tabi*, and on one foot only the black lacquered *geta* she valued so much, was not crying at all, she held a doll and her mother's old large purse firmly in her hands.

The smell of burning, the sound of the fire carried by the wind, seemingly right on top of them, the falling of missiles, like the sound of a sudden downpour, now far off toward the west, at times starting with fright the brother and sister drew close to each other, suddenly remembering he pulled out from the air-raid bag the lunch box—his mother, saying that there was no sense in leaving any behind, the night before had resolutely cooked up a meal of only white rice, the left-over rice she had mixed with that morning's beans and brown rice, half white, half brown—opening it up the rice was already covered slightly with moisture, he gave the portion of white rice to Setsuko; looking up the sky was dyed in an orange hue, he remembered that once his mother had told him that in the morning of the great Kantō earthquake the clouds had turned yellow.

“Where did mamma go?” “she's at the air-raid shelter, the shelter at the back of the fire station, it can take a direct hit from even a 550-pound bomb, so it's safe, there's nothing to worry about,” he spoke as if trying to convince himself, but the whole region of the Hanshin line along the sea that he could see at intervals beyond the row of pines along the embankment still flickered in scarlet. “For sure she'll be there at the double pine at Ishiya River, we'll rest a bit longer, then go,” thinking she very probably had escaped from

the flames his thoughts turned, "you make it OK, Setsuko?" "one of my *geta* is lost," "your brother'll buy another, a better one," "I got money too," she showed him the purse, "open it up," unfastening the strongly built clasp inside were three or four one-sen, five-sen pieces, otherwise a white spotted bean bag, a red, yellow, and blue marble—one year before Setsuko had swallowed a marble, after which they had made her do her duty on a newspaper spread out in the garden, on the evening of the next day in a successful issue it emerged, that very one. "Is our house burned up?" "seems so," "whad'll we do?" "papa will take revenge for us," it was an irrelevant answer but neither did Seita have any idea about what would happen from then on, only that finally the roar of the machines had faded into the distance, presently about a five-minute shower fell, looking at the black splotches on his clothes, "this must be the rain they say falls after an air raid," his fear had finally abated; standing and looking out at the sea it had in this short interval become covered with immense filthy completely black floating things rising and falling, the mountains the same as always, to the left of Ichiō Mountain what appeared to be a mountain forest fire, a purple smoke trailing rather leisurely, "all right, climb on," sitting Setsuko on the embankment Seita turned his back to her and she leaned over onto him, he had been oblivious of it when they were fleeing but she was clumsily heavy—taking hold of the roots of the grass he crawled his way up the embankment.

Reaching the top the Mikage First and Second National Elementary Schools and the Mikage Public Hall appeared so close it seemed that the buildings had come marching in their direction, the *sake* storage vats and the empty military barracks, moreover the fire station and the grove of pines all were gone, the bank of Hanshin line was right in front, along the national road three street-cars, linked together, were immobilized, it looked as if the ruins of the fires continued

along the rising slope of the city to the base of Mount Rokkō, the far side hazy with smoke, in 15 or 16 places flames and smoke still swirled upwards, with a whoosh a yet unexploded discharge, or perhaps a time bomb, abruptly raised a whistle like a winter wind, a whirlwind sending sheet zinc spinning end over end into space; he felt Setsuko tightly grasp his back and said, "this place is really cleaned up just as nice as can be, take a look—that's the Public Hall, we had dinner there remember?" tried to talk to her but there was no reply. Saying wait a minute he rewrapped his leggings, advancing along the top of the embankment on his right the burnt remains of three buildings—all that was left of Hanshin's Ishiya River Station was the skeleton of its roof, the shrine in front of it had been leveled, only the bowl of the cistern remained—gradually the number of people increased, all of them families, sitting exhausted at the side of the road, their mouths alone still lively, talking back and forth, with a kettle dangling from the end of sticks they boiled water over smoldering coal, roasting dried potatoes; the double pine was on the right down the national road further along toward the mountain, at last making their way to the place no sign of their mother, since everyone was peering down into the river bed he looked too, face downward, spread-eagled, five corpses, victims of suffocation, lay on the sand of the dried-up river, Seita already felt the need to ascertain whether one of them might be his mother.

