



KOBO ABE

THE FLOOD

Translated by Lane Dunlop

***Humankind is threatened by a
new disease—liquefaction.***

A certain poor but honest philosopher, to study the laws of the universe, took a telescope up to the roof of his tenement and pursued the movements of the heavenly bodies. As always, he seemed unable to discover more than a few meaningless shooting stars and the stars in their usual positions. It was not that he was bored or anything, but he happened to turn his telescope casually on the earth. An upsidedown road dangled in front of his nose. A similarly

inverted worker appeared, walking backwards along the road. Righting these images in his head, and returning them to their usual relationship, the philosopher adjusted the lens and followed the worker's movements. Under the wide-bore lens, the interior of the worker's little head was transparent. The reason was that the worker, on his way back from the night shift at the factory, had nothing in his head but fatigue.

However, the persevering philosopher, not turning the lens aside because of that, continued to follow the worker's progress. the philosopher's patience was soon rewarded. Suddenly, the following changes took place in the worker.

The outline of the worker's body unexpectedly grew blurred. Melting from the feet up, the figure knelt slimily and dissolved. Only the clothes, cap, and shoes remained, in a mass of fleshy liquid. Finally, completely fluid, it spread out flat on the ground.

The liquefied worker quietly began to flow toward lower ground. He flowed into a pothole. Then he crawled out of it. This movement of the liquid worker, in defiance of the laws of hydrodynamics, amazed the philosopher so much that he almost dropped the telescope. Flowing onward, the worker, when he came up against a roadside fence, crawled up it just like a snail gliding on its membrane, and disappeared from view over the fence. The philosopher, taking his eye from the telescope, heaved a deep sigh. The next day, he announced to the world the coming of a great flood.

Actually, everywhere in the world, the liquefaction of workers and poor people had begun. Particularly remarkable were the group liquefactions. In a large factory, the machinery would suddenly stop. The workers, deliquescing all at once, would form a single mass of liquid that

flowed in a stream under the door or, crawling up the wall, flowed out the window. Sometimes the process was reversed: after the workers had turned into liquid, only the machinery, in the deserted factory, would senselessly continue running and in the end break down. In addition, breakouts from prisons due to the mass liquefaction of the prisoners and small floods caused by the liquefaction of whole populations of farm villages were reported one after another in the newspapers.

The liquefaction of human beings, not limited to this kind of phenomenal abnormality, occasioned confusion in a variety of ways. Perfect crimes owing to the liquefaction of the criminal increased dramatically. Law and order were threatened. The police, secretly mobilizing the physicists, began an investigation of the properties of this water. But the liquid, completely ignoring the scientific laws of fluids, merely plunged the physicists into ludicrous confusion. Although to the touch it was in no way different from an ordinary water, at times it displayed a strong surface tension like mercury and could retain its shape like amoebae, so that not only could it crawl, as indicated before, from a low to a higher place, but after blending perfectly with its fellow liquefied people and other natural liquids, at some impulse or other it could also separate itself into its original volume. Again, conversely, it sometimes displayed a weak surface tension like that of alcohol. At such times, it had an extraordinary power of permeation vis-à-vis all solids. E.g., at times, probably in relation to differences in its use, with the same kind of paper it could either have absolutely no effect or could dissolve it chemically.

The liquefied human beings were also able to freeze or evaporate. Their freezing and evaporation points were various. Sleighs running over thick ice would be swallowed up horse and all by the suddenly melted ice; front-runners

in skating contests would abruptly vanish. Again, swimming pools would suddenly freeze in midsummer, sealing up girls who'd been swimming in them in frozen poses in the ice. The liquid human beings crawled up mountains, mixed with rivers, crossed oceans, evaporated into clouds and fell as rain, so that they spread all over the world. One could never tell what kind of thing was going to happen when and where. Chemistry experiments became well-nigh impossible. The boilers of steam engines, because of an admixture of liquid people, became completely unserviceable. No matter how much they were stoked, no pressure built up. Or all of a sudden the liquid people would violently expand and explode the boiler. Fish and plants that had a vital relationship to water were in a state of chaos beyond description. In every field of biology, transformations were difficult to calculate, and destructions, had begun. Apples rolled around warbling snatches of melody; rice stalks burst with a noise like firecrackers. Especially serious were the effects on human beings who had not yet deliquesced, and in particular on rich people.

