

My Postwar Life

New Writings from Japan
and Okinawa

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with a Foreword by
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*The title of this book is taken
from Ben Takara's poem Gama.*

*Names of Japanese persons
throughout this work
appear in western form, family
name last.*

The Silver Motorcycle

Katsunori Yamazato

1

She died nearly ten years ago, toward the end of a summer when it had hardly rained at all. Like sparrows at sunset, people had flocked together and gossiped about how she had been a little strange.

That summer, everything dried up. She had been proud of the big rubber tree at her gate, its leaves covered with fine white dust. The leaves turned yellow, then gradually brown as they fluttered in the wind until at last they fell straight down with a dry, rustling sound onto the pavement in front of the garage. And they kept falling, one after another, whenever the south wind blew hard, carrying with it a vague feeling of nostalgia.

The sofa in her living room was also covered with dust. She kept the curtains drawn, but the dust that blew off the street behind her house got in through small openings in the windows.

I worked for her that summer, taking care of her yard every other week. She had enough money from what Harry left her and got a check from America once a month. She couldn't spend it all by herself and was never stingy when it came to my wages. A little patience and I could get that motorcycle. "Just wait," I told myself, "and that shining 125-cc bike will be yours." I'd found the second-hand bike at a motorcycle shop near my house. The owner, a friend of my father, said he would keep it for me until I saved up enough money. The woman I worked for knew why I had taken the job in her yard, so she always gave me more than we had agreed to. My father was going to put up most of the money for the bike.

I always avoided the woman when I went to work. I tried to stay out in the yard as much as possible because I didn't like the way she looked straight into my eyes when she talked to me. It was my mother who made me take that job. "You should feel sorry for your aunt," she told me.

In those days, I was mad at myself for being so shy. I'd get embarrassed because I couldn't quite figure out what she was saying to me and would answer her sullenly.

"Is it raining? It must be raining."

"No."

"It must be raining. You'll catch a cold if you get wet."

"No, it's not raining."

"Not raining? You must be kidding."

"Take a look for yourself."

She spoke from beside the window where she sat with her eyes shut tight. I had tried to sound mean, telling her to "take a look for yourself," but my voice had turned hoarse when the words came out. Even so, they'd had an effect, and I could see her back twitching. She knew I was watching her and wasn't about to give up the argument. Though she seemed to be searching for the words to throw back at me, she was obviously beaten, unable even to look out toward the yard. After sitting up very straight for a while without saying anything, at last she pulled the curtains shut and withdrew inside the house. Victorious, I glared at her from the other side of the curtains. "There's no way it's going to rain," I told myself. "But if it does, let it pour down on this thirty-nine-year-old woman and wash away this obsession of hers."

As I pushed the lawn mower, I wondered why I felt this strange antipathy toward her. She had started talking about rain a couple of years after Harry died.

Harry never left Okinawa and ended up dying here. After coming back from Korea, he'd moved into one of the houses built for Americans on the hilltop in Ginowan. Years afterward, he came back early from Vietnam, got out of the army, and turned into a hopeless alcoholic. He would scare little children at the local clinic where he went to the doctor. When he saw a child crying, he would dance up to the kid, wagging his hips, and blow whisky breath in the kid's face. Or sometimes he would gently bite a kid's ear and yell, "Who's giving Mama a hard time?" Of course, the doctor told him to stop drinking, but he was always dead drunk by the time he got to the clinic, making the kids bawl and their mothers worry. And when he got tired of that, he would amuse himself talking to a black man who was just as drunk, also waiting to see the doctor. One day, a nurse called the woman to complain, and after that she went with Harry to the doctor. He'd sit quietly whenever she was with him.

But now the black man got bored. A fat man with a thick neck, he would come over to wag his butt and twist his torso in front of them. The woman reached out with her left hand and tried to push him away. But he only laughed in a low voice and twisted his hips even more feverishly, dancing nimbly with his butt pointed toward them. She couldn't stand it anymore, she said, and tried to hit that big butt of his. But the black man was too quick, and her hand hit only air. Now Harry broke into loud laughter, pounding the sofa with his right hand.

