

AT THE CHARITY CLINIC

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Translated from the Japanese by AMY OBERMEYER

By the time I returned to the hospital from the office of the military police, the sun was already setting. The reins of my overflowing carriage slackened as we approached the town square, clattering along on the sloping pavement.

“I have not any change,” the coachmen who’d brought me said, looking annoyed while spreading the bright silvery-blue bills and returning them to my palm. I bought two small white bills from the Chinese man’s stall near the front gates for tomorrow’s payment and received four small silver coins in return. Upon receiving his ten sen coin, the coachmen said “xie xie,” sounding his horn loudly at a boy pulling a bicycle ahead of him before taking off.

Under the electric light, the elderly man at the reception desk thrust out his neck and bowed politely as I changed into my cold, oily sandals, lazily straddling my fat legs. Already irritated, as I combed back the loose hairs from my forehead a dreadful melancholy fell over me. I was thinking about the dull ache running down my right leg when, as I reached the top stair leading down to the clinic in the half-basement, my leg cramped tightly, and as though some unknown force had scooped my feet out from under me, I collapsed onto the cold

concrete floor. Pushing myself up, I try standing, but my knees rattle like metal fittings and my hands tremble precariously as they struggle to support my body with its swollen belly. A quavering tremor makes its way from my limbs deeper into my trunk.

The corridor leading to the half-basement room was still, damp and dark like a tunnel. Around a meter ahead, a bundle of tissue paper had been cast onto the dark floor. That white rectangle seemed to float as I watched, lowering my ear to the ground waiting for the sound of someone approaching. As I strain my ear to the fusty floor, the low, clear sound of a mosquito's wings and a pungent scent mixed together in the breeze streams past my cheeks. My big belly is like a blood-sucking mosquito and cradling it while trying to stand is impossible, pathetically like trying to drag a heavy log from a cave. With my right hand, I try rubbing the left, frail like the stalk of an annual plant, and then, moving the five fingers of my right hand on my belly, I feel a tingling numbness, as though being stroked by crepe.

Beriberi. I'd heard from other people about its symptoms. For quite some time I've been here, breathing the red dust-laden air of the colony and eating the poor-quality Nanking rice, eight parts water and two parts salt. It had to be gestational beriberi I was suffering from. *On top of everything, beriberi?*

I feel myself staring blankly into the darkness.

On the other hand, having beriberi on top of childbirth, it's possible I may be able to postpone my imprisonment just a little while longer. Something resembling a faint happiness trickled out of my otherwise emotionless head. I am afraid of prison. As I try to picture the life of an incarcerated woman

with an infant in her arms, I feel my innards contracting. When I first learned of the child I'm now carrying, it was in jail in the chaotic aftermath of the great Kantō earthquake. Has this child been predestined to a life in prison on my account? That's no good . . . or maybe it's okay. Yes! I'll raise a Japanese Bolshevik from jail.

After a little while, I gave a thick-lipped whistle, careful to keep the fetus from pushing further into my chest. A hoarse whistle resembling a steam locomotive resonated down the hallway that zig-zagged like the edge of a key. The terrible sound of the rail car falling into the sea after we destroyed the railway line still echoes vividly in my ear. I regret all of it.

Because they'd planned the terrorist act, my husband along with three coolie supervisors were thrown into jail and the labor dispute was thoroughly lost. Unity among the coolies was destroyed and the working conditions were crueler than ever. They'd responded to Zhang Zuolin's¹ military recruitment with thin futons on their backs and dusty cloth shoes on their feet only to be loaded like cheap luggage onto the South Manchuria Railway and carried away. All that remained, with the jailing of four comrades and my husband's imprisonment, was my own path, was waiting for my diagnosis in the charity hospi-

1. Zhang Zuolin was a Japanese-backed warlord who controlled inner Manchuria. Although the territory was then still nominally under Chinese control, Japan enjoyed great influence in the area. In 1928, Zhang would be assassinated by the Japanese Army, triggering a series of events that ultimately led to the establishment of the formal Japanese puppet state within Manchuria, known as Manchukuo (1932-1945).

tal where I'll be admitted until I deliver.

I too, a former maid with the railway company, am likely destined to be detained as an accomplice the moment my labor ends. Beside my bed at the clinic, there's always a prison guard keeping watch, clutching a dirty towel to wipe the sweat from around under his tall collar that reaches up to his hairline.

I must not resent my husband. The prospect that something like this would happen after undertaking such a terrorist attack had been all too obvious to me. My husband and our three comrades joked that my thoughts were the indecisive cowardice of a pregnant woman, but the result was just as I'd predicted. However, if the whole group must get through such a situation facing it head on, then the campaign is the path of those who must. The husband is the wife's path. I have no regrets.

The sound of footsteps drew near. It was the rhythmic footfall of new leather shoes as if approaching from the window side. Outside the window, the upper body of an alpaca with dark blue shoulders was drawn on the back of a white shirt. I was ready to feign collapsing. It was the old man from the reception desk.

