Still in Kushimoto (A Novel)

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STILL IN KUSHIMOTO (A NOVEL)

WARREN O'SULLIVAN DECKER

Master’s Program in Creative Writing

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Warren Decker

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STILL IN KUSHIMOTO (A NOVEL)

by

WARREN O'SULLIVAN DECKER, M.A.

THESIS

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Preface

Introduction

*Still in Kushimoto* is a novel told from the perspective of a young American man named Zim who finds himself at a campground at the southern tip of Japan’s Honshu Island in the rural town of Kushimoto. He makes a New Year’s resolution to write in a journal in a conscious attempt to find the narrative of his own life. The novel takes the form of present day journal entries, interwoven with recollected past events in alternating chapters. As the story of the past moves forward, towards the end of the novel it merges with the present, but Zim finds himself still stranded in Kushimoto, still within a narrative that feels isolated, incoherent and meaningless. Zim’s narrative only begins to make sense and become meaningful when he begins to tell a story of “we” instead of just “I,” and when he begins to share his life and his story with others.

Like Zim, all of us tell ourselves the stories of ourselves in order to survive. Even without writing a single word, we shape our reality into a narrative structure through our thought, speech, and action. If I only tell my story to myself, (whether I write it down or simply think it), ultimately that story cannot make sense. In its isolation, it becomes a story about a meaningless and purposeless existence. However, if we share our stories with others, (and if we truly believe that others are out there), then our collective stories become meaningful.
Still in Kushimoto, is a story about stories. It is a story about our written and unwritten autobiographies. It is a story about how we are all active reality-shaping storytellers. Most importantly, Still in Kushimoto is a story about how our stories only become meaningful when we are willing to relinquish some control over our individual narrative threads, and recognize our stories as a part of a vast tapestry that we are all weaving together.

In this preface I will discuss the concepts of fictional reality, autofiction, and surfiction in the context of Still in Kushimoto. I will also explain some of the technical aspects of the novel’s structure and describe the influence of other surfictional literary works.

Let us begin with the paradoxical concept of “fictional reality.”

Part 1: Meaningful Reality as Shared Narrative

As an MFA student I encountered the idea of “fictional reality,” in a foundational Narrative Theory and Poetics class, through readings of critical theorists such as Bozzi, (to be discussed in detail later), and Roland Barthes who said unforgettably in Camera Lucida, “language is, by nature, fictional” (87). I would like to go a step further and argue that reality is, by nature, fictional. Reality is not fictional because it is unreal. Reality is fictional because it is a narrative that we actively create.

This idea of “fictional reality” is central to Still in Kushimoto on both a conceptual and technical level. Zim is stranded in Kushimoto, consciously trying to recover the lost narrative of his
reality. His case is extreme, because he is aimless and isolated in an unfamiliar place. Furthermore, his attempt to recover his lost narrative takes the very overt form of actually writing words in a journal. However, Zim is a metaphor for all of us who wake up each morning, and actively engage in creating the narratives or ourselves, regardless of whether or not we write a single word.

Jonathon Gottschall explains story-telling from an evolutionary standpoint in his non-fiction work, *The Story Telling Animal.* “The storytelling mind is a crucial evolutionary adaptation. It allows us to experience our lives as coherent, orderly, and meaningful. It is what makes life more than a blooming, buzzing confusion” (102-103). My protagonist Zim, like everyone, is writing a story to survive. In *Still in Kushimoto* I am echoing Gottschall’s concept of the essentiality of storytelling, and furthermore I am arguing that we must co-create *collective* stories in order to find coherence and meaning. As mentioned above, in the conclusion of the novel, Zim finds meaning in his writing only when he takes a leap of faith and believes that someone will actually read his words. He finds meaning in his life when he finally opens himself to Eiji, (the elderly local man who regularly distracts Zim from his writing), and physically helps him to escape from a dangerous winter storm. The decision to help Eiji is not written, but it is still a narrative insofar as Zim has to consciously take action and alter his existing narrative of his own selfish isolation. In one of Zim’s final journal entries from the Kushimoto campground, as he watches the snowstorm gain intensity, he writes:
I'm distracted by the thought of Eiji at his house with his wife and the two of them without any water or power. No phone service. But even if I did want to go and check on them, I don't know that I could find their house so I can sort of absolve myself of feeling like I should (121).

We see Zim trying to convince himself that he doesn't need to help Eiji. Following this entry, Zim returns to the thread of his past narrative, determined to tell his story, even at the expense of letting Eiji face the storm alone. However, a few entries later Zim is writing from a refuge center at an elementary school gym. He finally realizes that his story, and his reality, doesn't make sense in isolation. He has always understood that reality is narrative, but only at this turning point at the end of the novel does he come to understand that meaningful reality is shared narrative.

**Part 2: Autofiction, Autobiographical Fiction, and Fictional Autobiography**

With these concepts in mind, we can now turn to the idea of “autofiction.” In his article, “Facts, Fiction, Autofiction, and Surfiction in Herta Muller's Work” Bozzi, explains the term “autofictional” as “[an author’s] creative reworking of her own biographical experiences, [and] the fictionalization of (parts of) her life” (130). In *Still in Kushimoto* I hope to build on this concept and put forth the idea that even the most literal and factual autobiography is ultimately—like reality itself—a work of fiction. Conversely, I also hope to convey that all fiction is autobiographical. Let’s first consider the former idea.
In *Still in Kushimoto*, Zim is attempting to write his own autobiography in his journal, and even actively reflecting on his attempt to make sense of his life: “I’m sitting here in the back of a Honda-fit trying to write my story, losing the plot” (22). He directly addresses the reader, but alternates between thanking the reader to doubting the reader’s existence. He veers from “Thanks for reading this,” to “You’re not really reading this anyway are you?” (23), in the space of a few paragraphs.

Interspersed with these reflections on his situation in Kushimoto, Zim writes stories of his past. The first of these stories opens at the Lost Creek Commune: “Six of us are sitting with Dr. Jimathon in a big nylon tent in a tight circle on top of layers of sleeping bags spread out over foam camping pads” (28). I chose to have Zim write these entries in the present tense to make the scene immediate and vivid, but more importantly, I hoped to show how our memories are malleable, and reveal the fictional nature of our own actual lives. Zim experienced certain events in the past. However, by writing about them in his journal, he brings them into the present where he relives them and reshapes them. His autobiography, and all of our autobiographies, (written or unwritten), are works of autofiction. They are based on actual events but inevitably incorporate fictional elements as we reimagine them.

While Zim is stranded in Kushimoto working on his autofiction, we can also step out of the *Still in Kushimoto* narrative and into Warren Decker narrative to see another layer of autofiction at
work. Like Zim, I am an American in Japan who has worked in as an English teacher in Sendai. The campground at Kushimoto is an actual place I have been to many times. In this way, many of the physical details of the reality Zim inhabits have been taken directly from my own experience.

I’m down on the rocks this morning. I followed the woodchip loop around the perimeter of the field, then cut off onto the steep narrow path down through the shrubs and gnarled pine trees wrapped with briars. A cheap nylon rope is tied to a tree at the top, so I kept one hand on that for the steep parts, kept this notebook in my other hand, and scrambled down with my water-bottle tucked up under my armpit (32).

The above description could easily be an entry in my own actual journal, and as such it could have been written by either Zim or Warren. Anyone who has explored Kushimoto will recognize this setting as an actual place.

Despite these autofictional elements in *Still in Kushimoto*, the novel is definitely not an accurate or realistic autobiography of an actual person. By creating these parallels between myself and the protagonist I hope to blur the lines of fiction and nonfiction, and once again draw readers’ attention to the fictional aspects of any autobiography.

Having made this effort to convince you that all autobiography is autofictional, and therefore—on some levels—fictional, now I would like to suggest that the opposite is also true: All fiction is—on some level—autobiographical. This is another idea I have attempted to convey through *Still in Kushimoto*.

In *Letters to a Young Novelist*, Vargas Llosa, Mario states this idea with more subtlety: “All stories are rooted in the lives of those who write them; experience is the source from which fiction
flows” (15). Because our stories are rooted in our actual lives, all fiction must contain an element of autobiography. *Still in Kushimoto* is no exception, and though the physical setting is obviously drawn from my own experience, Zim’s fictional search for meaning and coherence is perhaps the most deeply autobiographical portion of the book.

Like the protagonist of my novel, I am constantly trying to write my story. Like Zim, my story is sometimes coherent and meaningful, sometimes incoherent and meaningless. I have written *Still in Kushimoto* with the assumption that fluctuations from feelings of meaningfulness to meaninglessness are a universal human experience. By having the novel’s protagonist find meaning by sharing his narrative, I hope that *Still in Kushimoto* encourages readers to actively take part in the co-creation of collective narrative. At the conclusion of the novel, Zim reflects on his own journal and writes, “…all these thousands of scrawled words, my entire story is just a tiny part of a much larger, much more elaborate and wonderful story” (151). I hope that *Still in Kushimoto* will encourage readers to share their stories and join others in the co-creation of this larger, collective story.

**Part 3: Surfiction**

Having established the idea that narrative becomes meaningful when shared, now I would like to take us in a different direction and argue that our collective narrative is also more meaningful and coherent when *we are aware that we are creating it*. This idea leads us to surfiction.
Bozzi paraphrases Federman when he explains surfiction as writing “that thematizes the constructedness of reality...[and] exposes the fictional nature of reality” (131). *Still in Kushimoto* is a story that is overtly about story-telling and story-writing, I hope it succeeds as a work of surfiction which makes readers aware of their active role in creating their own stories and helps readers to find meaning in their lives by consciously shaping reality through narrative.

In writing *Still in Kushimoto*, I was inspired by many other surfictional works. They are too numerous to list here comprehensively so I will focus on three particularly relevant examples: “Passage to Fudakaru” by Inoue, *Middlesex* by Eugenides, and “Inventory” by Machado.

“Passage to Fudakaru,” by Yasushi Inoue is work of historical fiction about the monks of Fudaraku Temple who sail for the mystical island of Fudaraku, a physical symbol of the enlightened state of nirvana. For most, the island is not visible, but one monk believes in it so fervently that he actually sees it. Another monk believes that he is throwing his life away into the ocean, but as an expression of his belief in Buddhism and his commitment to tradition, he sets sail willingly. Inoue’s story is a work of surfiction that reveals how reality is created through narrative. Because “Passage to Fudakaru” is based on an actual temple just north of Kushimoto, I chose to have Zim make direct references to the story in his journal entries.

In *Middlesex*, by Jeffrey Eugenides, a first-person narrator tells us a multigenerational history of his family and his own childhood. This history and memoir is intertwined with descriptions of
his present unfolding adult life in Germany, and his developing romance with the character Julie Kikuchi. The narrator in Middlesex tells us very specific details about his grandparents and events before his birth that he could not possibly have witnessed directly. Similarly, in Still in Kushimoto, Zim addresses readers from the present with alternating chapters that recount and reshape past events. Both surfictional novels hopefully heighten readers’ awareness of the fictional qualities of memory and of reality itself, thereby reminding readers of their own power to shape reality with narrative.

Finally, the surfictional short story “Inventory” by Carmen Maria Machado, (from Her Body and Other Parties), is a list of sexual encounters described by a first-person protagonist. As the story unfolds we learn that there is a terrible virus that is killing millions of people. This parallels the ominous winter storm brewing off the coast of Kushimoto. Only in the conclusion of the story does the narrator tell us, “I drank water and set up my tent and began to make lists…Every person who has probably loved me…The sand is blowing into my mouth, my hair, the center crevice of my notebook…” (44). We learn that the entire story has been the list that the protagonist has been writing in her notebook. Machado makes the technical decision to reveal the notebook at the end of her story, whereas in Still in Kushimoto, readers encounter the notebook immediately. Despite this structural difference, in surfictional terms I feel “Inventory” and Still in Kushimoto are parallel in that they both have first person protagonists desperately trying to make sense of reality through narrative.
in the form of a journal, and both protagonists are metaphors for all of us who are engaged in this constant search for coherence and meaning.

All of these surfictional works reminded me of my active role in creating the narrative of my unfolding reality, and I hope that Still in Kushimoto has the same power for readers.

Part 4: Communicating Vessels and Relinquishing Control

In Letters to a Young Novelist by Mario Vargas Llosa describes the technique of “communicating vessels.” In Still in Kushimoto there are two interwoven stories presented in alternating chapters. The first story is Zim’s unfolding present moment at Kushimoto as he sits in the back of a car and writes in his journal. The second story is Zim’s recollection of past events that have lead him up to this moment, starting with a scene from his childhood on a commune in Oregon, leading to his arrival in Japan, and then the subsequent events that led him to Kushimoto.

Vargas Llosa writes, “A system of communicating vessels operates when the sum of an episode is something more than its parts—”(121). In Still in Kushimoto, the communicating vessels of memoir and journal entries come together to reveal my idea about human need for a coherent and collective narrative. When the narrative threads of past and present meet, Zim has the frightening realization that his recollection of the past has only lead him to a present moment, in which he is still isolated at Kushimoto in a snowstorm with no plan, purpose, or meaning. The narrative threads
of the novel, kept formally apart from each other in separate chapters, finally come together both technically and conceptually to create a moment of crisis for Zim. He can only overcome that crisis by breaking himself free of his selfish narrative of isolation.

This narrative shift is indicated by the actual story line when Zim takes action to help Eiji escape from the storm. This shift is also portrayed by formal aspects of the novel's structure. When Zim finally leaves the stolen Honda Fit and the parking lot, he begins to reflect on his own act of journal writing. Up until that moment the journal entries started with “I am writing,” Only in the second to last chapter, “Kushimoto- January 6, 2001,” does Zim step outside of himself and describe from a broader perspective. He writes:

I look at the scrawled pencil marks in the soggy crumpled notebook and stare at the shapes of my messy slanted letters, letting my eyes unfocus until the words and letters unfurl themselves from their meanings (109).

This is the moment that he breaks free of his selfish and self-destructive narrative, enabling himself to create a new narrative that gives his life meaning.

Thus far in this preface I have argued that all of us constantly use narrative to shape our reality. I have argued that these narratives become meaningful when they are shared. Furthermore, I suggested that we benefit from an awareness of our own role as creators of reality through narrative. Now I need to explain how *Still in Kushimoto* is also a story about the danger of narrative.
Part 5: Trapped in Narrative

A powerful irony resides at the heart of this novel. Zim is writing in his journal, consciously trying to take control of his narrative and make sense of his reality. However, this effort to take control leads him further and further into a self-destructive narrative of isolation and self-pity. He feels that the world is against him. He rejects the generosity of Eiji and even fantasizes about murdering him. He sees Eiji as a distraction from his important work of recreating his narrative in his journal, when actually it is Eiji who is the only character who can save him, by drawing him out of his self-destructive narrative.

In the second chapter of the novel, “Lost Creek Commune, August 1992,” Zim recalls a scene from his adolescence when he has powerful psilocybin-induced psychedelic experience. He finds himself outside of his own body and sees that the entire concept of “Zim” is actually nothing more than a story. Without a concept of self, what is there to distinguish “Zim” from the physical material of the trees and the soil. The experience is both frightening and enlightening, and the chapter concludes with Zim being comforted by his mother and drinking a cup of tea, restoring a familiar narrative of himself.

In Kushimoto, Zim is stuck in a very different narrative. By desperately seeking to \textit{individually} make sense of \textit{his own} story, he locks himself into a narrative in which he is isolated and
alone. In “How to Change your Mind” Michael Pollan describes his research findings in psychedelic therapy for treatment of addiction and depression. He writes:

Getting overly attached to these narratives, taking them as fixed truths about ourselves rather than as stories subject to revision, contributes mightily to addiction, depression, and anxiety. Psychedelic therapy seems to weaken the grip of these narratives, perhaps by temporarily disintegrating the parts of the default mode network where they operate (441).

Zim’s “default mode” is his story of isolation and disconnection in which he is unable to feel gratitude for anything. Because he is locked in a selfish mode of thinking he can only see the selfish motives of other people. (A concrete example of this is contained in “January 5, 2001-6:30PM.” Zim goes to a buffet restaurant with Eiji, but instead of feeling gratitude for Eiji’s generosity and the abundance of food, he can only see the disturbing and destructive rapaciousness of himself and the other customers.)

In Japan, Zim has no access to psychedelic therapy to “weaken the grip” of his narrative, but within the story, Eiji’s distractions, and more dramatically, the huge winter storm serve the function of dramatic disruption that eventually enables Zim to escape his destructive narrative thread.

To restate, Zim feels that he must hold on to his narrative thread, but by trying to exert too much control he becomes locked in a narrative of isolation over which he has no control. (I chose first person perspective and the journal entry format for this novel to give readers a claustrophobic intimacy with Zim in his isolated state.) The following may seem like a Zen koan: Zim is only able to
regain control of his narrative by relinquishing control. This paradoxical idea is central to Still in Kushimoto. In order to truly co-create collective narratives we must have the courage to acknowledge that ultimately, we are not in control of our own narratives. This idea may seem to contradict what I have stated above about all of us shaping reality through our own narratives. Reality is fictional, but it is still real. There are winter storms. There are the physical realities of aging and dying. We have to work with reality to create our narratives. To put this in concrete terms, we can think of reality as the raw materials. As humans, we have the challenge of trying to actively shape those raw materials into something beautiful and meaningful, while simultaneously acknowledging that we have no control over what those raw materials might be.

Part 6: The Dreamworld

The esoteric ideas above might be more accessible if considered in the context of my actual writing process. From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction by Robert Olen Butler, and Becoming a Writer by Dortohea Brand were both very influential books because of their emphasis on the importance of a writing routine that accesses the unconscious mind. Brand offers this advice to writers:

[R]ise half an hour, or a full hour, earlier than you customarily rise. Just as soon as you can—and without talking, without reading the morning's paper, without picking up the book you laid aside the night before—begin to write (Loc 680).
Still in Kushimoto was written in the early hours of many mornings. By accessing my unconscious mind the writing went in directions that I could have not consciously predicted. Just as Zim has to relinquish his idea of control over reality to create a meaningful narrative, I had to relinquish my idea of complete authorial control in order to access the raw materials I needed to create Still in Kushimoto.

However, having accessed my unconscious mind and creating an initial draft of over 400 pages, then I had to shape that raw material into a meaningful and coherent narrative. I relinquished control then took control again. From the initial raw material just over 100 pages remains. My writing process mirrors this paradoxical idea in Still in Kushimoto of relinquishing control in order to make meaning from reality. As stated above, narratives become meaningful with they are co-created and collective. This co-creation doesn’t just happen with other people, but with the mysterious raw materials of existence itself. Implicit in the act of co-creation is an acceptance that none of us is in complete control. In the complex tapestry of our reality, we weave as we are woven.

Conclusion

Like Zim in his feverish journal writing in Kushimoto, the writing of this preface has led me back to this present moment, which is coherent and incoherent, meaningless and meaningful, all depending on how we frame it.
We are all engaged in this desperate and essential act of co-creation of collective meaningful narratives. Without them we are doomed to die alone. *Still in Kushimoto* and the writing of this preface have shown me the importance of joining with others to create meaning, and to always be thankful for those who help me in this process. While we actively shape our narratives, we must also be willing to share them, and thereby relinquish our illusions of control.

I have done my best to shape these ideas into a coherent preface here, and into a coherent novel in *Still in Kushimoto*, but now I must turn them over to you dear reader. I must share these words with you, relinquishing control over them. They become meaningful right now, at this precise moment, as they pass directly from my fingertips into your eyes. Thank you very much for reading.
References


Brande, Dorothea. *Becoming a Writer.* Kindle Ed, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1934


Still in Kushimoto

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual people or events is entirely coincidental.
January 1, 2001- 6:34 AM

I’m sitting in an orange sleeping bag, shivering in the back of a Honda Fit. Frost spirals on the inside of the windows and this flimsy notebook is propped up against my knee. I’m holding this mechanical pencil in freezing cold hands, scrawling these words in a little circle of light from my headlamp. A not quite full-moon is sinking towards the sea in the west, and the sky in the east is pinkish gray.

My New Year’s resolution: Write my story. (And stop drinking.)

I have no job. Kushimoto is the farthest south I can go. This is day seven here, day four on my own after Mariko rode off on the back of that guy’s motorcycle. Taka probably died of hypothermia in his wrecked apartment. The police are probably looking for this car. Eiji tells me there’s a big winter storm on the way, but what’s the worst that can happen? All I can do is die.

So I have nothing but time.

No. That’s not quite right. Dr. Jimathon always said we should use words with precision. Let me be more precise. Here’s what I have:

- this lime green Honda Fit, (stolen, Sendai plates, registered to Taka Tanaka), backseat folded down, giving me just enough room to lie down diagonally with my knees bent.
- 3,378 yen
- three loaves of Daburu Sofuto (Double soft) white bread
- a cardboard box full of Costco canned sardines- Sustainably Harvested! No Mercury! Great source of Omega-3!
a jar of Nescafe instant coffee granules (When this runs out it really will be time to make a driftwood raft and set sail for the mystical Buddhist island of Fudaraku.)

this musty sleeping bag with a duct-taped hole

Mariko’s sleeping bag bundled up in its orange stuff stack

two foam camping pads


confusion

the stars

Thanks for reading this by the way. If you are, it means I didn’t burn each page on a driftwood fire or send them out into the waves as a fleet of origami sailboats. It might even mean that I finished my story and made some sense of how my 20 years on this earth lead me to be sitting in the back of a stolen Honda Fit, stranded here in this campground in Kushimoto at the southern tip of the main island of Japan.