His mother had been plagued by heart trouble after the birth of Setsuko, in the middle of the night there would be spasm attacks and she would have Seita cool her chest with water, when it became painful she sat up in bed, her body propped up on cushions he piled behind her, even from outside her sleeping gown he could see her left breast shaking with the palpitations; her medicine was chiefly Chinese herbs, a red powder she took in the mornings and evenings, her wrist was thin enough to wrap one's palm around

twice. He had put her in the shelter beforehand because she could not run, but if once the shelter had been enveloped in fire there was a good chance that would be the place of her demise, knowing that only because the short cut to the shelter had been blocked by fire he had lost all concern for his mother's safety, Seita reproached himself, having run away at top speed like that, but even supposing that he had somehow made his way there would it have made any difference? "you and Setsuko please run for safety, your mother will in one way or another get by by herself, what excuse would I give your father if I don't have you two coming through safely? you understand, don't you?" his mother had said in a joking manner.

Two navy trucks went running west down the national road, from a car a man from the volunteer guard squad was shouting something through a megaphone, "to o' the direct hits dint go off, thought I oughta heave it, but the oil was spillin' everywhere, so . . ." a boy of about his age was talking to a friend, "please assemble at Mikage National School, everyone from Kaminishi, Kaminaka, Ichirizuka," the name of Seita's city area was called out, the thought immediately hit him that maybe his mother had taken refuge at the school, starting to descend the embankment again the sound of explosions, still the fire amongst the debris burned out of control, unless the road was sizeably wide one was blasted with heat, could not pass, "let's stay here for just a bit," he said to Setsuko; as if she had been waiting for him to speak, "I gotta pee," "OK down ya go," he lowered her, facing a thicket he held her under her legs, the urine spurted out with surprising force, he wiped her with a towel, "you can take off your hood now," taking a look at her head, which was covered with soot, using water from the canteen, "this end's clean ya know," he moistened the edge of one end of the towel and washed her, "my eye hurts," maybe because of the smoke it was red, bloodshot, "when we go to the school they'll wash it for

you," "what happened to mamma?" "she's at the school," "I wanna go there," "easy to say, but it's still too hot, can't walk," "I wanna go to the school," Setsuko began to cry, she was neither acting spoiled nor seemed to be in pain, a strangely adult voice. "Seita, did you meet your mother?" the daughter from the house facing theirs, already past the proper age for marriage, spoke out to him when Seita at the school playground was having Setsuko's eye cleaned again by someone from the medical corps—after one trip her eye still bothering her they had again lined up at the back of the line—"uh uh," "you better go quickly, she was hurt some," before he could say excuse me but could you look after Setsuko the girl "we'll take care of her, pretty scary eh Setchan, dintcha cry at all?" never before on especially friendly terms, did this provokingly kind treatment mean that his mother's condition was fairly serious? Seita left the line, going through this school he had attended for six years to the familiar medical room, a washbowl covered with blood color, a man wearing the national civilian uniform, face down, not a breath of movement, a woman, one leg of her trousers stripped off, wrapped up in bandages, not knowing what he should ask for so just standing there silently, then Mr. Ōbayashi, head of the town block association, "ah, Seita, we've been looking for you, you made it through all right?" he laid his hand on his shoulder "over here," leading him out to the hall. Mr. Ōbayashi then went back once more into the medical room, pulling out of a medical dispenser a jade ring wrapped in gauze, cut where it had been removed from the finger, "this is your mother's, isn't it?" in truth he did remember it.

The seriously wounded had been interned in the industrial arts room at the end of the first floor, those even worse off, on the verge of death, had been laid in the teacher's room inside; the upper half of his mother's body was covered with tape, her arms looked like wrapped up baseball bats, her face too wound