And the black man laughed, too, his whole body convulsing. Soon she was left alone in the waiting room, exposed to everyone's probing eyes.

Whenever she talked about this, her eyes got a little wild and she cursed the black man.

Harry died suddenly.

She insisted he had died because of the black man. "Harry always thought he might die at any time," my mother said to her, and then added in a whisper, "That's why he told you to go to the hospital."

"No, he just didn't want that baby," she replied, tugging gently at her hair.

"I'll never understand why he had to die in Okinawa, coming here all the way from that fine country of his," said my mother as she munched on peanuts coated with brown sugar.

In those days, I couldn't tell whether the woman was sad or not. It seemed as if she were trying hard to look calm, and she came often to see my mother, but I never saw her crying. The only difference was that whenever the wind picked up or there was a slight murmuring outside, she would always ask if it was raining and didn't seem to care if her question interrupted other people.

The leaves rustling on the row of palm trees in the yard did sound a lot like the showers that come suddenly on a summer evening. But she was the only one who always mistook the wind for rain. In the late afternoon, whenever the withered banana leaves swung listlessly, her ears would be deceived by the wind. And when she realized it wasn't raining, she would stare at us intently.

Drinking coffee, she would chat for hours. Sometimes she went to see a *yuta* fortune-teller and then brought my mother the latest news. Harry had ignored the important news from the *yuta*, so now she talked about it excitedly to my mother, who was always an eager listener.

My mother, who burned incense twice a month in front of the gas stove and prayed to the fire goddess, would encourage the woman to tell her everything the *yuta* had said. And my mother often nodded with satisfaction at the *yuta's* interpretation of things that had been worrying her. "Well, that's a relief," she would say, firmly committing the *yuta's* words to memory. "It was just as I'd imagined."

But for the woman it was all just talk, and she never followed the *yuta's* instructions. Whenever my mother tried to set the day for a pilgrimage, the woman would complain that walking made her tired, adding that even if they drove, it was still a long walk to the family's tomb, a hollow carved out of a cliff surrounded by rocks. Besides, she said, the silk trees growing along the path would scratch our arms and shoulders, and she got goose bumps just thinking about those mosquitoes that were nearly the size of your fingertip. "When Harry was alive, he never let me open the screen even for a second." She could think up any number of excuses for not going. And my mother used to say that it was just a waste of money if you didn't really believe what the *yuta* said.

—
yuta

a spiritual guide, in
Okinawan culture

In those days, I was rather serious about my studies and stayed home every day. When I got tired of studying, I'd have a cup of coffee and listen to them talk. I came to think of her as "that stubborn, rain-crazed woman" and tried to avoid eye contact with her. Sometimes she teased me and would say something out of the blue. "You have a nice masculine voice. The girls must like that." Then, when she stared at me, I got all flustered and clammed up. My mother winked at me, stifling a laugh, and said, "He's just shy, you know," which made me mad. Sometimes, all at once, the woman would start talking feverishly. She would speak about things from deep inside the burning core of her memory and seemed to forget about everything around her, including us, as if she were talking to herself.

"I sure hope it'll rain soon. Remember when we went to the hospital? Ever since then, I've felt the rain coming. It's strange, though, because that was so long ago. I know the rain will be heavy, and before the downpour, it will get very dark. We'll see the lightning flashes all around, and the thunder will shake everything. The rain will start far away, but I can feel it coming closer and closer to where I'm standing. I can smell the earth now as big raindrops begin to hit my face. It hurts so much that I have to open my eyes, but I can't see a thing through the heavy rain. I'll catch the thick drops in my palms, cupping them together until rain pours from my hands. Harry told me to go to the hospital, so I had to, but ever since then I've been feeling that a heavy rain like this would start any time. Well, he never came to visit me there. I guess he thought it would be all right because you were with me. It was humid that day. Now, if it rains..."

Unless my mother yelled at her to stop, she would go on and on like this, talking to herself. Whenever she started, my mother always tried to divert her attention. "Let's talk about what we did after the war," she would say. "About when we came out from hiding in the hills."