My coffee has already gotten cold, but there is still a sip left. The sun has risen over the ocean horizon and I don’t need my headlamp anymore. Beyond the reeds I can see a huge freighter out there in the distance, and with the rising sun turning everything pink and red, it seems to be floating out there in liquid flames.

Some guy is actually driving that ship. Amazing. He’s looking at computer consoles, with buttons, levers, and blinking lights. He’s heading west towards Osaka, with a load of what? Lexuses?
Delphinomin capsules?

And while he’s out there doing his important job, I’m sitting here in the back of a Honda Fit trying to write my story, losing the plot. You’re not really reading this anyway are you?

Lost Creek Commune: August 1992

Six of us are sitting with Dr. Jimathon in a big nylon tent in a tight circle on top of layers of sleeping bags spread out over foam camping pads. It smells like damp wool socks.

Dr. Jimathon, has us reading Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. Six-year-old Yoonie and I are sitting next to each other sharing a soggy, dog-eared paperback copy. The rain is pattering the nylon tent fly, and Porter’s head hangs down with his chin resting on his chest. Cedar is sliding the zipper back and forth on the sleeping bag in front of her.

“Let’s take a look right here my friends, top of the page, ‘That’s all the motorcycle is…’ are you with me? Porter? Are you with me?” Porter jerks his head up and opens his eyes. “OK Zim, could you read this for us please? Nice and slowly, just those two sentences starting with ‘That’s all the motorcycle is…’”

I’m the oldest at 12, and Dr. J. always calls on me to read.

“Sure Dr. J.” I say, and lick my lips. Yoonie holds the book over closer towards me. “‘That’s all the motorcycle is, a system of concepts worked out in steel. There’s no part in it, no shape in it,
that is not out of someone’s mind.’ ”

“Thank you Zim,”

I nod, and then Dr. J. reads the same sentences again, very slowly, and then reads them one more time, taking that last sentence reeeeeecccally slow “ ‘There’s no part in it,’” pause, “no shape in it,” pause with beard stroke, “that is not… out… of… someone’s… miiiiiiiiiiiiind,’ ” and that’s when I realize that either the mushrooms have kicked in hard, or this Pirsig dude is really on to something, because suddenly this idea makes perfect fucking sense!

Dr. J strokes his long brown and gray beard, looking around at the six younger kids, then looks right back at me and says, “Zim, what do you think Pirsig means here?”

“I get it.” I say, and everyone turns to look at me, sensing an energy in my voice. “Yes. I can totally explain it.” I look around at the other kids. “So the steel of the motorcycle engine must feel really hard right?” The other kids nod. “But Pirsig is saying that the motorcycle engine, even though it feels so hard and solid, is still just something that someone imagined. Unless someone had imagined all those pipes and pistons and shit—”

“Zim.”

“Yeah?”

“Is ‘shit’ a component of the motorcycle engine?”

“No, but...” He holds up his open hand to stop me.
He says, “Words are delicate instruments to be used with...?” and here Dr. J. raises his eyebrows, spins his pointer finger in a slow loop then stops on Cedar. “Words are delicate instruments to be used with...? Cedar?”

“Prissijen?” Cedar says.

“Thank you Cedar.” Dr. Jim smiles and nods, “Words are delicate instruments to be used with pre-ci-sion. Zim? You were saying?”

“Yeah, so, ‘less someone had imagined all those pipes and gears and pistons and…” drum roll of rain drops on the tent “…additional mechanical components…” Dr. J. nods, “…if no one had imagined them, then they wouldn’t ever have been made and they wouldn’t really exist, would they?” Confused wide-eyed nods from the six other kids. “So you could say that the motorcycle engine is imaginary.”

“That’s very good Zim, and we might also consider—”

“And then you can also think of your hand.” My own hand looks like a bright red sea anemone that is regenerating itself in my palm and radiating new growth outward to my fingertips. “Just take a look at your fucking hand!!”

“Zim?”

“You could say that our hand just became a hand by itself, or maybe because our mom and dad…well, I mean…I mean, we didn’t have to actually make our hand in the way that someone
made a motorcycle engine, but it—”

“Thank you Zim, perhaps—”

“—but it’s still something that we have to imagine, right? I mean, I think this is my hand, and you think that is your hand, and when we put our hand out to touch the moss and lichens on Mother Tree, we imagine that our hand is our hand and Mother Tree is Mother Tree and that they are somehow separate and different…and we imagine these hands to be our hands because we imagine ourselves to be ourselves. My mom imagined a boy named Zim, and gave me the name Zim—just like they might give me a motorcycle—and they helped me imagine a self called Zim that has two hands that aren’t part of Mother Tree, but Zim really knows he’s only imagining Zim, but if Zim is imaginary then who is imagining—”

I stand up and push my head up into the nylon top of the tent. Fourteen shiny convoluted metallic tubes extend from my mouth, contort around each other elaborately, then connect with all of the ears in the tent including my own.

Dr. J. touches my shoulder and the metal tubes retract into my mouth. The rain patters on the tent.

“Zim. Thank you. That’s… really quite…intriguing… and now if you need a little Mother Tree Time, that would be fine.”

I unzip the tent with a shaking hand and burst outside. I’m running towards Mother Tree
with raindrops and tears running down my face. I take off my fleece, my flannel shirt, my jeans, my boxer shorts, and I press myself up against the wet moss and lichens of Mother Tree, standing there till Mom comes down with a wool blanket that she wraps around my bare, shivering shoulders.

She gets me inside our tent, gives me a hot cup of chamomile tea, then tells me to breathe slowly. She strums “Amazing Grace” on her ukulele, and then—Shit. Here comes Eiji. More later.

January 1, 2001-12:45 PM

Eiji has finally left me alone, but now I’m distracted. He dragged me out of the Lost Creek Commune past, and forced me back into this Lost in Kushimoto present.

He’s a tiny little guy made of stringy old muscles. No fat anywhere. He has short, neatly combed white hair on his head, which smells like Listerine. His sunburnt skin is pulled taut over his cheek bones, and when he smiles his whole face scrunches up and his eyes almost disappear behind folded wrinkles.

When he saw me and Mariko making our first little campfire, (that would of have been Christmas day), he came right over to us, forced us to accept a big bag of mikan, then introduced himself, told us he was a retired fisherman living with his wife up the hill from the campground. Then he just stood there and smiled while we waited for him to leave.

And ever since that first night, he’s been around every day, always with some fruit or a bag
of rice-crackers as a pretense to visit. This morning, he showed up with a big paper bag filled with
dried persimmons. He said, “The wife and always I make too many.” I pictured him sitting at the
table reading a newspaper while his wife stood at the sink working.

“They say a big storm is coming,” he said this morning and smiled.

I smelled his Listerine hair, looked at the caked spittle in the corner on his chapped lips. We
were both standing awkwardly in the parking lot, both of us with nowhere to go. I wanted to get
back to work on my story and I started sending telepathic messages, “LEAVE LEAVE LEAVE
LEAVE LEAVE.”

Then he left and I felt like a jerk. Anyway, he’s gone now. Let me introduce you to Mariko.

Lost Creek Commune: August, 1995

A gauzy white parasol glides through the late, dusty afternoon at the campground. Mrs. Smith-Swain
stops by the cooking fire to talk with my Mom and Cedar. The parasol is as still as the trees.

I’m leaning over my SAT book at the picnic table, but my eyes are turned up. The girl
underneath the parasol is wearing a simple blue cotton dress that hangs down almost to her ankles.
She pats her forehead with a neatly folded tiny pink towel. She wears a pair of white sandals with
cork heels and walks carefully on the path of dust and gravel.

I am 15 years old. It is August and the nights are cold, but the days are still roasting hot,
staying warm until sundown. I have on my cut-off camo shorts and a light blue polo shirt. My thick matted hair hangs around my head as I pretend to look at the sample verbal test.

57. **Zim** is to **Parasol Girl** as…
   A. a **crow eating garbage** is to a **swan floating on a still pond**.
   B. a **blonde dreadlock** is to a **silky black braid**.
   C. a **root-cellar** is to a **castle turret**.
   D. all of the above.

The parasol glides closer. Mrs. Smith-Swain's heavy hiking-boot steps get louder. “Zim?” she says.

I look up at Mrs. Smith-Swain who is smiling at me, wearing a red flannel shirt and jeans, her unbrushed hair pulled loosely back. Then I look at the girl next to her. She and her parasol are backlit by the afternoon sun, and a halo of light shimmers around her.

I feel my filthy bare feet in the picnic table dust. I washed off in the river three days ago, using handfuls of coarse sand to scrape at my armpits, but now I smell the dried sweat from my polo shirt.

She has pale white skin, almost bluish, and eyes wide open in wonder. She seems too clean to be in a place where people get covered in dust and puke when they drink too much Carlo Rossi. Her eyes look too clear to ever see these things, and with the sun-halo shimmering around her, I'm afraid to look at her directly. I look down at my SAT book. Then I look back up to Mrs.
Smith-Swain.

“Zim, this is Ma-REE-ko. She’s come from Japan to study English. She’s staying with us this fall.” Mrs. Smith-Swain raises her arm as though she is going to push the girl a little closer to me, but then she stops and scratches at a little scab on the back of her thumb.

“My name is Marikominamimura” she says in a faint monotone voice, and then—trembling slightly—she holds out her hand for me to shake it.

My hands feel gritty with dust and dirt. With this tiny delicate hand extending towards me out of the rim of shade of the parasol, I think of all the times I’ve shat behind a tree and wiped myself with pinecones. I think of all the times I’ve jerked off in my sleeping bag.

I make a big show of wiping my hand on the chest of my polo shirt, but she doesn’t seem to understand the gesture, and just continues to look at me with her hand extended. I take it as though it was a hollow but magically uncracked eggshell.

“How do you do?” she says to me.


She nods, blinks, and pulls her hand back.

Mrs. Smith-Swain turns to her and holds her hand out toward me, palm up, tour-guide style.

“Zim is graduating from high school soon. Maybe he could help you with your English studies…” and she trails off and looks back to me.
The girl leans her upper body forward, very stiffly, her back perfectly straight. Does her stomach hurt? Is she fainting? But then she straightens up and says:

“Please.”

I try to think of something to say, anything to keep her from leaving. I look back down at my SAT book.

“Well,” Mrs Smith-Swain says, “we’ll let you study. We’re coming out for the campfire tomorrow… so… maybe see you there?”

I think Mariko is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. Tell her! Tell her right now!

“OK,” I say. Then she and Mrs. Smith-Swain turn to walk away. I watch the parasol glide through the campground towards Mrs. Smith-Swain’s forest-green Subaru. The car pulls out of the campground leaving a trail of dust behind it.

January 2, 2001- 9:45 AM

I’m down on the rocks this morning. I followed the woodchip loop around the perimeter of the field, then cut off onto the steep narrow path down through the shrubs and gnarled pine trees wrapped with briars. A cheap nylon rope is tied to a tree at the top, so I kept one hand on that for the steep parts, kept this notebook in my other hand, and scrambled down with my water-bottle tucked up under my armpit.
Out on the rocks, the only plants are tough looking clumps of wiry grass. Everything else has been washed away—ripped out by the roots over tens of thousands of years of typhoons. From where I am sitting now I can see the rocky end of Honshu Island extending out into the Pacific and then falling away. Someone has made a little red torii gate down here. The wind smells of salt and seaweed. Even as I write this I'm keeping the ocean in my field of vision, ready to look up and forget about all these words if a big set of smooth swells starts rolling in. I wish Mariko were still here. When we first arrived here, we watched these sets of waves together. Here comes one now.

In the narrow inlets between the rocks, the waves rise up steeper and steeper until they shatter themselves the rough surfaces of the cliffs. The clear blue water turns into a foamy white explosion, surging upward in a splash. Each time this happens, I focus on the highest droplet of water as it shoots up and then just before it starts falling back down. There must be a moment when it is perfectly still, glistening in the sunlight. I wish I could hold it right there. But of course, the droplet falls down along with the rest of the wave which collapses and cascades off the rocks in waterfalls.

The Swain Residence: November 1995

I'm sitting at the island counter in the center of the kitchen, drinking red wine from a Dunkin Donuts mug. My SAT book is open in front of me to some sample math problems. I studied all
afternoon in my room, but at 18:00 I relocated to the kitchen so I can be here when Mariko comes home from her English classes at the extension center of Portland International. Should be home pretty soon.

I’ve been living here now for about two months. I convinced my Mom and Mrs. Smith-Swain to let me stay in one of the guest rooms, study my SATs and help Mariko with her English.

The first weekend in September, I had my stuff packed up, and when Mrs. Smith-Swains’s forest-green Subaru was cruising down the gravel road back towards the highway, I was sitting in the back with Mariko.

The Smith-Swains didn’t have kids of their own, which is probably one reason why they hosted so many exchange students. They also had a massive house with a great view of Mt. Hood. When I first moved in, all of sudden we were a family of four. For September and most of October, we all ate meals together in the dining room.

Then Mrs. Smith-Swain saw a polaroid of Mr. Smith-Swain in a palm-tree patterned swimsuit with a pina colada in one hand, and the other hand on the sunburned thigh of a woman tiny blue bikini. Mr. Smith-Swain disappeared and Mrs. Smith-Swain became Ms. Swain.

Mariko and I pretended not to notice when we came downstairs and saw Ms. Swain sweeping up soil, rocks, an uprooted cactus, and shards of a red ceramic pot. She spent more and
more time in the sunroom, even as the winter clouds unloaded rain on the curved glass ceiling.

Initially, the notes in the kitchen said things like: *There's potato salad in the green Tupperware,* but soon became: *Help yourself to anything,* and then the notes stopped.

That's when Mariko and I started taking turns making dinner. It's her turn tonight. She should be home anytime. I take another sip of wine.

I hear her push the front door open and listen as she sets down her backpack, kicks off her boots, and hangs her key on the little metal rack in the entry way. I follow the sound of her footsteps coming closer, then pick up my pencil so it will look like I'm studying when she comes into the kitchen.

“Ta-dai-ma” she says. I know this one! It means *I'm home.* I forget the response.

“Welcome home,” I say.

She is carrying a thick, white plastic shopping bag. Smiling, she opens the top and shows me four whole slender silver fish resting on ice. “Sanma,” She says as she sets the bag down in the sink. She washes her hands in the kitchen sink then walks out of the kitchen. I hear her feet on the stairs, in the upstairs hall, then the click of the door to her room.

A few minutes later she is back. She has washed the make-up off her face and she is wearing gray sweatpants and a matching gray sweatshirt. When she comes into the kitchen, she puts on her denim apron that hangs on the pantry doorknob. Then she looks at the stove, and frowns.
“Most Japanese have a grill in their stove,” she says, then points to the bag in the sink, “for fish.”

“There’s one outside,” I say.

We go on to the porch with the rain beating down beside us. It is already dark. There is a large propane grill on a small roofed patio.

“This is not like Japan’s grill,” she says.

“American-style,” I say. I turn the dial and listen as the propane ignites.

Mariko and I go back inside. She washes the fish and then lays them out on a plate. Their tails stick off one end, and their heads stick off the other. She sprinkles salt on them and rubs it into their bluish silver skin. I hold the door for her as she carries them out to the porch.

When I open up the grill a cloud of thick smoke rises out and makes her cough. When the smoke clears, she sees the thick black layer of soot on the grill. Her lips compress and she touches her chin with one finger.

“Mr. Smith-Swain was not cleaning this?” she says.

There is a wire brush hanging from a hook on the side of the grill. Like the grill, it is also crusted in grease and black soot. I take it and start scraping. “Chotto matte Zimu,” she says. I know this one too! Wait a minute.

She hands me the plate of fish and goes back inside. The fish stare up at me through cloudy dead eyes. Mariko comes back out with a roll of tinfoil and lays a sheet down over the grill,
tapping it down and quickly pulling her fingers away from the heat. Then she picks up each fish by its tail and lays it carefully on the tinfoil surface. She closes the lid then takes a small white towel from the front pocket of her apron and wipes her hands.

“Why don’t you just use your apron,” I ask and demonstrate by wiping my hands on my flannel shirt. She just laughs. The rain patters on the porch roof, and a cold breeze makes a spiral of the smoke from the grill.

“How do you make low-heat?” she asks. I turn the dial back, then we go into the kitchen.

I sit back down in front of my SAT book but then close it and push it to the side. I take a big gulp of wine, then another. (I had found the Swain apocalypse-ready stash of about twenty boxes of red wine in one of their spare rooms. Ms. Swain did say “help yourself to anything.”)

“We are not speaking fluently in English class,” Mariko says. She opens the fridge and takes out a jug of No-Pulp Tropicana orange juice.

“You want some wine Mariko?”

“No thank you Zimu.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, thank you Zimu,” she smiles at me.

“Our English language teacher is named Mr. Chrisu,” she says, “but, when we are together as Japanese students, we all are calling him Mee-su-tah Coo-li-su.”
“Mee-su-tah Coo-li-su huh?”

“If I say ‘Mr. Chrisu’ then other students are saying I am…” she looks up and to the right and taps on her chin. “I am…”

“Showing off?”

“Yes!” She claps her hands and points at me. “They are saying I am showing off.”

“You sure you don’t want some wine Mariko?” I ask again. She told me that in Japan it’s impolite to accept anything on the first offer. Every night I offer five or six or seven times.

“OK. Give me very little. I am showing off,” she says and giggles, then reaches into the cupboard and pushes glasses around until she finds a Portland Trail Blazers shot-glass, which she sets on the counter next to her orange juice.

“Really?” I ask.

“Just half,” she points to the center of the spiral logo on the glass, “I am not very strong for alcohol.”

I take the shot-glass, and leaning over to the box on the countertop I fill it two-thirds full and pass it back. I fill up my Dunkin Donuts to the rim and a little bit drips over the side. I slurp at it like hot coffee.

Mariko is holding her glass up like she wants to propose a toast. I touch my mug to her shot-glass. “Compai,” she says softly, then sniffs at the wine and takes a tiny sip, then nods. “Pretty
“delicious.” she says, then starts talking to herself in Japanese, much too fast for me to understand.

She sets down her shot glass. From the jar of utensils by the sink she finds two unmatched chopsticks, then opens the door and goes out to the patio. I fill up my mug and follow her out.

When she opens the lid, a cloud of fishy smoke rolls out. When the cloud clears, the fish are lying there on the tinfoil with their dead white eyes protruding out of their slender heads. A layer of brown liquid is collecting underneath them. Mariko clicks her tongue and says “dame da ne.”

With the chopsticks, she pushes the fish over to one side of the tinfoil, and then starts meticulously poking lines of holes in the tinfoil. The liquid drips through and hisses below, and I smell the fishy burning grease.

Mariko closes the lid of the grill, but we can still hear the fish popping and hissing. She wipes her hands on the little towel and then puts it back in the front of her apron.

“Can I have a sip?” she asks, and takes my mug out of my hand, first taking a careful sip, then taking another bigger one before passing the mug back. “Why does she say I’m showing off. I’m not showing off.”

“Who?” I ask.

“I’m sorry?”

“Who says you are showing off?”

“Ah. It is one girl from my class…” Mariko clicks her tongue. “She…” but then she stops,
and shakes her head. “Zimu, in Japan, your name would be Jee-mu.”

“Jee-mu huh?” I am thinking about how it would feel to untie her apron. “Mariko…?”

“Zimu?”

“My name is actually Zim.”

“Yes. Zimu.”


“Mmmm. Mmmm,” she looks at my mouth and imitates me. Her lips are glossy and moist.

“Yeah. Like that. Mmmm. Now Zimmmmm.”

“Zimmmmmmm u-”

“No u- at the end,” she is still parting her lips, even though she doesn’t make a vowel sound.

“Just Zim. Mm.”

“Zim. Zim. Zim.” she keeps saying it again and again and I lean closer to look at her lips.

We both start saying “mm” and looking at each other’s closed mouths. The porch light shines on the side of our faces, and the rain keeps falling around us. The fish are hissing and popping, and probably on fire. We lean closer and closer and closer until somehow, our closed lips just brush against each other.

Then we both lean back abruptly.

Mariko giggles, then turns away and opens the grill and starts talking to herself in Japanese.
as she turns one of the sanma over. The underside, now on top, is deeply blackened and charred in
the places over the slits in the tinfoil.

“Sanma, Zim. Sa-n-ma” she says to me, pointing at her lips.

“Sama” I say.

She shakes her head, laughing. “Sa-N-ma,” say says, then turns back to flip the other three
over.

Back in the kitchen Mariko shows me how to use chopsticks to chop off the head of the
fish, then split it down its back and take out the center bone. She helps me push the greasy organs
off to the side, pours a little soy sauce over the splayed open fish, then says “itadakimasu” with her
hands together, and starts eating.

A month later Mariko and I are in her room sitting on her bed. A rumpled and folded “Longman's
SAT Practical Preparation Guide” lies on the floor, Mariko’s immaculate “Oxford’s Practical English
Communication for Advanced Students” textbook sits on the center of her desk with a note to the
next exchange student: “Please use this for your studies.” Mariko’s pink suitcase is packed, her
carry-on backpack zipped. Both pieces of luggage have a tag with her name and Sendai address,
carefully written in both Japanese and English.

