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Of Dreams and Illusions: Akutagawa's “MENSURA ZOILI” and “Fata Morgana” Commentary and Translation

Charles De Wolf

[In the following article, I compare and contrast two works by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and offer historical and cultural background, along with relevant linguistic details.]

Et de mensura jus dicere, vasa minora
Frangere pannosus vacuis ædilis Ulubris? (Juvenal, *Satire X*)

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*)

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke published “MENSURA ZOILI” in *Shinshichō* (新思潮) in January, 1917; equally autobiographical “Shinkirō: Aruiwa Zoku-Umi no Hotori” (蜃気楼 或いは続海のほとり) appeared in *Fujin-kōron* (婦人公論) in March, 1927, just months before the author's death. In both mood and style, the two works are strikingly different. In the former, Akutagawa waxes

Swiftian, with biting, satirical wit; in the latter, he is already quite uncertain of himself. In the invented dream of the first story, there are references, albeit both veiled and ironic, to decidedly real people; The second story, though seemingly light-hearted and largely factual, nonetheless suggests a twilight zone between reality and illusion.

Of “MENSURA ZOILI,” Mishima Yukio comments:

This work may very well be drawing on a variety of writing seen, for example, in Mori Ōgai’s “Le Parnasse ambulant.” Regarding that work, Hinatsu Kōnosuke has written: “It is, rather than a piece of literary fiction, the fictionalization of a tantrum or an example of cosmopolitan clutter. It is not something to be taken all that earnestly...Or you could say it is a satire printed in small type.” This description also applies to Akutagawa’s “Mensura Zoili.” The only difference is that Akutagawa is more reserved than Ōgai and unable to say what he is thinking. (Mishima, 1956, as translated by De Wolf)

Mori Ōgai’s “Le Parnasse ambulant” (1910) describes pretentious foreign literary critics. Mishima appears to be suggesting a rather tenuous connection. More generally, Akutagawa is clearly drawing on a long tradition of satire, as is also reflected in “Kappa” (河童), published in early 1927, the year of Akutagawa’s death. It is unclear what Mishima means by claiming that Akutagawa “is unable to say what he is thinking” (思ったことが言へない...). Perhaps more to the point is the fact that Akutagawa, unlike Ōgai, was largely apolitical. Even “Kappa,” it has been argued, is less about the world and Japanese society than about Akutagawa’s own inner turmoil.

Of “Shinkirō” [Mirage], Mishima comments:

Of Akutagawa's so-called "plotless" stories, perhaps none is as perfectly lucid as this one. Every time I read it, I am reminded of a Dali painting, with its vast, clear autumn sky and strangely shaped floating objects. "Shinkirō" is reminiscent of Kajii Motojirō, in that it presents clear images of things, the state of the author's mind being expressed through them, with poetry in the flow. This is because no other writer has applied as much interpretation to all things as has Akutagawa, removing their original nature and turning them into props for his stories. On the other hand, in the works written near the time of his death, all things tend to be dissolved in anxiety, losing clarity of form; for the author, the outside world is lost. None is this is true for "Shinkirō"; it happily falls somewhere in between.¹⁾ (Mishima, 1956, as translated by De Wolf)

"Shinkirō: Zoku-Umi no Hotori" ('Mirage: At the Seashore II') was originally published together with what we could call "At the Seashore I," the account, alluded to in Part II, of Akutagawa's days spent with his friend Kume Masao (久米正雄) (1891–1952) on the coast of Chiba Prefecture in 1915. In the descriptions of the sea and in the mood of camaraderie, the second story echoes the first, but in the sequel, youthful exuberance has yielded to a sense of foreboding. In "At the Seashore," too, the narrator (Akutagawa) recounts a strange dream, but he treats it with humor and irony, without dwelling on any psychological implications that it might suggest.²⁾

The stories are now just over a century old, and as time has rendered obscure some details, even for Japanese readers, explanatory notes may be needed, though I have chosen to include them in the introductions, rather than to resort to what may be distracting footnotes.

