

❧TRANSLATION

I Can Speak

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PAIN: a night of submission, a morning of resignation. Is this life a mere effort at resignation? An endurance of wretchedness? Day after day, my youth is thus gnawed away; and happiness—I have found it in wretched quarters.

My song having lost its voice, I lived in idleness in Tokyo for a while, and then, quietly, I began to write something—not a song, but as it were a ‘murmur of life’; thus I was little by little led by my work to realize how my writing should proceed. ‘Guess this is about the sort of thing. . .’—in this way I picked up a little something like confidence, and got started on the novel I had planned long ago.

Last year, in September, I rented the second floor of a resting-house called ‘Tenkajaya’ on the top of Misaka Pass in Yamanashi Prefecture. From then on my work moved steadily ahead, finally coming to almost a hundred pages. The results didn’t seem too bad even when I read them over. I gathered new strength. And one day when a strong wintry wind was blowing, I impetuously swore to myself that, no matter what, I would not return to Tokyo till I finished it.

It was a stupid pledge. September, October, November came, and the cold weather at Misaka became unbearable. During those months, the lonely, depressing nights followed one after another. How I was tempted! Having so impetuously made a promise to myself, I couldn’t go back on it now at this stage. Even though I wanted to run off to Tokyo, it would have been like breaking one of the Commandments. Atop the pass, I vacillated between two courses. I thought of going down to Kōfu. As Kōfu was even milder than Tokyo, I thought maybe I could last through the winter.

Down to Kōfu I went. It did me good. My bad cough left me. I rented a sunny room in a lodging house on the outskirts of town, and tried the feel of sitting at

a desk. I felt I had made the right decision. Once again, my work advanced bit by bit.

About noon, when I was working quietly alone, I could hear the sound of young girls singing. I would put down my pen and listen. There was a spinning mill across the alley from the lodging house, and the girls sang as they worked. Among them, one voice was especially good, and it led the singing. A swan in a pond of ducks, I thought. It was a beautiful voice, so beautiful that I even felt like expressing thanks to the singer. I even felt like climbing the wall of the mill and taking just one glance at the owner of that voice.

'Here I am, one miserable male, and you don't know how much I am helped day after day by your singing—you don't know how much. How wonderfully you have encouraged me, my work! I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart.' I wondered if I should scrawl something like this on a piece of paper and throw it through the mill window.

But if I did something like that and the girl became surprised, frightened, and lost her voice suddenly, I'd be worse off. If, contrary to my intentions, my expression of gratitude would sully that innocent singing, it would be a crime. I sat alone, fidgeting nervously. Love—perhaps it was love.

It was a cold, still evening in February. From the alley leading past the mill, the raucous words of a drunk suddenly broke the stillness. I strained to hear.

'D . . . don' make funna me! Whusso funny? Okay, so I drink now 'n then, thas no reason I sh'd be made fun of. . . I CAN SPEAK ENGLISH. I'm gonna night school. 'Dja know that, Sis? Betcha di'n't. Issa secret even from Ma. I'm gonna night school, onna sly. Gotta become a big shot, thass why! Whusso funny, Sis? Whacha laughin' at so much? Y'hear me, Sis? Pretty soon I'm goin' inna army. Don' be s'prised when I do. Maybe I'm a drunkard brother, but I c'n work like anybody else. No, 'at's a lie, I hav'n been called up yet. B'mind ya, I CAN SPEAK ENGLISH. CAN YOU SPEAK ENGLISH? YES, I CAN. Nice stuff, huh, this English? Tell me hones', Sis, I'm a goo' boy, huh? a goo' boy, ain' I? Ma, she jus' don' unnerstan'.'

I opened the paper door a bit and looked down into the alley. At first I thought what I saw was a white plum tree. It wasn't, though, it was the fellow's white raincoat.

He was wearing a raincoat quite out of season, and was standing with his back pressed up against the wall of the mill. From a window above the wall, a girl was leaning from the waist over the sill and staring at the drunken kid brother.

Though the moon was out, neither the face of the kid brother nor that of the

girl was clearly visible. Her face, round and faintly white, seemed to be laughing. His face, dark, looked still childish. 'I CAN SPEAK', the English of that drunk, hit me with almost painful force. *In the beginning was the word. All things were made through it.* Suddenly, I seemed to recall a forgotten song. It was an ordinary scene, but to me an unforgettable one.

The mill girl of that night—was she the one with the beautiful voice? I don't know if she was or not. Probably she wasn't.