She is wearing blue jeans, a fluffy silvery-white fleece. I am wearing a flannel shirt and my
usual camo shorts. I have my arm around her and her head rests on my shoulder. I rub her back gently, feeling the soft silver fleece flattening under my hand as I rub down, fluffing up as I rub my hand back up.

“I’ll come to Sendai someday.” I say.

I feel her nod, but she doesn’t say anything. I shift around so my face is near hers, hoping that we might accidentally kiss again, but she sits up higher and pulls my head down so it is resting on her breasts. I hear her breath as her chest slowly rises and falls. Then she coughs lightly and gently pushes me away before turning and checking the nametags on her luggage.

The next morning Ms. Swain drives us to the Portland airport in her green Subaru. Mariko rides up front, and I sit in the middle of the backseat like a little kid.

Outside of the security gate, Ms. Swain gives Mariko a big hug, but when Mariko turns to me, she glances at Ms. Swain, and then she extends her hand, which I take in both of mine, and shake it gently, feeling a pressure in my throat that I have to swallow back. Then, we all bow to each other, the way Mariko taught us, laughing, making jokes about the right 45 degree angle…and now she is walking away, putting her white shoulder-bag on the conveyer belt. On the other side of the scanner, she picks up her bag, then looks back and waves before disappearing behind a kiosk selling T-Shirts and Portland shot-glasses, leaving me with the memory of our first and only kiss.
OK. That's enough for one day. Maybe I'll go sit in the field with Chekov. Maybe there will be a women's volleyball team in the campground, all wearing bikinis as they set up their tents.

No really, really I'm fine…
Just had a few bottles of wine
When all that I see
Looks worthless like me
I just do my best to get blind.

January 3, 2001- 6:12 AM

Ouch. I don't even remember writing that limerick.

The duct tape is peeling off the hole that I burnt in this sleeping bag. When I woke up this morning, with a deep pulsing pain in my right temple, there were white feathers floating all around the interior of the car and I thought for a second that I was sleeping outside and it was snowing. Then my next thought was that an undersea volcano had erupted, boiling the oceans and covering the world in ash.

I met another gaijin last night. He was setting up a massive tent while I sat nearby, in the field so I could watch the operation unfolding and lust after his wife who was wearing extremely tight jeans and a little decorative leather belt, the kind that doesn't serve any practical function at
all—light pink, finger thickness, looped through the belt loops on the right side, then hanging diagonally down over her perfect, slender rounded—

It’s embarrassing to even write this all down. Please don’t think I am proud of myself. (But since you’re not really reading this, I guess it doesn’t matter.) I couldn’t stop looking. She had two little kids—of course a boy and a girl, I guess about 5 and 8—dressed in new, stylish camping clothes, the boy in a puffy blue down jacket, bright orange fleece pants, the girl wearing a long skirt made from thick canvas, lots of pockets and zippers at improbable angles, and a puffy pink down jacket, just like her brother’s except for the color.

Mama was getting the picnic table set up elaborately and kept bending over to take stuff out of the cooler and the big plastic boxes with the latched lids. I pretended to read my Chekov, “The House with the Mansard” for about the seventeenth time. The narrator in that story tells us: “Doomed as I was to a life of idleness I did nothing whatsoever,” and in that spirit, I just set the book down in the grass, not even putting in a pine needle bookmark, and turned over to watch mama leaning over the plastic crate, pulling out some yakiniku sauce, disposable chopsticks, and paper bowls.

Am I coming across as a chauvinistic asshole? What am I writing about here but just pure lust? Though I know I am just digging myself deeper, I just want to say in my defense, that I have great respect for this feeling of lust. This desire to connect with another person physically,
emotionally...possibly even bringing new life into the world. Pornography tries to reduce it all to physical mechanics and fluids...but you can't tell me that there isn't something sacred about our human sexuality. It is the source of life.

I used to want to be like Gandhi or some religious ascetic, “The path to god is to free yourself of desire.” But as far as being free from desire...well, I’ll let you know if that ever happens. My point it this: psychedelic gurus and Buddhist monks and yamabushi mystics—they all talk about trying to connect with the infinite. Well, just try sitting with your basic human sexual desire for a few minutes. You are connected with the infinite. That desire is something every single human being on the earth has felt and will feel in one form or another, (sometimes—in extreme cases like Taka—in forms you don't even want to imagine).

So meanwhile, back on planet Kushimoto, as I was watching Mama, I kept glancing over at Papa, mostly to make sure he wouldn't catch me staring at his wife. I watched him taking out the tent, everything still folded and wrapped in plastic. He was wearing sandals with thick wool-socks and loose khaki pants, with a smear of something brown on the thigh. A red untucked flannel shirt hung out from a rough looking maroon parka. On his head, he had a lime green fleece hat, totally incongruous to the rest of him—obviously something his wife had picked out for him.

He assembled one of the tent poles, then picked up a bottle of Jim Beam, and took a drink—not a bottle tilted vertical kind of shot, but definitely raised up above the horizontal with his
head leaned back. He looked to be in his fifties, unshaven, and miserable.

The kids were sitting at the table facing away from me. The mom had put the girl to work cutting up carrots. (Of course they were making Japanese-style curry. That is the obligatory camping food in this country. Don’t ask me why. It tastes like lard infused with chemical goo and it’s a pain in the ass to clean up, but, whatever…who am I to criticize the native customs?)

So I just watched Mama bending over and imagined what was just underneath that tight denim and that bewitching diagonal pink belt, (alluring precisely because of its impracticality!). I wouldn’t write this all down if I wasn’t going to burn this notebook anyway, but I imagined swimming between her legs and finding a warm undersea world of pulsing red anemones and blue sea ferns, and beyond that, an endless expanse of tiny luminescent jellyfish, filling the blue water like the stars in the sky—

and that’s just the moment that I realized that Papa was walking towards me with a close-lipped smile that turned the corners of his mouth up unnaturally but left his eyes looking hard, tired and half-closed.

He eased himself down beside me heavily. Somehow he’d got the tent set up. It was a beautiful new Coleman tent, big enough for ten people with a mesh porch extension. He’d done a shitty job setting it up. It was asymmetrical and the rainfly was sagging, but it was clear that he felt like he had done his part, and now it was time to start drinking in earnest.
In the background I saw his wife looking at both of us, and she gave me a smile and a little wave, and I knew for sure, just like she’d put that ridiculous lime-green hat on her post-mid-life-crisis husband, she’d also forced him to come over and say hello to me, all of which had me embarrassed, because I’d been trying to not be too overt in my gazing and I hadn’t realized that they’d had even noticed me.

“Kushimoto,” he said flatly. Then took a long pull of the bottle, (this time nearing the vertical), and passed it over to me.

Several swigs later and the horizon was tilting and I was sitting at the picnic table with the whole family. Mama only spoke English to me and Papa, but switched to rapid-fire Japanese to yell at her kids for dripping curry on their new camp clothes.

Papa didn’t say much at all. He just pulled on the whiskey steadily and passed me the bottle. There were only a few fingers left in the bottom. “You sure it’s OK?” I asked, trying not to slur my words. “I mean, I’m already…” He held up a hand palm forward, then he leaned over, groaning softly, and flipped open one of the plastic crates which had three more unopened bottles of Jim Beam, lined up beside soy sauce, mayonnaise and loaves of fluffy white bread.

“My husband is always drinking a lot,” Mama said, and somehow he and I ended up with an unspoken agreement that I would match him drink for drink. Then it seemed like Mama was flirting with me, talking about how I looked so slender, then pointing to her husband’s big gut that
pushed out his maroon down jacket.

The kids were either silent or giggling, and Papa offered me no help conversationally, so I said “This curry is very oishi.”

“Wow! She said. Your Japanese is really good!” She looked at Papa and then pointed to me. “His Japanese is soooooooood good.” Papa drank the last whiskey from the bottle than leaned over to grab a full one.

Awkward.

The ocean horizon was on a Jim Bean spin. I started wondering what I would do if she reached under the table and squeezed my leg. The kids stopped giggling and focused on their curry, scraping at the plates with their spoons to get every last bit of the sauce. Mama yelled something at them, then smiled at me.

Awkward.

Papa was amused by my discomfort. His mouth was the same chap-lipped horizontal line, but there was just a hint of laughter in his eyes as he watched me sit up straighter on the hard picnic table bench, and start looking around my shoulders for possible escape routes. “Kushimoto,” he said, and passed me the bottle, jerking his chin at me sharply, when I held it too long before raising it up to my lips.

Mama started stacking up the sticky curry plates and spoons, but when I tried to stand up,
Papa reached out and grabbed my forearm, giving me a stern look. So somehow, the dishes disappeared, Mama and the kids drove into town to go take a bath in the onsen, and he and I were left there at the cold picnic table. There were only three other tents, including an ojiisan's semi-permanent tarp structure over in the far corner by the parking lot. Over by the trashcans, a biker dude had set up his single tent, and a young couple's had set up their Everest-expedition North Face tent over underneath the pine trees.

Hopefully we weren’t talking too loud. I really don’t know. I know he wasn’t since he mostly just muttered “Kushimoto,” as though that was both the answer and the question. I was blubbering about Mariko, probably cursing bikers, (and now I get a stab of paranoia wondering if I said anything about Taka and the party).

We didn’t have a fire, but I remember a candle in the middle of the table in a pool of wax, listing slightly but stable enough. It was a cold clear windless night, so the little flame rose straight up into the darkness.

I honestly don’t remember if Mama and the kids were back or not when I was saying “I loved her. I really loved her” and crying.

The next memory of that fine evening was opening the side door in predawn gray and puking hard all over the parking lot, and then lying very very very still. I felt like Mama had stuck
tent stakes through both of my eye-sockets, wedged them up underneath my skull, and every time I moved she cursed at me in her super-fast Japanese, pushed them farther in, and started wiggling them around.

Now I am up with the sun pouring into the car. I forgot to close the back door and slept in all of my clothes, with the sleeping bag just pulled over me like a blanket. Even with the sun pouring in, my teeth are chattering. The tent stakes are still impaled in my eyes, and I am going to puke again, maybe right—

That feels a little better. Puking is a lot like writing.

Over in the campground the kids are playing badminton while Mama takes their picture. Papa is taking down the tent and packing it up. Now that I have puked, I'll try to get back to Sendai and my story. Maybe I'll relocate down to the rocks. I could just see Mama coming over to say goodbye and standing there with her cute little nose crinkled against the smell of this pile of puke that is steaming on the asphalt. I'd rather not be here for that.

Sendai Station: August 2000

A constant stream of people flows through the ticket gates at Sendai Station. Machines beep arrhythmically and there are layers of announcements on loud speakers. I'm wearing my cut-off camo shorts and a red flannel shirt that is way too hot for Japan in August. Sweat beads in my
armpits and trickles down my sides. At the exit, an angry swarm of people accumulates behind me. I check my pockets—breast pocket, side pockets, back pockets—and finally find the stiff little rectangular ticket in the lower cargo pocket of my shorts. I look into the crowd of people waiting on the other side, searching for Mariko, thinking of the hundreds of emails we exchanged over the last two years.

Mariko, I’m coming to Japan so let’s get married and have children

Ha ha. You are still the joking Zim.

Seriously, can you help me find a teaching job? I’ll have an Associate’s Degree. I’ll do anything! ha ha

I put the ticket into the yellow rimmed slot, and watch it zip away into the machine. I step forward into the crowd imagining Mariko exactly as I first saw her in Portland two years ago. Her hair will be long, parted in the middle and pulled tightly back in a ponytail. She will be wearing a long dark blue cotton dress and she will stand under a white parasol backlit by the brilliant sun. The shade of the parasol will envelop us both as I put my arms around her. She will push her body against mine, then lay her head on my shoulder. We’ll tell each other all the things we never could say in email.

Someone taps me on the shoulder. I turn and Mariko smiles at me. Her hair is cut short, hanging just over her shoulders, dyed a dark reddish brown. She is taller and her face is more angular. She’s wearing purple eyeshadow.
I open my arms for a hug, but stop when Mariko extends her hand. I take it in both of mine, not really shaking it, but just holding it until she pulls it away. She gestures to the man next to her. He is a head taller than me, much older, with a slightly wrinkled face and thick white hair that is pulled tightly back in a ponytail. He wears a light blue summer suit over a white polo shirt.

I compose an email to Mariko in my head. *Mariko, I love your new haircut, much more stylish than your old-man boyfriend’s style. ha ha.* But I say nothing. He is looking at me blankly, and I look down at the tiled floor of the station.

“Zim, this is Taka,” she says. I look up and hold out my hand. He grabs it, pumps in up and down once, then squeezes it hard before abruptly letting it drop. Somehow, in this split second of meeting—feeling his grip and sensing the energy between the two of them—I have a visceral understanding that Taka has done things with Mariko’s body that I hadn’t even allowed myself to imagine. The thought makes my stomach tighten sharply with revulsion and anger.

“Nice to meet you,” I say to Taka in formal Japanese. I bow at the angle Mariko had taught me. He just chuckles and then looks at his watch.

At the ramen shop, the three of us sit at the counter with Mariko in the middle. A slender young man in rubber boots, with a white towel tied around his head stirs a huge silver pot. He wears a T-shirt that says “Funk You.” An older man reaches over the counter and sets down our three
steaming bowls.

Mariko—the pure light and energy of email text—slurps at her noodles. Drops of broth spill on the counter. Mariko had told me that it was OK to make this slurping noise. We’d even practiced together in her dorm room with boiled packages of 99 cent chicken-flavor ramen.

*Remember the chicken ramen Mariko?*

This ramen has broth as thick as Thanksgiving gravy, sliced green onions, bean sprouts, two slices of fatty roast pork, and a boiled egg—the yolk still slightly soft—cut in half and laid on top. I can’t taste any of it.

Mariko takes a sip of water, then dabs at her greasy lips with a tissue. Taka puts his hand on Mariko’s back and leans back to look at me. “You were a lucky boy Zim,” he says, raising his eyebrows and tilting his head towards Mariko. “Two years ago, right?” I look away, staring into my ramen where the grease has coalesced in rainbow blobs. I imagine taking my chopsticks and gouging out Taka’s eyes. Mariko either doesn’t hear him or pretends not to, but she seems to stiffen and sit up a little straighter.

Taka shouts “sumimasen!” says something else and holds up three fingers. “Funk You” passes over a big bottle of Asahi beer, wet with condensation. Then he passes out three tiny glasses. He takes the bottle, hands me a glass, and fills it with beer. He pours a sip for Mariko. Then he sets the bottle down and Mariko picks it up and carefully fills his glass.
We clink glasses over the bowls of left-over broth. Mariko and I sip our beer slowly. Globs of pork grease orbit around in my ramen bowl and I feel nauseous. Taka downs his beer, his white ponytail hanging back from his raised head. Without looking, he holds out his glass for Mariko to fill again.

On the way out I pull out my wallet, but Taka pushes my hand down firmly, and puts a ten thousand yen bill on the counter. The old man at the register makes change from a wooden drawer, and then we are back out in the downtown Sendai street, people flowing around us as though we are a clump of three rocks in a turbulent and chaotic stream.

“Gochiso sama deshita.” I say, bowing to Taka, thanking him formally for the meal.

Mariko, in English to me “Your Japanese has gotten so good Zim!” then to Taka in Japanese “His Japanese is really good right?” Taka nods, looking at something in the distance.

“Nice to meet you Taka. Mariko, I will email soon.” Then I shake Taka’s hand, Mariko’s hand, and Mariko waves at me with both hands even though we only stand a few feet apart.

“Mata ne Zim!” she says. “Good luck with the teaching. I told Suzuka Sensei that you will be a very good teacher.” She reaches out and pats me on the shoulder and I know I’m going to cry so I bow again and turn and walk away.

When I look over my shoulder through the crowd, Taka has his arm around Mariko’s waist. He’s whispering something in her ear, and I imagine the smell of beer and ramen filling that space.
between his thin lips and her delicate ear. (I imagine other things too. Things I don't even want to write about here.) My stomach clenches into itself tightly and I think I might be sick. Mariko is laughing, face flushed slightly red, eyes closed, leaning into Taka's chest. I let myself get swallowed by the crowds and the tears drip off my nose and chin and splash down on the asphalt where they disappear under hundreds of moving feet.

Not a very fun memory. Let me jump ahead a month. I sit my dingy gray desk at Everyone’s English School vaguely pretending to study Japanese, waiting for five o'clock when Suzuka Sensei will tell me I can go home. I only had seven classes today, two for moms and infants, three for kindergarten kids, and then two in a row for the senior citizen tai-chi club. The teaching is draining but still better than slowly dying of nothingness in the “Room for Staffs and Teachers.” To my right, Mr. Ono sits perfectly still, glaring at the mahjong solitaire game on his computer screen. Now he clicks his tongue, and opens his web browser to the online tabloids.

“Junior High School Students Abusing Antidepressant Medication!”

Between the headlines and blocks of text, a very young woman holds three finger tips over each nipple. She is pouting and her fingernails are painted bright red.

Mr. Ono turns to me and sees me looking at his screen. I look away and pretend to concentrate on my “Japanese for Busy People 2” textbook. I compose an email to Mariko in my
head, but don’t have the energy to actually stand up and go to the computer and write it. *First month on the job and it’s still going great. A two year old kid puked on me today after we sang “Head Shoulders Knees and Toes.”*

**January 4, 2001- 6:54 AM**

As usual, my breath is rising in clouds in front of my headlamp. I’m wearing my fleece gloves but my fingertips are still cold. I’m in the back of the Honda Fit (surprise surprise), waiting for water to boil, watching the pot, determined to disprove the proverb.

Yesterday, after puking, I went down to the rocks and the ocean and walked as far as I could along the sand and pebbles. I wanted to be far away from Mama and Papa. I scrambled around a steep rocky point. In the cove on the other side there was an old wooden rowboat pushed way up on shore, tilted on its side, and filled with pebbles. I sat in the rowboat and wrote that last entry about meeting Mariko in Sendai. I wanted to distract myself from thoughts of everything I might have done the night before here in Kushimoto.

After writing and puking a few more times, I wandered around the cove looking at the detritus. There was a single pink child’s high-top sneaker, piles of styrofoam and driftwood, a blue plastic canister for gas or kerosene, faded and brittle from the sun, a garden hose, a severed seagull’s wing, a dead jellyfish with thick red tentacles sprawled out on the rocks. I also found a new soccer
ball, tautly inflated and wrapped in cellophane.

Late in the afternoon, I brought the soccer ball back with me to give to Mama and Papa’s kids, as a means of apology for being so drunk and maudlin. But they’d already packed up and left, so I just put the ball in the middle of an empty picnic table. I hope it will make someone happy, or at least less sad.

Back at the car, the pile of puke had warmed up in the winter sun and smelled like sour bourbon. I sat in the driver’s seat for the first time in days and was relieved that the car started. I drove diagonally across the parking lot to a corner spot right up against the trees and reeds and the low metal fence on the other side, as far away from my puke as I could be.

Only then did I go and fill up my waterbottle. I sat at the empty picnic table. There were still traces of wax in the center and I could see where Mama had tried to scrape it off the best she could. I imagined her cursing at her husband about the spilled wax in words that he refused to understand or acknowledge.

I sat alone and forced myself to drink the whole liter of water even though my stomach was still mistrustful. I filled it up again, then went back to the car. I sat with the door open and forced myself to eat a piece of white bread. The car still smelled like alcohol, or maybe it was just my nose and mouth itself that was still saturated with bourbon.

Eventually, I closed the back door and crawled in the side door, got in my sleeping bag.
stared at “The House with Mansard” but when the text started going blurry, I dropped the book.

When the paranoia started ringing again, I tried to remember Mama’s legs in her jeans. I thought of warm seas and red anemones and waving blue sea-ferns and starlit jellyfish, and I put my hand down in my pants, just trying to get an erection, just trying to get some of the blood away from my brain.

I don’t remember falling asleep last night.

Now, as I write this journal entry this morning, (stalling before getting us back to Sendai), I’m thinking about going back down to that cove tonight to build a huge driftwood fire so I can burn this notebook and be done with this ridiculous exercise of trying to make a coherent story from my incoherent life. But for now, the water is boiling, so I'll make coffee and try to prevail. Let’s jump forward a month from the last installment.

**Doutor on Ichibancho Shopping Street: October 2000**

Even now that we are living in the same city Mariko and I still communicate mostly by email, but today we have plans to meet in person. I just finished an exhausting class for retired business men, (all ten of them trying to talk over each other), and now I’m sitting at a Doutor in downtown Sendai, watching people walk by in the street outside the window, trying to make my large *bulendo* coffee last until she gets here. I try to remind myself that she won’t have a parasol, she won’t have her long
black hair parted in the middle and pulled back into a braid. Her emails have also been getting
cryptic lately.

*Taka is an open-minded person, but sometimes I think he is not so nice. Maybe he is too open-minded.*

*Now I know why you like to drink so much Zim. I am like you now. Ha ha.*

Outside a woman is talking on a pink phone and holding a huge white plastic bag from the
100 yen store. A group of three high school boys walks by. They all have shaved heads and bulging
black athletic bags. One of them looks at me, then turns to his friends. All three of them look back
at me, then turn to each other and laugh as they walk away.