"Excuse me, could you lend me a hand for a moment?"

"What in the . . . Sitting in a place like that?"

The old man squinted, a thick crease between his eyes, as if to confirm what he was seeing. He hunched forward as he approached. Once he realized I was a patient at the clinic, he spoke roughly.

"If it isn't Ms. Kitamura. Well well, aren't you in trouble?"

With his back still bent, he offered an unfriendly hand. I grabbed it, dry and languid, and leaned my body against the wooden wall. My feet were cold like fruit and when I tried to walk, they crumpled like an accordion. Putting the weight of

my swollen stomach onto the old man's unreliable body, together we descended the stairs to the basement.

The inescapable odor of disinfectant and bedpans, along with the dank smell of the half-basement floor, intertwines and attacks me who, owing to a summons from the military police, had breathed all day long the refreshing outdoor air. A paralyzed old woman, sleeping flopped like a squid on the bed, cast a sharp glance at me, moving only the whites of her eyes, which had a bluish hue that resembled the color of the wall. I gave her a similar look in return.

I could hear the sound of a praying voice resembling dissipating froth coming from the north corner of the room. This one too, an old woman with one hand rigid like a dried branch, was sent from the Port Arthur aged care home. Listening to the sound of her prayers, the odor of the toilet grows increasingly unbearable even to me, even though I'm not actually sick.

The guard on his rounds had put his storybook on my bedside table and fallen fast asleep diagonally across my futon. A thread of syrupy drool flowed from the corner of his mouth, dampening his moustache before meeting the top of my futon, where it sat like an earthworm. I seized the gold button on the breast of his white shirt and shook.

"Oh! I fell asleep. You're just now getting back? I was worried, it'd gotten so late."

Without responding, I grabbed a towel from the other side of the bed table and wiped the drool from the futon cover.

"What's wrong?"

"It was nothing."

My *obi* stretching onto the floor, I cast myself onto the bed, which creaked as I tossed and turned.

“Well, I’ll be leaving then. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

A former prostitute who’d attempted suicide and now looked as though she couldn’t sleep raised her head and followed the guard’s movements as he pushed open the door to leave. The elongated shadow of his uniform shakes on the hallway walls.

My feet are hot. Their leaden muscles lean against my knee. The jagged sawtooth of despair sinks its teeth into my soul. *My twenty-two years of life, the dreams I’ve accumulated, it all amounts to this?* Water stains create a strange map on the wallpaper.

As the night wore on, the wind blowing off the acacia nursery pierced the pharmaceutical storehouse and threw sand against the windowpanes of the clinic. They were the only things obstructing the roar of the wind, and they clattered jarringly. I mindlessly placed my left foot upon my right and thought about my husband as I stared up at the long cord of the electric light.

No, not my husband. He’s my comrade. Thinking about him draws out various discontents. We try to advance comradery among the sexes, but so many cling myopically to the dominance of that dubious old family system² that should have withered like last year’s weeds.

However, his big, round glasses with black

2. A system formalized legally in the aftermath of the Meiji Restoration that imagined the household as a microcosm of the national body, with the father granted imperial authority over all members of the household. Lack of fidelity to the system was construed to be a lack of fidelity to the nation and to the emperor himself.

frames look down on short me, trying to suck me in.

“Mitsuyo, please forgive me. To you and to our child, I’ve behaved inexcusably. I was wrong.” Looking down, a tear plopped onto his glasses, magnifying it. Such was the scene this afternoon when I encountered him chained up in the hallway of the military police. I felt the impulse to cover my face.

What is it causing his effeminate attitude that threads his lingering attachment? His bloodshot eyes, what in the world could they want of me? The wife’s presence keeps the weak-willed husband’s attention. When the edge of a long sash is cast off by a husband full of lingering affection, a wife cannot help but receive it. Alas, it’s detestable. Detestable. The feeling that I’m falling into something is unbearable. I am hollow, collapsing like a Yosegi puzzle box. *Beloved comrade, don’t look around. Look straight ahead. Keep looking straight ahead*, I appeal to the phantom of him that appears on the high ceiling.

I rounded my throat and, in a low voice, began to sing “The People’s Flag.” When I arrive at the loud points, I thrust forward my shoulders and pushed the air from my lungs, I come to hear my own trembling voice. Tears began streaming, tickling as they entered my ear.

I wonder how many hours I slept. I jolted awake with a start to asthmatic coughing in the next bed. The windows rattle gently. As I moved my back to reposition my feet, a creeping vine of intense pain crawled into my lower abdomen. Now this too? A crushing pain continues bearing down on me. To be able to bear it I bend my back and press both hands against my belly, my numb fingertips and palms feeling my puffy, swollen skin.

I tried gently stroking it. A hard-to-fight drowsiness overtakes my eyelids, after which the roaring stomach pain draws in. The pain! The pain is unbearable.