Then they would sip coffee and talk about my grandfather, sometimes cursing him, sometimes pitying him.

"By now there must be lots of fruit on the Indian almond tree behind our old house. Remember how we used to eat it? I want to go pick some now, but I feel like that old drunkard is still there."

"That's no way to talk about him. Everyone becomes a god after they die."

"That's easy for you to say, since you moved away to Koza after you got married. That old drunk was always waking me up in the middle of the night. Mother died too soon, while Seiichi and Keiko were still crawling around."

My grandmother died of encephalitis five years after the war. She died singing "coloring the flowers, coloring the flowers" in a soft, clear voice. According to my mother, the memory of that voice and her song haunted my grandfather, and he became a hopeless drunk.

After my grandmother died, the woman worked for about a year under the big radar dish at the American base on top of Mount Yae, near the town of Motobu. She washed and dried soldiers' uniforms, always noticing that Harry's

was the biggest. Harry was kind and generous to her. It wasn't that she was tired of paying for my grandfather's liquor or taking care of her little brother and sister. So she didn't think it was wrong to say yes when Harry asked her to marry him.

But when she told my grandfather, he grabbed the pole he used to carry baggage and tried to club Harry with it. Then she ran out of the house, following Harry, and never went home again.

My grandfather died of appendicitis. He had tried to ignore the pain, dulling it with liquor, and got peritonitis. He died in his futon, sucking a thick sugarcane leaf. There was already a bad smell coming from his guts, and it filled the house. He wasn't really the kind of man to die miserably like that, my mother had said. She came back after his death to put away the futon while the men there laughed and drank.

These are the things I heard them talking about as that summer came to an end.

That summer had constantly betrayed the woman as the days came and went uneventfully. The typhoons that suck in all the energy and then explode off the water skirted the island many times. But the heavy rains she was waiting for never came. The ocean, dyed a dark red in the light of the setting sun, rolled on and on with a sense of promise. And the clouds skirting southward thrilled her. At night they would sweep across the sky, sucked in by the approaching typhoon. And behind them the moon shone, flickering like the giant inflamed eye of the universe as it gazed down at humanity and its puny rebellions.

But the typhoon only pretended to attack and retreated without striking. One of them could easily have landed, raping the island, yet even if it had, the woman would have just stared calmly into its face. But then it would only pass by, front paws extended, back stooped over. Or it would run out of breath and drift away, panting toward the distant southern seas.

3

She always acted bossy inside her house, except that the telephone would startle her. But if it were a wrong number, she would chew out the caller. A man with a gravelly voice dialed the wrong number many times that summer, maybe because it had been so hot.

She liked to make fun of Gravel Voice. He seemed sincere when offering a lengthy apology. But her voice, when she answered, "That's perfectly all right," sounded so phony it made me angry.

Sometimes, though, Gravel Voice seemed to learn from his mistakes. He could apparently tell by the tone of her voice whether he should apologize politely or just hang up quietly. When he didn't apologize, I would always have to listen to her bad-mouthing him. He even seemed to know that he should hang up on the days she spent manicuring her nails over and over. On those days, I would be sure to stay outside in the far corner of the yard.

I just couldn't figure her out. She would stop drinking her freshly brewed coffee to complain that the clock's chimes were too loud. She accused the clock of playing innocent while it cut everything short, ticking toward some final goal. The clock fooled everyone, she said, because it looked so ordinary. Then, grumbling about how we were all being deceived even as we sipped our coffee, she would empty her cup into the sink.

"Listen, it's a race, okay? You'll be tricked if you just keep sipping coffee. The moment you close your eyes and say, 'Ah, that's good,' you've already fallen way behind. Doesn't it just wear you out, trying to keep up with everything?"

"But I heard things were easier for you, living by yourself."

"Who said that?"

"My mother."

"That stupid woman."

She always talked in riddles. But all I could think of was the shiny 125-cc silver motorbike, so for me, the things she said and did were just a nuisance. I was supposed to report them all to my mother, but there was no way I was going to try deciphering all that mumbo-jumbo she threw at me.