Then I see Mariko’s standing out on the sidewalk. Her eyes look puffy. She has dyed her
hair an even lighter shade of reddish brown and cut it even shorter so it only hangs down to her
chin. She takes a blue pill out of her big white leather handbag and washes it down with a sip of
cold green tea from a plastic bottle. She frowns deeply, but when she looks up and finally sees me
the corners of her mouth raise into a smile. But then a moment later her bottom lip protrudes and
for a second I glimpse the Mariko that I met in Portland. (I remember her making this expression
when her miso soup didn’t turn out right.) She wipes a tear away from her eye with the back of her
hand, shakes her head once sharply, then walks in to the coffee shop.

A chime on the door rings and the man at the counter shouts “irrashaimase!” Mariko
orders a double espresso at the counter then walks over to me. She sits down across from me and
when she takes my hand I realize that we haven’t actually really touched each other since I arrived in Sendai. Her hand is soft and smooth. Mine is sweaty and sticky.

“Zim… I am very changed?” she says and her intonation rises slightly so I am not sure if it is a question or not. She pulls her hand away and pulls out a pack of mentholated Marlboros from her handbag. “I’m even smoking,” and says and laughs sadly as she lights the cigarette. From the way she inhales it hungrily, I can tell she’s been smoking for quite a while.

“You are a little changed.” I say. I’d make a joke if it were email. What happened to your parasol?

“It is Taka…” she says, and looks down before continuing. “I think I maybe am needing your help.”

January 5, 2001- 7:11 AM

I’m up early today. Need to get started before Eiji comes down. Yesterday I’d just finished that little section at the coffee shop with its enigmatic ending, I was taking out bread for my sardine sandwich when he knocked on my window, cupping his hands to the glass and looking in at me. I didn’t smile, but forced myself to at least open the door and say “Hello Eiji.”

He was worked up. He kept shifting the weight of his stringy body back and forth from his right to left foot, running his fingers through his white bristly hair and scratching at his white
stubbly chin. He had on his usual grayish blue worker’s jump suit, splotched with paint and oil.

“Winter storm blahblahblahblah. Philippines blahblahblahblah. Typhoon blahblahblahblah.” Then he reached in his pocket and pulled out a single shriveled moldy dried permission. He pulled a bit of red string out of its sticky surface then handed it to me.

“Arigatou,” I said, then asked “How is your wife today?”

“Yes yes yes yes yes. Wife is very genki. Always genki.” He said, then stood there a few more minutes, then finally walked away.

I thought maybe Eiji was imagining the winter storm, but I was filling up my water bottle after he left and two women were washing a pile of plastic dishes next to me. Sure enough, from what I could catch of their conversation: Big-ass storm coming, unprecedented winter typhoon.

I’m trying to outwit Eiji this morning. Instead of writing in the back of the car, I’ve relocated to the cove with my notebook and a thermos of coffee. The waves are crashing higher then I have ever seen them, even getting close to this rock-filled wooden boat where I’m sitting. The fire-pit circle of big rocks I made last night has already been broken up, all the ashes and embers washed out to sea.

I’ve got my coffee. No distractions. No excuses. I’m either going to get this story together or go for a long swim to Fudaraku. Weird red and green spirals are unfolding here in an unearthly sunrise over Kushimoto.
Mariko’s House in Sendai: November 2000

Thanksgiving weekend doesn’t mean much in Japan, but on that clear cold Saturday morning, just as I’m starting to feel homesick, my phone rings. Mariko tells me that her parents are in Tokyo for the weekend and invites me to come visit.

She meets me at the station, and surprises me by putting her arm through my elbow as she guides me over the busy four-lane road, over the river, past the Homac Home Center and the FamilyMart, and then onto a gravel road that leads through rice fields, and into an older neighborhood.

“No one else here,” she says, and smiles as she slides the heavy door open.

“Where’s Taka,” I ask, but she looks at me hard and I look away.

The moment passes and after we kick off our shoes, she grabs my hand and pulls me into the house. She gives me the tour—the tatami living room with the TV and kotatsu, the smaller tatami room with a small Buddhist shrine beneath a black and white picture of a handsome and stern looking man. She shows me the blue-tiled bathroom, the toilet with its matching fluffy pink seat cover and carpet at its base. She opens the door to the kitchen and I just get a quick glimpse of a table with three chairs, wooden cupboards with glass doors, filled with different sized dishes in
neat stacks. Then she leads me up the steep narrow staircase to her bedroom. We sit side by side on her bed. She ladles out two glasses of plum wine from a huge glass jar and passes me one.

“Homemade,” she says, and smiles as she looks in my eyes. I take a small sip. Then I take another so that she won’t notice me swallowing nervously.

And then, after all the different scenes I had imagined over the past two years, (from base and lurid to ethereal and transformative), it somehow all feels very natural when she leans over and kisses me. Loosened by the plum wine I kiss her back. Later, there’s a little awkward moment when we fumble with the condom, but otherwise everything feels pretty natural I guess, and so much less dramatic than I thought it would be.

Afterwards, in the fading afternoon light, she looks into my eyes and I gaze back at hers, but then I pretend to cough and look away. Then she climbs out of bed and walks towards the bathroom. The sight of her moving away fills me with a wave of sadness. But she is back now, smiling, six blue pills in her open hand that she holds out to me. I start to ask what they are but she puts her finger to her lips to tell me to be quiet. She puts three of them into her mouth and the other three in mine. We wash them down with our plum wine.

Later, with the sun setting and the sky glowing orange outside the window, Mariko reaches down to get her phone out of the pocket of her jeans on the floor. I listen as she orders a Teriyaki Chicken & Mayonnaise deep dish pizza.
“You have to go downstairs and pick it up,” she says, folding her phone shut with a click and throwing it down on the pile of clothes.

“Sure” I say.

Mariko reaches over and takes the ladle from the big open glass jar of plum wine. She extends her hand for my empty cup and I pass it over. She laughs as half of the wine spills from the overflowing ladle on to her bed.

When the doorbell rings, I put my khaki pants on with no underwear, and float down the stairs on feet I can’t feel. I should be cold. At the door, the delivery-guy is wearing a huge puffy red jacket that hangs down to his knees, but I feel warmth radiating out of every surface, even the smooth wooden floor beneath my bare feet.

He starts in on his programmed speech: “At Pizza-La we strive to bring you the best”— but then when he gets a better look at me standing there, foreign, shirtless, pupils dilated, swaying slightly, possibly drooling, he stops and says, “Pizza please,” then bows and holds out the box to me with both hands holding the sides.

I don’t remember paying him or going back upstairs and but when I take the first bite of pizza everything comes back into focus and Mariko and I are sitting naked on her bed, her kerosene heater blazing. She has a black and white poster of Madonna on her wall, a profile shot of Madonna with frizzy blonde hair pulled up and back and a big cross earring dangling from her earlobe.
Mariko’s thick fluffy blankets are piled on the floor, and we are sitting on her red flannel sheets with the pizza box between us. I’ve never tasted anything as delicious as this pizza, and when I look down again, it is gone. Mariko has a tiny dollop of mayonnaise on her lip and I lean over and lick it off.

After we finish the pizza, she gives me three more of her blue pills. Everything gets really fluffy from then. I remember being so comforted by the thought that all I had to eventually do was die. I also remember spooning in the dark and Mariko’s voice coming to me from far away.

“Zim?”

“Mariko?”

“Can you promise me something?”

“Of course Mariko,” and I am ready to promise anything at all. We are floating together on a cloud flowing down a river of light.

“I need you to kill Taka.”

January 5, 2000- 10:45AM

Eiji finally left me alone. This is really getting to be a fucking problem. He was waiting for me at the car when I climbed back up from my hidden rowboat outpost down in the cove. It was only 7:30 and he was talking about this storm again. Saying how big it is and how I should come and stay with him and his wife, again and again, until I started thinking about getting out of the car, breaking a
pine branch off of one of the trees, and swinging it into his little head, knocking him over on the parking lot. Then I thought about starting up the car engine and backing into him full speed, then driving back and forth zig-zagging over his body. (For the record, I didn’t.) I’m not proud to say that I just frowned at him and maintained complete silence until he gave up and walked away. Anyway, let me get on with the story while I can. We are almost to that crazy fucking party.

Everyone’s English School, December 23, 2000

I’ve just finished five 45 minute private lessons in a row, each one more painful than the first. My plan is to numb myself with Yahoo News and drink instant coffee until I can leave at 5:00. I don’t even have the energy to write an email to Mariko. I ignore the ringing phone, but am surprised when Suzuka Sensei calls from her desk. “It’s for you Zim Sensei.” She presses a button on her phone, and then the phone on my desk rings for the first time since I started working here.

“Zim,” someone says in a slightly effeminate, vaguely familiar male voice.

“This is Zim.”

“Ziiiiiiim.” Now I place it. Taka. I met him at the ramen shop and then one other time when I bumped into him and Mariko on Jozenji-Dori, but his voice is distinctive. It’s definitely him.

“Ziiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiim” he says again

“This is Zim speaking,” I say, refusing to acknowledge that I know who he is.
“I’d like to invite you to my annual Eve of Christmas Eve Party. Mariko can inform you of the location. She has been here before many times. The doors will open at 9:00PM. You will not make other plans?” he says, then hangs up without waiting for an answer.

Sorry. Back in Kushimoto for a moment. Here is something new. Someone is pulling into the campground in a taxi. What the fuck?

January 5, 2001- 6:30PM

I’m afraid I can’t get us back to Sendai until I get you caught up with the events in Kushimoto. I just puked in the dusting of snow that is covering the parking lot…but before I can even get to the present moment, let me tell you about this afternoon.

The taxi’s automatic back door popped open, and Eiji—sitting in the back seat grinning—leaned towards the open door from the inside and did that obnoxious Japanese old-man’s gesture for “come here”—hand raised, palm down, flicking his fingers back and forth—(which still looks to me like “go away”). Over a rust-colored sweater, he was wearing a dark suit coat that was too big for him.

My first instinct was to run down to the sea. My second impulse was to cut his throat with the lid of a sardine can. But when I didn’t jump into the taxi, his bewildered face stuck like a tent stake into the weak part of me that will probably keep me from ever finishing this fucking ridiculous
story of my ridiculous fucking life because I don’t have the fucking strength—even here at the end of the world in fucking Kushimoto—to just tell Eiji and everyone else to LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE!

The cab driver, in his dark blue uniform turned to look at me with a “are you coming or not kid” cold stare on his middle-aged acne-scarred face. Don’t know what the fuck his problem was. The meter was running wasn’t it?

But even as my mind told me to refuse, told me to stay here and keep writing, (and at very least get the Eve of Christmas Eve party scrawled out in this notebook) I was already pulling myself out of the sleeping bag, leaning up over the passenger seat to get my wallet out of the glove box, getting my keys from the divot in the driver’s side armrest. I stepped out of the car and locked it up. Then, before committing myself to the chemical-fruity air-freshened interior of the taxi, I leaned down with one arm draped across the open door and looked at Eiji whose smile had turned his already wrinkled face into a collection of deep valleys and ridges. His “come on” hand gesture became more emphatic now that I was so close.

“I don’t have any money” I said to Eiji. (Actually I still had 3,000 yen and change, but that was my emergency fund.) Eiji’s face shifted into a frown that made deep lines at the sides of his compressed lips. He must have shaved that morning. The white stubble was gone and he had a little red cut on his chin. He nodded once slowly, then raised his eyes to meet mine.
“Jee-mu. This is my treat,” he said. He pulled an envelope from the breast pocket of his over-sized suitcoat. I was still standing outside, leaning into the cab. The driver clicked his tongue and sighed, then rubbed his hands together in a cartoonish “It’s cold,” gesture.

Eiji’s envelope was white with a simple black looping design on the front in black. I remembered Yamada Sensei in that damp classroom in Portland. “These envelopes are for wedding, you see red and gold design. Don’t confuse them with these envelope. Only black design. These are for funerals.”

He carefully peeled at a corner of the sealed top, licking at his finger then rubbing his saliva on the glue so he could peel it open without ripping it. The cab driver looked forward again towards the reeds and the curving blue horizon of the ocean. He leaned over to the passenger seat, then sat back up as he put on a pair of mirrored shades. He turned the radio on and scrolled the dial through different variations of static until a man’s polished radio voice came through the speakers: “Winter Typhoon would make a great name for a rock band,” and then a woman laughed.

Finally Eiji got his envelope open and then he pulled a half-centimeter of the 10,000 yen bill out from the top and showed it to me as though it was a big secret. “For you,” he said, but when he saw me flinch backward, he waved the envelope in the air as though to blow away his previous words. “For us. For us.” Then he said, “Please Jee-mu. Please,” and gestured towards the open seat. I climbed in the cab.
We made the fifteen minute drive into the town of Kushimoto. The clouds hung low over the ocean with a strange dark red tint. The road dipped down and ran alongside the flat rocks of a cove. A steep rocky point jutted out into the water. Huge waves were rolling in and smashing themselves against the rocks, audible even with the cab windows closed and the talk-show hosts blabbing and laughing with exaggerated amusement. We came to the straight flat section on east side of the peninsula, passed the bridge leading out to Ooshima Island, and then we were in town.

Food Festival was on the main road heading north to Shingu, across the street from the Okuwa Supermarket where I got my provisions. The taxi pulled into the parking lot, and Eiji extended the crisp 10,000 yen bill to the driver, holding it carefully with both hands. The driver reached back and took it without looking, then passed back eight 1,000 yen bills and a single 100 yen coin. Then he pushed a button and the back door popped open.

Eiji’s eyes shifted down to the money in his hand, then up to the meter, then he leaned his head back and looked up towards the top of the cab. He nodded twice, then put the bills and the single coin back in the envelope which he folded and tucked into his breast pocket. “Arigatou gozaimashita,” he said to the driver, bowing his head until his forehead bumped the back of the front seat. The driver nodded and mumbled “Arigatou gozaimashita,” then nodded once and sighed.

There was a big crowd at Food Festival. With the indoor waiting benches filled, people spilled out to the parking lot. A Dad in a gray sweatsuit gnawed on a cigarette, looking morose as his
two kids ran in circles around his legs. There was an old couple, Eiji’s generation, formally dressed and timid. A middle aged woman in a Patagonia fleece jacket scraped at her front tooth with her fingernail. A trio of teenage girls blinked their neon blue, neon purple, and neon green contact-lensed eyes.

There was a crowd of seven bikers, all dressed up in imitation leather and big black boots, talking and laughing. One of them said, “…better eat as much as we can before…WOOOOSH” and then he balanced on one leg, leaned to the side and stuck his arms out with splayed fingers waving around. The others laughed. “HA HA HA HA!”

So much noise. So many worthless soundwaves.

Eiji pushed himself through the crowd to put his name on a list. A speaker crackled and “Tanaka, party of two” warbled out over the parking lot. The older couple shuffled towards the door, taking a long route around the contact-lens high school girls and the shouting bikers.

A big hand-written sign in the window said: “Honorable customers, we are terribly sorry for the inconvenience but due to the evacuation Food Festival will be closed from tomorrow until further notice.”

I was pondering this as Eiji came back with a smile wrinkling his face. “Only one hour!” he said. I wanted to punch him in the nose. I wanted to take his delusional happiness away from him,
condense it into a chemical, and swallow it like a time-release capsule. Couldn’t he see the terrible, deadly, sinister, maliciously meaninglessness of it all?

One of the bikers started cackling again, and I thought of how Mariko chose someone like him over me. I thought of the mess that I’d left behind in Sendai and the improbability of ever getting this story told, and more to the point, I remembered that even if I did manage to make a story of this all, who the fuck cares?

After 90 minutes the loud speaker finally warbled out “Yukiyama, Party of two,” and Eiji, who had been standing there with his eyes closed and a stupid contented smile, put his hand on my back and guided me towards the door, insisting that I go first.

Inside, a woman in a pink Adidas track suit walked by with a plate with three thick slices of roast beef, two pieces of salmon sushi, four deep fried chicken wings, and on top of it all, a fucking scoop of mint-chocolate chip ice cream. There was a kid dipping fish-sticks into the chocolate fondue fountain. A woman shouted “Look, they have grilled eel!”

I got a plate full of broccoli, but when I sat down and bit into the first piece it was soggy and still frozen on the inside. I went back and got a seven deep fried chicken drumsticks and a thick slice of roast beef.
Eiji was sitting across from me, solemn and silent as though engaged in a religious ritual. He ate everything on his plate, even the detached deep-fried little clumps of bread crumbs that fell off his deep-fried crab-cream croquettes.

On the four big TVs, a woman with a silk floral scarf was tilting her head and touching her cheek with one finger, mouth slightly open as she listened to a man with white pants and a tweed jacket. The scene cut to a bearded man in shorts and flip-flops with a towel around his shoulders. He was standing in a lush tropical forest, holding his palms open and looking up as snowflakes drifted down through the thick green foliage all around him.

I got up to refill my coffee for the eleventh time. (No exaggeration. I counted.) A little kid almost crashed into me as he ran with a drumstick in his raised hand. He made a shrill monotonous buzzing sound as he steered the drumstick through the air.

That’s when I actually registered what the screen was showing, a spiral of clouds over the Pacific, its upper left side just beneath Japan in the north, arcing down to Taiwan and the Philippines, and stretching all the way south to Indonesia and New Guinea. The TV cut to a grainy image of a palm tree, the fronds shaking violently in the wind and snow zipping by horizontally. The tree curved over, leaning further and further until it suddenly snapped in half.
The elderly couple was in line before me at the coffee machine and they were both watching the TV in silence. The kid with the flying drumstick forced his way behind them making gunfire bursts with his pursed lips.

Back at the table I caught Eiji’s eye as he leaned towards a spoonful of soft ice-cream and colorful sprinkles. “Are you evacuating?” I asked. With his mouth full, he shook his head once and waved his hand in front of his face. Before his next bite he said, “My wife doesn’t like to travel.”

“Think we’ll be OK?” Eiji smiled, tilted his head to one side, then took another bite of ice-cream.

At the cash register, the total was 8,050. “I’m sorry Eiji, like I said—” he held up his open hand to stop me. The teenager at the cash register scratched impatiently at a pimple as Eiji slowly took out the envelope, slowly took out the bills, then slowly counted out the eight 1,000 yen bills before carefully passing them over. Only then did he turn the envelope upside down and let the 100 yen coin drop out in his palm. He passed this over too.

When the teenager gave him his change of a single 50 yen coin, Eiji held it out to me. When I refused, he tried to stuff it in my pocket so I stepped away and pushed through the door to the parking lot, where the crowd was even larger than before.

Looking back through the glass door, I saw Eiji crouching down and giving the fifty yen coin to the little kid with the flying drumstick. The kid smiled as he carefully put the coin away in his
pocket, and then Eiji rubbed the kid’s short bristly hair before turning and coming out to meet me in the parking lot.

I was getting ready to say “arigatou gozaimashita,” but he put a hand on my shoulder before I could lean forward in a bow, and before I could say anything, he was apologizing to me.

“I’m so sorry Zim, no money for a taxi,” he glanced up at me, then glanced down in embarrassment. Then he looked up at the thick greenish clouds, as though hoping the storm would come.

“I am happy to walk,” I said, rubbing a hand over my belly. And that was true, or maybe I should have said, I am less unhappy to walk. That 15 minute cab ride would have definitely made me throw up everything I’d just forced into my stomach. He apologized again, bowing low, I assured him that it was OK.

Shit. Now that I’m alone and writing this, I realize that I never even thanked him properly. What the fuck is wrong with me? Maybe this storm will swallow me and this notebook, wrapping up this narrative dramatically and saving me from the hard work of doing it myself. My headlamp is fading. I can barely make out these words.

**Everyone’s English School, December 23**

* Taka invited me to his party.
Meet me at my house at 8:00. We can go together. You are remembering your promise?

Outside of the school it is cold and dark and a light snow is falling. The Christmas lights in the park are blinking and I watch a couple walk by hand-in-hand. The man wears a black suit with a bright pink scarf. Snowflakes stick to his hair like dandruff. The woman wears a short plaid skirt and puffy white down jacket. She sticks out her tongue to catch a snowflake.

I unlock my bike and brush a thin layer of dry snow from the seat. I ride back to my little apartment then I take a long shower with the water turned up hot enough to scald my skin. Ever since Thanksgiving with Mariko I’ve been keeping a little stock of my own Delphonimin, and I swallow three of the big time release 500mg capsules, then I take one more and chew it up, grimacing against the bitterness, but already feeling a soothing apathy that flows over my sharp anxiety like dark viscous mud.

I get on the subway heading north to go meet Mariko. It is crowded with commuters on their way home. A bald man next to me is speaking in a soft voice to the man next to him. “I’m sorry. Please. Just wait for Akita.” The other man is silent, and even with the rattling of the train, the coughing and sniffling, the shrill laughter from a group of three school girls in their dark blue uniforms, this man’s frowning silence seems to engulf the entire train car, thinning out the air, making it difficult
for me to breathe. I stand up and weave over to the door, and I’m the first out when the doors slide open at Yaotome station.

January 5, 2001- 9:36 PM

Full blizzard outside. The car is rocking in the wind. I opened the door for a second and a thick spiral of superfine snowflakes came in. A little worried about Eiji. Hope he’s not wondering around out there. Visibility must be about ten centimeters and I don’t think he has a light.

Damn. The wind just pushed the car and held it leaning over. Not lifting it off the tires but pretty fucking close. All kinds of shit is flying around, beating on the roof and windows like a crowd of people hitting it with their fists, trying to get in out of the cold.

For a second I thought it was Eiji. There was this steady thump thump thump, but then whatever it was blew away with an awful scraping sound across the top of the car.