MENSURA ZOILI

The Latinate title of the story is that of the author, the noun *mensura* derived from the deponent verb *metior* ‘measure’. Zoili ‘of Zoilus’ refers to the Greek grammarian and critic, Zoilos (BCE 400–320), known for his harsh criticism of Homer, for which he may or may not have been punished with death.

Kinoshita Mokutarō (木下壱太郎) was the penname of the polymath, Ōta Masao (太田正雄) (1875–1945), who distinguished himself both as a literary figure and as a dermatologist, endeavoring to treat Hansen’s Disease. He was known for the precision of his observations.

The narrator remarks: “I am astounded that a man with so square a jaw could be so learned.” (僕は、角顎の見かけによらない博学に、驚いた。) At the end of the story, Akutagawa wonders whether the man in his dream was Kume Masao. Akutagawa appears to be engaging in playful teasing, suggesting that physical appearance, including his close friend’s (somewhat) square jaw and his brown suit, may suggest something other than a fine literary sense.

The reference to Pallas Athena’s transforming frogs into humans is obviously Akutagawa’s invention. It is tempting to suppose that he is thinking not only of Greco-Roman mythology but also of the famous Heian-Kamakura-period scrolls, *Chōjū-giga* (鳥獣戯画), satirically representing anthropomorphic animals, including frogs.

Akutagawa was a compulsive smoker and describes himself as such, with frequent references to cigarettes and the brands of the time. Asahi cigarettes (1904–76) were more expensive than Golden Bat but cheaper than Shikishima, the latter, Akutagawa says at the beginning of “At the Seashore,” he was smoking with Kume.

““A most useful tool. A facilitator of what we call civilization.”” (非常に便利です。所謂文明の利器ですな。) Sino-Japanese *bunmei* (文明) was an old word that in the Meiji period took on a new meaning, suggesting “civilization” and “enlightenment,” particularly as promoted by educator Fukuzawa Yukichi (福沢諭吉). Akutagawa had ambivalent feelings about the concept and often speaks of it in ironic tones.

““The mere sight of it is enough to strike fear in the hearts of those writers and artists who think that they can peddle dog meat with the display of a sheep’s head.”” Akutagawa, who was steeped in Chinese learning, is referring to the classical phrase 懸羊頭賣狗肉 (*xuán yángtóu mài gǒuròu*). The German translator, Armin Stein (2022), nativizes the expression as “die Katze im Sack kaufen” (‘sell a cat in a sack’), cf. English “pig in a poke.”

““Kume? “The Silver Coin”? ‘Yes, it has been evaluated.’” Just two months before the publication of “MENSURA ZOILI,” both Kume’s story and Akutagawa’s “The Pipe” (煙管 *Kiseru*) had been negatively reviewed by literary critic and translator Hirotsu Kazuo (広津和郎) (1891–1968) in the November 8th edition of the *Jiji-shinpō* (時事新報).

““By holding up to it proven masterpieces. Maupassant’s *Une vie*, for example, caused the needle to swing to full deflection.”” Akutagawa was well acquainted with and admiring of the work of Maupassant, but here he is no doubt satirizing those espousing naturalism, to which Akutagawa was opposed. Furthermore, the Japanese translator of *Une vie* was none other than Hirotsu Kazuo.

““Or is it the eruption of an undersea volcano?”” It is tempting to speculate here that Akutagawa is thinking of Jules Verne’s *L’île mystérieuse*, at the end of which the island where Captain Nemo and the Nautilus had taken refuge, is destroyed in a volcanic eruption. If so, Akutagawa would have read it in French or in English, as it had not yet been translated into Japa-

nese.

The narrator awakes to find himself holding St. John Ervine's *The Critics*, a drama in which four critics review a play, *Hamlet*, by a supposedly unknown playwright. Again, such "reviewers" are the subject of satire.