Stripping off my undershirt, mowing the grass, gulping down water from the hose, then splashing the water on my face, neck, and shoulders all helped to relieve the oppressive feeling I got from talking to her.

Summer grass grows faster than you realize. Every other week, when I went there, I was surprised at how tall it had gotten. But she never cared about the grass. It would grow very early in the morning or very late at night, while she was sleeping. Just after she fell fast asleep or before she woke up, those blades fed off of the sunlight they snatched during the day. Or, giggling among themselves, they imbibed what they could find groping inside the dry soil. The summer grasses, too, seemed to be outwitting her.

I pushed the lawn mower hard when I cut the grass. The wilder the grass grew, the harder I pushed. The motorcycle was shining brilliantly in the sun, in a future not too far off. Stretching out my arm, I could almost touch it. Every time I pushed the lawn mower, I advanced a notch along the flow of time. The stiffness of each stem of grass only made those notches more tangible. When I cut the grass, I held my breath and felt I was controlling the flow of time. Cutting the grass was all I had to do, I thought. But now I know I was wrong. That summer, I was determined to cut down every blade of grass in her yard until I got that 125-cc motorbike, no matter how uncomfortable I felt talking to her and how quickly the thriving grass outwitted her.

Toward the end of August, when its growth slowed, she started wearing gaudy clothes in bright primary colors and letting her hair grow long. I would walk straight to her yard, pull out the lawn mower, and try to avoid talking to her.

Since it was too hot during the day, the best time to work was between five and seven in the evening. Mowing the grass on a hill in her yard, I would see the sun sinking over Kerama Island, squatting out in the ocean. A little past seven, the red-hot sun would start melting. As it dipped toward the horizon,

its core turned fluid and it could no longer hold its neat midday perimeter. The cloud castle towering in the western sky seemed to catch fire, and the white cement walls on the island smoldered silently. A lonely pine tree writhed as it burned, and a coral reef emerging from under the sea seemed annoyed that it had dried up. That's when I noticed that the upper half of my body, too, had gotten burned. Feeling for a moment like the whole universe was on fire, I watched the bloated sun sink into the horizon.

Seeing everything aflame as I stood leaning against the lawn mower, I repeated many times in a small voice, "Oh, gods, if we're all going to die, please let the red-hot sun burn us up."

It was around this time that her hair got really long. Toward evening, she took a shower. Then she would sit with her shiny dark hair wrapped around her slender neck, gazing at herself in the mirror. Her bedroom faced the yard, and when she pulled open the drapes, it made me uncomfortable to see her large almond eyes peering up at the mirror. I pretended not to notice her, but she insisted on talking to me. As she put on her makeup, she told me about her plans for excursions, which of course never materialized. Or, she talked about some poor heroine in an old movie whose lover pushed her off a bridge. She cursed the man's cruelty but seemed to enjoy telling his story. Then she frowned and said how she hated April evenings when the southern breezes start blowing. "After the kids run off, you can hear the *sanshin* in the dark. 'Oh, Kana, my love, how well I remember your face...' 'Oh, yes, even I know that song. Granpa was always singing it, playing his *sanshin*."

She went on muttering while she made herself up. "Oh, you that I love, if only you could love me." Leaning her head to one side, she slowly brushed her hair. "Please come to my village." I stopped the lawn mower, telling myself I would say something nice. Suddenly, she turned toward me, noticing that the lawn mower—Harry's lawn mower, rusty from years of use—had stopped. She pointed at me with her index finger curved slightly downward like a witch and said, "I'll get mad if you keep calling me Auntie. From now on call me Masayo, like Michiko does. I'm Masayo Kinjo, okay? Well, Masayo Thompson is fine, too. Listen, I haven't dried up like Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Scott. You know what I mean, don't you? Probably not."