Might not be much time left.

Eve of Christmas Eve Party 1: December 23, 2000

I arrive at Mariko’s house just before 8:00. I ring the doorbell and after a few seconds, she opens the heavy wooden door and greets me with “konbanwa” and a bow. She’s dressed in a long wine-red velvet dress and she has a string of small pearls around her neck.
Calling back into the living room she says, “Mom, Dad, come meet Zim.” Her mother and father come to the genkan and bow politely. They both have graying hair in a similar short-cut style. Each one puts a hand on Mariko’s back. The father smiles warmly.

“Thank you for taking care of Mariko in America,” he says.

“No no no. Mariko took care of me,” I say.

“I see you got dressed up Zim,” Mariko says sarcastically, looking at my sneakers and rumpled khaki pants. “Dad?” she says, and turns smiling to her father.

“Come on inside Zim,” he says. I kick off my sneakers and as I step up from the genkan he takes me by the arm and leads me to his bedroom. He turns on the glaring fluorescent light then steps back, estimating my height with a glance. “Mariko’s told us all about you,” he says, opening up the door to a wardrobe made of dark gleaming wood.

“Oh?” I ask.

“She’s right about your Japanese. Impressive,” he says, then turns to the wardrobe, and pulls out a brown corduroy suit wrapped in the plastic from the cleaners. “Try this one on?” he suggests then walks out of the room.

Ten minutes later, I am wearing the brown corduroy and Mariko has chosen a simple pair of polished black leather shoes for me. “Don’t wait up for us,” she says, before slipping into her leather boots and pushing me out the door.
She is silent on the way to the subway. She has a puffy purple down jacket on over her formal dress, and a tiny feather is poking out of a seam on her shoulder. We walk past a little triangular park with a single cherry tree and a thick hedge of camellias. She puts her gloved hand on my arm, and we walk through the lightly falling snow. The city rumbles in the distance.

The south-bound subway is full of other couples, dressed nicely, probably on their way to downtown Sendai to see the Christmas lights on Jozenji-Dori and have a nice meal. Mariko hasn’t spoken since we left her house. She keeps touching the pearls at her neck, glancing at her watch. She’s sitting up very straight and frowning. The subway pulls into Ashigaoka Station, and without a word Mariko stands up and walks towards the door. We step out on to the tiled platform, and as the subway pulls away, she fishes the pack of cigarettes out of her bag and opens it up. “I need to get some cigarettes,” she says.

I follow Mariko into a Lawson’s in the station and wander over to the magazines. On one of the covers, a man sits on a motorcycle, dressed in full gear with a black helmet, with a woman in a bikini sitting behind him, wearing a white helmet with the visor flipped up, revealing her pouting face. The tiled floor of the store feels soft under my feet and the fluorescent lights are flickering with strange colors.

“Zim?” Mariko’s voice is close in my ear. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. The Wham “Last Christmas” muzack switches over to a techno jingle-bells. Mariko snaps her fingers in
front of my eyes. Her nails are painted in alternating green and red, with an intricate snowflake in the middle of each one. “You OK?” she asks.

I look past her hand to the two clerks, both high-school aged kids wearing the blue and white striped Lawson's uniforms, both with mild acne, both laughing, but then quickly straightening up and shouting “irashaimase” as the electronic doorbell rings and an old man in paint-splattered lavender overalls comes in. He looks down at his feet and walks directly over towards the liquor section, taking two Sake One Cups in each hand and bringing them to the counter.

We step outside into the cold and snow. Definitely snowing harder now. We walk away from the station, away from the shops and lights, and soon we are passing through a neighborhood of large houses, the windows mostly dark. I slip on a wet patch of snow on a manhole cover, and Mariko catches me by my arm before I fall over. “Zim. Please. Stay focused.” It’s snowing hard enough that I don’t even notice the one high-rise apartment in the neighborhood until we are already approaching the immaculate glass doors. A security guard sits behind a window in the entryway, and nods as Mariko punches in five digits in a mounted metal console. The doors slide open silently. We walk over the shining floor to the elevator, our footsteps echoing in the empty space.

The elevator doors are polished mirrors, and our reflections stare back at us. My brown corduroy is slightly too small, but in a way that seems intentional and stylish. Mariko looks beautiful
and elegant in her wine-red velvet dress. The pale skin of her neck is exposed and the pearls catch the soft light of the foyer.

The elevator doors slide open and we step inside. Both sides are mirrored and the two of us are reflected hundreds of times. Hundreds of Mariko’s press hundreds of “Close Door” buttons, and hundreds of B3 buttons. There is no muzack in this elevator. The cables and gears make delicate sounds like robots cuddling in bed.

When the doors open on to an industrial looking corridor on B3, Mariko grabs my arm and pulls me off. The corridor seems to extend for thousands of miles. “Zim, come here a second.” Mariko puts her hands around the back of my head and pulls my face down into the soft thick velvet over her breasts. I inhale deeply through my nose. She smells like cinnamon. She strokes my head gently, the tips of her fingernails running through my hair, brushing my scalp, tracing lines down to the back of my neck. “This will all be over soon enough” she says.

**January 5, 2001- 23:47 PM**

Taking a break to make some more coffee. Here’s the latest. In addition to the relentless sound of wind, the crashing shit bouncing off the windshield and left-side windows—we also have the muffled sound of distant air-raid sounding sirens going *whaaawwww, whaaawwww, whaaawwww*, in slow monotonous waves. There’s already five inches of snow on the ground so I don’t know if I
could drive out of here if I wanted to. I need to get us to this party in Sendai, but I also need to get us caught up on this Kushimoto afternoon. Just hope I can do both. I'll start with the latter.

Eiji and I started walking back from Food Festival at about 14:00. Small clumps of gray clouds scuttled quickly by underneath a solid bank of blue-black clouds up above. Cars filled the road in town in both directions. There was a line of ten cars pulled over on the side of the road waiting to get into the Okuwa supermarket parking lot.

We turned off the highway and walked past the harbor. The sea looked restless and choppy with little waves slapping against the concrete jetties and straining the boats against their moorings. Three men in knee-high black rubber boots sat on buckets staring out towards the harbor smoking cigarettes in silence.

“Bad storm coming,” Eiji said to me.

We continued on to the narrow coastal road, heading south. To our left, waves crashed into the rocks. To our right, the land rose steeply and was covered with reeds, evergreen shrubs, and a few warped pine trees.

Just past the turnoff to the Oshima bridge, next to the “Southernmost Point 3.5 km” sign, a police car was parked in the middle of the road, its sirens silently spinning. I froze, imagining myself in handcuffs in the back of the car. They found out about Taka and his apartment! They found the
Eiji kept walking, and stopped when he realized I wasn’t next to him anymore. He waved at me to follow him, and I slowly continued walking.

The cop had set up a barrier with two bright orange cones that were linked together on top by a plastic pole wrapped with a spiral of reflective yellow tape. The spiral lit up rhythmically as the siren’s red light fell across it. The trunk was open, and the cop picked up a white sandbag, waddled across the road under its weight, then leaned forward and dropped it heavily on the base of one of the cones. A sudden gust of wind knocked the other unweighted cone on its side, dislodging the plastic pole which skittered a few feet on the road with a scraping noise. When the cop saw us he stood up straight, glancing first at Eiji then narrowing his eyes at me.

He wore an immaculate uniform, his hair cut short on the sides and back, slightly longer on the top and combed with a careful part that was fixed in place with some kind of gel. He turned and looked down at Eiji and his face immediately relaxed into a smile. His big crooked teeth emerged from behind his plump youthful lips.

“Yukiyma-san? Yukiyma-san desu ka?”

“Ooooh. Is that little Yoshi-kun?” Eiji said, looking up.

“O hisashi buri desu ne. It’s been a long time. Look,” he gestured to his police uniform, the badge on his chest, “I’m a real police officer.”

“Ooooooh” Eiji said, nodding and smiling.
“Who’s the gaijin?” the cop asked, nodding towards me.

“He is a friend,” Eiji said simply. I pretended not to understand and stared at the crashing waves, trying to think how I would act if I hadn’t stolen a car, and if nothing had happened back in Sendai. “He is helping me during the storm.”

The cop looked out towards the ocean, just as a huge wave crashed in, splashing up on the concrete barrier beside the road. The wind blasted a fine spray of white foam over the three of us. Little droplets clung to the sides of our faces and peppered the windshield of the police car.

“Gonna be a bad one.” said the cop, still looking out at the ocean and dark clouds. Then he turned to Eiji, “Yukiyama-san, you’re all set up at the shelter?”

“Yes yes. Thank you. Just came to look at the waves.” Eiji said smiling and nodding.

“Road’s closed…but…need anything from your house? If we go right now, I could run you out and back real quick.” He spoke in a hushed voice and looked over his shoulder.

“No, no. Thank you Yoshi-kun. Just came to look at the waves.” Eiji said, still smiling and nodding.

“Well…need a lift to the shelter?” he asked.

I looked at my feet on the asphalt, out to the ocean, up to the spinning clouds, then back to my feet again. I wondered if Taka’s apartment was wrapped in police tape. I thought of Taka’s body surrounded by broken shards of glass, dusted with snow, the collar of his white shirt soaked red.
The waves and wind grew louder. A single snowflake drifted down, landed on the asphalt and immediately melted.

“Where’d you meet the gaijin?” the cop asked, nodding towards me again.

“He was at the campground. He is a good man.” Eiji said, and I looked at him carefully.

Really? Was I?

“Where’s he staying?” the cop asked. He lips puckered like he’d just eaten a wedge of lemon.

“He is with me at the shelter, helping me,” Eiji said looking out over the choppy ocean. Off on the horizon a sharp beam of sunlight burst through a hole in the clouds, then quickly disappeared. There was a rumble of thunder.

“Thunder in January?” the cop said shaking his head, “Gonna be bad one.” Then looking at me again he said, “Yukiyama-san, that shelter’s not really intended for tourists…” but he trailed off when he saw Eiji’s expression harden.

Eiji bent over to stand up the fallen traffic cone. The cop jumped over to help. “Ah! Yukiyama-san, I’m so sorry, let me do it.” Then, as Eiji righted the cone, the cop ran to pick up the fallen pole and put it back in place. He walked quickly to the trunk of his car where he pulled out another sandbag and waddled over to the cone. He dropped it heavily then squatted down and rolled
it over on to the cone’s base. White sand spilled from a seam and blew along the top of the road in braided tendrils that quickly dispersed. His radio squawked from inside his car.

Still squatting over the sandbag he looked up at us, first me, then Eiji, “Yukiyama-san, please let me give you a ride to the shelter. It’s coming for sure.” A garbled voice came from the radio again.

“We will watch the waves for a few minutes.”

“Yukiyama-san, I’d feel better if…” the cop reached out to put a hand on Eiji’s shoulder, then changed his mind and let it fall to his side. He pulled up the waistband of his blue police-uniform pants.

“We might be in the shelter for a long time.” Eiji said, nodding and smiling. The cop’s radio crackled again and started beeping noise.

“Just a minute,” the cop went back to his car and took out the radio. Putting it to the side of his head, he bowed and said “I understand. Yes sir. Right away.”

When he came back to us, he put both hands very lightly on Eiji’s shoulders, bending down, trying to look in his eyes. Eiji glanced up at him, his eyes watery from the wind and spray, they held eye contact for a few seconds before Eiji looked out to the ocean. Another wave crashed and a few drops of water spattered over us.

The cop said, “I really need to go, so please just let me give you a quick ride.”
Eiji smiled and nodded and reached up to pat the cop’s hand that still rested on his shoulder. “Little Yoshi, I’ve been here a long time,” he said and then Eiji stood up straighter, raised his head and looked directly into the cop’s eyes. “We will watch the waves for a little longer.”

The cop opened and closed his mouth, then dropped his gaze and said “OK, Mr. Yukiyama. Just please be careful.” He bowed at Eiji formally, glanced at me quickly, then walked over and climbed into his police car.

He drove away with his sirens flashing bright red in the dim moss-green daylight. He gave a little beep of his horn and watched us in the rearview mirror until he was around the corner and out of sight. As soon as he was gone, Eiji went around the cones and started walking south. A few more snowflakes drifted down from the sky, melting as they hit the road at our feet. “Little Yoshi…all grown up,” Eiji said, then without looking back he continued walking.

He walked quickly for his age, but I kept getting out ahead of him. I wanted to be back in the car before it really started snowing. It felt too warm for a winter storm, with gusts of humid tropical air blowing in from the ocean. A styrofoam cooler bounced in the center of the road in front of us, splitting into four different pieces that blew up into the shrubs to our right. The clouds darkened and sank lower, and the crests of waves reached up towards them before crashing down angrily.
My stomach was turning and I imagined the severed heads of all the Food Festival buffet animals heads floating on a sea of blood. I imagined a pig’s head blowing up on to the road. Instead of splitting into pieces like the styrofoam cooler, it would just land with a wet crunch, its eyes open, staring at us as we walked pass.

I wanted a super-strong cup of intensely bitter instant coffee to get the taste of blood and grease out of my mouth. I wished I had refused to come with Eiji. I figured that I could have had the Sendai story finished if I had stayed back in the car at the campground. The snow started to fall harder, big fat flakes flying in horizontally from over the crashing waves. They melted as soon as they hit the asphalt or the rocks.

“Eiji, listen, I’m not feeling so well. I think I better go on ahead.” I said. The campground was only about two more kilometers away, and most of the route with the exception of one last cove, was up high and out of the waves.

“But you can stay with me tonight Zim. With me and my wife.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “You be careful too,” and I started walking.

“Too dangerous to sleep in the car tonight Jee-mu,” he said and actually took my arm in his hand as though to hold me back.

“I’ll be fine,” I said, more strongly this time, and I pulled my arm out of his bony hand. I was surprised how easily he let go.
“Yes. Yes Jee-mu. Of course. You have your writing.” He did an impersonation of me hunched over my notebook. “You should go ahead.” A wave crashed over the concrete wall on the side of the road. I ran forward to get out of the way and Eiji took several steps backwards. The foaming water spilled on to the road between us, pooling up in the center in a spiral before flowing down to either side. Eiji waved and I turned and walked away.

**Eve of Christmas Eve Party 2: December 23, 2000**

Mariko is still stroking my hair with one hand, holding my head to her breasts with the other. Each time her hand comes up from the back of my neck to the top of my head, she repeats “It’ll be OK.” Then she gently steps back and puts her hands on my shoulders, holding me as though as I am about to fall over. She looks into my eyes. “Taka keeps his car key on a brass hook in his genkan. It has an hourglass keychain. Zim?”

“I’m listening.”

“At some point, get that key in your pocket.”

“Hourglass,” I say.

“He drives a lime-green Honda fit. It’s in the parking garage at the end of this hall. B3. Got it?”

I nod again.
“If we get separated, we meet in the car.”

“OK.” I’m almost certain that this is just a dream so I’ll just go with whatever happens.

Hourglass keychain. Lime-Green Honda Fit. Sure.

“And if that doesn’t work we will make another plan. Take this just in case,” and she takes a business card from her wallet and hands it to me. It says North Wind Taxi with a phone number and a cartoonish black and white cab with a smiling driver. “It needs to be done tonight.”

I glance at it and tuck it in my suit jacket breast pocket. The Dephinition reminds me that at worst we will all die and that will happen even if I get the koala-bear keychain instead of the hourglass. My eyes drift closed.

“Zim.” Mariko snaps her fingers in front of my eyes again. “Stay focused. Please. How many did you take?”

“Just one,” I say, holding up a finger.

“We’ll meet at the car. You and I. After…” she stops and looks down the long empty corridor. One of the fluorescent bulbs flickers erratically. It is cold down here, and a draft blows in from the parking garage.
January 6, 2001- 1:39 AM

The sirens haven’t stopped here in Kushimoto. They seem to be getting fainter, maybe because it is snowing harder. Where are you with your clever plans now. Mariko? If I could just rest my head on your breasts one more time. You can make fun of me. Call me a baby. It doesn’t matter. I just want to rest my head there while you stroke your fingers through my hair and tell me what I should do now. Tell me that this snowstorm will just blow over. Tell me that it’s OK that I was mean to Eiji. Tell me I’m forgiven. Tell me I’ll get this story finished.


Back on the elevator, Mariko presses 57, and when the light behind the button starts slowly blinking red, she punches in a code in the number console. When nothing happens she says “fuck!” and tries again, pushing the buttons harder, slamming her fingertip into them like she’s trying to chip them out of the wall. The blinking red light behind 57 turns green, and the elevator starts moving up.

She looks at the fingernail on her pointer finger then sticks out her bottom lip in exaggerated sadness. She holds her nail up for me to see. The red tip has chipped, just above the intricate white snow flake. She nibbles at it carefully, trying to even it out then spits out a tiny chip of red on to the carpeted elevator floor. Then, as the ascending numbers pass 32, she starts rummaging around in her bag, reaching deeply into the bottom, raking around with fingers.
Hundreds of her reflections also search their bags in the mirrored elevator walls. As we pass 44, her hand emerges with four different pills, two familiar blue Dephinomins, (200mg quick release), a big yellow/white two tone capsule, and a light red gelcap.

She holds out her open hand to me. “Take two,” she says, raising her eyebrows at me and smiles crookedly. “He’ll be suspicious if we’re sober.” She thrusts her chin to the pills impatiently. I take a familiar blue and the unknown red gelcap. Then she reaches in her bag, pulls out a plastic bottle filled with an amber liquid, unscrews the cap and takes a sip to wash down both of her pills. Then she passes me the bottle and I recognize the sweet smell of plum wine. I take a big gulp and wash down both of my pills too.

**January 6, 2001- 2:54 AM**

Bad news: Went to fill up my water-bottle at the campground tap. Trudged through snow up to my knees. No water. Almost got blown over by the wind. Half the pine trees are shattered and laying on the ground. Good news: There is plenty of snow to melt so I won’t die of thirst. Up to my knees. Melting a pot of it right now. Bad news: Gas canister is running low.
Eve of Christmas Eve Party 4: December 23, 2000

The elevator doors slide open into a genkan packed with formal shoes, leather winter boots, and one pair of flip-flops with green palm tree pattern. The key with the hourglass keychain hangs on a hook in the wall. It is filled with purple sand that has drained to the bottom. Mariko sees me staring and elbows me. Then she kicks her feet out of her boots.

A woman in a green maid’s uniform approaches us and says “Merry Christmas” with mechanical cheer. She has a shiny bald head, a green contact lens in one eye and a red one in the other. As we step up on to the carpeted floor, she holds out two silver trays to us, one with martini glasses filled with clear liquid, condensation on the glasses (half with olives, half without), and the other tray with tall bubbling champagne glasses.

“Merry Christmas” I say. The bright genkan light makes her smooth scalp glow and the black hair follicles give it a bluish tint. I pass a champagne glass to Mariko and take a martini for myself, and then I notice that the maid doesn’t have any eyebrows. She smiles at me with her mouth, but her eyes are cold.

Mariko tilts back her champagne and finishes it in three gulps, then takes another glass, setting the empty glass on the genkan shelf, underneath the car key and the hourglass keychain. She passes me another martini, even though mine is still completely full. She thrusts her chin at my glass and looks hard in my eyes. I drain my glass, drops of gin running down my cheeks, and then lower
my hand to my side. The olive rolls out of the glass and falls in one of the dress shoes behind me. I hold on to my empty glass.

The maid steps aside to let us pass, her close-lipped smile unaltered. She winks at me, first with the red eye, then with the green eye. We walk down the hall towards the smell of rosemary and garlic and the sound of laughter and twanging sitar music. The hallway opens into a large open room, a kitchen area to the left, separated from the living room by a counter island with several bottles of liquor beside a tray of deviled eggs sprinkled with paprika and a tray of fried chicken wings, their tips wrapped in small pieces of tinfoil.

Two big black leather couches, arranged in an L, face into the living room toward a gas-fireplace where an imitation log is lit up by seven perfectly even tongues of flame. In front of the fireplace four flattened limbs of a faux-bearskin rug stretch out on the wooden floor. It has no head. On the far side of the living room a dining table is covered in food and drinks, and beside that to the right, a large flat screen TV sits on a black shelf. On the screen, a green fractal pattern dissolves into spring leaves which dissolve into a fractal pattern which dissolves into ocean waves. The far wall of the living room is made entirely of glass, and the reflection of the party is superimposed over the falling snow and the city lights in the distance.

There are about forty people sitting on the couches or standing around the counter, the table, or by the fire. About ten more are in the kitchen. An older man wearing a full suit of blue
nautical raingear is dancing with a woman who is naked from the waist up. His rough hands press into the soft flesh of her back. A man wearing only a speedo bathing suit and a bowtie is standing in front of the fire, his hands open behind him to the gas flames.

Taka appears in front of us. He wears a neon blue suit, a white shirt, and a tie with a pattern of bright red Christmas trees over a dark green background. His pupils are huge, only a fringe of dark brown iris visible. His hair is pulled up and back tightly and his ponytail sticks up in an arc from the back of his head.

He leans over and kisses Mariko, first on the cheek, then a quick peck on the lips, but then Mariko leans in closer and her tongue flicks out and touches his upper lip. He draws his head back in exaggerated surprise then smiles faintly.

Then he turns to me. “Ziiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiim.” I reach out to shake his hand, but he holds his arms wide for an embrace. As I lean in to hug him, I consider shattering the top of my martini glass on the door frame. When I step back from the embrace, I’d gouge out each of his eyes with glass stem.