One morning, the owner of a big factory drowned in a cup of coffee as soon as he put his lips to the cup. Another industrialist drowned in a glass of whiskey. An extreme example was a drowning in a single drop of eyewash. These seem like things scarcely to be believed, but they all happened.

As these facts were reported, many rich people contracted hydrophobia in the true sense of the word. A certain high government official made the following confession: "When I'm about to drink, I look at the water in the glass and already it does not seem like water to me. In short, it is a liquidized mineral, a harmful substance that is impossible to digest. If I took a mouthful, I am positive I

would immediately get sick. I'm instantly invaded by tragic fears."

Even if dysphagia were not present, this was plainly hydrophobia. Everywhere, there were instances of old ladies who fainted away at the mere sight of water. Yet antirabies vaccine did no good whatsoever.

By now, from one end of the world to the other, invisible voices were mingling in a chorus crying doom by a great flood. But the newspapers, at first publishing the following reasons, strenuously denied those rumors:

- a) This year's rainfall, both regional and global, is below the annual average.
- b) All rivers reported to have flooded have not exceeded the seasonal variation for a normal year.
- c) No meteorological or geological abnormalities have been observed.

These were the facts. But it was also a fact that the flood had already started. This contradiction caused general social unrest. It was already clear to everyone that this was no ordinary flood. Presently even the newspapers were forced to acknowledge the reality of the flood. But in their usual optimistic tone, they reiterated that this was due to some cosmic accident, was no more than temporary, and would soon end of its own accord. However, the flood, spreading daily, engulfed many villages and towns, many flatlands and low hills were submerged by the liquid people, and the people of status, the people of wealth, began a competitive stampede for refuge in the upland and mountain districts. Although realizing that that kind of thing was useless against the liquid people who climbed even walls, they were unable to think of anything else to do.

Finally, even the presidents and prime ministers admitted the urgency of the situation. Proclamations were

issued, saying that in order to save humanity from extinction in this flood it was necessary to mobilize all spiritual and material resources and expedite the building of great dams and dikes. Tens of thousands of workers, for that purpose, were rounded up for compulsory labor. Whereupon the newspapers also, suddenly changing their attitude, chimed in with the proclamations and praised their high morality and sense of public duty. But just about everybody, including the presidents and prime ministers, knew that those proclamations were nothing more than proclamations for the sake of proclamations. Dikes and such, against the liquid people, being no more than Newtonian dynamics against quantum dynamics, were completely ineffectual. Not only that, but the workers constructing the dikes were rapidly turning into liquid this side of the dikes. The "personal items" pages of the newspapers were awash with notices of missing persons. But, true to character, the newspapers dealt with such disappearances simply as effects rather than causes of the flood. In regard to the contradictory nature of the flood and its essential cause, they maintained a resolute silence, refusing even to mention the subject.

At this time, there was a scientist who proposed that the liquid that had covered the earth be volatilized by means of nuclear energy. The governments, speedily indicating their approval, pledged their full-scale assistance. But when they tried to begin, what became clear, rather than various difficulties, was the impossibility of the project. Because of the liquefaction of human beings, which was accelerating at geometrical progression, there were not enough workers for adequate replacements. Also, liquefaction was already occurring among the scientists. Furthermore, the parts factories were steadily being destroyed and engulfed by the waters. Harassed by problems

of reorganization and reconstruction, governments could not predict when the production of vital nuclear equipment would begin.

Unrest and distress swept the world. People were turning into mummies from dehydration, emitting gasping, rattling noises each time they breathed.