I find myself in the lounge of a ship, looking across the table at a strange man.

But wait! I say "a ship's lounge," but I cannot be sure. I have the uneasy feeling that though the room's arrangement or the view of the ocean beyond the window may lead me to think so, the setting is, in fact, quite ordinary. Ah, but no again. It occurs to me that it is a ship's lounge after all, for otherwise it would not be swaying so. As I am not Kinoshita Mokutarō, I am unable to measure the fluctuations centimeter for centimeter, but it is clear that the ship is indeed swaying. Any thought to the contrary will be refuted by the sight outside of the window of the horizon rising and falling. The sky is overcast, the sea stretching endlessly in a muddled green. Where that green meets the gray clouds, the hazy boundary slices the porthole with ever-shifting string-like lines. Floating within that view, something sky-colored is drifting past—most likely a seagull.

Well now, the strange man, with a bored expression, is reading a newspaper, spectacles perched on his nose, the thick lenses hinting at myopia. His face, with its bushy mustache and square jaw, looks familiar, but though I may well have seen him somewhere before, memory fails me. His long, tousled hair suggests that he belongs to the literary or artistic class, an image rendered incongruous by the brown suit he is wearing.

For some minutes, I steal glances at him, as I sip sweet wine from a small goblet. I too am bored and should like to speak to him but hesitate to

do so, as he seems quite unapproachable. And now this square-jawed man plants his feet firmly down, stretches out his legs, and exclaims with a suppressed yawn: "How very dull!" He glances at me through his spectacles and turns back to his newspaper.

It seems to me all the more certain that I have met him somewhere before. There is no one in the lounge apart from the two of us. A moment later the strange man repeats his words:

"How very dull!" Throwing his newspaper down onto the table, he looks idly at me as I imbibe my wine.

"Would you care to join me in a drink? I ask.

He gives me an equivocal reply: "Hmm, well, thank you..." Cocking his head to one side, he continues: "The boredom is unbearable. By the time we arrive, it could well be the end of me." To this I agree.

"It will be more than a week before we set foot on the soil of Zoilia," he says. "And already I am heartily weary of this ship."

"Zoilia?"

"Yes, the Republic of Zoilia."

"Is there a country called Zoilia?"

"You surprise me! How strange that you are unaware of Zoilia's existence! I do not know where your journey is taking you, but it has long been the custom for this ship to call at the port of Zoilia."

Quite perplexed, I am now unsure as to why I am even on this ship—and I have certainly never heard of Zoilia before.

"Really?"

"Of course! The land of Zoilia has long been renowned. As you surely know, the scholar who was Homer's most vehement critic hailed from Zoilia, and even today there are magnificent monuments in the capital commemorating him."

I am astounded that a man with so square a jaw could be so learned.

“It would seem then to be an ancient land.”

“Yes indeed. According to myth, it was originally inhabited by frogs, to which Pallas Athena gave human form. Some people have speculated that this is why the speech of Zoilians resembles batrachian quacking, but such a claim should hardly be given credence. The earliest chronicles begin with that extraordinary figure who vanquished Homer.

“So is it even now quite a civilized land?”

“Absolutely! Particularly at the University of Zoilia, located in the capital, the nation’s finest scholars are gathered, making it second to none among its global peers. There is a recently developed value-measuring device, a valorimeter, as it were. It is a modern wonder—or so it is reported by the *Zoilia Daily News*.

“What is a valorimeter?”

“It is quite literally a device for measuring value. It is apparently used primarily to evaluate literature and paintings.

“What sort of value?”

“First and foremost, artistic value, but, of course, other criteria can be applied. The Zoilians have named it in honor of their renowned ancestor, and so it is called the ‘Mensura Zoili.’”

“Have you ever seen it?”

