and lit a cigarette. Although he had been drinking all afternoon, he felt no trace of the blue flame of alcohol. A thirst slowly spread throughout his body.

'They don't wrestle,' he commented, his voice a little hoarse.

The older man's eyes were somber, virile. He smiled deeply. 'No mercy allowed.'

Trailing a long shadow on the barren road, the older man hung his head low and spoke again. 'No mercy allowed.'

At last, the young man thought, *I have taken my first step on this island*.

OE KENZABURO (1935–)

PRIZE STOCK

Translated by John Nathan

My kid brother and I were digging with pieces of wood in the loose earth that smelled of fat and ashes at the surface of the crematorium, the makeshift crematorium in the valley that was simply a shallow pit in a clearing in the underbrush. The valley bottom was already wrapped in dusk and fog as cold as the spring water that welled up in the woods, but the side of the hill where we lived, the little village built around a cobblestone road, was bathed in grape light. I straightened out of a crouch and weakly yawned, my mouth stretching open. My brother stood up too, gave a small yawn, and smiled at me.

Giving up on 'collecting', we threw our sticks into the thick summer underbrush and climbed the narrow path shoulder to shoulder. We had come down to the crematorium in search of remains, nicely shaped bones we could use as medals to decorate our chests, but the village children had collected them all and we came away empty-handed. I would have to beat some out of one of my friends at elementary school. I remembered peeking two days earlier, past the waists of the adults darkly grouped around the pit, at the corpse of a village woman lying on her back with her naked belly swollen like a small hill, her expression full of sadness in the light of the flames. I was afraid. I grasped my brother's slender arm and quickened my step. The odor of the corpse, like the sticky fluid certain kinds of beetles leaked when we squeezed them in our calloused fingers, seemed to revive in my nostrils.

Our village had been forced to begin cremating out of doors by an extended rainy season: early summer rains had fallen stubbornly until floods had become an everyday occurrence. When a landslide crushed the suspension bridge that was the shortest route to the *town*, the elementary school annex in our village was closed, mail delivery stopped, and our adults, when a trip was unavoidable, reached the

town by walking the narrow, crumbly path along the mountain ridge. Transporting the dead to the crematorium in the *town* was out of the question.

But being cut off from the *town* caused our old but undeveloped homesteaders' village no very acute distress. Not only were we treated like dirty animals in the *town*, everything we required from day to day was packed into the small compounds clustered on the slope above the narrow valley. Besides, it was the beginning of summer, the children were happy school was closed.

Harelip was standing at the entrance to the village, where the cobblestone road began, cuddling a dog against his chest. With a hand on my brother's shoulder, I ran through the deep shade of the great gingko tree to peer at the dog in Harelip's arms.

'See!' Harelip shook the dog and made him snarl. 'Look at him!'

The arms Harelip thrust in front of me were covered with bites matted with dog hair and blood. Bites stood out like buds on his chest, too, and his short, thick neck.

'See!' Harelip said grandly.

'You promised to go after mountain dogs with me!' I said, my chest clogged with surprise and chagrin. 'You went alone!'

'I went looking for you,' Harelip said quickly. 'You weren't around . . .'

'You really got bit!' I said, just touching the dog with my fingertips. Its eyes were frenzied, like a wolf's, its nostrils flared. 'Did you crawl into the lair?'

'I wrapped a leather belt around my neck so he couldn't get my throat,' Harelip said proudly.

In the dusking, purple hillside and the cobblestone road I distinctly saw Harelip emerging from a lair of withered grass and shrubs with a leather belt around his throat and the puppy in his arms while a mountain dog bit into him.

'As long as they don't get your throat,' he said, confidence strong in his voice. 'And I waited until there were only puppies inside.'

'I saw them running across the valley,' my brother said excitedly, 'five of them.'

'When?'

'Just after noon.'

'I went after that.'

'He sure is white,' I said, keeping envy out of my voice.

'His mother *mated* with a wolf!' The dialect Harelip used was lewd but very real.

'You swear?' My brother spoke as if in a dream.

'He's used to me now,' Harelip said, accentuating his confidence. 'He won't go back to his friends.'

My brother and I were silent.

'Watch!' Harelip put the dog down on the cobblestones and released him. 'See!'

But instead of looking down at the dog we looked up at the sky covering the narrow valley. An unbelievably large airplane was crossing it at terrific speed. The roar churned the air into waves and briefly drowned us. Like insects trapped in oil we were unable to move in the sound.

'It's an enemy plane!' Harelip screamed. 'The enemy's here!'

Looking up at the sky we shouted ourselves hoarse. 'An enemy plane . . .'

But except for the clouds glowing darkly in the setting sun the sky was already empty. We turned back to Harelip's dog just as it was yowling down the gravel path away from us, its body dancing. Plunging into the underbrush alongside the path it quickly disappeared. Harelip stood there dumbfounded, his body poised for pursuit. My brother and I laughed until our blood seethed like liquor. Chagrined as he was, Harelip had to laugh, too.

We left him, and ran back to the storehouse crouching in the dusk like a giant beast. In the semi-darkness inside, my father was preparing our meal on the dirt floor.

'We saw a plane!' my brother shouted at my father's back. 'A great big enemy plane!'

My father grunted and did not turn around. Intending to clean it, I lifted his heavy hunting gun down from the rack on the wall and climbed the dark stairs, arm in arm with my brother.

'Too bad about that dog,' I said.

'And that plane,' my brother said.

We lived on the second floor of the co-operative storehouse in the middle of the village, in the small room once used for raising silkworms. When my father stretched out on his straw mats and blankets on the floor of thick planks that were beginning to rot and my brother and I lay down on the old door which was our sleeping platform, the former residence of countless silkworms that had left stains on the paper walls still reeking of their bodies and bits of

rotten mulberry leaf stuck to the naked beams in the ceiling filled to repletion with human beings.

We had no furniture at all. There was the dull gleam of my father's hunting gun, not only the barrel but even the stock, as if the oiled wood were also steel that would numb your hand if you slapped it, to provide our poor quarters with a certain direction, there were dried weasel pelts hanging in bunches from the exposed beams, there were various traps. My father made his living shooting rabbits, birds, wild boar in winter when the snow was deep, and trapping weasels and delivering the dried pelts to the *town* office.

As my brother and I polished the stock with an oil rag we gazed up through the chinks in the wooden slats at the dark sky outside. As if the roar of an airplane would descend from there again. But it was rare for a plane to cross the sky above the village. When I had put the gun back in the rack on the wall we lay down on the sleeping platform, huddling together, and waited, threatened by the emptiness in our stomachs, for my father to bring the pot of rice and vegetables, upstairs.