I rose up impulsively, taking my fat knee into my hands and pressing it into my stomach.

An unthinkable nostalgic warmth transmitted within my body to my chilled abdomen. The pain was so unbearable the only thing to do was to push with my feet. I cast them out again and collapsed, feeling a hard pillow around my back. I was caught by the rattling horizontal bar that surrounded my bed. The pain ebbs as though pulled by the tide and I find the coolness of the rusty iron bar pleasing to my greasy hands.

I grasped the iron rod as though to pull it near, drew in my breath and endured the brute force.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!”

When I scrunch up the muscles around my nose and concentrate all my energy into my stomach, amidst the darkness of closed eyes, various things appear and disappear all at once. I can hear that terrible sound of the rail car crashing into the sea. Dust from which I want to avert my eyes whirls above like smoke.

When I open my eyes, the windows are being rattled by a sandstorm outside. The cord of the electric light, suspended from the high ceiling, is swaying quietly back and forth. The rustling of soft frail breaths of sleep, unmixed with my own squeezed groans, rises in the air.

In cold blood I listened attentively to my own gruesome, beastly moans. I must not mourn my own misfortune, torn from my beloved husband and thrust into this colonial charity clinic to birth my child like a stray dog. For me, it is as if I have

lived up until now always keeping watch over a single candle within me, whose flame always returns, never disappearing for good. I live believing in the future. Even now in this, I feel the single red flame threaded throughout this struggle. No matter where, I will go and see this fight through. Salty tears flow ceaselessly down my distorted face.

At five in the morning, a nurse came from the second floor to the toilet and found me with labor pains. She lay out an old, stained cotton futon and there, like a monkey, I gave birth to a baby girl. Her long hair like stretched silk thread pointed over her forehead. After five minutes, her eyes, closed tightly resembling filaments, finally opened.

Outside the windowpane, the blue night had turned to dawn. The child was returned from the nursery. Around her pillow, the hemp leaf patterned futon was encrusted with milk. With her quilt removed, she kicked her bright red legs as though they were aflame. As the outside light streamed into the room, the high-strung bleached blue whiteness of the nurse's uniform pierced my crumpled, tired nerves.

I obediently position my feet just as the nurse said to and close my eyes. Damn, it's like my crotch is melting. I shrug my shoulders from the pain at the base of the arm. When stroking the arch of my strangely soft foot, it's like touching a terribly smooth and distant object. Both my hands and my feet feel stretched like thick mochi and are entirely numb.

The sensation of the nurse's cold nickel forceps touching my inner thigh was so indirect as not to remember anything.

"Nurse, this seems to be really severe beriberi. To be this numb . . ."

Positioning my palms as if begging for mercy, I demonstrate rubbing the skin of my white feet.

“Beriberi? You’re just fine.”

Lowering the corners of her eyes into her unimpressed face, the nurse cast the gauze dripping with yellow liquid into the porcelain dish.

“But . . . well, look here. It’s pretty concave.”

When I push my index finger into the side of my knee, it depresses into a deep dimple and does not spring back. It was surprising even to me. I try pressing in two more spots, and dimples where I’d sunk my fingers in appear.

“You’ve had some trouble.”

As if she doubts me, she tries pressing with her own finger. Afterwards, she wrinkles up her forehead like a shrimp and shakes her bedraggled head from side to side. I turn to the open window and contemplate the nurse’s attitude.

Gestational beriberi is the most challenging illness in this hospital. Here in the colony, if the beriberi is even a little serious, after three or even five years, you still can’t stand. Being burdened with someone who can’t even go to the bathroom alone or stand on their own two feet is certain to be an outsized nuisance for the sort of hospital director who hopes to receive as much subsidy from the city as possible for a minimal amount of labor, and to then get on with his private life. Results-wise, keeping the same patient for three or five years is unattractive. If you’re writing how many tens, hundreds, thousands of patients handled on the report you send to your wealthy benefactors, decreasing that number just isn’t profitable.

The nurse is the director’s wife and is a Christian. The pre-

tense is that she's the head nurse, but without so much as a medical license, she examines patients herself and does house calls. Superficially, she's as gentle as velvet, but underneath, she is a woman with the terrifying defenses of a thorn bush. After she finished with me, she pulled my *yukata* back down toward my feet and then turned toward my child's crib, pulling it back to my bedside. I picked up the child and stared intently into her eyes. She was squinting weakly as though she couldn't bear the brightness.

Curiously, I feel only an inexplicable disquiet and the feeling I'd feared most of all—love—has not at all awakened. When the nurse haphazardly puts down a red cotton futon, she taps the child's foot, and the child moves her chest and breathes softly in her sleep as though she's been tickled. This white, healthy-looking thing fills my heart. It's the feeling of exiting a long tunnel. It's the feeling of a refreshing morning. Until tomorrow, say, let's cast aside my oily, desperately frightened self. I beg that this hope is not the ephemeral type that dries up in one day's time.