I hug him firmly. He runs both hands down my back, then over my ass, giving me a little pull towards him, bringing our pelvises together for just a moment before letting me go. “Welcome Zim,” he says, then turns to the room and announces, “Ladies and gentleman,” and he waits till everyone is listening, “the most ravishing new couple in Sendai. Zim and Mariko!” Suddenly it is
quiet. The old man with the raingear stops his shuffling dance and turns to look at us. A young woman in a leather biker dress claps her hands until she realizes that no one else is clapping. She stops and puts her left hand to the zipper below her neck.

The sitar music has stopped. The only sound is the whirring of gas in the imitation fireplace. I am taking fast shallow breaths. No one moves. Taka stares at me with a stern expression that cuts deep lines in his hollow cheeks. His nostrils are flared.

I reach my arm back like a baseball pitcher and hurl my martini glass into the brick fireplace. It shatters noisily but even this sound is quickly swallowed up.

Taka looks at me then looks around the room then back at me. Then he shouts, “Merry Christmas!” and everyone starts clapping and laughing. The man in the speedo presses a button on a remote control and the sitar music comes on again. Everyone starts talking. I hear someone say “Same every year huh? Yeah so anyway, fucking Phuket man…”

A man in a pink dress is filling a champagne glass from a two-liter bottle of Pepsi. He says to the woman next to him, “I only do stimulants, definitely no dairy,” and they both start laughing.

Taka says “make yourselves comfortable,” and I feel like a cat is writhing in my stomach, trying to crawl out of me. I weave through the room, left around the couches, right around the drink and appetizer table, moving towards the glass wall on the other side of the room. I slide open the glass door and step out on to the balcony. It's very cold and the snow is falling fast and silently. The
lights of the city are far below. I take several deep breaths, then I puke over the side of the balcony, watching a spray of pink liquid fall into the void below.

I stand up and wipe my mouth on my corduroy sleeve. I take a bit of snow from the railing and put it in my mouth. There is no wind and the snow falls straight down silently. I startle myself by leaning too far over the railing of the balcony and tipping forward into the void for a second before leaning back, and turning around to go back inside.

I need some coffee. The Delphinomin has made everything start to wobble and fade. I squeeze past a circle of five people who are clinking shotglasses filled with something the color and consistency of blood. A woman in a purple mini skirt steps in front of me, then reaches out and takes both of my hands in hers. “We can go into one of the rooms if you like,” she says, blinking at me slowly, pouting her glossy lips.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble, and start to move away.

“Why not?” she leans in closer to me, pushing her breasts against me. Over her shoulder I see Taka and Mariko sitting together on the couch, and a tall woman with short blonde hair sits on the other side of Mariko with her arm around her shoulder, her hand casually resting on Mariko’s breast. Taka looks sullen, but has the corners of his lips turned up in a rigid smile.

The woman in front of me is still staring up at me, pulling me closer. I see Mariko lean over and kiss Taka. “I’m sorry I say,” and walk away from the woman, working my way towards the
hallway. The first door I try open on to a pitch black room and a voice with a British accent tells me calmly “Fuck off please.”

The next room is empty and in dim light from the glow of the city outside the window I see a double bed, the sheets and covers rumpled. I collapse on it and fall asleep instantly.

I wake up with the room spinning, and it takes several minutes to remember where I am, and even when I do, I have no idea of how long I was asleep. When I go back out into the living room, a plump woman is passed out on the bearskin carpet, naked with her head resting in the lap of a man in a green tuxedo who sits there with his legs crossed. A trickle of blood runs from her nose and the man dabs at it with a plaid Burberry handkerchief. Her huge breasts lay splayed out to each side, almost resting on the bearskin carpet beside her.

Mariko is still sitting next to Taka on a black leather couch, stroking his back as he leans forward with a rolled up 10,000 yen bill in his nose and snorts up a line of powder noisily. He leans back, rubbing his nose and shouts “Merry Christmas!” The area around the lines of powder has been cleared away carefully, but the rest of the table is cluttered with glasses, a big dinner plate with a chicken drumstick, and a large purple vibrator.

I start walking towards the genkan imagining that I will soon be in one of the bedrooms, tied up and gagged. Taka will be watching with unfocused eyes, smiling as the man in a green-tuxedo
slices off my nose and places it on a small porcelain plate, blood pooling around it like sauce. Taka will lick his lips and take the plate, stabbing my nose with a small gold dessert fork and bringing it to his lips.

I shake my head and rub my hands across my face. I find myself in the genkan and take a quick look over my shoulder before I grab the hourglass keychain and stuff it in the pocket of my corduroy pants. I pick up a glass of warm flat champagne from the genkan shelf and take a small sip.

“Zim,” Taka’s voice is close to my ear. His breath smells like puke and mint mouthwash. He puts his arm around my waist and pulls me towards him. “Tonight Zim, we have something else…something very special. Please.” He leads me back into the living room but then turns and starts us down the hall. I glance over my shoulder and Mariko is watching us carefully even as she laughs at something the blond woman says.

Taka and I continue down the hall. He knocks on a door, and when there is no response, he pushes it open. The bright fluorescent light hurts my eyes and a blink a few times. The room is very hot, and empty except for a single bed and a small bedside table with a single drawer. A young girl, fourteen or fifteen, lays on the bed in a thin blue bathrobe, her bare calves sticking out from the bottom. Her mouth is slightly open. She is sound asleep and breathing softly and evenly. The bed is still neatly made up with a patchwork blanket spread out smoothly underneath her, the covers tucked
in beneath the sides of the mattress. Taka looks at me and then holds one hand open towards the young girl.

“Look Zim,” he says, watching me closely. Taka sits down on the edge of the bed. The mattress shifts under his weight and the girl rolls over. Taka sees me looking at her and smiles at me.

I look away towards the closed white Venetian blinds over the room’s only window.

“Why is she here?” I ask. I keep staring at the venetian blinds and the little rows of darkness between the white slats. Under the fluorescent lights, Taka looks old and frail. The dead white ponytail sticks up from the back of his head.

“All of that, out there” he swings his hand loosely in the direction of the living room, “approaches…but never the decisive leap. I thought maybe you and Mariko and I…” He stands up and reaches back to touch his ponytail. The girl mumbles something and rolls over on her side. I ease the patchwork blanket out from underneath her sleeping body, while behind me Taka starts pacing. “Forbidden to the cowardly,” he says. The girl breathes slowly and evenly as I keep working the covers out from underneath her. “Take another look Zim, before you cover her up,” he says from behind me.

I pull the quilt up to her chin and smooth the hem over her shoulders. With her body covered she looks even younger, the skin on her face so thin and delicate, her lips slightly parted as
she breathes. Behind me Taka paces faster now. He sniffs and rubs his nose. “Afraid Zim?” his voice is softer now, but he speaks quickly. “Mariko told me you were extraordinary.”

“Taka?” I say, trying to keep my voice calm.

“I thought we’d…” and his voice trails off as he gestures to the girl’s sleeping body. He paces back and forth then walks over the bedside table. He opens the drawer and pulls out a large serrated knife. Jazz music from the living room comes muffled through the walls.

“Zim?”

“Yes.”

“If I attack her, what will you do?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“If you could kill me, surely you could…” again he leaves his statement incomplete and gestures to the girl.

I open my mouth to speak but Taka lunges at me with the knife, slashing the blade into my left shoulder. A searing pain races through me as I grab his wrist, and pull his hand with the knife away from me. Suddenly he is just a frail old man again. He opens his hand and the knife falls to the floor.

The girl snores very faintly through her nose. I let go of his wrist, and Taka wipes his face with both hands, then brushes them together roughly. I hold my shoulder with my hand and blood
drips from between my fingers. He looks at me for a moment then down at his feet. Then he shrugs sadly, walks over, opens the door, and walks out of the room. I stand up and kick the knife under the bed, turn off the fluorescent light then follow him out the door, closing it behind me. He moves down the hallway toward the living room, keeping one hand on the wall.

Most of the people sit in a loose circle on the floor, lit by the artificial log fire, sipping drinks and smoking cigarettes, some mostly naked, many of them looking tired and embarrassed. Loud jazz music plays from the speakers. The woman is still passed out on the bearskin carpet, but her nose has stopped bleeding and the man in the green tuxedo is gone. Someone has covered her up with a light blue bath towel. The skin around her sleeping mouth hangs loosely, and her thick lipstick branches off into capillaries in the wrinkles of her chin.

Taka turns on a harsh overhead fluorescent light. As people blink and sit up straighter, someone leans over and presses a button on the stereo. The loud jazz music stops. A woman starts sorting through a pile of clothes on the floor, and pulls a camouflage sweatshirt on over her gray sports bra.

“Merry Eve of Christmas Eve everyone. The party is over,” Taka says in a booming voice. Then he speaks more softly to Mariko who is still sitting on the couch, fully-clothed. “Perhaps you could help Zim? He…” but then his voice trails off and he collapses on the couch next to her and closes his eyes. All around people are stamping out cigarettes, finishing the last sips of drinks,
picking up purses, and putting on clothes and jackets. Blood drips out from between my fingers
soaking into the corduroy, and the room is spinning slowly around me.

Mariko stands up, and pushes me into the kitchen area. She pulls out a folded pink dish
towel from a drawer, then helps me peel off the blood-soaked jacket and shirt. She soaks the towel
in hot water and wipes away the blood as it flows out.

“I’m OK.” I whisper. The living room is mostly silent, just the sound of footsteps and a
chair scraping. Someone says “Merry Christmas,” sarcastically, and makes a sharp laugh like a single
bark. The elevator doors open and people slip into their shoes and squeeze on.

I put my hand on the towel and hold it there. Mariko takes another towel from the drawer,
this one with a pumpkin and vine pattern. She soaks it under the faucet, wrings it out, then wraps it
around my upper arm, keeping pressure on the cut.

The elevator doors beep and open again, and the everyone squeezes on until a faint alarm
starts pinging and the last four people step back out, one after the other until the alarm goes quiet.
As the elevator doors close, one of them says “Fuck.”

The living room feels colder in the after-party fluorescent light and silence. Gritting my
teeth against the pain, I wriggle my arm back into the jacket forcing the towel into the snug sleeve to
hold it in place. I leave my bloody shirt balled up on the floor.
A stand there trying to catch my breath. Several moments pass and pain throbs from my arm. The elevator doors open again and the last four people leave.

Taka is slumped on the couch, leaning back with his eyes closed and his thin wrinkled neck exposed. I’m going to get the serrated knife, then grab Taka’s white pony tail, pull back his head, and bring down the knife into his neck with a sharp swing. Blood will shoot in an arc from his artery, spraying on the wall behind the couch.

“Zim?” Mariko’s voice is soft and childlike. She is looking down at the kitchen sink as though afraid to meet my eyes as she speaks. “Can I cut his head off?” When I don’t answer she looks directly into the eyes. “He asked me to Zim,” Mariko says. “He wanted me to.” Mariko says, then she looks back down.

The sky outside is turning gray with the dawn. I must have slept several hours. The snow falls silently.

“I’ll do it,” I say, and Mariko turns to look at me. “I’ll do it.” I say again.

The girl’s frail voice comes from the bedroom. “Hello?” she calls uncertainly.

Mariko’s head snaps up, her eyes suddenly clear. She starts walking fast towards the bedroom door. When I follow, she raises her open hand and pushes against my bare chest between the corduroy lapels, forcing me to take a few steps back. “You call a taxi. Tell them Dianohara Station.”
“Call a taxi,” I say and nod, turning back into the kitchen. On the counter, there is a receipt for 2,703 yen from Sports Authority, and a glass swan paperweight. I pull out the rumpled North Wind Taxi card from my pocket. I dial the number and listen to the tinny ring of the phone.

There is a click after the third ring. “North Wind Taxi Service, name, phone number, and address of pick-up please,” says a polite professional female voice.

“Tanaka” I say, “I don’t have a phone. Dianohara Station.”

There is a pause, then she says mechanically, “20 minutes. Thank you for using North Wind Taxi Service. Arigatou gozaimashita,” and the line goes dead.

So some reality still exists beyond this room. Outside of the glass wall and fifty-seven stories below, the city is still there, people are waking up and making coffee, eating toast and getting ready for work.

Taka’s mouth is wide open and he snores softly. His head rolls over to face me. His eyes open and he seems to recognize me, but then they close again. A line of tension creases his forehead.

I hear the rising sound of a question in the girl’s voice. Mariko says, “It’s cold out there OK? Zip up that jacket.”

When they come out, Mariko has her purple jacket on over her wine-red dress. The girl wears her dark blue school uniform, and a big puffy white down coat with a pink scarf.
Mariko’s face strains with a forced smile. She sees the girl’s big eyes taking in the room, the half-empty glasses, a bra hanging from the mantle. Her eyes are youthful, but not innocent. They widen further when she sees me, standing in the kitchen in my bloody corduroy jacket. I raise my good arm in a wave.

She has her school bag with her, the strap over her shoulder with her small hand resting on the bag’s top. A stuffed Pikachu hangs from the strap.

“That old grandfather fell asleep on the couch,” Mariko says. The girl smirks and I think she winks at me. Mariko asks me, “You called a taxi right?”

I nod.

“I’m taking her home now,” she keeps her eyes on me as she steps into the genkan and starts putting on her boots.


“Bye-bye,” she says as the elevator doors slid open. She is scuffing her feet into her white school sneakers.

“You can…” Mariko begins, looking at me with wide imploring eyes, the smile gone. “You can…take care of everything here…right?”
“Sure. I’ll take care of it,” I say. I feel like my face is cracking apart and falling on to the floor in pieces like a jigsaw puzzle.

“Pick me up at Sendai Station in an hour or so?” she says. They are both on the elevator now, Mariko standing there in her velvet dress, her hand on the button to keep the door open.

“Sure,” I say.

The girl reaches up to adjust her scarf. She is still trying to kick one of her feet into her sneaker. She finally gets it on, then looks straight at me. This time she definitely winks. Then she smiles very faintly and the elevator doors slide closed.

January 6, 2001- 4:33 AM

Obviously there’s still another chapter or two to get from Sendai to here, but I will just include a little update here. The snow and wind is so intense that I decided to pee in an empty Alpaca wine bottle instead of trying to go outside. The wind is gnawing on the metal frame of the car.

Dawn of Christmas Eve: December 24, 2000

I walk down the hall and into the bedroom where the girl had been. Mariko has made the bed up neatly, and there is no trace that anyone has been in here, except a very faint flowery smell. I lie down on the floor and reach under the bed to grab the knife.
When I go back into the living room, Taka is still slumped on the couch with his head leaned back. His head rolls towards me and his eyes meet mine then roll down to look at the bloody knife in my hand. He smiles faintly.

“Before we go Zim, could you…” he says, then raises his right hand weakly and says, “Could you please...?” but then his eyes close again. He breathes very slowly and the artery in his neck pulses slowly with each heartbeat. I pick up the knife in my right hand. I imagine his severed head in the fireplace, the neck jagged with tendons and torn flesh, and his lifeless eyes staring at me as flames lick towards up around his cheeks. My shoulder throbs in pain but I raise my left hand and firmly grab Taka’s white ponytail and pull it back taut and horizontal from his head. I raise the knife and bring it down with a chop, slicing into the pony tail, then sawing away until it comes away from his head in my left hand. I open my fingers and the long white hairs flutter down to the hardwood floor.

Then I slash at the leather couch beside him, gouging through the thick hide and into the white foam underneath it, slashing again and again until all the cushions are cut open. I walk over to the dining table. With the knife still in my hand, I extend my right arm flat on the tabletop and sweep all of the half-filled glasses and plates towards the edge, the mass getting heavier and heavier until it all begins cascading down to the floor, splashing and shattering into a mound of wet plate shards, chicken bones, forks, and broken glass.
I walk through the living room toward the genkan, running my hand along the wall, knocking off a picture a Taka standing with a golf club on trimmed grass in front of a tropical blue sea. In the genkan, I put my shoes on, then walk back into the living room. Plates and glasses crack under my feet, piled so thick at the edge of the table that I feel like I’m walking on loose gravel.

Cords and cables stretch and pop as I lift up the flat screen TV. I swing in a full circle, like a discus thrower, and hurl it into the stone surface above the fireplace. The screen shatters spectacularly, and one corner of the plastic frame crumples. It falls on to the bearskin rug with a thud.

In the kitchen, I open a cupboard, and throw three plates like frisbees, one against the glass wall, one towards the fireplace, and one out towards the genkan. Then I reach in and drag out the remaining stacks of plates, letting them fall and shatter on the floor and counter top.

I open the door to the refrigerator, pushing it back against its hinges, then swinging it back and forth until something snaps and the door hangs there unevenly. Cold air flows out around me as I take each egg and throw it diagonally over the counter towards the glass wall. The translucent egg-whites and thick yellow yolks burst in front of the falling morning snow. Bits of egg shell cling to the wall and begin to slowly drip down. I grab the top of the fridge and rock it forward twice before toppling it completely over on the kitchen floor. A carton of milk spills out and a white puddle grows on the linoleum, flowing around a shattered jar of capers.
I pick up a squeezable container of ketchup, walk over to the couch, and spray it all over Taka’s neon blue suit and his white shirt. Then I put a careful line of the red ketchup along his neck, just above the stiff white collar of his shirt, and finally, a dollop on his creased forehead.

With my good arm, I take a wooden chair from the dining table, and swing it as hard as I can against the glass wall. The wooden leg bounces off the glass panel, sending a painful vibration through my torso. I grit my teeth against the pain in my shoulder and pick up the chair with both hands. I swing it again, visualizing it passing right through the window then falling fifty seven stories to the road below. It bounces back and falls on its side.

I walk back into the kitchen and open cupboards until I find a big cast-iron fry pan. I pick it up in my good arm and walk over to the glass wall. Outside, snow falls silently. It is already light outside, but the sun is dimmed by the low gray clouds. A thick layer of snow rests on the balcony and the railing.

I lift the fry pan over my head and slam it into the glass. A wave of pain surges through my arm into my chest, but I’ve only made a big white scratch. I raise up my arm and hit it again, aiming for the same spot. I hit it again and again and again until finally, with the soft sharp sound of a snapping dry twig, three cracks shoot out a few inches in different directions from a central point. Behind me Taka is snoring very faintly with a dry rattling sound deep in his throat each time he exhales.
I hold the frypan at my side and take a deep breath. The room is completely still, the shattered dishes, the TV in a broken pile in front of the fireplace, the broken eggs running down the walls. A single champagne glass sits upside down on the dark wooden floor, with a pink boiled shrimp curled inside it.

I raise the frypan and strike the glass again. The cracks extend further and the sound deepens. I hit again and again, until finally, on the fifth swing, a big triangle section of glass snaps loose with a clink and falls down to the balcony outside. It lands in the light dusting of snow without breaking and reflects a shard of the gray sky. Snowflakes land on it and melt into tiny droplets of water.

A cold draft of air rushes in through the window, drawing snowflakes into the living room. I strike again and another big triangle breaks away. Then I smash and smash until there is only a rectangular frame of jagged glass teeth along the edges of the wall. Snowflakes drift into the room, and I see a few of them falling into the cavity of the chicken carcass on that lays on the bear skin rug. One large snowflake swirls around the room slowly, then falls straight down into Taka’s open mouth.

He continues to sleep, a soft smile on his face, even as the snowstorm flows into his living room. I throw the frypan into the fireplace where it bounces once then lodges itself sideways.
between the imitation log and the imitation brick wall. The flames curve to rise up around it, their flickering orange reflected in the deep black iron surface.

I go into the bedroom and pull the thick patchwork blanket off the bed that Mariko had made up so neatly. Back in the living room, I throw the blanket over Taka’s sleeping body pulling the top edge of the blanket up to his ketchup-stained neck. His head rolls to the side slightly, his eyelid wobbling like he might wake up, but then he starts snoring again, very gently as before, the same dry rattle coming from deep within him. A tiny snowflake lands on his cheek and melts, the droplet of water pausing for a moment before running down a wrinkle in the side of his face.

I touch the hourglass key in my pocket, then walk to the elevator and press the down arrow. As I wait, my reflection stares back at me from the mirrored doors. Blood soaks the sleeve of my brown corduroy jacket, a white powder arcs diagonally across both lapels, a fragment of eggshell clings to the film of sweat on my bare chest, my hands are shaking, and my pupils dilate further as I look at them. I try to make myself smile but it looks like my reflection is baring its teeth in confrontation. A black sesame seed is lodged between my two front teeth and I am picking it out with my fingernail just as there is a faint bell sound and the doors slide open.

In the mirrors on both sides of the elevator, hundreds of me extend in both directions, reaching out to push hundreds of identical round B3 buttons. A few snowflakes drift in as the doors slide closed. I close my eyes on the ride down. My ears are ringing and I hear muffled sirens.
Taka’s lime green Honda Fit is easy to find, towards the end of the row, parked between a white BMW sedan and black Toyota Land Cruiser. I reach into my pocket and push the button on the key. There is a soft beep and the lights flash as the doors unlock with a muted clunk.

I open the door and climb in and when I turn the key in the ignition, the engine hums softly. The immaculate interior feels like a sacred room in a temple that has never had a visitor. There’s not a single grain of sand in the carpet by my feet, no coins in the cup holders, no maps crammed into the space between the seat and the emergency brake. I sit there for a moment with the car idling, taking a few breaths of the minty antiseptic smell.