There was just one person who was calm and happy. This was the optimistic and wily Noah. Noah, from his experience with the previous flood, without getting agitated or panicky, diligently worked on his ark. When he thought that the future of the human race was being entrusted to him and his family alone, he was even able to steep himself in a religious exaltation.

Presently, when the flood approached his house, Noah, accompanied by his family and domestic animals, boarded the ark. Immediately, the liquid people started to crawl up the sides of the boat. Noah berated them in a loud voice.

"Hey! Whose boat do you think this is? I am Noah. This is Noah's Ark. Make no mistake about it. Go on, get out of here!"

But to think that the liquid, which was no longer human, could understand his words was clearly a hasty conclusion and a miscalculation. For liquid, there are only concerns of liquid. The next minute, the ark filled up with liquid and the living creatures drowned. The derelict ark drifted at the mercy of the wind.

In this manner, humanity perished in the Second Flood. But, if you could have looked at the street corners and under the trees of the villages at the bottom of the now-peaceful waters, you would have seen a glittering substance starting to crystallize. Probably around the invisible core of the supersaturated liquid people.



RYO HANMURA

CARDBOARD BOX

Translated by David Lewis

*Contemplated in allegory is the fate of
ordinary working people.*

Suddenly, I perceived myself.

If that's what you call birth, it was pretty disappointing. Then my body, bent and folded flat, was quickly unfolded, and in the next instant I was overturned and enraptured with the sensation of my bottom being fitted together and closed.

To tell the truth, I came into the world without having any idea of what was happening to me.

Even so, I still remember how strong and dependable I felt myself to be when that wide tape, sucking tight against my skin was criss-crossed across my bottom. But that was only for the shortest of moments. Again I was spun round, and turned right side up. When I think back on it, I realize that by then I was already on the conveyor belt, but at the time I was completely absorbed in sensing the white fluorescent light that filled my surroundings, and I didn't even notice that I was moving, swaying as I went.

My comrades . . . perhaps I should say my brothers? In any case, it was when we were riding that belt conveyor that I first realized that they and I were separate entities. They were swaying in front of me and behind me, and I thought to myself that I, too, was swaying just like them.

They had the same markings on their bodies as I had on mine. We were exactly the same size. In fact, it was at that time that I first realized I had markings on my own body as well.

I was feeling a bit forlorn. I had just been born and didn't understand things clearly, but I couldn't help feeling that I wasn't closely attached to them.

I was born and, thus separated from my brothers, began to exist. Perhaps I felt forlorn because I wasn't used to an independent existence.

I spoke to the comrade closest to me to drive away the loneliness.

"I wonder why we're swaying?"

My comrades, well-mannered, were all queued up in a line, swaying from side to side. The one I spoke to was directly in front of me in the queue.

"How should I know?" he answered.

"We're moving. We're being transported someplace," said the one behind me.

"I wonder where we're going?"

"How should I know?" he answered. He spoke exactly like the one in front of me.

"In any case, we're going to be filled. Isn't that good enough?"

The comrade behind me was suddenly overjoyed.

"We'll be filled! Hey, everybody! From now on we're going to be filled!"

Pleasure spread through all my queued-up comrades when he cried out.

"We'll be filled! We'll be filled! We'll all be filled!"

A chorus began, and before I knew it I, too, had joined in. "It's good to be alive," I thought. In a few moments I'd be filled. This body of mine would be filled completely. That was my vindication for living. That was my purpose in life.

My body shook, not just because of the conveyor belt, but with joy. The expectation that in a moment I would be filled left me on Cloud Nine. But suddenly I heard a thin, whooshing sound, and we were given an even more violent shaking. I had a sense of falling forward, and was on the verge of tumbling dangerously from the conveyor belt.

"What happened?" asked a worried voice from behind. "We're not going anywhere."

"Good Lord! Surely they're not going to tell us to stay as we are! This isn't funny. Hurry up and fill us!"