My brother and I were small seeds deeply embedded in thick flesh and tough, outer skin, green seeds soft and fresh and encased in membrane that would shiver and slough away at the first exposure to light. And outside the tough, outer skin, near the sea that was visible from the roof as a thin ribbon glittering in the distance, in the city beyond the heaped, rippling mountains, the war, majestic and awkward now like a legend that had survived down the ages, was belching foul air. But to us the war was nothing more than the absence of young men in our village and the announcements the mailman sometimes delivered of soldiers killed in action. The war did not penetrate the tough outer skin and the thick flesh. Even the 'enemy' planes that had begun recently to traverse the sky above the village were nothing more to us than a rare species of bird.

Near dawn I was awakened by the noise of a gigantic impact and a furious ringing in the ground. I saw my father sit up on his blanket on the floor like a beast lurking in the forest night about to spring upon his prey, his eyes bright with desire and his body tense. But instead of springing he dropped back to the floor and appeared to fall asleep again.

For a long time I waited with my ears peeled, but that ringing did not occur again. Breathing quietly the damp air that smelled of mold and small animals I waited patiently in the pale moonlight creeping

through the skylight high in the storehouse roof. A long time passed, and my brother, who had been asleep, his sweaty forehead pressed against my side, began to whimper. He too had been waiting for the ground to quiver and ring again, and the prolonged anticipation had been too much for him. Placing my hand on his delicate neck like a slender plant stem I shook him lightly to comfort him, and, lulled by the gentle movement of my own arm, fell asleep.

When I woke up, fecund morning light was slanting through every crack in the slat walls, and it was already hot. My father was gone. So was his gun from the wall. I shook my brother awake and went out to the cobblestone road without a shirt. The road and the stone steps were awash in the morning light. Children squinting and blinking in the glare were standing vacantly or picking fleas out of the dogs or running around and shouting, but there were no adults. My brother and I ran over to the blacksmith's shed in the shade of the lush nettle tree. In the darkness inside, the charcoal fire on the dirt floor spat no tongues of red flame, the bellows did not hiss, the blacksmith lifted no red-hot steel with his lean, sun-blackened arms. Morning and the blacksmith not in his shop—we had never known this to happen. Arm in arm, my brother and I walked back along the cobblestone road in silence. The village was empty of adults. The women were probably waiting at the back of their dark houses. Only the children were drowning in the flood of sunlight. My chest tightened with anxiety.

Harelip spotted us from where he was sprawled at the stone steps that descended to the village fountain and came running over, arms waving. He was working hard at being important, spraying fine white bubbles of sticky saliva from the split in his lip.

'Hey! Have you heard?' he shouted, slamming me on the shoulder.

'Have you?'

'Heard?' I said vaguely.

'That plane yesterday crashed in the hills last night. And they're looking for the enemy soldiers that were in it, the adults have all gone hunting in the hills with their guns!'

'Will they shoot the enemy soldiers?' my brother asked shrilly.

'They won't shoot, they don't have much ammunition,' Harelip explained obligingly, 'They aim to catch them!'

'What do you think happened to the plane?' I said.

'It got stuck in the fir trees and came apart,' Harelip said quickly, his eyes flashing. 'The mailman saw it, you know those trees.'

I did, fir blossoms like grass tassles would be in bloom in those woods now. And at the end of summer, fir cones shaped like wild bird's eggs would replace the tassles, and we would collect them to use as weapons. At dusk then and at dawn, with a sudden rude clatter, the dark brown bullets would be fired into the walls of the storehouse. . . .

'Do you know the woods I mean?'

'Sure I do. Want to go?'

Harelip smiled slyly, countless wrinkles forming around his eyes, and peered at me in silence. I was annoyed.

'If we're going to go I'll get a shirt,' I said, glaring at Harelip. 'And don't try leaving ahead of me because I'll catch up with you right away!'

Harelip's whole face became a smirk and his voice was fat with satisfaction.

'Nobody's going! Kids are forbidden to go into the hills. You'd be mistaken for the foreign soldiers and shot!'

I hung my head and stared at my bare feet on the cobblestones baking in the morning sun, at the sturdy, stubby toes. Disappointment seeped through me like treesap and made my skin flush hot as the innards of a freshly killed chicken.

'What do you think the enemy looks like?' my brother said.

I left Harelip and went back along the cobblestone road, my arm around my brother's shoulders. What *did* the enemy soldiers look like, in what positions were they lurking in the fields and the woods? I could feel foreign soldiers hiding in all the fields and woods that surrounded the valley, the sound of their hushed breathing about to explode into an uproar. Their sweaty skin and harsh body odor covered the valley like a season.

'I just hope they aren't dead,' my brother said dreamily. 'I just hope they catch them and bring them in.'

In the abundant sunlight we were hungry; saliva was sticky in our throats and our stomach muscles were tight. Probably it would be dusk before my father returned, we would have to find our own food. We went down behind the storehouse to the well with the broken bucket and drank, bracing ourselves with both hands against the chilly, sweating stones jutting from the inside wall like the swollen belly of a pupa. When we had drawn water for the shallow

iron pot and built a fire, we stuck our arms into the chaff heaped at the rear of the storehouse and stole some potatoes. As we washed them, the potatoes were hard as rocks in our hands.

The meal we began after our brief efforts was simple but plentiful. Eating away like a contented animal at the potato he grasped in both hands, my brother pondered a minute, then said, 'Do you think the soldiers are up in the fir trees? I saw a squirrel on a fir branch!'

'It would be easy to hide in the fir because they're in bloom,' I said.

'The squirrel hid right away, too,' my brother said, smiling.

I pictured fir trees covered with blossoms like grass tassles, and the foreign soldiers lurking in the highest branches and watching my father and the others through the bunched green needles. With fir blossoms stuck to their bulky flying suits, the soldiers would look like fat squirrels ready for hibernation.

'Even if they're hiding in the trees the dogs will find them and bark,' my brother said confidently.

When our stomachs were full we left the pot on the dirt floor with the remaining potatoes and a fistful of salt and sat down on the stone steps at the entrance to the storehouse. For a long time we sat there drowsily, and in the afternoon we went to bathe at the spring that fed the village fountain.

At the spring, Harelip, sprawled naked on the broadest, smoothest stone, was allowing the girls to fondle his rosy penis as if it were a small doll. Every so often, face beet-red, laughing shrilly in a voice like a screaming bird, he slapped one of the girls on her naked rear.