Her laughter sounded rough and mean. Finding no words to throw back at her, I stood in silence as she turned again to face the mirror and began reciting a Ryukyuan poem in a high-pitched voice. "O, you that I love, if you love me, too, please come to seek my hand at the village of Ishado blooming with flowers in Nakagusuku."

sanshin

a three-stringed Okinawan instrument, similar to the Japanese shamisen

4

By the end of August everything had dried up. I watered her yard furiously, but the whole island lay parched, waiting for rain. The American military seemed aloof to the problem at first, but finally the high commissioner (or some other high officer) made an announcement that a rainfall operation

would be attempted over Yomitan. They were going to scatter chemicals over the clouds to make rain.

She came to our house early on the day of the rainfall operation. Her plymouth stopped with squeaking a sound, and when she opened our front door, her eyes were sparkling. A telescope hung from her shoulders. It had belonged to Harry and was especially powerful and of high quality. She wanted to go to Yomitan with my mother to see what she called "this great operation." She wore a long, loose-fitting purple dress that looked like an evening gown. Whenever she dressed like that, my mother talked to her as if she were her dumbest daughter.

"It's not going to rain, you know. The newspaper says they're only making a trial run. Just look at the sky. They aren't magicians, after all. I'm not going."

"The military can do it, I'd even bet on it. I'm driving, so come with me. Just to watch the airplane. See, I brought my telescope."

"Hey, there are things even the military can't do. You just don't want to go by yourself. But I really can't make it. They're supplying water today, and I need it to do my laundry."

"Michiko, you only do what I ask when you need something. Well, from now on I'm not doing *anything* for you."

"C'mon, you know I'll be in trouble if I don't fill my buckets with water. Seizo, maybe you should go with your auntie. I mean, if you're not studying today."

Hearing this, the woman and I both frowned. But my mother started winking at me as she always does, and in the end I had to go. So I went out and got into the woman's Plymouth.

We whistled as she drove north on Highway One. Obviously in high spirits, she leveled her intense gaze at me and asked if I could whistle. It was embarrassing to listen as she soared easily up to the high notes. My whistling stayed low and somber, never reaching those joyful heights.

"I bet it'll rain."

"I wonder."

"I'm sure of it. I trust my sixth sense. Harry told me once that the air force always makes it rain in California. I know it'll rain today."

"Well, if you say so, but..."

"But what?"

"Never mind."

"You should act like a man and not be so wishy-washy. Maybe that's why you failed your entrance exams."

"Well, what are you going to do? I mean, if it doesn't rain today?"

"Now you're mad."

"No, I'm not."

"If it doesn't rain, I'll give you the telescope. I'm taking you away from your studies today, so you can have it."

I didn't answer.

"Now what's the matter?"

"But I thought you really liked that telescope."

"Hey! You're a strange kid, thinking it's already yours. Now what are you going to give me if it *does* rain?"

"I'll cut the grass for nothing and wash your car, too."

"Now you're trying to be stoic. Just buy your motorbike, and if it rains today, you can give me a ride when you get it."

She was speeding way over the limit on Highway One, and I was worried the MPs would stop us. Driving along, she whistled short, high-pitched melodies as if reminiscing about something. In the bright, transparent daylight I could see the downy hair on her rounded lips.

That morning was terribly humid. The oleanders planted along the fence inside the military base were blooming in bright red clusters. I only glanced at flowers from our passing car, but they seemed to be floating before my eyes all the way to Yomitan. Every time I thought of how the oleanders burned even redder under the summer sun, it felt like sweat was breaking out all over my body.

The sky above Yomitan was covered with clouds. Through the opening between them I could see chunks of blue sky that, with their ragged cloud perimeters, looked like slices of bitter melon that someone had shoved inside. But those clouds seemed much too high for rain.

She decided to park her Plymouth on a small hill to get a good view of the airplane. Veering recklessly off the road, she drove around in search of a vantage point until she finally came to a stop on a slope covered with rocks. Coming out of the car, she saw a boulder nearby as tall as she was, and, pulling her dress up to her thighs, she hurried into a shaded spot underneath that was just big enough for one person.