Unease spread to everybody the moment the conveyor belt stopped. Of course I also waited nervously for the movement to resume. If I had to spend my whole life like this with an empty body . . . Just thinking of it made me cry out, abandoning all propriety.

"Move! Don't leave us like this!"

That stoppage was agony. Not only had we yet to be filled, we still didn't have anything at all in our bodies.

How long did that uneasy time continue? I have a feeling it was a very long time. By the time the conveyor began, with a thudding impact, to move again, we were at our wits' end, not even caring if we weren't filled, just so long as something, anything was put into our bodies.

"Anything'll do; I want something put in fast!" Writhing with base desires, I was transported to the end of the conveyor belt before I knew it.

Ecstasy came suddenly.

A round, flexible something rushed into a corner of my square body.

Aaah . . . I shivered.

For the first time since my birth I was numb with the pleasure driven into my body. The round, pliable objects lithely and accurately began to fill me. My pleasure mounted as the accumulated weight of the objects increased. I will never forget the pleasure of that moment, mounting higher and higher, leaving me no time even to breathe. My bottom was buried without a gap, and the objects climbed steadily higher and higher.

Then at last I was full. I had been completely filled!

Even then my body was being moved. When I was completely full and quivering with the pleasure of it, the top of my body was suddenly bent and folded again, and that tape that sucked tight against my skin sealed my body tight.

I felt myself powerful with a strength ten times that I had felt before. My adequately filled self slid down an incline, was pulled around, heaved and piled, but even that violence was not painful, as though somewhere within it was a gentle consideration.

I came to rest. No sooner had I come to rest than the weight of my comrades came down on top of me. I myself was positioned on top of more of my comrades. In the end,

in front, in back, to right and left, I was tight against the bodies of my comrades, filled and quivering with joy.

"It's wonderful! I'm completely full!"

That shout could be heard from somewhere among my piled-up companions. I, too, was lucky like the owner of that voice. I felt I had been born for pleasure.

It appeared that, still piled up, we had begun to move again. But this time it was in darkness. In the midst of ceaseless small vibrations and occasional leisurely swaying, I felt myself to be completely satisfied.

However, from far away towards the edge of our pile, a voice started up, filled with sarcasm.

"You all seem pretty smug, don't you now."

The voice was hoarse as though tired.

"Well, it's something to be satisfied about. But it's not going to last for long."

"Who's talking like that?" asked one of my comrades cheerily.

"Hey, heh," returned the sarcastic hoarse voice. "Right now we're being taken to town in a truck. When we get there, you'll all have your lids cut open, and you'll have to cough up all those things you've got in you bodies."

"Liar! Who could think of emptying us so soon, now that we've finally been filled . . ."

"You're still a lot of babies," ridiculed Hoarse Voice. "First off, you probably don't even know what you've got in your bodies."

"I don't know," admitted another voice from the back. "What are those round things, tell us!"

"Oh, I'll tell you all right," said Hoarse Voice. "They're tangerines. The things you got stuffed in your bodies are tangerines. When tangerines get to town they're divided up and sent to stores, piled up and sold. That's why you're all going to get your lids cut open and be emptied."

We, the load of a truck, were returned to silence.

"That's okay. Maybe it can't be helped," said one of my companions who seemed to be near Hoarse Voice. "We're filled with tangerines. No doubt it's true. Tangerines are transported to town and sold in stores. Probably that's true, too. That's why we've been filled with tangerines and are being taken to town. And then, probably, when we reach the town, our lids will be cut and we'll cough up our tangerines—"

A voice that was not quite a shriek and not quite a sigh filled the truck.

"But that's not the end, right? We're a species born to have our bodies filled!"

"With something more than air, that is," said Hoarse Voice nastily.

"That's right," continued the second voice with strong self control, not rising to Hoarse Voice's challenge. "We are boxes. Cardboard boxes. We can do more than just hold tangerines. Even after we've had our tangerines taken out we can still hold other things."