My brother sat down next to Harelip and raptly observed the merry ritual. I splashed water on the ugly children drowsily sunning themselves around the spring, put on my shirt without drying myself, returned to the stone steps at the storehouse entrance, leaving wet footprints on the cobblestones, and sat there without moving for a long time again, hugging my knees. Anticipation that was like madness, a heated, drunken feeling, was crackling up and down beneath my skin. Dreamily I pictured myself absorbed in the odd game to which Harelip seemed abnormally attached. But whenever the girls among the children returning naked from the spring smiled timidly at me, their hips swaying at each step they took and an unstable color like mashed peaches peeking from the folds of their meager, exposed vaginas, I rained pebbles and abuse on them and made them cringe.

I waited in the same position until a passionate sunset covered the valley, clouds the color of a forest fire wheeling in the sky, but still the adults did not return. I felt I would go mad with waiting.

The sunset had paled, a cool wind that felt good on newly burned skin had begun to blow up from the valley, and the first darkness of night had touched the shadows of things when the adults and the barking dogs finally returned to the hushed village, the village whose mind had been affected by uneasy anticipation. With the other children I ran out to greet them, and saw a large black man surrounded by adults. Fear struck me like a fist.

Surrounding the *catch* solemnly as they surrounded the wild boar they hunted in winter, their lips drawn tightly across their teeth, their backs bent forward almost sadly, the adults came walking in. The *catch*, instead of a flying suit of burnt-ocher silk and black leather flying shoes, wore a khaki jacket and pants and, on his feet, ugly, heavy-looking boots. His large, darkly glistening face was tilted up at the sky still streaked with light, and he limped as he dragged himself along. The iron chain of a boar trap was locked around both his ankles, rattling as he moved. We children fell in behind the adults, as silent as they were. The procession slowly advanced to the square in front of the school house and quietly halted. I pushed my way through the children to the front, but the old man who was our village headman loudly ordered us away; we retreated as far as the apricot trees in one corner of the square, halted there determinedly, and from beneath the trees kept watch through the thickening darkness over the adults' meeting. In the dirt floor houses that faced on the square the women hugging themselves beneath their white smocks strained irritably to catch the murmuring of the men who returned from a dangerous hunt with a *catch*. Harelip poked me sharply in the side from behind and pulled me away from the other children into the deep shadow of a camphor tree.

'He's black, you see that! I thought he would be all along.' Harelip's voice trembled with excitement. 'He's a real black man, you see!'

'What are they going to do with him, shoot him?'

'Shoot him!' Harelip shouted, gasping with surprise. 'Shoot a real live black man!'

'Because he's the enemy,' I asserted without confidence.

'Enemy! You call him an enemy!' Harelip seized my shirt and railed at me hoarsely, spraying my face with saliva through his lip.

'He's a black man, he's no enemy!'

'Look! Look at that!' It was my brother's awed voice, coming from the crowd of children. 'Look!'

Harelip and I turned around and peered at the black soldier; standing a little apart from the adults observing him in consternation, his shoulders sagging heavily, he was pissing. His body was beginning to melt into the thickened evening darkness, leaving behind the khaki jacket and pants that were somehow like overalls. His head to one side, the black soldier pissed on and on, and when a cloud of sighs from the children watching rose behind him he mournfully shook his hips.

The adults surrounded the black soldier again and slowly led him off; we followed a short distance behind. The silent procession surrounding the *catch* stopped in front of the loading entrance at the side of the storehouse. There the steps down to the cellar where the best of the autumn chestnuts were stored over the winter after the grubs beneath their hard skin had been killed with carbon disulfide yawned open blackly, like a hole inhabited by animals. Still surrounding the black soldier, the adults descended into the hole solemnly, as if a ceremony were beginning, and the white wavering of an adult arm closed the heavy trapdoor from inside.

Straining to catch a sound, we watched an orange light go on inside the long, narrow skylight window that ran between the floor of the storehouse and the ground. We could not find the courage to peek through the skylight. The short, anxious wait exhausted us. But no gunshot rang out. Instead, the village headman's shadowed face appeared beneath the partly opened trapdoor and we were yelled at and had to abandon even keeping watch at a distance from the skylight; the children, carrying with them expectations that would fill the night hours with bad dreams, ran off down the cobblestone road without a word of disappointment. Fear, awakened by their pounding feet, pursued them from behind.

Leaving Harelip lurking in the darkness of the apricot trees, still determined to observe the adults and the *catch*, my brother and I went around to the front of the storehouse and climbed, supporting ourselves against the railing that was always damp, to our room in the attic. We were to live in the same house as the *catch*, that was how it was to be! No matter how hard we listened in the attic, we would never be able to hear screaming in the cellar, but the luxurious, hazardous, entirely unbelievable fact was that we were sitting

on a sleeping platform above the cellar to which the black soldier had been taken. My teeth were chattering with fear and joy, and my brother huddling beneath the blanket was shaking as if he had caught a cold. As we waited for my father to come home dragging his fatigue and his heavy gun we smiled together at the wonderful good fortune that had befallen us.

Not so much to satisfy our hunger as to distract ourselves from the uproar in our chests with raising and lowering of arms and precise chewing, we were beginning to eat the cold, hardened, sweating potatoes that were left over when my father climbed the stairs. Shivering, my brother and I watched him place his hunting gun in the wooden rack on the wall and lower himself to the blanket spread on the dirt floor, but he said nothing, merely looked at the pot of potatoes we were eating. I could tell he was tired to death, and irritated. There was nothing we children could do about that.

'Is the rice gone?' he said, staring at me, the skin of his throat puffing like a sack beneath the stubble of beard.

'Yes. . . .' I said weakly.

'The barley too?' he grunted sourly.

'There's nothing!' I was angry.

'What about the airplane?' my brother said timidly. 'What happened to it?'

'It burned. Almost started a forest fire.'

My brother let out a sigh. 'The whole thing?'

'Just the tail was left.'

'The tail . . .' my brother murmured.

'Were there any others?' I asked. 'Was he flying alone?'

'Two other soldiers were dead. He came down in a parachute.'

'A parachute . . .' My brother was entirely lost in a dream. I summoned up my courage.

'What are you going to do with him?'

'Until we know what the town thinks, rear him.'

'Rear him? Like an animal?'

'He's the same as an animal,' my father said gravely. 'He stinks like an ox.'

'It would sure be nice to see him,' my brother said with an eye on my father, but my father went back down the stairs in grim silence.