The morning's meal is the same as the day before—Shanghai rice with lye-like white miso soup, a small plate of kelp *tsukudani* that tastes like a mouth full of salt, and two yellow half-moons of pickled daikon. I mix the kelp into the mushy congee and, still lying on my side, pour it into my mouth.

“Again today, Shanghai rice. Tomorrow too, Shanghai rice. Ya' get the feelin' they're trying to starve us to death?” uttered an elderly woman with palsy and a wild Kyushu accent. Sitting primly on the edge of her futon, she chewed exaggeratedly and then spat something blue onto the floor.

We all turned and laughed the hollow laugh of a mouth filled with food.

“Hey, grandma, if you don’t like the miso, trade me for my pickled daikon!” The former prostitute got down from her bed, dragged out her purple rubber slippers, and went toward the old woman’s bed.

“I’m telling you, I’m going to kill Koramata Komiya. Unforgivable! Unforgivable!”

Suddenly, a delusional woman of about forty appeared in front of the prostitute, holding out her black chopsticks and sternly shaking them. Komiya was her husband that had died more than ten years previously. Since this is an everyday thing, no one laughs.

Although I had a lot of congee and kelp left, I put down my chopsticks. It occurred to me to write a letter to my husband. I’d often heard from the former prostitute, who’d had a miscarriage, that you shouldn’t read or write for a bit after giving birth, and I was plagued by vexing thoughts whenever I saw the personalized stationary bearing the name of the rail company that had deceived me. I set up the magazine behind my bedside table as a stand and spread the paper out. At first, to reassure him from his worry, I began to write cheerfully, but as I got toward the end, it became strangely agitated.

“I can’t stand on my own two feet. I can’t even handle the toilet alone. It pains me to think about the nasty face the nurse makes at me as she cleans up after. Beyond that, there’s no one to clean the infant’s diapers. I had no choice but to talk with the housekeeper who works on the second floor about her doing the washing for two sen per diaper, but now there’s only two yen and seventy or eighty sen left in my

wallet.³ How in the world can I carry on?”

Even as I was thinking, *don't write it, don't write it*, I was pushed on by my own feelings until I wound up writing exactly that. Writing these complaints and feeling such scorn, as I sit up and seal the letter suddenly my head feels strangely unsteady. As I hastily close my eyes and fall back onto my pillow, I hear only a distasteful silence, like sinking down to the bottom of the sea.

As I was watching the fluttering white Japanese hand towels that had been hung over the window and thinking about how it was likely anemia, I lost consciousness.

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I abruptly regained consciousness. My left arm hurts. I turn up my sleeves and find a diamond-shaped bandage stuck on both arms. When a guard on his round notices, he grabs my wrist with his sticky tepid hands. I'd assumed he was taking my pulse, but a moment later I noticed it; antipathy was welling up within me, surprisingly irrepressible. Looking up from below at his whisker-dappled chin, with great force I broke free of his grasp.

“Injection for Kitamura Mitsuyo, one syringe, 8:30 p.m.”

“Fine.”

The sound of young women's voices flirted with the swishing of the moths in the dark air,

3. In 1927, the yen was pegged to the gold exchange standard and was worth \$0.50 in US dollars, the equivalent of roughly \$7.35 today. One sen is 1/100 of a yen.

moving back and forth like a bell. The *boing* of the spring on the syringe case closing reverberated forcefully.

Enema syringes the size of large candles to insert into the anuses of the palsy sufferers were sitting on the nurses' station.

"I'm sorry, day nurse, ma'am. Can we request enemas today? I'm so glad. It's been five whole days that I've been unable to go. Since June my abdomen has been so bloated . . ."

Without apparent reason, the delusional woman accompanied the old woman, angrily chanting "glad, glad."

"Oy! Lady, lady. You keep shouting like that and I send you to the morgue!" the former prostitute taunted the delusional woman. The two women with palsy both made displeased faces and got quiet. They both believe whole cloth a newspaper article accusing the clinic director of carrying a long-troublesome and still alive patient into the morgue and locking it from the outside. Anyone who's been troubled by the director for past three months knows that at least once, when you meet your final moments, you'll find yourself in the same room. There are no strangers to the morgue in the corner of the garden.

Fine leaves of an acacia tree shroud the masonry of the wide, windowless morgue as though shielded by hands. In front, blue mold grows over a river of ragged sandals, haphazardly removed. The sound of water dripping slowly from a leaky tap onto the stone of the autopsy table is unceasing. The shape of a buttocks, arm, head, and shoulders is carved scrupulously onto the surface of the fake stone autopsy table, about twenty square feet in area. Owing to the ceaseless drip of water, a single thread of rust grows on the front of that artificial stone

made to look like granite, and somehow, you can always tell by smell when they've just chopped up some human flesh. For those defeated in life's long battle, those who have dragged their chains of life down to this basement, more even than the prospect of a protracted death in the clinic, in the moment of your death imagining yourself on this autopsy table is the hardest to bear. On top of that cold stone, instead of paying the hospital fees of the living, your body is cut into shreds. How can you believe in a peaceful transition, laid out on the autopsy table like that, forehead covered in dust?