"That's right, all right," laughed Hoarse Voice. "In my body right now there's a cotton jacket and a dirty towel and a lunch box and a pair of old shoes. They belong to the driver of this truck. But that's not what it was like before.

"I was a box full of writing materials. Writing materials like kids use at school. Writing materials, each bugger wrapped up proper, filling me to the brim. I was filled! Even I wasn't like this in the beginning."

For some reason Hoarse Voice began to get angry.

"You can put anything in a box. But even so, you guys, the world is like that. You were made to put tangerines in. They stuff tangerines into your bodies, and after they've all been taken out, not one left behind, nobody cares what'll happen to you."

"No!!"

"It's true! No mistake about it. After the tangerines are gone you guys are just empty boxes. Bothersome, troublesome empty cardboard boxes. Even the guys who made you never thought about what happens after that."

"That's terrible . . ." somebody began to cry. "You mean when these tangerines reach their destination, that's the end?"

Hoarse Voice began to laugh crazily.

"That's right! That's right! You all get the can!"

"What happens then?"

"If your luck's bad, you'll be burned right off and turned into ash. If it goes like usual, you'll have your bottom tape yanked off. You'll be folded up flat, piled and left somewhere. In a while you'll be gathered together and taken away someplace, and that's the end of it."

"After I've been emptied of tangerines, my body will never be filled again?"

"After that, it's fate. It's up to fate. If your luck's good they may put in something else. Like me, an oily cotton jacket, dirty towels, old shoes . . ."

"Anything's fine. I want to be filled! I want to live!"

"It's better to resign yourself. A box you put tangerines in is a tangerine box. A tangerine box with its tangerines gone is garbage. Then you guys, you've got 'tangerine box' written all over you. Even if you get, like, bundles of money stuffed into you, a tangerine box is still a tangerine box."

"On that body of yours . . ." the comrade right next to Hoarse Voice seemed to be looking over his companion's body. "You've got 'pencil box' written on you, don't you. Were you a box for putting pencils in?"

Hoarse Voice laughed crazily again.

"I'm a box for putting pencil boxes in! I told you.

There's good luck and bad luck. I'm not lucky, not me. In this cardboard box called me, pencil boxes like elementary school kids use. . . . You get that? Even a pencil box is a box!"

Hoarse Voice had begun to cry.

"A box for putting boxes in! I was a box for putting boxes in! There's nothing inside a pencil box before it's sold. It's an empty box! And those were stuffed into me. . . .

"Can you understand that feeling? Filled in form only. It's not like you've really been filled. You're filled with empty boxes! You guys here worrying about what happens after you get to town and have your tangerines taken out, that's a luxury! Aren't you filled and happy enough to shiver!"

"Hey, Mr. Pencil Box, don't cry."

"I'm not a pencil box! I'm a box for pencil boxes!"

"But even after you were emptied aren't you still alive? Cheer up!"

My comrades all joined in, trying to encourage the old cardboard box with the hoarse voice. But even then we were approaching the town that was to be our final destination.

Lowered from the truck, we were scattered far and wide under the sun. It was a bustling vegetable and fruit market, and there I had no choice but to observe a most blood-curdling scene.

Right next to where I and two or three of my comrades had been placed together in a clump a big bonfire was blazing. People gathered around that fire, rubbing their hands together coldly. Now and then they fed the fire scraps of wood, and empty cardboard boxes from among my comrades.

I had to sit there and stare at what my end would be.

A sense of helplessness welled up within me. My sole salvation were the tangerines still stuffed within my body.

However, as I gazed upon my comrades burning up one after the other, I suddenly awoke to the truth that I was not really full. Considerable gaps remained between the round tangerines. Every time I thought of the dark road ahead, my heart grew wilder with the thought that my present half-filled state was not enough.

'I want to be filled more! I want this body filled until not a single gap remains!'

Consumed with lust, I forgot myself. "Put more in! Even fuller!" I screamed, even though I was already tightly closed with tape.

"Hey! Calm down!" My comrades rebuked me, unable to contain themselves, but I continued to scream.