“I know it only from an illustration in the *Zoilia Daily News*. From what I could see, it is no different from ordinary measuring devices. One simply sets it up in front of a book or a canvas. A book’s binding or a picture frame may distort the initial data, but as the deviation can later be corrected, that is no serious issue.”

“All in all, a useful tool indeed.”

“A most useful tool. A facilitator of what we call civilization.” So say-

ing, Squarejaw takes from his pocket a pack of Asahi and places a cigarette between his lips.

"The mere sight of it is enough to strike fear in the hearts of those writers and artists who think that they can peddle dog meat with the display of a sheep's head. After all, it allows the value of a work to be clearly quantified and given a numerical rating. I think it particularly wise of the Zoilian citizenry to have promptly provided the customs authorities with the device."

"Why so?"

"To ensure that the value of all books and pictures coming from abroad is properly measured and that those deemed worthless are denied entry. At present, all works undergo inspection, whether they come from Japan, England, Germany, Austria, France, Russia, Italy, Spain, America, Sweden, Norway or any other country. It would seem, by the way, that those from Japan do not fare well in the process, even though, from our perspective, of course, there are many quite capable Japanese writers and artists."

As we are speaking, the door of the lounge opens, and a black garçon comes in. A nimble fellow dressed in indigo-dyed summer wear, he is carrying under his arm a bundle of newspapers, which he silently places on the table before disappearing through the door. Squarejaw flicks the ashes off his Asahi and picks up one of the newspapers. It is the *Zoilia Daily News*, printed with lines in strange cuneiform-like characters. Once again I am amazed at the erudition of the man, able as he is to read those peculiar signs.

"Again, all of the attention is still on the Mensura Zoili," he says, as he peruses the articles. "Look. Here is a table of ratings for the short stories published in Japan last month. It even includes an appendix with notes from the technician who took the measurements."

"Does it say anything about a man named Kume?" I ask, curious to know whether my friend has been mentioned.

“Kume? ‘The Silver Coin’? Yes, it has been evaluated.”

“And...?”

“Hopeless. The story, they say, is motivated by his banal and trivial insights into life. What’s worse, he rashly affects a knowing, sophisticated tone, as if he were already worldly-wise. The work as a whole is judged to be disgustingly vulgar.”

I am feeling uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry to say,” Squarejaw continues, with a sardonic chuckle, “that your story ‘The Pipe’ has also been rated.”

“And what is the judgment?”

“It is much the same. As run of the mill. Then it says: ‘Perhaps this author has already produced too many works?’”

“Oh??” My discomfort yields to a feeling of absurdity.

“You are not the only one to be submitted to the device’s judgment; so are all writers and artists. Resistance is futile; it is impossible to deceive it! It does no good to praise one’s own work, as its value is determined solely by the Mensura. It goes without saying that even favorable reviews by one’s comrades cannot alter reality. Ah, the production of a truly valuable work requires no less than stupendous, exhausting effort!”

“But how can you verify the accuracy of the evaluation?”

“By holding up to it proven masterpieces. Maupassant’s *Une vie*, for example, caused the needle to swing to full deflection.”

“Is that all?”

“That is all.”

I fall silent, for it seems to me that Squarejaw’s thinking is quite devoid of logic. But then another question occurs to me:

“So the works of Zoilian artists are also judged by this instrument?”

“No, such is forbidden by law.”

"And why is that?"

"The reason? Necessity. To do otherwise would be unacceptable to the people of Zoilia, which has always been a democracy, a country where the concept of vox populi, vox Dei is taken quite literally and strictly observed."

With a strange smile of his face, Squarejaw continues: "It is, I should say, rumored that if indigenous works were evaluated in the same way, the needle might well move quite against them. And in that event, the Zoilians would face a dilemma. They would be obliged to question either the correctness of the measurement results or the value of their works—a most unwelcome prospect. As I say, however, such is no more than a rumor."