"Oy Oy! It was just a bad joke I tell you. Doesn't this place just rot your spirit?" the former prostitute said without actually saying it, shrinking her neck down and thrusting her tongue out like a turtle. In order to avoid dealing with the persnickety palsy sufferers, she began telling fortunes with playing cards.

"Hearts, huh? Good, good. Oh my! It's a diamond, isn't it? Look again, is it a diamond? A good sign, I tell you!"

As I listened to the former prostitute's hysterical voice, I turned toward my child's face and nodded off.

As it turned to afternoon, a pain came over me as though my breasts were two bags dangling from my shoulders. Pulling down my chin, I stare for a while at my own breasts, ugly, swollen and darkened like winter melons.

Milk—the problem of milk. No warmth flows. I've worked together with the other women with children who'd been laid off from the brick factory and who, with eyes heavily swollen, were afflicted with beriberi and trying to get their children to swallow the milk. It was the rainy season in late autumn; day by day the diarrhea caused them to lose weight and shrivel. Whenever they separated from the breast, they would cry like

baby birds. They won't look after sick children in the nursery. Those women came to work with their bodies tied up with cord, slipping the janitors a little bit of money to let the children sleep in the janitor's closet. The sight of those emaciated children in comparison to the size of their pillows brought people to tears. The factory was shut down during the recession, but I'd heard that among the children with infantile beriberi, a number of them had died. My beriberi too seems to have originated from my time spent working at the factory.

Whatever will be, will be. In this case at least, I don't know what else to tell myself.

If I pinch my nipple between my forefinger and thumb and press a little, so many curved streaks of white milk like hair ribbons go flying over the pillowcase. Suddenly it hits me; I wash my index finger in a teacup at my bedside and bring it to my child's peach-colored lips, and she purses them like a wheel and begins to suck. When I pull my finger back she draws near it and begins to cry.

4. *Graptopsaltria nigrofuscata*, a species of large, brown cicada native to Japan and other parts of East Asia. Its name means "oil cicada."

At dusk, an unusual *aburazemi*⁴ stopped along the wooden fence of the pharmaceutical warehouse and chirped loudly, making the sound of boiling oil. Outside the window, the thin leaves of the acacia catch the weak light cast sideways by the sunset and rustle softly in the wind. Off

in the distance, the lingering sound of a rickshaw horn seems to flow.

“We’re taking temperatures!” the nurse shouts towards the boys’ ward, swinging a silver pocketwatch as she stands up from the nurse’s station. Thick, bare voices rattle polyphonously down to the ends of the narrow hallway. I look listlessly up at the clock on the wall and pinch the cold thermometer in my armpit. It’s milk! With just six ounces of milk each day, this problem would resolve itself I’m sure. Children mustn’t drink beriberi-tainted milk.

My chest hurts as though tied down with thread, and when I touch it, milk gushes out onto the faint pattern on my *yukata*. The sleeve of my kimono touches my child’s chin and she cries as she follows it. She must be seeking the breast.

I looked through the window at the temperature on the thermometer. The mercury has climbed to 38.5 degrees. That means it’s up 2.5 degrees. I tried pressing lightly on my forehead.

“Rounds! Rounds!” A young nurse ran by, her white hat fluttering, carrying a tin bedpan and heading toward the hall. The bedpan belonged to the bedbound old woman who resembled a squid. When the lid was removed, flies fluttered out vigorously like scattered sesame seeds.

Shortly thereafter, the director and his wife entered through the west entrance. The rubber tube of the stethoscope bounced vigorously in the head nurse’s hand. The director followed her, his veiny hands threaded together over the seat of his pants. Visible through the weak prescription lenses of his glasses, behind his eyelids those two discerning eyes were bloodshot from tedium. Or maybe he was drinking sake last night.

“O Lord, thank you for bestowing these unfortunate ailing people again today with more time together.”

“Amen,” added the former prostitute in a nasally voice.

I thought about how I should broach the subject of milk with the director. Discussing the idea with her, I found myself revolted by the former prostitute’s nasally voice. I felt myself sharply on guard like a cat. Lying on my back, I shut my eyes.

I could hear the sound of the second hand on the nurse’s watch as she approached, so I snapped my eyes opened as though I’d just awoken from a long sleep.

“Ah, what a lovely sleeping face!” The nurse removed the gauze meant to protect the child’s face from insects. Afterwards, the director followed behind her.

“Noda, what did you use this bottle for?” The director turned toward the nurse who was rifling through the pages of the patient roster balanced on her arm and pointed to a small bottle. I hadn’t noticed, but it was on my bedside table.

“Yes?” The nurse made an inscrutable face as she took the bottle, raised it up to eye level, and carefully read the label. “Ah yes. This is the medicine we injected her with this morning.”