"Put more in! Even fuller!"

For a tangerine box, I enjoyed the greatest of luck. Right after being transported from the market to the town's fruit store, the other two boxes with me were opened and the tangerines inside them were piled up in front of the store by shop attendants. But I was placed, untouched, in the back of the store. Two, three days passed, but I stayed put on the concrete floor. Until the second day I had my two empty comrades beside me, but on the third day they were folded up roughly by the shopkeeper and taken away.

Just before being folded, one of them shouted in my direction.

"Farewell! It was an empty life!"

I tried to say something in return, but he had already ceased to exist as a box.

A box is for putting things in. It is in having things put into them that boxes find pleasure in life. When things are packed in lightly, a box's body can shiver with insurmountable gratification.

Yet people make boxes just to put tangerines in, and once that duty is finished, even if a box can still be used, they abandon it without a care. I have no way of knowing what happened to my comrades forsaken in this way, but no doubt every one of them had their lives as boxes closed out.

Fortunately for me, I was chanced upon by a customer who wanted to buy a whole box of tangerines and was taken to his house by one of the fruit store attendants. There I was pushed onto a warm dark shelf in the kitchen and had the tangerines inside me taken out little by little.

Only at that time was I unable to complain that I was empty, that I was not filled. Instead, I prayed desperately that I could buy even a little more time before the last tangerine was taken away.

But that did not take long. My emptied self was dragged out to a bright place and was cast away. Then, in a short while, people began, little by little, to fill me again.

Beer bottle caps and thick plastic bags, padding used for packing, all kinds of nonflammable garbage was tossed inside me.

Even with that, I was satisfied. It doesn't matter what's inside. Just so long as its body is filled, a box is satisfied.

And at last, I was filled. It was the second climax of my life. Filled with nonflammable garbage, I was left alone for more than half a year.

My good luck continued. One day, my nonflammable friends quickly left my body. By all rights, my own life should have ended there as well, but for some reason only my contents were thrown away and I was left in the street outside the house. There the children came, one getting inside my body and two others pushing and pulling the two of us around. I was worn threadbare on the concrete road, but I was enraptured with being filled by human children.

The children took the game to heart. They carried me to a nearby park with a pond, and played there over and over again every day. In just a few days I was worn out, but I was still alive. Perhaps I was able to last longer because I had the dirt of the path beneath me instead of concrete.

But as far as having anything put into me again, it was hopeless. My corners were split. I was full of holes. Never again would I be able to perform my role as a box.

Then the children tired of their game with me. One windy night I was blown over by a gust, and drew closer to the pond.

To a cardboard box, water is an object of terror. The wind maliciously pushed me toward the water's edge.

"This is the end. . . ."

I resigned myself to my fate. The wind blew stronger, and at last I was blown over and fell onto the water. Fallen, but still floating. I was blown by the wind like a sailing ship, and moved toward the center of the pond.

A cardboard box fears the water. And that water soaked steadily into my body. I began to sink, unable to move even when blown by the wind. The water infiltrated me, making my body ridiculously heavy.

Sinking. I was sinking.

The park where I had passed the hours playing with the children was lost to my sight. The sky, the wind, both passed from my consciousness.

"Here my life has come to an end:" so thinking, I gave myself up. Slowly, slowly, I sank toward the bottom of the pond.

Aaah . . . What ecstasy . . .

I was enraptured. I was filled! For the first time in my life I was completely filled! The water, with perfect, even density, was filling my body!

It was an ecstasy like melting. Indeed, my body would

no doubt dissolve in the water. Yet wasn't that the same as dissolving in the ecstasy of being filled?

As I quietly submerged, my body swamped with water, I was numb with joy.

"It no longer matters if I die," I whispered. Could there ever have been another cardboard box so perfectly filled? Could there ever have been another cardboard box who ended his life in such ecstasy. . . .

I no longer have need for the concept of time. I, adequately filled at last and gently dissolving away, am now in the midst of joy.

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