round and round with rolls of tape, only at her eyes and nose and mouth black holes opened up, the end of her nose exactly like a coating of *tempura*, her hardly recognizable trousers were everywhere covered with burn holes, he could see her camel colored drawers underneath, “she’s finally dropped off to sleep . . . she oughta be put in a hospital if there’s one left somewhere, I’m trying to find out, it seems the Kaisei Hospital at Nishinomiya wasn’t burned,” it was more like a state of coma than sleep, her breathing irregular, “my mother has a bad heart, is there any way you can get medicine for her?” “well, we can ask,” he nodded his head in assent, but Seita too well knew that it was a complete impossibility. The man lying at his mother’s side blew bubbles of blood from his nostrils with every breath, while a girl wearing a middy blouse, her eyes wandering back and forth across the room—the sight perhaps more than she could bear—wiped it away with a towel, on the opposite side the lower half of the body of a middle-aged woman was exposed, nothing more than a piece of gauze put over her pubic area, her left leg gone from the knee down, “mother,” he called to her in a low voice but he had no sense of that in actuality being her, anyway there was Setsuko to worry about; when he returned to the playground she was with the girl in a sandbox, a horizontal bar over it, “you see?” “yes,” “you have all my sympathy, if there’s anything I can do please tell me, oh yes, did you get your crackers already?” when he shook his head she said she would go and get it for them and left, Setsuko was playing with an ice cream scoop she had picked up from the sand. “Put this ring in your purse, take care not to lose it,” putting it away in the bag, “mamma isn’t feeling so good, but she’ll be better real soon,” “where is she?” “at the hospital, the one at Nishinomiya, that being so today you and big brother will stay here at the school, tomorrow, you know your aunt in Nishinomiya dontcha, near the pond, we’ll go there,” Setsuko did not say a word, building

various shapes with the sand, “my family’s in the classroom on the second floor, they’ll all be there so why dontcha come along,” the girl, bringing the brown colored packages of crackers returned. He said they would come a little later, were they to mix together with the family, both parents there, Setsuko would be miserable, even more than that maybe Seita himself would break out in tears, “ya wanna eat?” “I wanna go where mamma is,” “tomorrow we’ll go, it’s already late,” he sat at the edge of the sandbox, give it a try “watch this, your brother’s an expert,” Seita sprang onto the horizontal bar with a great swing pulling his body up onto it and began spinning around, round and round without end, in his third year at the National School, December 8, the morning of the beginning of the war, Seita had on the same bar done 46 spins, setting a new record. On the second day he decided to take her to the hospital, but there was no way he could carry her on his back so he finally hired a jinriksha from near the still standing Rokkō Michi Station, “well then, get on, I’ll take ya to the school,” for the first time in his life he rode on a jinriksha, running down the fire-gutted streets; by the time they arrived she was already near death, impossible to move her, the driver waved his hand, refused to take his money and returned, that evening his mother, through physical collapse brought on by the burns, expired. “May I have the bandages removed so I can look at her?” the doctor, wearing the uniform of a military medic, at Seita’s request stripped off the white cloth, “it would be better not to look, that would be better,” blood seeped through the bandages of his completely rigid, mummified mother, flies swarmed en masse around her, the blood-bubbling man, the woman with the leg cut off, all had died, a policeman was speaking a few words to the survivors, writing something down, “nothing else we can do, have a dig a hole on the grounds of Rokkō crematorium, burn ’em there, if we don’t get a truck today to carry ’em outa here, anyway in this kinda weather

...” he said to no one in particular, saluting, and going out; no incense or flowers, no dumpling offering, no reading of the sutras, not even someone to cry, one woman from the bereaved, her eyes shut tightly, was having her hair combed by an old lady, another, her chest bared, nursed a baby, also a boy, a special edition of an already crumpled tabloid clutched in one hand, “will ya look’t this, of 350 attacking bombers 60 percent shot down,” he said with great enthusiasm, Seita too calculated in his head 60 percent of 350 planes is 210 planes, a thought of little relation to his mother’s death.

He had hastily left Setsuko in the care of their distant relative in Nishinomiya—they had made a mutual promise with this house that they would come together if either was burned out—a widow, a boy presently enrolled in a mercantile marine school, a daughter, then one lodger working at the Kobe customs office. His mother’s corpse was to be cremated from noon, June 7, at the foot of Ichiō Mountain the bandage was stripped from her wrist, a marker tied on with metal, finally he was able to see his mother’s skin, turned a black color, hard to think of it as belonging to a human; in the instant she was put up on the stretcher some fat maggots fell off, looking more closely there were hundreds, thousands of maggots crawling around the industrial arts room, obliviously being squashed by those carrying out the corpses, the burnt, cylindrical log-like body was wrapped in a straw mat, piled into the truck, the suffocated, the fatally wounded, nothing to cover them, were lined up in a row on a bus with its seats removed, and carried off.