I check the rearview mirror and turn on the heat. I back out carefully, then shift and start rolling forward. The parking garage seems to expand infinitely in every direction, thousands of floors above me and below me, a labyrinth I will never escape. I run my hand down my face and shake away the image. I spin the wheel clockwise, turning to the right into a narrow concrete lane that leads between two rows of gleaming cars, every space filled. I turn right again and this leads me up a ramp. At the top I turn right again, and make another loop.

The cars are all backed in to their spaces and their dull headlights watch me menacingly, their front bumpers smiling scornfully. I come around another corner, and the glaring artificial light of the fluorescent lamps is softened by the soft diffused glow of morning sun on a snowy day. Snowflakes follow drafts of cold air down into the parking lot, and I start driving up into them on
the final ramp leading me outside. The top third of the ramp is dusted in soft unblemished snow that gets deeper and deeper as I drive towards the opening above.

Out on the street the snow is deep and still falling steadily. The streets are empty and every surface in this old neighborhood is covered in a thick layer of snow. Snow curves from the eaves of the tiled roofs. It sits in mounds on the small sculpted pine trees and camellia bushes. It clings to the side of telephone poles and balances on the metal lattices of the entryway gates. I drive to the end of the road and look up, hoping to see the broken glass wall on the fifty-seventh floor, but everything above the tenth floor is lost in the dense low clouds.

I creep along, turning left, then right, looking for a way out of the residential area. I turn left on to a wider road that has already been plowed, and start slowly driving downhill. A man in a bright purple ski suit is shoveling the sidewalk in front of a yakitori restaurant. Another man in a black overcoat and light tan leather gloves holds a translucent umbrella in his hand and his briefcase in the other. Further down the hill I see Dainohara Station in front of me. More people, mostly in suits and overcoats, are walking on the sidewalk towards the subway.

Past the station, I wait at a stoplight behind a big blue van, and two unbuckled kids turn around and stare at me over their seat through the back window. One of them waves, and when I wave back, they look at each other and giggle. When the light turns green, the van pulls ahead and turns right to the north. I turn left and join the traffic heading south towards Sendai Station.
The road’s surface is white with a fresh dusting of snow, two lines of compressed snow tire-tracks in each lane. Cars, trucks and busses move slowly in both directions in all four lanes, with more cars flowing in from the side streets.

Downtown Sendai is an enclosed maze, with a ceiling of low clouds that blocks the sky and clings to the sides of buildings. Under the dark clouds, the lit windows are a mosaic of interior lights, some cold blue fluorescence, others soft warm orange.

I know what road I’m on, but beyond that I can’t tell where I am. All the familiar landmarks are lost in the swirling snow. I’m downtown now and the major roads are all two or three lanes and either direction. The stoplights at every block glow eerily in the gray light.

There has been a volcanic eruption and this isn’t snow, but the ash that will dim the sun for centuries. Plants will die first, and a band of savage people will survive by murdering and eating their friends. A horn blasts beside me and a taxi driver skids diagonally to a stop. The driver is pointing at me and his mouth moves, but I only hear the soft whir of the car engine, the whoosh of air from the heater, and the soft muffled sound of my tires on the compressed snow as I push on the accelerator and keep driving forward.

There is a red eye staring at me, and when I understand it is a stoplight, I push down hard on the brake, sliding a few feet in the snow before coming to a stop. The crosswalk in front of me is
filled with people. A man with a goatee walks by carrying a polka-dot umbrella and a tan leather briefcase, and suddenly I realize that I am only a left turn and two blocks away from Sendai Station.

I imagine meeting Mariko. She will climb into the passenger side and we will take each other in our arms. Then we will kiss each other softly on the lips. Then we will just hold each other and everything will be OK.

I pull up to the curb of the station behind a big Toyota Forerunner. A little girl in a puffy white fleece jacket climbs out with a violin case. A taxi pulls up behind me and pops open the back door for an older couple. Then I see Mariko.

She has lost her jacket somewhere and her wine-red dress looks rumpled and damp. She is shivering. Her face is puffy and her eyes are bloodshot. Her hair hangs down around her face in stringy clumps. Her white leather bag hangs on her shoulder and seems to be pulling her down. I open the door and she climbs in. We sit in silence for a minute. The heater whirs. The taxi pulls out from behind and drives away.

“Did you take care of everything?” she asks.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Is the girl OK?” I ask.

She nods impatiently, then leans closer to me. “Did you take care of him?” She asks.

“Yeah. Taken care of,” I say. She is still staring at me. Her eyes are wide open and her pupils are dilated. She is waiting for something more, so I lightly touch my finger to my throat, and draw it
to the left before letting it fall in my lap. Then I reach out and turn the heat dial down one notch, then back up again. Mariko sits back heavily in her seat, closes her eyes. She nods three times, inhales deeply, then sighs.

“Where should we go?” I ask. Mariko turns to me, suddenly looking like an old woman, with furrows cut in her cheeks next to a deep frown, and deep black smudges underneath her eyes. Then she blinks, and smiles, at first just a rigid smile of her mouth, but this blossoms into a fuller smile and then she laughs and shakes her head, her wet hair swinging back and forth. She starts to laugh louder, rubs her hands across her face, and then abruptly screams, her whole body shaking and contorted with the force of the sound. From the sidewalk, two men in construction helmets raise their heads and stare at us. A woman in a black funeral dress glances towards us then walks away quickly.

After the scream, Mariko turns to look at me and her eyes are bright. She looks like a child on a snowy day when school is cancelled. “Let’s go south Zim,” she says, then nods and says it again. “Let’s go south.”

January 6, 2001- 6:46 AM

So we are getting closer to understanding how I got to be here, sitting in the back of a Honda fit in an orange sleeping bag. As I write these words in my fading headlamp light and the wind rocks the
car back and forth, I realize a terrible irony: The whole point of this story was to make some sense of my life, but it just leads me here, to this present moment that makes no sense at all.

On the upwind side of the car, the snow swirls around like water in an eddy and it has piled in a fluffy drift that reaches to the window. I’m boiling water for more coffee, probably my tenth cup of the night, (not including all the coffee this afternoon at the restaurant). My tongue is bitter and my stomach is gurgling and acidic, but fuck it. Even if I’ve fucked everything else up, even if Eiji and Taka both froze to death, even if I’ll never see Mariko again, even if you’re not reading this…

I’m going to get this fucking story done. Then, I can walk down and watch the snow falling on the Kushimoto waves, and then I can throw this fucking notebook into the waves and let the ocean read it.

Then I guess I should probably go for a swim myself.

**Tama-Sakai Costco: December 24, 2000**

Mariko says that the drive from Sendai to Tokyo should only take four or five hours, but around Nasu Kogen we run into a blizzard and the interstate is closed. We take Route 4 with stoplights in every rural town, each with busted looking pachinko parlors, “Books and Adult Goods” shops, and ramen restaurants with greasy, fogged-up windows. We get back on the interstate in Saitama, then inch our way through Tokyo in gridlocked rush hour traffic. The blizzard still swirls around us and...
as darkness falls, Tokyo begins to light up around us, sparkling windows in skyscrapers like
bioluminescent plankton floating around beneath the low gray clouds. The snow looks like falling
ash.

The Tokyo Expressway sign is like a glowing red spider web with arrows pointing out in
eight different directions, each one towards a cluster of unfamiliar Kanji. Mariko is sound asleep,
snoring faintly so I just follow signs to Shizuoka or Osaka, and somehow get us on the Tomei
Expressway heading southwest towards Kanagawa.

Mariko wakes up, reads “Yokohama Machida” on the sign out loud, and says, “take this
next exit.” More gridlocked urban traffic, endless traffic lights, and an hour later, with Mariko giving
directions, stopping twice at convenience stores to ask the clerks, we pull into a crowded Costco
parking lot. Mariko and I walk into the fluorescent-lit crowd. She is still wearing in her retro,
wine-red velvet party dress, with her white bag hanging over her shoulder. I have buttoned up my
corduroy jacket, but people stare at my bare chest and the big black stain on the arm.

Mariko says, “I’ll go get us some clothes,” and takes off into the crowd.

I walk around with the massive cart until I find the camping section. I load up two sleeping
bags, two foam camping pads, a little camping stove, a box of compressed gas cartridges, a little
aluminum pot, a set of plastic dishes with mugs, plates, bowls, plastic forks and knives, four of
everything.
It is a clear autumn day in the image on the dish-set box. The plates are set out on a picnic table and the fall leaves are computer-enhanced orange and yellow against an supernaturally clear blue sky. A woman ladles curry into a dish in front of a boy with an asymmetrical haircut and an insolent grin. His sister and father are smiling at him.

I crash directly into another cart. An Indian woman in a purple Sari and a pair of white Adidas with green stripes, looks at me with her head drawn back. She says “You allright then?” but then pushes her cart to the side and moves on without waiting for my answer. I hold on to the cart for balance, shuffling forward in my black leather shoes. The dish-set box rests on the metal grid with the cold gray concrete floor rolling underneath. The mother, with the ladle in her hand, looks at me and winks.

I find myself in an aisle with stationary and I take this pencil and this notebook down from a shelf.

“Zim?” Mariko waves a hand in front of my face. “Camping gear?” I look up and see folded jeans on a shelf, a row of pastel colored fleece jackets. I try to focus on Mariko. Real, three-dimensional, keeping-it-together Mariko, so beautiful, even with the deep black smudges under her eyes. “Whatever. It's almost closing time,” she points upward and I notice Auld Lang Syne playing over the speakers. “Can you get us some food?”
I leave the enormous cart with her, and start working my way through the crowds, urgency building all around me as Auld Lang Syne gets louder. In the central aisle a woman, Costco Nametag: Suzu stacks tiny white plastic cups that are stained pink on the inside. I veer out of the central aisle and stumble into a side aisle, catching myself on the shelf and leaning against it as I shuffle further along. Tabasco, Green Tabasco, Cholula, Smoky-Style Cholula, Pace Salsa Extra Mild. Pace Salsa Medium. Pace Salsa Hot. I lurch over to the other side of the aisle, bracing myself against a shelf with gallon jugs of vinegar, square bottles of balsamic vinegar, a huge jug of extra virgin olive oil. As I zig-zag down the aisle, I look up and see a woman in puffy gray fleece pointing at me and talking to a man in a black suit with a wide lavender tie hanging over the bulk of his stomach.

There has been a nuclear blast in central Osaka. I open the door to the humming coolers and start balancing blocks of orange cheese in the crook of my bad arm when a female voice with unnaturally clear enunciation speaks in English over the loud speakers: “Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for shopping at Costco today. A nuclear missle is bound for Tokyo…”

I knock down a column of cheese from the shelf with my shaking good arm. I picture Mariko and I huddled under a diagonally fallen slab of concrete, rebar sticking out at wild angles from the top. All around us the city burns with a crackling campfire sound, as overheated windows pop. Collapsing slabs of concrete buildings send wild firefly sparks rising into the bright orange sky. Mariko and I gnaw on our last block of cheese.
On a huge cardboard display sign, a cartoon fish is smiling and swimming in a paradise of waving purple and green seaweed. *Sustainably Harvested! No Mercury! Great source of Omega-3!* Yes. Omega-3 will protect our organs from the carcinogenic fallout. I set the cheese on top of a large cardboard box. The sardines, with their heads and tails severed, swim happily in self-contained metal pods of olive oil. Half of them are swimming west, the other half swimming east, and they—

“Zim,” Mariko is speaking in my ear, her hand rubbing my corduroy back. In the cart, on top of the camping gear, I see a pile of clothes—plain white T-shirts, two fluffy blue down jackets, stiffly folded jeans, two fleece jackets, (one black, one pink). Three big plastic bags of dinner rolls sit beside this pile, and beside them, three jars of Nestle instant coffee are bound together by thick plastic. “Let’s get out of here,” and gestures with her chin to the fat man in the lavender tie, who is now talking to another man.

At the register I rub my hands across my own face and see that I am standing on the wrong side of the rolling black conveyer belt where Mariko is trying to put the cart. Costco Nametag: *Yumiko* watches us nervously as I walk over the right side of the conveyer belt to stand next to Mariko. Yumiko scans the tags on the sleeping bags and the register chirps like a bird as Auld Lang Syne plays on. I try to clear my head of my apocalypse delusions and I’m so thankful that Mariko is not as fucked up as I am.
That’s when she says: “I took care of him, didn’t I Zim?” Yumiko pauses with a block of cheese in her hand, listening, but then pulls the bar code over the scanner. Numbers appear on a screen. “I cut his fucking head off. Didn’t I Zim?”

Behind us, a woman with artificially curled hair pulls her two children closer to her. Their cart contains only a bag of organic corn chips and a single styrofoam tray with a large salmon fillet. Mariko draws her Christmas painted fingernail over her throat. “I cut his fucking head-off. Didn’t I Zim?” The woman behind us backs away and starts walking toward a different register. Her children look over their shoulders as they walk away, and now Mariko pretends to swing a knife down hack at stubborn tendons. “I CUT HIS FUCKING HEAD OFF!”

“It’s OK now Mariko,” I say. Yumiko glances up at me, then looks down and continues to scan. I rub the back of Mariko’s dress. She drops her hands, lowers her head and makes a single garbled sobbing sound.

“Your total today is 36,622,” Yumiko says softly, with her head angled down, eyes raised towards the exit.

“Here,” Mariko says, sharply, looking up, not bothering to wipe off tears that are running in black mascara lines down her pale face. She reaches into her bag, pulls out her wallet and takes out four 10,000 yen bills. Then, pushing the cart with one hand and dragging me by my good arm behind her, she heads towards the crowd at the exit.
Yumiko runs up behind us, and hands me the change and the receipt, trying not to let Mariko see her. I stuff the bills and coins in the pocket of my jacket. At the exit, Costco Nametag: 

*Yukihiro* says “arigatou-gozaimashita,” after he glances at our long receipt and the cart. The dish-set has somehow risen to the top of the pile. Mariko leans over and whispers to the woman who is ladling out the steaming curry, “I took care of him. I fucking cut his head off.”

**January 6, 2001- 7:45 AM**

More bad news. My last compressed gas cartridge has sputtered and gone out. Good news: you can still make instant coffee with lukewarm water. Good news: I still have half a jar of Nestle instant coffee granules. Bad news: I just sponged out the oil of my last sardine can with my last slice of Double Sofuto white bread. I can’t see more than a foot outside the windows. Even the reeds, which are right there, are lost in sheets of horizontally blowing snow. Good news: I don’t have much further to go with this story. Bad news: I’m distracted by the thought of Eiji at his house with his wife and the two of them without any water or power. No phone service. But even if I did want to go and check on them, I don’t know that I could find their house so I can sort of absolve myself of feeling like I should.
**Heading South from Tokyo: December 24, 2000**

Mariko and I push the huge cart out through the crowded parking lot. Snow swirls under the bright lights. I was hoping she could take a shift driving, but she is still mumbling, “I took care of him, I took care of him.” I keep seeing the snow as radioactive fallout, and force myself to look at all the other Christmas Eve shoppers who think everything is normal. We pass a family that looks like the one on the dish set. A girl in a school uniform reaches into a full cart, picks up a plastic tub of Caesar salad, then bends over to load it into the back of their SUV. I am looking at the big fluffy white socks that hang loosely around her calves when I crash our cart into Taka’s lime-green Honda Fit leaving a long scratch in the paint.

As we unload the gear, the woman on the dish set whispers to me: “We could be together you know. Just you and I in this perfect campground. All you have to do is kill Mariko, kill that family loading the SUV over there, and then kill yourself.” I ignore her and put her at the bottom of the trunk. She is still staring at me and licking her lips, still holding the ladle of curry in one hand and running her other hand over her breast. I put the cardboard sardine box *Great Source of Omega 3!* directly on top of her, then put the sleeping bags on top of the sardine box.

Mariko is smoking a Marlboro and staring at the father of the family beside us. He smokes too and stares back with a sneer. The mother sees him staring and clicks her tongue then says,
“gonna help at all?” The little boy picks up a box of red-wine, and scuffs his feet in the snow as he walks to the car.

It takes us more than an hour to get through the stoplights and congestion back to the Tomei Expressway. We get our toll ticket and merge with the three lanes heading southwest, I accelerate with the snowflakes racing towards us, following a big Green Kuro Neko Delivery Truck. It has a yellow circle with a simple image of a mama cat carrying her kitten by the fur at the back of its neck.

“Mariko?” I ask softly. Her eyes are closed and if she’s asleep I’ll just let her sleep.

“Yeah?” she replies without opening her eyes.

“Could you bite the back of my neck please?” I ask. She shifts and opens her eyes, then reaches out for her Marlboro’s. “Like the cat.” I nod toward the truck in front of us.

“Sure Zim. Sure. Lean forward.” She puts the pack of cigarettes back on the dashboard and unbuckles her seatbelt. Then she leans over reaching her right arm around my back, then she bites my neck hard, holding a tendon and a fold of soft flesh between her teeth. The pain courses through me and when I flinch away she sinks her teeth in harder, and puts her left hand flat on my chest to keep me from leaning away. The two cats on the truck look back at us blankly. The streetlights pass overhead with hypnotic regularity.

“Thanks” I say.
“--ure” Mariko says, still biting so she can’t make the S sound. Then she releases my neck and slumps back in her seat. She reaches for her cigarettes, lighting one up and taking a deep drag before offering it to me.

“Just one drag,” I say, and I take it from her and inhale so strongly that the smoke from the filter burns the tip of my tongue. I draw it deeply into my lungs, knowing that it will make me cough, and then I cough. Mariko laughs softly and takes the cigarette back.

On a green sign a white arrow points diagonally up and to the left for the exit to a town I’ve never heard of written with a kanji I’ve never seen. The other arrow points straight ahead and beside it, in block white letters with both kanji and alphabet versions, it says “名古屋 Nagoya, 大阪 Osaka.”

We keep driving.

Mariko throws her cigarette butt at her feet and an acrid smell of burning plastic rises from the floor mat. She stubs it out with the toe of her boot. She turns the heat up, then shifts herself out of the chest strap of her seatbelt and takes her arms out of her new puffy blue coat. She lays her coat over herself like a blanket and leans her body over the emergency brake, resting her head on my lap. She brushes her hair behind her ear, then rests her hand on my knee.

I take a breath and focus on the two black cats in the yellow circle in front of us. The truck rolls forwards at a steady 100km per hour and I follow along in the eddy of swirling snow behind
him. Mariko shifts the weight of her head, and my groin twinges. I try to shift in my seat, but in a moment, my erection presses against her cheek, and I sense her body going tense.

“Goddammit Zim,” she says and sits up leaning away from me. She puts her head against the window on the passenger side and a few strands of her hair stick to the condensation. With her eyes closed she pulls the puffy coat up to her chin. “I just needed a pillow.”

January 6, 2001- 9:32AM
The snow drifts are halfway up the windows on the downstream side of the car. Thought snow caves were supposed to be warm, but I’m cold as fuck. No more gas for the stove. Finished the last splash of water from the melt pot. Keep writing. Almost here.

Heading South from Osaka: (1:30 AM) December 25, 2000
“Zim?” I wake up with a string of drool running down my cheek. Toxic fluorescent orange light dimly filters through the car. All around us huge trucks are idling. Smoke rises up in a cloud that collects in the concrete lid above us.

“Higashi Osaka,” Mariko says, doing a tour-guide hand sweep at the parking lot and the growling trucks. “Can you can drive?”

I rub my hands across my face. “Sure sure sure. Let me get a coffee.”
“I’m going to sleep. Just follow the signs to Kansai Airport,” Mariko says, and opens her door. Cold air and the smell of gasoline sweeps into the car. I step out of my door too.

When we meet in the front of the car I try to give her a hug, but her body is stiff and she leaves one arm at her side. Already she is trying to pull away. “I’m so tired Zim,” she says, but I hold on for another minute. After she pulls away, I walk to the vending machine and get a hot can of Boss Coffee.

About an hour and a half later, the lights of Osaka spread out behind us and to our right, and Mariko shifts in her seat and sits up. “Follow the signs to the airport,” she says.

“The airport?”

“I’ll catch a train somewhere. You can go home.”

“Home?” I ask. I think of the worn tatami in my Sendai apartment.

“Back to Oregon…or wherever.” We drive along in silence. The signs tell us the junction is a kilometer ahead. Left lane for Kansai airport, right two lanes for Wakayama. “You want the left lane here Zim,” Mariko says, but I stay in the center. A red sports car zips past us in the right lane. “I have cash. I can pay for the ticket. We ditch the car—” she leans forward and speaks faster as the junction approaches, but as the exit curves off to the left to Kansai Airport, I keep going straight.

“We’re going south,” I say.
Mariko leans back in her chair and sighs. She reaches for her cigarettes and pulls one out of the top of the pack with her lips. She laughs harshly, then lights it. Then she exhales the smoke and sighs deeply again.

The snow has stopped falling and to the south, the city of Wakayama sparkles white, red, blue, yellow, and orange. The dark mass of the Kinokawa River hovers in middle like an inversion of the milky way galaxy. Orion throws himself into the cold Pacific Ocean to the west.

Behind us trucks groan as they descend into Wakayama, but on the expressway down in the valley they are silent blips of light flowing in both directions over the bridge above the dark river.

I’m drinking a shitty cup of coffee from the vending machine. I pushed the button for “Extra Thick” but it is the color of Lipton tea and tastes like tinfoil. Mariko is pissed-off and told me not to follow her when she went in to the empty food court.