At that moment, the ship lurches violently, sending Squarejaw tumbling out of his chair. Next, the table collapses, the wine bottle, the goblet, and the newspapers all dropping to the floor. The view of the horizon through the window vanishes, replaced by the sounds of plates breaking, chairs falling, and waves crashing against the side of the ship... A collision! A collision? Or is it the eruption of an undersea volcano?

I awake. I am sitting in the rocking chair of my study, holding the script of St. John Ervine's *The Critics*. I have fallen asleep while reading it. What I thought was the rocking of a ship was actually the rocking of the chair. Sometimes I think Squarechin was Kume, but then I think that it was another. I still do not know.

Fata Morgana

The original title, 蜃気楼 (shinkirō), reflects a Chinese legend, according to which a colossal sea creature, a giant clam or a dragon, emits vapor that forms the shape of an (illusory) tower, cf. Chinese shènqilóu. The translation to which I have resorted derives from Italian, with specific reference to the mirages seen over the Strait of Messina, as attributed to Morgan le Fay of

Arthurian legend. Such is also the title of Jürgen Berndt's (1975) German translation.

The story begins: "I set off from home one autumn day at about noon, together with K, a student who had come from Tokyo, to see a Fata Morgana." K is clearly Kume Masao, but in the autumn of 1927 he was nearly 36 and obviously no longer a student. Akutagawa is deliberately blending fiction and fact: *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.

The Azumaya (東屋 'eastern inn') was a ryokan in Kanagawa Prefecture, not far from Kugenuma Beach. It drew numerous literary figures, including Akutagawa, who resided there with his wife Fumiko and their son Yasushi (1925–1989) from February to May, 1926, before moving to a nearby villa. Referred to as Y-chan in the story, the son became a celebrated composer and conductor.

O is clearly Oana Ryūichi (小穴隆一) (1894–1966), a Western-style painter and haiku poet. Before taking his life on July 24, 1927, Akutagawa left for his children a message urging them to look up to Oana as a father figure.

The name of the offshore island Enoshima is written 江の島, lit. 'river island', referring to the Katase River (片瀬川), but Akutagawa resorts to 絵の島, lit. 'picture island'. There is, in fact, such an island, but it is located in Hiroshima Prefecture.

"What is it? 'Sr. H. Tsuji ... Unua ... Aprilo ... Jaro ... 1906...'." "What is it? 'Dua ... Majesta ...?' It says 1926." The language is Esperanto: "Mr. H. Tsuji, April 1, 1906 – May 2, 1926." Akutagawa was conversant in several languages and would have been well aware of Esperanto, interest in which at the time had reached its peak in Japan. Here he is most likely to be inserting an element of the fantastical, especially as the "real" Esperanto word for 'May' is Mayo, not Majesta.

“Ugh! I thought this was the foot of a *Dozaemon*!” Narusegawa Dozaemon (成瀬川土左衛門衛門) was an Edo-period sumo wrestler, known for being pale-skinned as well as fat. When a drowning victim was once pulled from the water, an official is said to have exclaimed that the swollen body was a Dozaemon.

Pokkuri (木履) refers to lacquered clogs worn by young girls. Though the characters would normally be read *bokuri*, it is thought that the pronunciation has been influenced by onomatopoeic *poku-poku* (*aruku*) ‘plod’ (as of horses, donkeys).

“When will Grandfather’s golden anniversary celebration be held?” The narrator explains that “Grandfather” (*Ojiisan*) refers to his father, though, in fact, he is Akutagawa’s adoptive father, his maternal uncle, Akutagawa Michiaki (芥川道章).