The operation was scheduled to start at eleven, and she waited without saying a word. She never seemed to think about anyone else. Whenever I saw her, she always made me uncomfortable.

A little after eleven, from out of nowhere we heard the roar of an airplane. She looked up at the sky through her sunglasses, but neither of us could spot it. The plane sounded as if it were determined to keep flying above those clouds. And, listening to that faint but persistent drone, I began to think that it might actually start raining, that maybe the American military really *could* make it rain.

The sun was right above us. There was sweat on her forehead. I could smell gasoline from her car, and the air was filled with the pungent odor of grass. Small insects flew all around, annoying us. The smell of tires. Flies. Rocks baked hot in the sun. Naked... Harry and his friends had been naked above their waists. Small bottles of beer. Strong American men pouring beer over each other in the late-afternoon sun. Clarinets, saxophones, and trumpets wailing frantically in my ears. Roaring laughter. A hairy chest. The small carton of ice cream Harry had given me that I hid under the sofa, where it melted and turned into bubbles. Harry's yard. The close-cropped lawn with the bittersweet

smell. Harry's hard body conquering and taming the grass with the obstinate violence of iron. The late-afternoon sun beginning to bloat. Someone's back starting to sweat. The smell of beer. The rasping of a trumpet. A languid saxophone. "Harry, Harry! The ice cream is melting. It's all melted!" "Oh, no," she says. "I told you to put it in the fridge. I'm not going to bring you here anymore if you don't do what I say." "But if I put it in the fridge, it won't be mine any more." "What a dumb kid," she says. Harry and his friends roar with laughter. After tossing me around playfully from one to the other, they give me a big box of ice cream. But, oh no, that's melting too, and will be all gone unless I do something. Ice cream melting in the heat and changing into white bubbles. Noisy flying bugs. The scratch I got from a twig begins to hurt. The smell of gasoline. Water. She drinks from her cupped palms. The smell of burning tires. Sunglasses. Telescope. Clouds. And, oh yes, the roar of an airplane. The roar....

We waited for two hours but never saw the plane. And there wasn't even the slightest hint of rain. Apparently the operation had ended in a fiasco.

"So this is what you call an 'air force,' a 'great operation,'" she said angrily.

But she kept looking up at the sky, and I hesitated to say let's go home because she seemed to be challenging something up there. She wasn't just looking at the clouds, but at something beyond the clouds, higher and deeper.

Strangely, at that moment I could feel her strength. Then, maybe because the telescope was too big for her, I felt like laughing. It hid her pale, white face completely. I decided to tell her I wouldn't take the telescope after all and that she could ride the motorbike whenever she wanted.

The warm southern wind swept over the hill, rustling the hem of her long, loose dress. It was a beautiful sight, I thought.

The next morning the newspapers reported that the cause of the fiasco had been "low cloud density." Maybe so, but it just shows that making rain is no simple matter.

A few days later my parents went on an overnight trip. I'd caught a slight cold and had to stay home in bed. My father said he couldn't postpone the trip because he'd already scheduled his annual paid holiday. He was grumpy that day because my mother had been pestering him to go, and he had finally given in.

My parents had asked the woman to come and stay with me.

As soon as she came into my room that evening, she held her nose. I had sweated a lot sleeping in my room, which was baked by sun during the day. That night I had a fever. She had kept telling me to take a shower, and after I did, I ran that fever and my eyes got bloodshot. I knew she was upset, but I didn't say anything and just stayed in bed.

A little after ten o'clock, she told me she would be staying overnight because it looked like rain.

It was the first heavy rain in ages. After clouding up in the evening, it began pouring after ten o'clock. When the rain started, she sat on the edge of my bed and softly sang a very old song.

I could hear thunder in the distance, and streaks of lightning slashed through the darkness outside my window. Then I heard the unmistakable sound of rain hitting the ground. She had waited a long time for this rain, but she greeted it silently. Though I told her not to, she began combing my hair with her fingers. A languid feeling came over me, and I kept my eyes closed.