“Injected? Did you ask the head nurse’s permission?”

“No, well . . . it was just that she fainted. She’s always getting cerebral anemia, so I skipped getting permission this time.”

“You goddamn fool!”

Suddenly, the blue glass shattered against the floor, sending the pieces flying in all directions and the cork bouncing almost four meters.

“You’ve been a nurse here for two years now, you ought to be able to read German like this. This G— medicine, you give it

by mouth once and then you can't use it again. Don't you know how much a gram is? Do you think that this impoverished hospital can afford to use such medicine for each and every case of cerebral anemia?"

Hearing the sound of poor German spoken garrulously coming from above my pillow, I laughed through my nostrils. *The price of a bottle of medicine compared to the life of a despised female patient.* The decision to feed my child corrupted milk bounced around my lonely heart like a brisk wind.

Milk gushes out with incredible force. The pain attached to the milk, by morning it reaches up to my shoulders. I feel as though my body is partially filled with pus. Overnight I give the child the nipple three times. The milk being lured out by the sucking of her throat and tongue is pleasant, like being teased by drowsiness. This must be the beginning of motherly love. A terribly pleasant morning is on its way. From below my breasts a numbness rises through my body; it is as smooth as a perfectly fitted silk shirt against the skin.

"Milk, milk," I can't help but hear over and over in a voice as charmless as smoked herring, but it's easy to cast aside. Whether its beriberi-tainted milk or pus, isn't that what my beloved child is crying out to drink? Both my grandfather, a poor farmer, and my father, a craftsman, died after wearing themselves down, working themselves to death their whole lives to feed their children, like maggots with so many mouths. The strong desire to feed children is a tradition that has pierced the poor the like wire since time immemorial.

I feel cut off from the past and the future, flat like a sheet of paper. At any rate, ours is only for a short while the relationship between parent and child. Prison is the wall standing in

my way. Once she grows up a little, I'll be separated from her. I must never let her know of the miserable life of prison. The sin of the parent is not the sin of the child; they have been illegally imprisoned—that's why children are expelled. But in this individualist world, how can a child torn from its mother ever be free? The law requires that imprisoned mothers lose the baggage of their beloved children. Having been born in prison does not mean their own imprisonment. Ah, my thoughts arriving to this point, without having noticed I've discovered within myself an unmanageable nihilism.

I, a socialist, have withered before the fact of imprisonment. I have certainly withered. Ah, and moreover, this pitiful self-awareness makes me long for myself. *Woman no, have faith in the future!* My love for my child is deep, and because of that depth, I vow to fight.

What a truly refreshing morning it is.

The sound of a tuberculous cough from the men's ward and a sheet of pink paper were blown around my bed, near the window, by the relentless wind. The former prostitute was crying hysterically, the bright white soles of her shoes visible at the edge of her futon. Sprouting up around her long ears, a suppressed pink innocence is visible. She must've been a beautiful young woman.

Just as I began nodding off, the clamor running in the hallway caused me to open my eyes. Their white uniforms fluttering in the commotion, a number of nurses come running by.

"They've died!" I heard a voice say.

"What? Dead?" Surprised at even my own surprise, I lifted

my head. Then, the dimpled apprentice nurse jumped in as if she were lost, covered her face with her arm, and let out a deep sigh as though she were vomiting out her surprise.

“The person in the intensive care with beriberi-induced heart failure, because, I don’t know, when they died, the flies were covering their face like this . . .” The nurse put her red ruby-adorned left hand over her eye and showed her face.

“What? Flies?”

Recalling the cold, unpleasant sensation of a fly landing on my face, I waved my hand through the flies swarming around my child’s face. As she sleeps, she moves her eyebrows up and down. Before long, a crude stretcher made of canvas suspended between two rods of bamboo passed through the dark corridor against the background of the bright green leaves outside. From underneath the dirty flannel blanket, one leg, swollen like an oriental melon, was visible.

The stretcher was circling the garden and headed toward the morgue. From my position on the bed, I could just make out the shape of the Chinese man carrying the stretcher, his Manchu queue bouncing up and down vigorously with every step. On the ground near where the Chinese man steps, I can see the yellow blooms of the dandelions that have been crushed by stones.

In the corner of the room, so dark that no matter where you look is black, the delusional mad woman repeated “Hail Amitabha Buddha, Hail Amitabha Buddha,” moving her mouth to laugh.

“Ms. Kitamura. That person just now, they were alive.”

“Huh?”

I couldn’t make sense of it. I listened more.

“That person going by on the stretcher. They were alive I tell you.”

“No chance . . .”

“No, they were alive, they were alive.”

While saying it she made a funny face and turned her knee, sticking out one foot and wiggling it around, showing her sagging flesh beneath the unbecoming red frock.

“I could see it perfectly from here. Her foot was moving around like this!”

“Why are you saying such rotten things?”

Suddenly, a woman with palsy threw an apple skin.