In the original, we read: 僕等は気軽にO君に別れ、松風の音の中を歩いて行った。その又松風の音の中には虫の声もかすかにまじっていた。(We bade O a cheery farewell and walked on amidst the keening sound of the wind in the pines, blending with the faint chirping of insects.) Here Akutagawa is no doubt deliberately echoing the conclusion to “By the Seashore”: HやNさんに別れた後、僕等は格別急ぎもせず、冷びえした渚を引き返した。渚には打ち寄せる浪の音のほかに時々澄み渡った蜩の声も僕等の耳へ伝わって来た。それは少くとも三町は離れた松林に鳴いている蜩だった。(Having parted company with H and N-san, M and I made our way unhurriedly back along the chilly edge of the waves. Their roar was in our ears – and then from time to time the clear tone of the evening cicadas’ singing in the pine wood that lay more than three hundred meters away.) At the same time, there is a contrast in mood. In the second story, the sound of the wind in the pine trees is described in the original with the onomatopoeic *kō-kō* (こうこう), a somewhat archaic word describing the howling of foxes, cf.

kon-kon. Berndt (1975) renders this as säuselte ‘rustled’, then, where I have “keening,” as raunte ‘murmured, whispered’. Where in the original, matsu-kaze no oto (松風の音) ‘the sound of the wind in the pines’ is repeated, he resorts to (poetic) Geflüster ‘whisperings’. Akutagawa is surely suggesting something more ominous.

I

I set off from home one autumn day at about noon, together with K, a student who had come from Tokyo, to see a Fata Morgana. Everyone had no doubt already heard that such optical illusions could be observed at Kugenuma Beach. Having glimpsed a ship sailing upside down, our maid had exclaimed in wonder: “It was exactly like the recent newspaper photo!”

Arriving at the Azumaya, we took a turn around the corner, as we wanted to invite O along. As was his wont, he was dressed in a red shirt and appeared to be preparing lunch, for over the hedge we could see him standing at the well, busily pumping water. I raised my ashwood walking staff and beckoned to him to join us.

“Well, well, so *you’re* here too!” he responded “Come on up, the both of you!”

O seemed to have thought that K and I had come for a visit.

“We’re on our way to see a Fata Morgana. Won’t you come along?”

“A Fata Morgana?” he asked with a laugh. “These days, everything seems to be about the Fata Morgana.”

Five minutes later, O was with us, as we trudged along the path of thick-layered sand. To the left lay the broad tidal flat, through which ran diagonally deep, ink-black oxcart tracks, evoking in me a feeling close to op-

pression. They seemed to be the traces of a most powerful prodigy's work, and the thought did indeed weigh upon me.

"I'm not fully recovered. Even those traces in the sand have a strange effect on me."

O responded with no more than knitted brows, though he seemed to grasp the intent of my words.

Before long we were walking along the banks of the Hikiji River, among of a scattering of dwarf pine trees. Though from beyond the wide beach shone the deep-blue ocean, the houses and trees of Enoshima, that picture of beauty, lay shrouded in a dull, melancholy haze.

"Well now, is that not the modern age personified?" exclaimed K abruptly and immediately smiled.

"Oh?" I wondered but then in an instant discovered myself what he was seeing: a man and a woman gazing at the sea, their backs to the bamboo-grass hedge serving as a sand barrier. In his Inverness cape and fedora, the man hardly seemed an embodiment of modernity, but the description fit the woman all the more so, with her bobbed hair, parasol, and low-heeled shoes.

"They certainly seem happy..."

"I suppose you're envious." suggested O teasingly.

The place from which the mirage could be seen was well over a hundred meters from the couple. We lay prone and looked across the river at the shimmering sand, on which shone a blue line, about the width of a ribbon. It seemed to be simply a reflection of the water's color, with no shadow of a ship or anything else.

"Is that all there is to a Fata Morgana?" remarked K in a tone of disappointment, his chin covered with sand. Flying above from somewhere, several hundred meters away, was a crow, skimming the dancing indigo before alighting and leaving for just an instant on the shimmering ribbon a reflec-

tion of its upturned shadow.

“Even so,” said O, as we rose from the sand, “I would call that quite a first-class show for today.”