In the field below Ichiō there was a hole, diameter 10 yards, where the ridge poles, pillars, doors, sliding screens of evacuated buildings were randomly piled up, the corpses on top; the civilian guards hurled buckets of heavy oil like in fire-fighting drills, setting fire to a rag throwing it on top instantly a black smoke curled up, flames shot up, when

the burning corpses rolled off they snared them with fire hooks, returning them back to the middle of the flames, at the side on a table covered with white cloth there were hundreds of crude wooden boxes—in these they would collect the bones.

He was chased away, told that having the families around obstructed their work, that night at the end of the cremation, not even a beggar monk there, just like he was receiving his rations he was passed the wooden box with the bones, the name marked with charcoal, just wonder how useful those markers were considering how black the smoke was it contained a surprisingly white finger bone.

Late that night he made his way back to the Nishinomiya house, “is mamma still feelin’ bad?” “mm, she was hurt in the air raid,” “maybe she won’t be wearing this ring anymore, she gave it to me dint she?” he had hidden the box with the bone in a shutter above the alcove shelf, but the image floated through his head if they were to insert that ring on that white bone, disconcertingly wiping the thought from his mind, “that’s a pretty important thing, so let’s put it away,” he said to Setsuko, perched on top a mattress playing with her marble and the ring. Seita had not known it but his mother had removed clothes, nightwear, mosquito net, to the Nishinomiya relatives, the widow declared “the navy’s got it so good, gettin’ to use trucks to carry things,” hard to tell if she was being sarcastic; she showed him the baggage covered with an arabesque patterned cloth wrapper in the corner of the hallway, opening the wicker basket—in the middle everything from Setsuko’s and Seita’s underwear to their mother’s everyday wear was discovered, in the box of western clothes long sleeved dress-up kimono, the smell of naphthalene filled with memories.

They were given a three-mat room off the entranceway, with proof of personal calamity they could receive special allotments of rice, cans of salmon, beef, boiled beans; at the site of the ruins after the conflagration, could that

really have been where we lived? this astonishingly small tract of land, digging in the likely place the food stored away in the Seto brazier was safe. Borrowing a large pull-cart he crossed Ishiya, Sumiyoshi, Ashiya, Shukugawa, four rivers, taking an entire day he carried the stuff, as he was piling it up in the entranceway this time too the widow "it's only the military families that are living high," repeated her complaining, with an expression of pure delight she lorded over the goods, even giving out pickled plums to the neighbors; the water supply continued to be cut off, so it was natural that Seita's strong young arm would be most welcome in drawing water from the well 300 yards away, for a while the daughter, 4th year pupil of a girls' school now mobilized into Nakajima Aircraft, took off from work and kept company with Setsuko.

A neighborhood wife whose husband was at the front was seen at the well audaciously holding hands with a student of Doshisha University, wearing a square student cap, his body half naked, becoming the object of local gossip, Seita and Setsuko too, being the family of a naval first lieutenant and as misfortunate children who had lost their mother in the raids, aroused local sympathy through the widow, playing the modest benefactor.

In the evening the bullfrogs in the nearby reservoir croaked ferociously, on the end of each blade of the lush grass growing along both sides of the deep-flowing stream emerging from there a firefly twinkled, extending his hand the same light moved into the middle of his fingers, "hey, try catching one," placing it on Setsuko's palm she grasped it with all her strength, immediately crushing it, in her palm a nose pricking pungent smell remained; in the deep velvety smooth darkness of June, it was still Nishinomiya but it was the side of the mountain and the air raids yet seemed to be of another world's concern.

They had sent a letter in care of the naval base at Kure, and one day on their way back