When the three o'clock rounds finished, they wrap the body tightly in a white apron. The doctors puffed tobacco smoke as they walked towards the morgue. In addition to the two professors, there were three students from the Port Arthur Medical School who'd previously examined me.

The day of the autopsy, as always, everyone seemed depressed and couldn't get up. I received a letter from my husband:

While I was wondering why the baby hadn't come yet, this morning I heard from the guard there was news of your birth in the paper. Does the baby look like me? Does it have normal toes?

I'd been emotional since the morning, and the part about the toes being normal inevitably brought me to tears. My husband's big toe has a birth defect and is as thin as his pinky toe. And in the letter, likewise inevitably, he told me about his life in prison. I felt indignant that even in the life of my captive husband, his wife on the outside and his just born child were his primary concern. But I also felt an unbearable nostalgia that I wanted to cling to.

That evening, the child was afflicted with terrible diarrhea, her stool a copper-green mixture of water and grain. I'd been checking her diaper constantly, bringing her lips to the breast to measure her temperature, but I was exhausted and soon I'd turned my back to my child and closed my eyes.

When I brought her lips to my breast, she shook her neck in displeasure. She seemed delirious with fever. What I'd been clearly all too afraid of was manifesting. I've tried to trick her into swallowing some red grape-colored medicine by bringing it to my breast, but as she won't even swallow the milk, I can hardly make her take the medicine.

After crinkling up her mouth and vomiting, her throat became inflamed. When I requested they examine her for illness, the nurse made an annoyed face, grabbed my child by the diaper, and carried her to the second floor. I stayed up through the night, straining my ears listening for any sound from the second floor. Until midnight, I could hear the voice of a paying patient in the room next to the nurse's station singing the words to a popular song without pausing for breath to such an extent I didn't believe he was sick. Until it got late, I couldn't even hear the sound of the nurses' footsteps.

Upon returning downstairs, I passed the night waiting for the sound of the nurses' footsteps.

When the night broke, the apprentice nurse came to my bedside with a friendly smile. That grin seemingly matched perfectly my intuition.

"I'm very sorry; she passed at precisely four o'clock."

"Is that so?" I replied in a calm voice, as if to cover the hushed voice of my interlocutor, as if nothing were wrong. Truthfully, no feelings beyond that have awakened in me.

"I'd certainly like to see her face, but I'm having difficulty walking."

"No, you can't."

At this point, begrudging her smile, whatever I said wasn't an answer. The nurses, whose primary obligation was to entertain the paying male patients, how far would they actually go? For them, these sorts of things are merely perfunctory.

As if I were in the second-floor exam room where the nurses play, waiting for the pus in the beriberi-infected milk, I drew a sketch of a small child, puffy and drowsy. When I close my eyes, I feel as though I'm moving between my dreams and reality. However, it is as though all I can see is a solitary fabric fluttering back and forth like a flag, just visible in the darkness. All my senses are dead. Is this unhappiness?

When she noticed that the corpse was being carried to the morgue, the former prostitute, who was ambulatory, offered to go buy incense in my stead. Actually, frankly I asked her. Lying down as I am, instead of the memory of my child's face, the sound of dripping of the tap in the morgue came to me. Already the autopsy begins.

The autopsy will almost certainly show that the infant died because I had no money for infant formula, I was helpless and had to feed her milk contaminated with beriberi. And moreover, more and more the evidence will tell the medical community: "Beware of beriberi-contaminated milk. When the mother has beriberi, the child must be raised with a wet nurse or on infant formula." Nevertheless, from the autopsy of my sweet child's corpse they'll never be able to draw the conclusions about what the sorts of people who can't afford formula ought to do.

The next day, I received a call from the prosecutor stating my imprisonment proceedings had concluded. That night, it was raining, a rare downpour in the colony. At the front entrance, where the lights are shut off at 8 p.m. to save power, the sabers worn by two police officers glimmered. I was helped into a carriage by a Chinese rickshaw driver. My destination was Lushun Prison in Port Arthur. On the hill climbing into the suburbs, the carriage trembled driving into the blinding wind. Every time the carriage shifted, bright red light in the distance flickered on the hood's celluloid windows. It's the prison gate.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: By 1927, Japan's so-called "Taishō democracy" had begun to give way to the imperialism of the early Shōwa era. The death of the reformist Emperor Meiji initially brought political turmoil via the Taishō political crisis of 1912, but the ultimate outcome was a period of fairly peaceful, democratic government. Subsequently, the 1910s and early 1920s brought to Japan the proliferation of various forms of political thought, including socialism, communism, and anarchism, and in 1922, on the heels of the success of the Bolsheviks, the Japanese Communist Party was formed. However, the newly-established parliamentary government was not yet rooted enough to withstand major upheaval, and the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 was the beginning of the end of any pretense of liberal democracy in the prewar era.