Just as we were on our way back, we saw coming toward us “the modern age,” though the two should have been *behind* us. Quite surprised, I turned around. The man and woman were still there with their backs to the bamboo-grass hedge; they seemed to be engaged in conversation. We laughed, as though with a hint of disappointment, especially on the part of O.

“Well, if they are not a mirage!”

They were not, of course, the same couple, though there was a remarkable resemblance, the woman with her bobbed hair and the man with his fedora.

“Quite uncanny!”

“I also wondered how they could have crept up on us.”

As we went on talking, we left the bank of the Hikiji River behind and crossed a stretch of low dunes. At the foot of bamboo-grass fences, the sand had dusted the dwarf pines yellow. O stopped for a moment and grunted, as he bent down to pick up something: a wooden plaque inscribed with Roman letters in a bitumen-black frame.

“What is it? ‘Sr. H. Tsuji ... Unua ... Aprilo ... Jaro ... 1906...’”

“What is it? ‘Dua ... Majesta ...’? It says 1926.”

“This was attached to a body buried at sea, was it not?” The question came from O.

“But aren’t remains simply wrapped in a burial cloth before being committed to the waves?”

“Yes, but then this plaque was attached. Look. Here is a nail that was driven in. Perhaps it’s what is left of a cross.”

We were by this time walking through dwarf-bamboo and a pine grove,

both reminiscent of a country villa. O's explanation of the plaque seemed to me quite plausible. Even there in the bright sunlight, I felt a flutter of unease.

"Now there you've picked up something that will hardly bring good luck!"

"What? I think I shall make it my talisman...The dates are 1906 to 1926. So the deceased died at about twenty. Twenty or so..."

"Male or female?"

"Hmm...In any case, perhaps a mixed-blood..."

As I replied to K's question, I pictured a Eurasian youth dying on a ship. In my imagination, he had had a Japanese mother.

"A mirage?" O remarked suddenly, as though to himself. He was staring ahead as he spoke, perhaps off-handedly, though his word somehow touched something in my heart.

"How about stopping for tea?"

We were now standing at the corner of the main street, which was lined with houses. Lined with houses? There was nonetheless hardly a soul to be seen on the dry sandy road.

"What do you intend to do?" I asked K.

"Whatever you like," he replied

At that moment a snow-white dog, its tail hanging limply, was coming toward us from down the street.

II

After K had left for Tokyo, I once again crossed the bridge over the Hikiji River with O—this time also in the company of my wife. It was around seven in the evening; we had just finished dinner.

The stars were not visible that night. We walked along the deserted beach, exchanging few words. On the beach, near the mouth of the river,

there was a single moving light, apparently a marker for fishing boats out at sea.

There was also, of course, the endless roar of the waves. As we drew closer to the water, the scent gradually grew stronger; it seemed to be less of the sea itself than of the seaweed and the tide-washed wood being strewn at our feet. I felt it somehow not only through my nose but also on my skin.

We stood at the water's edge for a while, watching the faint glow of the waves. Wherever we looked, the sea was pitch-black. I remembered staying at a beach in Kazusa some ten years before and immediately also recalled the friend who was with me. Even as he continued studying, he had gone over the galley proofs of my short story "Yam Gruel."

Meanwhile, O was crouching at the water's edge, as he lit a match.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, nothing...But you know you can see all sorts of things this way."

O was looking over his shoulder at us, directing his comment more to my wife. Indeed, amidst the scattering of green *Codium* tufts and red *Gelidium* strands, various seashells were shining in the light of the flame. When the match went out, O struck another and step by step moved on along the edge of the surf.

"Ugh! I thought this was the foot of a *Dozaemon*!" Half-buried in the sand was a bathing shoe. Lying in the seaweed was also a large sea sponge. As the fire was now extinguished, we were all the more enveloped in darkness.

"Our present spoils are not at all up to what we had this afternoon."

"Spoils? Oh, you mean that plaque. That's hardly the sort of thing one sees every day."