We sat down on the wooden frame of our sleeping platform to

wait for my father to come back with borrowed rice and vegetables and cook us a pot of steaming gruel. We were too exhausted to be really hungry. And the skin all over our bodies was twitching and jumping like the genitals of a bitch in heat. We were going to rear the black soldier. I hugged myself with both arms, I wanted to throw off my clothes and shout—we were going to rear the black soldier, like an animal!

The next morning my father shook me awake without a word. Dawn was just breaking. Thick light and heavy fog were seeping through every crack in the wall boards. As I gulped my cold breakfast I gradually woke up. My father, his hunting gun on his shoulder and a lunch basket tied to his waist, watched me as I ate, waiting for me to finish, eyes dull yellow from lack of sleep. When I saw the bundle of weasel skins wrapped in a torn burlap bag at his knee I swallowed hard and thought to myself, so we are going down to the *town!* And surely we would report the black man to the authorities.

A whirlpool of words at the back of my throat was slowing the speed at which I could eat, but I saw my father's strong lower jaw covered in coarse beard moving incessantly as if he were chewing grain and I knew he was nervous and irritated from lack of sleep. Asking about the black soldier was impossible. The night before, after supper, my father had loaded his gun with new bullets and gone out to stand night watch.

My brother was sleeping with his head buried under a blanket that smelled of dank hay. When I was finished eating I moved around the room on tiptoes, careful not to wake him. Wrapping a green shirt of thick cloth around my bare shoulders, I stepped into the cloth sneakers I normally never used, shouldered the bundle that was between my father's knees, and ran down the stairs.

Low fog rolled along just above the wet cobblestones; the village, wrapped in haze, was fast asleep. The chickens were already tired and silent; the dogs did not even bark. I saw an adult with a gun leaning against the apricot tree alongside the storehouse, his head drooping. My father and the guard exchanged a few words in low voices. I stole a look at the cellar skylight yawning blackly open like a wound and I was gripped by terrific fear. The black soldier's arm reaches through the skylight and extends to seize me. I wanted to leave the village quickly. When we began walking in silence, careful

not to slip on the cobblestones, the sun penetrated the layers of fog and struck at us with tough, heated light.

To reach the village road along the ridge we climbed the narrow path of red earth into the fir forest, where once again we were at the bottom of dark night. Fog that filled my mouth with a metallic taste slanted down on us in droplets large as rain, making it hard for me to breathe and wetting my hair and forming white, shiny beads on the lint of my grimy, wrinkled shirt. The spring water that seeped up through the rotten leaves so soft beneath our feet to soak our cloth shoes and to freeze our toes was not so bad; we had to be truly careful not to wound our skin against the iron stalks of ferns or to surprise the adders watchfully coiled among their stubborn roots.

When we emerged from the fir forest onto the village road, where it was brightening and the fog was burning off, I brushed the fog out of my shirt and short pants as carefully as if I were removing sticky tickseeds. The sky was clear and violently blue. The distant mountains the color of the copper ore we found in the dangerous abandoned mine in our valley was a sparkling, deep-blue sea rushing at us. And a single, whitish handful of the real sea.

All around us wild birds were singing. The upper branches of the high pines were humming in the wind. Crushed beneath my father's boot, a fieldmouse leaped from the piled leaves like a spurting gray fountain, frightening me for an instant, and ran in a frenzy into the brilliant underbrush alongside the road.

'Are we going to tell about the black man when we get to town?' I asked my father's broad back.

'Umm?' my father said. 'Yes. . . .'

'Will the constable come out from town?'

'There's no telling,' my father grunted. 'Until the report gets to the prefectural office there's no telling what will happen.'

'Couldn't we just go on rearing him in the village? Is he dangerous? You think he is?'

My father rejected me with silence. I felt my surprise and fear of the night before, when the black soldier was led back to the village, reviving in my body. What was he doing in that cellar? The black soldier leaves the cellar, slaughters the people and the hunting dogs in the village and sets fire to the houses. I was so afraid I was trembling, I didn't want to think about it. I passed my father and ran, panting, down the long slope.

By the time we were on level road again the sun was high. The

red earth exposed by small landslides on both sides of the road was raw as blood and glistening in the sun. We walked along with our foreheads bared to the fierce light. Sweat bubbled from the skin on my head, soaked through my cropped hair and ran from my forehead down my cheeks.

When we entered the *town* I pressed my shoulder against my father's high hip and marched straight past the provocations of the children in the street. If my father hadn't been there the children would have jeered at me and thrown stones. I hated the children of the *town* as I would have hated a species of beetle with a shape I could never feel comfortable with, and I disdained them. Skinny children in the noonday light flooding the town, with treacherous eyes. If only adult eyes had not been watching me from the rear of dark shops I was confident I could have knocked any one of them down.

The town office was closed for lunch. We worked the pump in the square in front of the office and drank some water, then sat down on wooden chairs beneath a window with hot sun pouring through it and waited a long time. An old official finally finished his lunch and appeared, and when he and my father had spoken together in low voices and stepped into the mayor's office I carried the weasel pelts over to the small scales lined up behind a reception window. There the skins were counted and entered in an account book with my father's name. I watched carefully as a nearsighted lady official with thick glasses wrote down the number of skins.

When this job was finished I had no idea what to do. My father was taking forever. So I went looking, my bare feet squishing down the hall like suction cups, one shoe in each hand, for my only acquaintance in the *town*, a man who frequently carried notices out to our village. We all called this one-legged man 'Clerk', but he did other things as well, such as assisting the doctor when we had our physicals at the school annex in the village.

'Well if it isn't Frog!' Rising from the chair behind his desk, Clerk shouted, making me just a little angry, but I went over anyway. Since we called him 'Clerk', we couldn't very well complain about his calling us, the village children, 'Frog'. I was happy to have found him.

'So you caught yourselves a black man!' Clerk said, rattling his false leg under the desk.

'Yes. . . .' I said, resting my hands on his desk where his lunch was wrapped in yellowed newspaper.

'That's really something!'

I wanted to nod grandly at his bloodless lips, like an adult, and talk about the black soldier, but words to explain the huge negro who had been led through the dusk to the village like captured prey I simply couldn't find.

'Will they shoot him?' I asked.

'I don't know.' Clerk gestured with his chin at the mayor's office. 'They're probably deciding now.'

'Will they bring him to town?' I said.

'You look mighty happy the schoolroom is closed,' Clerk said, evading my important question. 'The schoolmistress is too lazy to make the trip out there, all she does is complain. She says the village children are dirty and smelly.'