from the post office—no reply had come—he had coaxed his mother to drop by their bank, thus he now remembered the Kobe Bank, Rokkō branch, Sumiyoshi Bank, Motomachi branch, going there to ascertain how much they had saved he was told it amounted to only 7,000 yen, "when my husband passed away his retirement compensation was 70,000 yen," the widow said puffing out her chest, "Yukihiko was only in his third year of middle school but ya shoulda seen how nicely he greeted the company president, they all praised him, just as steady as can be, that boy," great pride in her son; at night he had trouble getting Setsuko to sleep, at times she would cry out as if in fright, every time waking him up, inadvertently sleeping late insinuating remarks could be heard directed toward Seita, in a span of only ten days the plums in the wide-mouthed bottle, the dehydrated eggs, the butter, quickly disappeared, the special allotment for disaster victims also ended, when the 2 go 3 shaku (approx. 0.9 pint) ration also became half soybean, barley, millet, the widow suspected only because children are naturally big eaters that maybe these two were eating some of her family's share, after a while even with the rice porridge served three times a day she would with a vigorous stroke scoop down to the bottom, giving the rice settled there to her daughter, pouring into Seita's and Setsuko's bowl only the soup with those vegetable leaves floating on top, at times perhaps in a pang of conscience, "my young lady here is in service as a laborer for our country, she hasta eat a lot so we can have her at full strength," from the kitchen always there came the sound of her scraping the encrusted burnt rice at the bottom of the porridge, that surely mouth savoring taste, the aroma, the crisply chewable burnt rice, rather than getting angry at the thought of the greedy widow his mouth oozed with spittle. The lodger working at the customs office was well versed in the black-market routes, he gave cans of meat, honey, salmon to the widow, generally ingratiating

himself, he had eyes for the daughter.

"Shall we go to the sea?" he said one clear day in the rainy season, Seita was worried about Setsuko's extreme heat rash, surely it will improve if she wiped off with sea water—who could say how she had come to terms in her child's heart, but she very seldom spoke of her mother, she just clung even closer now to her brother—"mm, that'll be fun," until the previous summer they had borrowed a room in Suma, spending the summer there, leaving Setsuko on the beach he had swam out and back to the buoys of the fishermen's nets floating in the sea, there was a so-called beachside teahouse, just one building, where they could drink *amazake* (a sweet drink made from fermented rice), the two of them sipping down that ginger smelling liquid, going back Setsuko cramming the roasted wheat powder their mother made into her mouth, choking, her face covered with crumbs. "Do ya remember that, Setsuko," he started to say, but no, no good to needlessly make her think about it.

They headed toward the beach along a small stream, scattered along the straight asphalt road horse carts were idling, evacuees transporting their baggage, a plump boy wearing glasses, the cap of Kobe No. 1 Middle School on his head, was grasping in both arms a great pile of difficult looking books, placing them on a baggage cart, the horse only jerking his tail languidly; turning toward the right they came out on the embankment of the Shukugawa River, at the coffee house Paboni along the way vegetable gelatin flavored with saccharin was being sold, so they stopped for some—Juchheim's in San'nomiya had until the very end sold cake, a half year before announcing that they would close up shop they made decorated fancy cakes and their mother had bought one, the owner of that shop was Jewish, about 1940 a great many Jewish refugees had come to Akayashiki near Shinohara where Seita had gone to learn arithmetic, they were young but all were bearded, at four in the afternoon they would

line up outside the bathhouse, even in the summer wearing thick overcoats, there was one wearing two left shoes, limping along, what happened to that guy no doubt imprisoned, put to work in a factory, prisoners really had to work, first prisoners, second students, third drafted workers, fourth actual employees, the professional workers are making duralumin cigarette cases, making rulers from synthetic resin, is this really how we're winning the war?—the embankment of Shukugawa River had been turned into vegetable gardens, the flowers of pumpkin and cucumbers were blooming, up to the national road there were almost no people to be seen, amidst the grove of trees lining the road a medium capacity training plane to be used in the final battle for the protection of the beloved homeland was for appearance sake covered with camouflage roping, all was quiet. At the seaside a child scooping up sea water with a one *shō* (1.92 quarts) bottle and an old lady, "Setsuko, take off your clothes," Seita soaked a towel in the water, washing over and over the countless red spots on the skin of her shoulders and thighs, already taking a plump rounded girlish shape, "probably a little cold,"—they would go to the bathhouse removed from the widow's, but always after everyone else had finished and bathing in the darkness of the blackout he never felt cleansed—looking again at the naked body of Setsuko she resembled their father, her skin white, "what's that person doin' ? sleepin' ?" looking down at the side of a low sea wall there was a corpse covered with a straw mat, the two legs thrust out appearing terribly big in comparison with the body, "best not look at that, when it gets a little warmer we can go swimming, I'll teach ya."

"If we go swimmin' I'll get hungry," it had recently become difficult for Seita too to bear his empty stomach, to the extent that absently squeezing the pimples breaking out on his face he would even unconsciously pop the white oil into his mouth, they had money but he was not wise in the ways of buying through