Putting the waves and their ceaseless roar behind us, we walked back over the broad strand, often with seaweed under foot as well as sand.

"There are all sorts of things around here too!"

"Shall I light another match?"

"No...But wait. I hear bells ringing."

Thinking that this might be yet another of the many hallucinations I had been suffering, I listened intently. But this time there was no mistake; there was a real sound coming from somewhere. Once more I asked O whether he had heard the same. My wife, walking several steps behind, now spoke to us with a laugh.

"You must be hearing my clog bells."

I did not need to turn around to know that she was wearing straw sandals.

"I've become a child this evening and am walking about in *pokkuri*."

"What's ringing in your sleeve. Ah," said O with a laugh, "it's one of Y-chan's toys, a celluloid toy, with a bell inside."

And now my wife had caught up with us, and the three of us were walking side by side. Encouraged by her playful banter, we spoke in a more cheerful tone.

I told O about the dream I had had the night before. In it, I found myself talking to a truck driver in front of a modern, Western-style house. I was sure that I had met him before but, on waking, could not remember where.

"And then I suddenly remembered: It was a woman, a journalist who came to interview me three or four years ago."

"So it was a female driver?"

"No, a man, naturally. But his face—his face alone was hers. Once one sees something, it somehow remains somewhere in the mind, does it not?"

"I suppose so...At least if one sees a face that leaves a strong impression..."

"But that is what is so uncanny about it. I wasn't at all interested in the

person's face. There is, it seems, so much that lies beyond the thresholds of consciousness."

"So it's like us, here on the beach. One lights a match, and then all manner of things come into view."

As we conversed in this way, I noticed quite by chance that our faces were visible—though the darkness had remained as before, with not so much as a star to be seen. Once again, I was struck by a sense of eeriness, as I gazed up at the sky. My wife too seemed to have noticed something, for she now said, as though responding to my unspoken question: "It's because of the sand, isn't it?"

She drew her sleeves together, as she looked back over the broad beach.

"So it would seem."

"Sand is quite a trickster. It even conjures up mirages. Have you seen any yourself?" O asked her.

"Not really, though the other day I saw some sort of bluish stripe."

"Just what we saw today. That's all there was."

We crossed the bridge and walked along the embankment past the Azumaya. The wind had risen without our notice, and there was a howling in the tops of all the pines. Now it seemed to me that a small man was swiftly coming toward us. I suddenly remembered an illusion from the summer: On an evening such as this, I had taken a piece of paper stuck on a poplar branch to be a helmet. But the man was no hallucination, and the closer he came, the more clearly I could see the breast of his shirt.

"What sort of a necktie pin is that?"

I had hardly posed the question in a quiet voice, when I saw that it was the glow of a cigarette. My wife bit into a sleeve to suppress her laughter. Without giving us so much as a glance, the man hurried past us.

"Good night."

"Good night."

We bade O a cheery farewell and walked on amidst the keening sound of the wind in the pines, blending with the faint chirping of insects.

"When will Grandfather's golden anniversary celebration be held?"

She was referring to my father.

"I wonder...Did the butter from Tokyo arrive?"

"No. Just sausages."

Soon we stood before our house gate—and saw that it was half-open.

Notes

- 1) Hinatsu Kōnosuke (日夏 耿之介) was the penname of Higuchi Kunito (樋口國登) (1890–1971), poet, literary scholar, and translator of English literature. Kajii Motojirō (梶井基次郎) (1901–32) is best known for "Lemon" Remon 檸檬), a short story in which the protagonist deliberately leaves a lemon atop a collection of illustrations he sees in the Maruzen book store.
- 2) In the dream, Akutagawa thinks that a troublesome student from his university days is calling to him, only to realize that it is a crucian carp in a moonlit pond. He then awakes. For an English translation of "Umi no Hotori," see De Wolf, *Mandarins* (2007). Archipelago Books. Brooklyn, New York.

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