I felt ashamed of the dirt creasing my neck, but I shook my head defiantly and made myself laugh. Clerk's artificial leg jutting from beneath his desk was twisted awkwardly. I liked to watch him hopping along the mountain road with his good right leg and the artifical leg and jut one crutch, but here the artificial leg was weird and treacherous, like the children of the *town*.

'But what do you care, as long as school is out you have no complaints, right, Frog!' Clerk laughed, his artificial leg rattling again. 'You and your pals are better off playing outside than being treated like dirt in a schoolroom!'

'They're just as dirty,' I said.

It was true, the women teachers were ugly and dirty, all of them; Clerk laughed. My father had come out of the mayor's office and was calling me quietly. Clerk patted me on the shoulder and I patted him on the arm and ran out.

'Don't let the prisoner escape, Frog!' he shouted at my back.

'What did they decide to do with him?' I said to my father as we returned through the sunwashed *town*.

'You think they're going to take any responsibility!' My father spat out the words as if he were scolding me, and said nothing more. Intimidated by my father's foul humor I walked along in silence, in and out of the shade of the *town's* shriveled, ugly trees. Even the trees in the *town*, like the children in the streets, were treacherous and unfamiliar.

When we came to the bridge at the edge of the *town* we sat down

on the low railing and my father unwrapped our lunch in silence. Struggling to keep myself from asking questions, I extended a slightly dirty hand toward the package on his lap. Still in silence we ate our rice balls.

As we were finishing, a young girl with a neck as refreshing as a bird's came walking across the bridge. I swiftly considered my own clothes and features and decided I was finer and tougher than any child in the *town*. I stuck both feet out in front of me, my shoes on, and waited for the girl to pass. Hot blood was singing in my ears. For a brief instant the girl peered at me scowlingly, then she ran off. Suddenly my appetite was gone. I climbed down the narrow stairs at the approach to the bridge and walked to the river for a drink of water. Tall wormwood bushes clustered thickly along the bank. I kicked and tore my way through them to the river's edge, but the water was a stagnant, dirty brown. It struck me I was a miserable and meager creature.

By the time we had left the road along the ridge, cleared the fir forest, and emerged at the entrance to the village, calves stiffened and faces caked with dust and oil and sweat, evening had covered the valley entirely; in our bodies the heat of the sun lingered and the heavy fog was a relief. I left my father on his way to the village headman's house to make his report and climbed to the second floor of the storehouse. My brother was sitting on the sleeping platform, fast asleep. I reached out and shook him, feeling the fragile bones in his naked shoulder against my palm. My brother's skin contracted slightly beneath my hot hand, and from his eyes that suddenly opened fatigue and fear faded.

'How was he?' I said.

'He just slept in the cellar.'

'Were you scared all by yourself?' I said gently.

My brother shook his head, his eyes serious. I opened the wooden shutters just a little and climbed onto the window sill to piss. The fog engulfed me like a living thing and swiftly stole into my nostrils. My urine jumped a great distance, spattering against the cobblestones, and when it struck the bay window that jutted from the first floor it rebounded and warmly wet the tops of my feet and my goosepimpled thighs. My brother, his head pressed against my side like a baby animal, observed intently.

We remained in that position for a while. Small yawns rose from

our narrow throats, and with each yawn we cried just a few transparent, meaningless tears.

'Did Harelip get to see him?' I said to my brother as he helped me close the wooden shutters, the slender muscles in his shoulders knotting.

'Kids get yelled at if they go to the square,' he said with chagrin. 'Are they coming from town to take him?'

'I don't know,' I said.

Downstairs, my father and the lady from the general store came in talking in loud voices. The lady from the general store was insisting that she couldn't carry the food for the black soldier down to the cellar. That's no job for a woman, your son should be a help! I finished removing my shoes and straightened up. My brother's soft palm was pressed against my hip. Biting my lip, I waited for my father's voice.

'Come down here!' When I heard my father shout I threw my shoes under the sleeping platform and ran down the stairs.

With the butt of his hunting gun my father pointed to the basket of food the woman had left on the dirt floor. I nodded, and lifted the basket carefully. In silence we left the storehouse and walked through the chill fog. The cobblestones underfoot retained the warmth of day. At the side of the storehouse no adult was standing guard. I saw the pale light leaking through the narrow cellar window and felt fatigue break out all over my body. Yet my teeth were chattering with excitement at this first opportunity to see the black man close up.

The imposing padlock on the cellar door was dripping wet; my father unlocked it and peered inside, then carefully, his gun ready, went down alone. I squatted at the entrance, waiting, and air wet with fog fastened to the back of my neck. In front of the countless eyes hovering behind and peering at me I was ashamed of the trembling in my brown, sturdy legs.

'C'mon,' said my father's muffled voice.

Holding the foodbasket against my chest, I went down the short steps. The *catch* was crouching in the dim light of a naked bulb. The thick chain of a boar-trap connecting his black leg and a pillar drew and locked my gaze.

Arms clasped around his knees and his chin resting even further down on his long legs, the *catch* looked up at me with bloodshot eyes, sticky eyes that wrapped themselves around me. All the blood

in my body rushed toward my ears, heating my face. I turned away and looked up at my father, who was leaning against the wall with his gun pointed at the black soldier. My father motioned at me with his chin. With my eyes almost closed I stepped forward and placed the basket of food in front of the black soldier. As I stepped back, my insides shuddered with sudden fear and I had to fight my nausea down. At the basket of food the black soldier stared, my father stared, I stared. A dog barked in the distance. Beyond the narrow skylight window the dark square was hushed.

Suddenly the food basket began to interest me, I was seeing the food through the black soldier's starved eyes. Several large rice balls, dried fish with the fat broiled away, stewed vegetables, goat's milk in a cut-glass bottle. Without unfolding from his crouch, still hugging his knees, the black soldier continued to stare at the food basket for a long time until finally I began to feel hunger pangs myself. It occurred to me the black soldier might disdain the meager supper we provided, and disdain us, and refuse to touch the food. Shame assaulted me. If the black soldier showed no intention of eating, my shame would infect my father, adult's shame would drive my father to desperation and violence, the whole village would be torn apart by adults pale with shame. What a terrible idea it had been to feed the black soldier!