After that I dozed off, though I don't know for how long. When I woke up, I saw her standing next to my bed. She was drenched with rain, her large eyes shining and her lips pressed tightly together. Raindrops were dripping from her hair. I looked up at her but said nothing, and then suddenly she threw herself onto the bed. She didn't seem to care whether I got wet or not as she wrapped her arms around me and pulled me toward her. My throat was dry, and I couldn't say a word.

Holding me softly, she put her nose to my neck and called a man's name I'd never heard.

Though wet, she felt warm to me and smelled good. She reminded me of my mother, who used to lie down next to me whenever I had a cold. It was the same warmth and smell. And she felt soft, too.

Outside my window it continued to pour.

Her voice moaned as his name tumbled from her lips. In her trembling body, I felt a sadness I could neither describe nor explain. Then my body began to tremble. I couldn't help it and didn't know why, but now I was shaking and crying, too.

Apparently startled, she pushed me back down on the bed and hurried out of the room. But I couldn't stop shaking.

It rained until the next morning.

Late that afternoon, my parents returned home in high spirits. But the woman stayed closed up silently in the room next to mine.

I couldn't explain why I'd cried so much that night, but I had strange dreams later, whenever I thought of her.

She is walking toward me, about to cross the Hija Bridge from Yomitan to Naha. A man is with her. She is wearing an old-fashioned white cardigan. She starts pleading that she doesn't want to go across the bridge. Her eyes seem like a rabbit's, meek and innocent, as she peers up at the man. Despair is written on his face, but he drags her toward the bridge. "I'm doing this for your sake," he says. He is heavy-set and bowlegged with a sallow face, and he is a smooth taker. Yet he seems pathetic, too, a man whose whole life has been a failure.

Near the bridge, I see big, beautiful Ryukyuan pine trees spreading their branches. The moonlit night is tinged with blue. Yes, it is one of those April nights when the southern breezes begin to blow, making everyone restless. She is weak, going along with the man just because he yells at her. She is singing a song. I can hear your song, Auntie, if you sing it a little louder, just a bit louder. But, look, she is crossing the bridge. She fades from sight.

Next she is standing on the south end of Hija Bridge. She has draped a red cardigan over her shoulders and hides her face with a scarf. She wears

black high heels. She is walking around rubbing her hands, waiting for someone. She is chewing gum. Here he comes. He is tall with a cold, indifferent look. She is trying hard to say something to him. But he only pretends to listen. She motions that she can't go to the other side of the bridge. The tall man laughs. The night is clear with no north wind. But the white road stretching north and south from Hija Bridge looks cold. Now the man is leaving. She is left standing alone in the moonlight.

Next I see my grandfather. He is drunk and trying to club someone with his carrying pole. He makes me want to laugh, and then I really am laughing. Now he collapses on the ground, wailing in that pitiful voice. Grandpa, where's your sense of dignity? I'm sick of your crying and wailing.

Still, she stands alone, stretching her arms outward into the slashing winds of purple time that swirl around her.

5

On the last Saturday in August, I finally got the silver motorcycle. It had a black seat and a silver body that was light and sleek. Though a second-hand machine, its sturdy engine looked as though it would never stop running. And the tires were sharply notched with a deep tread that seemed sure to grip the road without slipping. This bike would run fast and proud on Highway One.

As I rubbed the machine all over with an oilcloth, the guys at the bike shop made a lewd joke about what I was doing. The owner laughed. "You be careful now," he told me. Later, when I was riding close to home, I shifted down and ran the bike for 300 yards in low gear. The heavy throbbing of the engine felt good and made me proud.

That day my father came back from his job at City Hall before noon and said something that made my heart sink.

"Well, thanks to Auntie Masayo, you can ride that bike now even if you haven't passed your entrance exams yet. We ought to go show it to her."

"Hey, he worked long and hard in that blazing sun," my mother said.

"Aw, c'mon. He's already a young man. The heat shouldn't bother him."

"Oh, yeah? It'd wear you out in half an hour."

"Hey, everybody at City Hall tells me how tough I am."

"Well, then, why don't you cut down the branches in the yard once in a while on Sundays instead of lying around the house all day."