On September 1, a magnitude 7.9 earthquake struck just outside

of Tokyo, killing over 140,000 and leaving millions more homeless. In the aftermath, ethnic violence was rampant as unfounded rumors spread that Koreans living in the area were committing robberies and engaging in violence and sabotage. The Japanese government reported over two hundred deaths of ethnic Koreans, though some sources place the number much higher. The ethnic violence spilled over to other populations as well, including Chinese and Ryukyuan (indigenous Okinawan) people. Ultimately, the event would lay bare the violence underlying the apparent "peace" within the rising imperial nation. At the time of the quake, Japan already formally held Taiwan and Korea as colonies and, in practice, it ruled over much of Manchuria as well. As the decades wore on, its methods of colonial administration became increasingly brutal. The Japanese government took advantage of the crisis to pass the 1925 Peace Preservation Law, which was targeted

specifically toward socialists and carried a penalty of up to ten years' imprisonment for involvement with socialist organizing.

This history forms the backdrop of Taiko Hirabayashi's story, a famously semi-autobiographical tale. Hirabayashi was a member of the proletarian writers' movement and active in the Japanese leftist community more broadly. In the aftermath of the earthquake, she and her anarchist lover were arrested and jailed for a month. Subsequently, they struggled to find work and were in the constant sights of Japanese police. This experience led them to move first to Korea and then to Manchuria. In the latter locale, Hirabayashi began working for a railway company until she and her lover were again arrested. While she was questioned and quickly released, unlike her lover, she was then already eight months pregnant and suffering from the effects of beriberi. Like her protagonist, she was held in a charity hospital to give

birth, and her only biological child died after a scant few weeks. This incident would greatly affect Hirabayashi, and would inform much of her work, including this text as well as her 1926 breakout work "Self-Mockery."

At the time that Hirabayashi was in Manchuria, the region was still nominally under Chinese control. Influence in the region, however, had been one of the causes of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. Japan had initially acquired a lease in perpetuity over a small portion of the territory known as the Kwantung Leasehold as a result of the 1894-1895 Sino-Japanese War, but as a consequence of the Triple Intervention in the war's aftermath, the lease was then ceded nearly immediately to Russia. Ten years later, Japan regained the lease after the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905. During the era of Russian control, a railway had been built within the territory, which was ceded to Japan in the terms of the treaty, and Ja-

pan further established rights of extraterritoriality in the areas immediately surrounding the railroad. In administering this area and in state policy more broadly, Imperial Japan employed formalized tactics of settler colonialism which served the twin purposes of expanding the Japanese sphere of influence and disposing of unwanted populations that could potentially drain government resources and contribute to political instability. In other words, that Hirabayashi and other dissidents like her ended up in Manchuria was no accident.

What is perhaps most notable about Hirabayashi's work broadly is its depiction of the oppression borne by working-class women at the hands of capitalism and patriarchy. In "At the Charity Clinic," she viscerally portrays the choicelessness and oppression faced by working-class women, focusing particularly on the ways in which these circumstances are marked on the body. She, however, spares room to criticize even

leftist men for their treatment of women, from their adherence to patriarchal systems to their minimization of women's contributions. Other of her works, such as "Beating" (1929), take on feminist themes such as domestic violence more explicitly. In the postwar era, she became associated with Tenkō literature. Tenkō was a political conversion in the postwar period whereby socialist and communist figures renounced their radical beliefs and embraced a more reformist outlook. Such "conversions" often took place under duress. Whether Hirabayashi's was sincere or in the service of self-preservation, her work is remembered today as important not only in the sphere of proletarian literature, but also for its feminist ethos and its portrayal of working-class women's subjective, embodied experience.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION: The historical present appears much more frequently in Japanese writing than it does in English. Many writers in En-

glish may recall their early compositions marked in red with the note “tense inconsistency.” Japanese, however, has no such stricture, and within a paragraph an author may move seamlessly between the past and present tenses, the present interrupting in the middle of a paragraph in order to communicate a sense of immediacy within a text otherwise unfolding in the past. In “At the Charity Clinic” and many other stories besides, Hirabayashi makes particularly effective use of this form in conveying the embodied experience of working-class women. While translating the text, I found that attempts to bring it in line with English conventions surrounding tenses removed something fundamental from the reading experience and flattened the emotional impact. There are certainly risks in leaving the Japanese historical present intact when brought into English. Perhaps most pressing, in its strangeness to the Anglophone ear, is the risk of Orientalization and

exoticization. Additionally, it may appear from the English translation that Hirabayashi’s writing was more experimental in form than it was in reality. These risks, however, pale in comparison to the risk of draining the very life from the text itself.

TAIKO HIRABAYASHI was born in Suwa, Nagano in 1905. A prolific author and literary critic, she continued publishing until soon before her death in 1972. The Taiko Hirabayashi Prize for Literature was established in her honor after her death and ran for 25 years until 1997. Although in Japan many of her stories were adapted into films, she remains little known and little translated in the English-speaking world.

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