But all of a sudden he extended an unbelievably long arm, lifted the wide-mouthed bottle in thick fingers covered with bristly hair, drew it to himself, and smelled it. Then the bottle was tipped, the black soldier's thick, rubbery lips opened, large white teeth neatly aligned like parts inside a machine were exposed, and I saw milk flowing back into a vast, pink, glistening mouth. The black soldier's throat made a noise like water and air entering a drain, from the corners of his swollen lips like overripe fruit that had been bound with string the thick milk spilled, ran down his bare neck, soaked his open shirt and chest, and coagulated like fat on his tough, darkly, gleaming skin, trembling there. I discovered, my own lips drying with excitement, that goat's milk was a beautiful liquid.

With a harsh clanking the black soldier returned the glass bottle to the basket. Now his original hesitation was gone. The rice balls looked like small cakes as he rolled them in his giant hands; the dried fish, head bones and all, was crushed between his gleaming teeth. Standing alongside my father with my back against the wall, buffeted by admiration, I observed the black soldier's powerful chewing.

Since he was engrossed in his meal and paid no attention to us, I had the opportunity, even as I fought the pangs in my own empty stomach, to observe the adults' *catch* in suffocating detail. And what a wonderful *catch* he was!

The black soldier's short, curly hair tightened into small cowlicks here and there on his well-shaped skull, and just above his ears, which were pointed like a wolf's, turned a smoldering gray. The skin from his throat to his chest was lit from inside with a somber, purple light; every time he turned his head and supple creases appeared in his thick, oily neck, I felt my heart leap. And there was the odor of his body, pervading with the persistence of nausea rising into the throat, permeating all things like a corrosive poison, an odor that flushed my cheeks and flashed before my eyes like madness. . . . As I watched the black soldier feeding ravenously, my eyes hot and watery as though infected, the crude food in the basket was transformed into a fragrant, rich, exotic feast. If even a morsel had remained when I lifted the basket I would have seized it with fingers that trembled with secret pleasure and wolfed it down. But the black soldier finished every bit of food and then wiped the dish of vegetables clean with his fingers.

My father poked me in the side and, trembling with shame and outrage, as if I had been aroused from a lewd daydream, I walked over to the black soldier and lifted the basket. Protected by the muzzle of my father's gun I turned my back to the black soldier and was starting up the steps when I heard his low, rich cough. I stumbled, and felt fear goosepimple the skin all over my body.

At the top of the stairs to the second floor of the storehouse a dark, distorting mirror swayed in the hollow of a pillar; as I climbed the stairs a totally insignificant Japanese boy with twitching cheeks and pale, bloodless lips on which he chewed rose gradually out of the dimness. My arms hung limply and I felt almost ready to cry. I fought a beaten, tearful feeling as I opened the rain shutters that someone had closed at some point in the day.

My brother, eyes flashing, was sitting on the sleeping platform. His eyes were hot, and a little dry with fear.

'You closed the rain shutters, didn't you!' I said, sneering to hide the trembling of my own lips.

'Yes—' Ashamed of his timidness my brother lowered his eyes. 'How was he?'

'He smells terrible,' I said, sinking in fatigue. Truly I was ex-

hausted, and I felt wretched. The trip to the *town*, the black soldier's supper—after the long day's work my body was as heavy as a sponge soaked with fatigue. Taking off my shirt, which was covered with dried leaves and burrs, I bent over to wipe my dirty feet with a rag, a demonstration for my brother's sake that I had no desire to accept further questions. My brother observed me worriedly, his lips pursed. I crawled in next to him and burrowed under our blanket with its smell of sweat and small animals. My brother sat there watching me, his knees together and pressing against my shoulder, not asking any more questions. It was just as he sat when I was sick with fever, and I too, just as when I was sick with fever, longed only to sleep.

When I woke up late the next morning I heard the noise of a crowd coming from the square alongside the storehouse. My brother and father were gone. I looked up at the wall and saw that the hunting gun was not there. As I listened to the clamor and stared at the empty gun rack my heart began to pound. I sprang out of bed, grabbed my shirt, and ran down the stairs.

Adults were crowded into the square, and the dirty faces of the children looking up at them were tight with uneasiness. Apart from everyone, Harelip and my brother were squatting next to the cellar window. They've been watching! I thought to myself angrily, and was running toward them when I saw Clerk emerge, head lowered, lightly supporting himself on his crutch, from the cellar entrance. Violent, dark exhaustion and landsliding disappointment buried me. But what followed Clerk was not the dead body of the black soldier but my father, his gun on his shoulder and the barrel still in its bag, talking quietly with the village headman. I breathed a sigh, and sweat hot as boiling water steamed down my sides and the insides of my thighs.

'Take a look!' Harelip shouted at me as I stood there. 'Go on!'

I got down on all fours on the hot cobblestones and peered in through the narrow skylight window that was just at ground level. At the bottom of the lake of darkness the black soldier lay slumped on the floor like a domestic animal that had been pummeled senseless.

'Did they beat him?' I said to Harelip, my body trembling with anger as I straightened. 'Did they beat him when he had his feet tied and couldn't move?' I shouted.

'What?' In order to repel my anger Harelip had readied himself for a fight, his face taut, his lip thrust out.

'Who?'

'The adults!' I shouted. 'Did they beat him?'

'They didn't have to beat him,' Harelip said regretfully. 'All they did was go in and look, Just looking at him did that!'

Anger faded. I shook my head vaguely. My brother was peering at me.

'It's all right,' I said to my brother.

One of the village children stepped around us and tried to look through the skylight window but Harelip kicked him in the side and he screamed. Harelip had already reserved the right to decide who should look at the black soldier through the skylight. And he was keeping a nervous watch on those who would usurp his right.

I walked over to where Clerk was talking to the adults surrounding him. As if I were a village brat with snot drying on my upper lip he ignored me completely and went right on talking, damaging my self-respect and my feeling of friendship for him. But there are times when you cannot afford to nurse your own pride and self-respect. I thrust my head past the hips of the adults and listened to Clerk and the headman talking.

Clerk was saying that neither the *town* office nor the police station was able to take charge of the black prisoner. Until a report had been made to the prefectural office and a reply received, the village must keep the black soldier, was obliged to keep him. The headman objected, repeating that the village lacked the force to hold the black soldier prisoner. Moreover, delivering the dangerous prisoner under guard by the long mountain route was too much for the villagers to handle unaided. The long rainy season and the floods had made everything complicated, difficult.

But when Clerk assumed a peremptory tone, the arrogant tone of a minor bureaucrat, the adults submitted weakly. When it became clear that the village would keep the black soldier until the prefecture had settled on a policy, I left the perplexed, disgruntled adults and ran back to my brother and Harelip where they sat in front of the skylight, monopolizing it. I was filled with deep relief, anticipation, and anxiety I had contracted from the adults and which moved in me like sluggish worms.