“Give me a little space here Zim,” she’d said. I don’t want to give her space. There’s way too much space out here. The twinkling lights of Wakayama city dissipate into the dark mass of the mountains. The stars spin in the clear dark sky above us. I want to put my head between Mariko’s breasts and breathe in her smoky Marlboro cinnamon smell.
I take another sip of my coffee. Beside me, a man in a leather jacket and a baseball cap lights a cigarette and looks out from the parking area terrace into the darkness. He wipes at the corner of his eye with his pinky.

Mariko walks up behind me and she rubs her hand on my back. The nylon of the fluffy down jacket makes a swishing noise. “I feel better now Zim. Gomen ne. I’m sorry.” Pain shoots through my shoulder as I turn to look up at her. She has washed her face and has her hair pulled back neatly. Her blue jacket is zipped all the way up to her chin. “Let’s keep going south.”

January 6, 2001- 20:34 PM

This school gym is drafty and cold, so I’m sitting next to one of the big kerosene heaters. My feet are pretty fucked up. They are tucked into my sleeping bag and I don’t even want to look at them. The young guy with the nametag says it’s a good sign if they are hurting. There are about 50 people here I’d guess, 40 old people like Eiji and 10 official looking people with nametags that hang from green straps around their necks.

Yeah. And then there’s me of course, but I won’t be here much longer.

People are sitting on blankets spread out on the gleaming cold wooden gym floor. Over at the tables by the stage, the green nametag crew is ladling soup into styrofoam bowls and passing them out to the line of old folks.
A woman who looks about 150 years old is sitting next to me on a bright pink fleece blanket, staring into the flames at the center of heater. A minute ago she asked me where I was from, “America desu ka?” I nodded and tried to answer, but started coughing instead. I took a sip of water and licked my chapped lips, reviewing my story in my head. (I am a graduate student from Osaka University doing research in marine-biology here in Kushimoto.) By the time I turned back to her, she had forgotten I was there.

Now she chews on a mikan. The peel sits in a spiral in her empty styrofoam bowl. Without looking, she pulls off a section of the fruit and very slowly puts it in her mouth. In the skin around her lips, deep furrows wiggle up and down as she chews.

Eiji is sleeping beside me in a thick brown sleeping bag pulled up around his head, the drawstring tightened, so the only thing visible is his face, faintly smiling, a few stands of white hair resting on his wrinkled forehead.

My Mom said that when I was a baby she’d always lean over and check to see if I was still breathing. No reason to think I wasn’t breathing, but still she would check. That’s what I’m doing with Eiji as I write this. The guy with the nametag said Eiji would be OK. “Just needs to get warmed up and rehydrated,” he said. Eiji did manage to eat some soup without puking it up. I listen to his snoring even as my pencil loops through these words. When he shifts his weight and his breathing becomes silent, I stop after each paragraph and lean over close to his sleeping face, putting my ear
by his mouth to hear and feel the gentle exhalation of warm air from his lungs. Still breathing. I’m still breathing too. Tears keep dripping down my face. The cold must have done something to my eyes. Let me go back to this morning and tell you about how I ended up here.

**Kushimoto - January 6, 2001**

I look up from my journal after writing about the junction to the airport and then the scene at Kinokawa Parking Area overlooking Wakayama. I realize that there’s not really much more to tell. Mariko and I are heading south, and you already know that we made it to Kushimoto. You already know we camped out here together for a few days and then she took off on the back of some guy’s motorcycle. (No time or desire to go into any more details on that.)

I look at the scrawled pencil marks in the soggy crumpled notebook and stare at the shapes of my messy slanted letters, letting my eyes unfocus until the words and letters unfurl themselves from their meanings. The pencil markings look like overlapping tips of winter tree branches silhouetted against a cold gray January sunset.

My water bottle is empty. I pee into an empty Pocari Sweat bottle and my urine is the color of a mikan peel and smells like rancid coffee. I close the notebook and look around me. The cardboard box is full of empty sardine cans glistening with grease. Three empty compressed-gas
canisters are lined up in the right corner by my feet. Mariko’s sleeping bag is stuffed away, and rests under my elbow. Anton Chekov is lying face down on top of the foam camping pad next to me.

The downstream side of the car is completely buried in snow, and the snow still swirls around in the wind. I’m cold and thirsty and I have nothing more to write, and when I close my eyes, I see Eiji. He is floating face down in the ocean. Snow has accumulated on the back of his corpse gracefully rising over a huge swell. He is lying in the middle of the road buried in snow. His head splits open like a watermelon under a rescue truck’s tire. He is sitting in his house and his corpse is embracing his wife’s corpse. Tiny icicles hang from each of their eyelashes in front of their open frozen eyes.

I push open the back door, stick my head out and gag into the snow but I only wretch up a little string of saliva. The wind howls in, but I leave the door open as I stuff my sleeping bag, empty water-bottle, and my half-dead headlamp into my backpack. I can’t get the zipper closed so I take out the sleeping bag and throw it into the box with the sardine cans. I put this notebook into the front zippered pocket of the pack. Then I take it out and set it face up on the driver’s seat. Then I pick it up again, flutter the pages with my thumb, looking at my scrawled and smudged letters. I close it and put it back into the pack along with this pencil.

I pick up Mariko’s bundled sleeping bag and squeeze it as hard as I can as I put my face up to the tightened drawstring at the top of the stuff-sack. The bundle compresses under the force of
my arms and in the mildewy air that presses out of the top, there is a faint trace of Mariko’s cinnamon smell.

I put her sleeping bag down, put my arms through the straps of my backpack, slip on my sneakers, pull my fleece hat down low over my ears and after looking around one more time, I step outside into the wind and sink up to my thighs in dry fluffy snow.

I can only see about ten feet in front of me. I push my way over to the edge of the parking lot and find the railing that separates the asphalt from the grassy field. I follow this until I can see the pine trees of the camping area. The picnic tables are visible only as smooth raised mounds of snow. As I force a path over to the sink, the snow that has fallen into my shoes starts to melt around my ankles.

I clear the snow away from one of the spigots. When I turn the nozzle it squeaks as it turns around and around in my hand. There is a tiny frozen icicle coming from the spigot. I break it off and put it into my mouth. It tastes like blood but the few drops of cold water are soothing on my raw throat until I start gagging and dry-heaving again. A trickle of coffee-stained bile falls down into the snow around my thighs.

I try the sink in the public bathroom across the road, but it doesn’t work either. I sit down on the cold porcelain toilet seat and try to shit. Nothing. My stomach hurts bad now and I just sit there for a minute, my khaki pants and gray long underwear bunched up around my ankles above my
boots, my dick hanging limp and cold between my legs over the toilet water. I shift around and try to puke again. Nothing. I kneel there with my bare ass pushed against the cold metal of the stall door. In the dim gray light I see my face reflected in the toilet water, and my eyes slowly close.

I snap my head back from the toilet water. The front of my fleece hat is dripping wet and the water runs down my forehead, around my nose, and as a drop of it forms on my upper lip, I stick out my tongue and lick at it.

I stand up and pull my pants back up. I pull the rectangular square lid off the back of the toilet, then take my water-bottle from my backpack and fill it up as much as I can. I sip the water and it tastes like rust. The cold makes my teeth ache, but I force myself to take another sip.

Outside again, I push through the snow toward the cluster of houses on the hill. The snow on the road pushes back against my thighs with each step, and the falling snow flies into my face. “EIJI!? EIJI!!?” I shout. The scratchy hollow sound of my voice is swallowed by the snow. The front doors of the first two houses are locked. The sliding door of the third house rattles opens, but the tatami room behind the genkan is piled with fishing nets, buoys, and styrofoam coolers. An old style bicycle with a thick metal frame leans diagonally against a boxy TV with a shattered screen, and everything is covered with a dusting of snow that trickles in through a broken window.
The front door of the next house is partially open. In the concrete genkan, I see Eiji’s tiny leather shoes, placed neatly together with the toes facing out towards the door. I step in and close the door behind me. It is as cold inside as out and my breath rises in a big cloud. “EIJI!?”

The house feels empty, and only then do I admit to myself that I was hoping to find Eiji and his wife sitting at the table with a bubbling hotpot of sukiyaki and a tall ceramic bottle of sake heating in a pot of boiled water. A cold wind whips through the genkan from the space under the door and my entire body starts trembling.

A big tatami room extends from the genkan and there is nothing but the woven fibers of the tatami mats and the irregular grid pattern of the green strips of fabric on their sides. I kick off my sneakers and clumps of snow fall from the bottom of my pants. My socks are soaked. I set my backpack down heavily on the floor and step up into the house.

The tatami creeps and sags under my weight. “EIJI!?” The sliding door to the kitchen is open. I step on the cold linoleum, leaving footprints of moisture on the faded floral pattern. I try the tap in the sink, but no water comes out. My reflected face distorts in the curved metal of the tap with my eyes curved and elongated.

“EIJI!” I open the fridge but the light doesn’t switch on. Three big red-snapper heads are sealed in a plastic bag in a pool of blood. Their dead eyes stare out at me from the darkness, each big eye catching and bending the square of gray light from the single window in the kitchen.
I slam the refrigerator door and gag again. Food poisoning, hypothermia, dehydration.

Dying.

“EIJI!?” Already dead. “EIJI!?"

I push open a flimsy wood-paneled door that leads out of the kitchen, and there’s Eiji, lying flat on his back in his futon, perfectly straight with his legs extended, his arms at his sides and a thick wool blanket pulled up to his chin. His eyes are closed and his mouth slightly open with a faint smile.

There is a shallow plastic bucket beside him half full of a foamy liquid. Vomit extends from the futon beside Eiji’s head, in a layered frozen explosion on the tatami beneath the bucket. The room smells like piss and shit.

“EIJI! EIJI! EIJI!” I fall down on my knees beside him, my knees squishing in the puke, and put my hands on both sides of his face. When I feel the warmth of his cheeks a tear runs down the tip of my nose and falls into his face, pooling in the corner of his right eye. He is breathing softly, but still his eyes don’t open. I push myself backwards and put my head down on his chest. His ribcage is hard against my ear and I remember the first time Mariko let me do this, back in Portland, and she had stroked my hair and said “baby Zim.”

There is a framed black and white portrait of a woman leaning up against the wall. Her hair is pulled straight back. Her eyes are clear and intense, as though she was lost out at sea for months.
Her cheekbones are sharp and her cheeks are drawn in, but even though the rest of her face looks stern and serious, there is a hint of a smile on her thin lips. With my head on Eiji’s chest, I look at her, but she doesn’t see me.

Then she climbs out of the photo, still black and white, and moves silently into the kitchen. I hear the sound of water running, and then she comes back into the room with a little folded towel. It is pink with a pattern of red flowers, vivid in her hand which is the gray of the black and white photo. I turn my head on Eiji’s chest and watch as she pats his face with the towel, wiping away a crust of puke from the corner of his lips. Then she leans over and kisses his forehead, running her hand through his white hair, before standing up silently and walking backward into the picture frame and freezing again.

There is a dry creaking sound in Eiji’s chest, and then a cough rocks through him, arcing his back and making my head bounce on his hard ribcage. I hear him open his mouth and lick his lips, then I feel his hand on my head.

“I told her you would come Zim,” he says.

“Eiji?”

“I told her that you would want to come with us.” His voice is coming to me from deep in his sternum and I remember falling asleep in the double sleeping bag, back in Lost Creek with Mom, my head on her chest, listening to her read Little House on the Prairie.
Eiji coughs again, more gently this time. “Kikue said that you were too young. Said you should stay onshore.” Eiji takes a deep breath and I feel his chest rise and fall like an ocean swell. I am shivering again, my body shaking and my teeth chattering. I raise myself up just enough to pull the covers back. In the dim light I see that Eiji is completely naked and the sharp smell of shit hits me and makes me gag.

But I'm so cold. So cold. I put my head against Eiji’s chest, my cold ear against his warm leathery skin. I hear his heartbeat faintly, and then his voice comes to me again. “But I knew you would come Zim.”

“I'm sorry Eiji.” The words come out muffled with my face on his chest, my lips pressed into his skin. Tears run down my face and snot dribbles out of my nose.

Eiji rubs my head and says, “You are so young Zim. But it is time for us to go to sea.” The smell of Eiji’s shit, piss, vomit, and stale sweat all mingle in a sweet scent of cinnamon and daffodils and I start to doze off. I snap my head up and sit up on my knees. The entire room is rocking back and forth like we are out at sea in a storm. The woman in the picture leans into the right side of her picture frame as we climb a steep wave, then she leans to the left as we race down the wave’s steep back.

“Eiji. We need to leave.” I say, but I know he can’t hear me. His body is so still. I pull open his closet and find a black suit, still in the plastic bags from the cleaners. I look for more clothes in
the set of plastic drawers at the base of his closet, but each drawer is filled with carefully arranged books with browning covers. All I can find is the suit. I take it out of its plastic and lay the jacket and pants on the tatami. Then I pull the wool blanket off of Eiji and drag his body off the shit-stained futon and over to a clean spot on the tatami near the open door to the kitchen.

He mumbles something but keeps his eyes closed. His shriveled penis looks like a delicate hatchling nestled in his white pubic hair. The backs of his legs are coated with dried diarrhea. I run out to the genkan, steadying myself against the walls and door frames as the house continues to rock in waves. I step outside into the snow storm in my socks and scoop as much snow as I can carry in my cupped bare hands. Then I run back inside and push the snow between Eiji’s legs and gently rub his thighs with my hands. The snow melts and trickles away in light brown rivulets on to the tatami beneath us. I clean him with more snow until it melts into clear water.

I run to the kitchen and open drawers until I find a little towel. It is old and the fabric is coarse, but still retains its pattern of bright pink and yellow flowers. The kitchen rocks in a big wave and I steady myself against the table as I stagger back to the tatami room.

I drag Eiji closer to the kitchen on to a dry corner of tatami, wipe him dry then pull the pants up around his waist. He is shivering now so I get him in the suitcoat as fast as I can, rolling him first to one side and then to the other. “Eiji! We have to go.” I say and pull him so he is sitting upright.
His eyes open and then close again and he nods, opens and closes his mouth, then he whispers, “Yes. Go to sea. Go to sea.”

Another big wave swell rolls underneath us and I lean into it as I take off my puffy down jacket, fling it around Eiji’s narrow shoulders, then work his arms into the sleeves. The sleeves hang down several inches from his hands. I wrap the wool blanket around him and tie the corners in a big bulky knot around his chest. I run out to the genkan and put my backpack on backwards with its bulk sticking out from my chest. When I get back to the tatami, Eiji has lain back down again, curled into a ball, the wool blanket splayed out behind him like a cape. I pull him up by his arms, then position myself in front of him and get his arms extending over my shoulders from behind. Holding on to his hands, I straighten my legs and stand up, leaning forward with Eiji balanced on my back, my hands underneath his legs, holding him up piggy-back style.

The snow still falls outside, and the path that I made on the way here has already been partially filled in and smoothed over with new granules of powder. The wind is blowing and the snow is falling diagonally and swirling around, but it is absolutely silent except for the sound of Eiji’s shallow breathing in my ear. His chin rests on my shoulder and rolls from side to side as I start pushing myself through the snow.

I follow the trace of my path for about ten slow steps, then I stop. I turn around and start walking up the road, heading inland pushing forward into the unblemished snow. Along the left side
of the road, portions of exposed rock wall poke out where they rise up in rice-field terraces. I am breathing hard through my open mouth, and a puff of steam rises from me each time I exhale. The sky is a uniform gray shield of low clouds that press down on me with each step I take up the gentle slope of the hill. On the right side of the road, broad-leaf evergreen shrubs look confused by the snow that collects on their leaves and clings to the tops of their branches.

I collapse on my side into the deep white snow around me, dropping Eiji. I retch up foamy white bile into the snow that surrounds my face. I could just lay here for a few minutes. It is so soft. I'm nice and warm from the effort of walking along the road. I'll just close my eyes, just for a moment.

“Zim?” Eiji is gently slapping my cheek and looking down at me. He has the wool blanket still around him like a cape. The snow sticks to his white hair. He is smiling at me. “You go ahead,” he says, “I'll go back to Kikue.” He pushes his hands out of the drooping sleeves of the blue jacket and takes my hand in his. I can barely feel them, as though my hand is wrapped in a huge ball of gauze, but I see Eiji’s hands holding mine and pulling me out of the snow. His arms go taut and he leans back, veins in his skinny neck stick out, and his teeth clamp together as he pulls. I shift my weight and lean into his effort, and he pulls me up on to my numb feet. After he has pulled me up, he continues to lean back and lies down in the snow. “Go ahead Zim. I'll go back to Kikue.” The
snow rises around him in a perfect outline of his head and shoulders. He smiles, nods once, and closes his eyes.

“Eiji?” He seems to already be asleep. “Eiji. We can’t stay here,” I say. I pull him out of the snow, get him balanced on my back again, then I take another step forward.

**January 6, 2001- 22:34 PM**

And that’s how I got to be here, sitting in this school gym, writing these words in the circle of my headlamp as it shines down on this soggy page in my notebook. I’d give you more details of the walk through the snow if I could remember them, but after I finally got Eiji on my back the second time I knew for sure—not with my intellect but with the living cells of my body—that if I stopped again, we would both die.

So all of my energy was focused on pushing one leg out into the snow in front of me, then pushing the other one forward, then pushing the other one forward. I stumbled off the road a few times, but then veered back away from the edge and pushed back into the middle. My story was reduced to pushing my legs forward in the snow. As it started to get dark I told myself that after ten steps I could stand still—but never sit—and take a rest. Then I started doing that every nine steps, eight steps, seven steps, until finally I was pausing after each step and taking two or three deep
breaths. I couldn't feel my legs beneath me, but I heard Eiji’s breathing in my ear entire time. That raspy shallow sound of Eiji’s breath that pushed me forward, even as I forgot who I was.

When we stumbled out on to the main highway, suddenly there was no resistance from the snow, and I fell forward onto the packed tire treads. Eiji and I lay there, with him spooning me from behind, and I held on to his hand as well as I could, with my hands numb and his hand lost in the long sleeves of the coat.

I don’t know how long we lay there. The falling snow twinkled with beautiful flashing red lights and I was riding upwards in a warm spiral carrying Eiji with me on my back, and we were shedding our bodies and spiraling around each other, both of us delicate filaments of spinning red light.

But someone was grabbing my feet, trying to pull me down to the cold, trying to pull Eiji and I apart and stuff us back into our individual bodies that lay there frozen on the road. I tried to kick my feet loose of the force, but I didn’t have the strength, and as I came back into my body, I saw a woman in a police uniform holding both my feet and I felt a set of strong hands under my shoulders. I heard “1, 2, 3!” and my body rose up from the ground and floated towards the open door of a police car.

Eiji was already in there beside me. His eyes were closed. We had been pulled back into our wet, filthy, falling-apart, frostbitten bodies. I was furious. But the police officer looked back at us
over her shoulder and said “Just hold on.” I saw the spirals of red light, spinning through me, through the police officer, through Eiji, through all the other characters that have helped me to write this story. The tears were dripping down my face just as they are now.

And it’s hard to know how to bring this to a close, because I need to address both you and you.

So let me start with you Eiji. Thank you. You kept me alive. All my talk about cutting my wrists with a sardine can lid, sailing to Fudaraku on a styrofoam cooler lid...all those times I imagined running you over with the car, beating you to death with a pine branch…it makes me so embarrassed—so embarrassed that it will make it hard for me to ever let you or anyone else read this story.

But this is my story. This is me Eiji, writing these words in this faint disc of light from the headlamp, listening to you snore. You made me see that all these thousands of scrawled words, my entire story is just a tiny part of a much larger, much more elaborate and wonderful story.

I know that is sounds like I’m building to some grand exit, placing this notebook on top of your sleeping bag where you will definitely find it. And that’s sort of half what I was thinking. I was imagining you waking up, looking for me, ready to smile and say good morning to me, and finding only this notebook. Then I imagined myself...doing what? Staggering alone through the snow? Finding an abandoned shed outside of town where I could sit the storm out?
No. I’m going to finish this story, and then sit here and listen to you breathe until I fall asleep. And when you wake up in the morning I’ll be here. And before I leave, whenever that is, I’m going to thank you properly.

And thank you, whoever you are that has spent so many hours with me, reading these words. All the time I was writing this I thought I needed to write my story. Only now that it’s almost over, do I understand that I am writing this story for you.

All around me in this elementary school gym, people are sleeping wrapped in sleeping bags and blankets. In the corner a man from the city hall, in light blue work clothes with a green strap nametag around his neck, sits slumped over in the light of a small desk lamp on a fold out table. He is waiting there, half asleep with his hand pushing his plump cheek up into his half-closed eye, but ready to wake up if someone comes in, ready to turn on the portable gas burner, heat up the soup and ladle it into a styrofoam bowl. He is ready to rub the back of a half-frozen old man who takes a careful sip of the hot, salty broth.

The four kerosene heaters have been turned down but still roar faintly, like distant ocean waves. A warm orange light glows out from their insides, shining in a dim circle around their base.

All around me people snore softly. An old woman startled me just now, laughing suddenly in her sleep, then rolling over, smacking her lips softly three times, and continuing to snore. Eiji is still
breathing. So am I. Outside of the school gym, a siren silently spins round and round casting a beautiful red light that spirals gently over us all.
Curriculum Vita

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