"A section chief's job is demanding. Exhausting."

"Oh, sure. Sitting at your desk, puffing on cigarettes. Isn't that really all you do?"

"Smart-ass women. Think they know everything."

"That's right. We know *all* about it."

"Hey, why do you have to talk to me like that?"

"Well, excuse me. I'm so sorry..."

It was true that the woman they called Aunt Masayo always made me feel strange. Yet she threw herself into everything she did and seemed more sincere than either of my parents.

That afternoon, my father drove our mini-car along the highway just ahead of me riding my motorcycle. My mother, who sat beside him, kept turning around to look back at me. She was talking to my father and smiling, but he wouldn't answer and just stared straight ahead. She seemed proud of me. My father stayed in the far right lane, driving ten miles below the speed limit. It annoyed me. I told myself that after showing the woman my bike, I would drive out to the reclaimed shore land and open it up as fast as it would go. It took us half an hour to get to her place.

After making us wait a long time, she stunned us when she finally opened the door. My father grimaced, and my mother's shrieking laugh sounded almost hysterical. I felt like hugging the woman and vomiting at the same time.

She must have thought she looked "cute." She wore a white cotton shirt and red short pants covered with little pale printed flowers. She had laced her white leather boots extremely tight. She wore no lipstick but had put on thick eyeliner, and her shiny dark hair hung down her back.

My parents looked disgusted but went inside without saying anything. Meanwhile, I couldn't take my eyes off her. Under her thin cotton shirt, I could see the shapes of her breasts. If I cupped my right palm, it would just cover one of those poor little breasts. While my father spouted polite clichés, thanking her for the motorcycle, she seemed restless, walking back and forth over the tile floor in her squeaking boots. She had longer legs than I'd thought, and seeing how thin they were made me angry. Her small waist made me sad, though, and I wanted to howl like some wild animal.

Without asking anyone's permission, my mother went about making fresh coffee and was soon sipping it with my father. When the two of them started talking about old times, the woman got bored and said she wanted to take a ride on the motorcycle. Though the long downpour had ended, the island was still covered with thick clouds, and it rained off and on. But she was no longer preoccupied with rain, her interest having already shifted to the silver bike that was now mine. Before my last day working in her yard, I had explained how to ride a motorcycle. I told her how to start the engine, release the clutch, and apply the breaks. She insisted that I accept her telescope or she wouldn't take driving lessons from me. But I was stubborn, too, when it came to the telescope. So we made a compromise and asked my mother to hold on to it for us.

That day she got off to a shaky start. At first, I had to hold on to the seat from behind so she could keep her balance. She sat there, laughing happily, but looked funny because she was leaning too far backward. I kept telling her to bend forward. After driving only four or five yards, she fell off because she had accelerated too abruptly. But she didn't seem to care that her left knee was skinned and just got up and grasped the handlebars again.

We decided to take a break, and I explained again how to control her speed by balancing the clutch and the accelerator. She was so cheerful she seemed like a different person. She listened to me attentively, stroking her hair and leaning her head to one side. She looked very funny, I thought, like a high school girl. But she was so serious that I couldn't possibly laugh.

After the break she tried again. I decided I would let her drive today as much as she wanted. She went a hundred yards this time but fell again on her way back to where I was standing. She'd hit her right elbow hard on the ground and there was a lot of blood. I ran to her and reached out my hand to help her up, but she slapped it away and averted her eyes. She gazed off, squinting into the distance, as if to watch a rival who had passed her up and was now driving a motorcycle far away at full speed.

She wore the look of a young girl determined to win.

There was no way I could stop what happened after that. Suddenly she got up, straddled the silver motorcycle, and took off at full speed. The whining roar of the engine stabbed me in the stomach. In the next moment she shifted quickly from second to third, then bolted ahead.

She was racing after someone, speeding toward some unreachable goal.

Her hair fluttered wildly in the wind.

At the next curve she failed to make the turn, plunged off the road, and crashed into a stone wall. The collision hurled her down onto the asphalt in a flash of silver light.