'I told you they weren't going to kill him!' Harelip shouted triumphantly. 'How can a black man be an enemy!'

'It'd be a waste,' said my brother happily. The three of us peered through the skylight, cheeks bumping, and seeing the black soldier stretched out as before, his chest lifting and falling as he breathed, we sighed with satisfaction. There were some children who advanced right to the soles of our feet upturned on the ground and drying under the sun, muttering their displeasure with us, but when Harelip sprang up and shouted they scattered, screaming.

Presently we tired of watching the black soldier lying there, but we did not abandon our privileged position. Harelip allowed the children one by one, when they had promised compensation in dates, apricots, figs, persimmons or whatever, to look through the skylight for a short time. As the children stared through the window even the backs of their necks reddened with their surprise and wonder, and when they stood up they rubbed the dirt from their jaws with their palms. Leaning against the storehouse wall I looked down at the children engrossed in this first real experience of their lives while Harelip yelled at them to hurry and their small butts burned in the sun, and I felt a strange satisfaction and fullness, exhilaration. Harelip turned over on his knees a hunting dog that wandered over from the crowd of adults and began pulling ticks and crushing them between his amber nails as he shouted orders and arrogant abuse at the children. Even after the adults had left with Clerk to see him as far as the ridge road we continued our strange game. From time to time we took long looks ourselves, the children's resentful voices at our backs, but the black soldier lay sprawled there as before and gave no indication of moving. As if he had been beaten and kicked, as if merely looking at him had been enough to wound him!

That night, accompanied once again by my father with his gun, I went down into the cellar carrying a heavy pot of gruel. The black soldier looked up at us with eyes yellowed heavily along the edges with fat, then thrust his hairy fingers directly into the hot pot and ate hungrily. I was able to observe him calmly, and my father, who had stopped pointing his gun, leaned against the wall looking bored.

As I looked down at the black man with his forehead aslant above the pot, watching the trembling of his thick neck and the sudden flexing and relaxing of his muscles, I began to perceive him as a gentle animal, an obedient animal. I looked up at Harelip and my brother peering through the skylight with bated breath and flashed a sly smile at their gleaming eyes. I was growing used to the black

soldier—the thought planted a seed of proud happiness that sprouted in me. But when the black soldier moved in such a way that the chain on the boar-trap rattled, fear revived in me with tremendous vigor, rushing into even the most distant blood vessels in my body and making my skin crawl.

From that day on, the job of carrying food to the black soldier, once in the morning and once at night, accompanied by my father, who no longer bothered to remove his rifle from his shoulder, was a special privilege reserved for me. When my father and I appeared at the side of the storehouse early in the morning or as evening was becoming night, the children who had been waiting in the square would release all at once a large sigh that rose spreading, like a cloud, into the sky. Like a specialist who has lost all interest in his work but retains his meticulousness on the job, I crossed the square with brows intently knit, never glancing at the children. My brother and Harelip were satisfied to walk on either side of me, so close our bodies touched, as far as the entrance to the cellar. And when my father and I went down the steps they ran back and peered through the skylight. Even if I had become entirely bored with carrying food to the black soldier, I would have continued the job simply for the pleasure of feeling at my back as I walked along that hot sigh of envy risen to resentment in all the children, Harelip included.

I did ask my father, however, for special permission for Harelip to come to the cellar once a day only, in the afternoon. This was to transfer to Harelip's shoulders part of a burden that was too heavy for me to handle alone. A small, old barrel had been placed next to one of the pillars in the cellar for the black soldier's use. In the afternoon, lifting the barrel between us by the thick, heavy rope that ran through it, Harelip and I carefully climbed the steps and walked to the communal compost heap to empty the stinking, sloshing mixture of the black soldier's shit and piss. Harelip went about his work with excessive zeal: sometimes, before we emptied the barrel into the large tank alongside the compost heap, he would stir the contents with a stick and discourse on the state of the black soldier's digestion, particularly his diarrhea, concluding, among other things, that the trouble was caused by the kernels of corn in his gruel.

When Harelip and I went down to the cellar with my father to get the small barrel and found the black soldier astride it, his pants down around his ankles and his black, shiny rear thrust out in almost

exactly the attitude of a copulating dog, we had to wait behind him for a while. Harelip, listening to the furtive clinking of the chain that linked the black soldier's ankles on either side of the barrel, eyes glazed dreamily with surprise and awe, kept a tight grip on my arm.

The children came to be occupied entirely with the black soldier, he filled every smallest corner of our lives. Among the children the black soldier spread like a plague. But the adults had their work. The adults did not catch the children's plague. They could not afford to wait motionlessly for the instructions that were so slow to arrive from the town office. When even my father, who had undertaken supervision of the prisoner, began leaving the village to hunt again, the black soldier began to exist in the cellar for the sole purpose of filling the children's daily lives.

My brother and Harelip and I fell into the habit of spending the daylight hours in the cellar where the black soldier sat, our chests hammering with the excitement of breaking a rule at first but soon enough, as we grew accustomed to being there, with complete casualness, as if supervising the black soldier during the day, while the adults were away in the hills or down in the valley, was a duty we had been entrusted with and must not neglect. The peephole at the skylight, abandoned by Harelip and my brother, was passed on to the village children. Flat on their bellies on the hot, dusty ground, their throats flushed and dry with envy, the children took turns peering in at the three of us sitting around the black soldier on the dirt floor. When occasionally, in an excess of envy, a child forgot himself and tried to follow us into the cellar, he received a pommeling from Harelip for his rebellious act and had to fall to the ground with a bloody nose.

In no time at all we had only to carry the black soldier's 'barrel' to the top of the cellar steps, transporting it to the compost heap in the fierce sun while under attack by its ferocious stench was a task carried out by children we haughtily appointed. The designated children, cheeks shining with pleasure, carried the barrel straight up, careful not to spill a drop of the muddy yellow liquid that seemed so precious to them. And every morning all the children, including ourselves, glanced up at the narrow road that descended through the woods from the ridge with almost a prayer that Clerk would not appear with instructions we dreaded.

The chain from the boar-trap cut into the black man's ankles, the

cuts became inflamed, blood trickled onto his feet and shriveled and stuck there like dried blades of grass. We worried constantly about the pinkish infection in the wounds. When he straddled the barrel the pain was so bad it made the black soldier bare his teeth like a laughing child. After looking deep into one another's eyes for a long time and talking together, we resolved to remove the boar-trap. The black soldier, like a dull black beast, his eyes always wet with a thick liquid that might have been tears or mucous, sat in silence hugging his knees on the cellar floor—what harm could he do us when we removed the trap? He was only a single head of black man!

When Harelip tightly grasped the key I brought from my father's tool bag, leaned over so far his shoulder was touching the black soldier's knees, and unlocked the trap, the black soldier suddenly rose with a groan and stamped his feet. Weeping with fear, Harelip threw the trap against the wall and ran up the steps; my brother and I, not even able to stand up, huddled together. The fear of the black soldier that had suddenly revived in us took our breaths away. But instead of dropping upon us like an eagle, the black soldier sat back down just where he was and hugged his knees and gazed with his wet, filmy eyes at the trap lying against the wall. When Harelip returned, head hanging with shame, my brother and I greeted him with kind smiles. The black soldier was as gentle as a domestic animal. . . .

Late that night my father came to lock the giant padlock on the cellar door and saw that the black soldier's ankles had been freed, yet he did not admonish me. Gentle as cattle—the thought, like air itself, had crept into the lungs of everyone in the village, children and adults alike.

The next morning my brother and Harelip and I took breakfast to the black soldier and found him puttering with the boar trap. When Harelip had thrown the trap against the wall the mechanism that snapped it shut had broken. The black soldier was examining the broken part with the same expert assurance as the trap-mender who came to the village every spring. And then abruptly he lifted his darkly glistening forehead and indicated with motions what he wanted. I looked at Harelip, unable to contain the joy that seemed to slacken my cheeks. The black soldier had communicated with us, just as our livestock communicated so had the black soldier!

We ran to the village headman's house, shouldered the tool box

that was part of common village property, and carried it back to the cellar. It contained things that could have been used as weapons but we did not hesitate to entrust it to the black soldier. We could not believe that this black man like a domestic animal once had been a soldier fighting in the war, the fact rejected the imagination. The black soldier looked at the tool box, then gazed into our eyes. We watched him with joy that made us flush and shiver.

'He's like a person!' Harelip said to me softly, and as I poked my brother in the rear I was so proud and pleased I felt my body twist with laughter. Sighs of wonder from the children billowed through the skylight like fog.

We took the breakfast basket back, and when we finished our own breakfast and returned to the cellar the black soldier had taken a wrench and a small hammer from the tool box and had placed them neatly on a burlap bag on the floor. We sat next to him and he looked at us, then his large, yellowed teeth were bared and his cheeks slackened and we were jolted by the discovery that he could also smile. We understood then that we had been joined to him by a sudden, deep, passionate bond that was almost 'human'.

Afternoon lengthened, the lady from the blacksmith's dragged Harelip off with angry shouts and our butts began to ache from sitting directly on the dirt floor, but still the black soldier worked on the trap, his fingers soiled with old, dusty grease, the spring making a soft metallic click as he cocked and tried it again and again.

Not bored, I watched his pink palm indent where the teeth of the trap pressed into it and watched the oily grime twist into strands on his thick, sweaty neck. These things produced in me a not unpleasant nausea, a faint repulsion connected to desire. Puffing out his cheeks as if he were softly singing inside his broad mouth, the black soldier worked on intently. My brother, leaning on my knees, observed his fingers moving with eyes that shone with admiration. Flies swarmed around us, and their buzzing entangled the heat and echoed with it deep inside my ears.

When the trap bit into the braided rope with a noticeably sharper, sturdier snap, the black soldier placed it carefully on the floor and smiled at me and my brother through the dull, heavy liquid in his eyes. Beads of sweat trembled on the dark polish of his forehead. For truly a long time we peered, still smiling, just as we did with the goats and the hunting dogs, into the black soldier's gentle eyes. It was hot. We immersed ourselves in the heat, as if it were a shared

pleasure connecting us and the black soldier, and continued smiling back and forth. . . .

One morning Clerk was carried in covered in mud and bleeding from his chin. He had stumbled in the woods and fallen from a low cliff, and he had been found, unable to move, by a man from the village on his way to work in the hills. As he received treatment at the village headman's house Clerk stared in dismay at his artificial leg, which had bent where the thick, stiff leather was secured with a metal band and could not be properly reattached. He made no effort to communicate instructions from the *town*. The adults grew irritated; we wished Clerk had lain at the foot of the cliff undiscovered and had starved to death, assuming he had come to take the black soldier away. But he had come to explain that instructions from the prefecture still had not arrived. We regained our happiness, our energy, our sympathy for Clerk. And we took his artificial leg, and the toolbox, to the cellar.

Lying on the sweating cellar floor, the black soldier was singing in a soft, thick voice, a song that gripped us with its raw power, a song concealing regret and screams that threatened to overwhelm us. We showed him the damaged artificial leg. He stood up, peered at the leg for a minute, then swiftly fell to work. Cries of delight burst from the children peeping through the skylight, and the three of us, Harelip and my brother and I, also laughed at the top of our lungs.

When Clerk came to the cellar at dusk the artificial leg was completely restored. He fitted it onto his stump of a thigh and stood up, and we again raised a shout of happiness. Clerk bounded up the stairs and went into the square to try the fit of the leg. We pulled the black soldier to his feet by both arms and, without the slightest hesitation, as if it were an established habit already, took him into the square with us.

The black soldier filled his broad nostrils with the young, buoyant, summer-evening air, his first air above ground since he had been taken prisoner, and observed Clerk closely as he tried his leg. All went well. Clerk came running over, took from his pocket a cigarette made of knotweed leaves, a lopsided cigarette that smelled something like a brush fire and smarted fiercely if the smoke got in your eyes, lit it, and handed it to the tall black soldier. The black soldier inhaled it and doubled over coughing violently and clutching his throat. Clerk, embarrassed, smiled a doleful smile, but we chil-

dren laughed out loud. The black soldier straightened, wiped his tears with a giant palm, took from the pocket of the linen pants hugging his powerful hips a dark, shiny pipe and held it out to Clerk.

Clerk accepted the gift, the black soldier nodded his satisfaction, and the evening sun flooded them in grape light. We shouted until our throats began to hurt and milled around them, laughing as though touched by madness.

We began taking the black soldier out of the cellar frequently, for walks along the cobblestone road. The adults said nothing. When they encountered the black soldier surrounded by us children they merely looked away and circled around him, just as they stepped into the grass to avoid the bull from the headman's house when it came along the road.

Even when the children were all being kept busy working at home and could not visit the black soldier in his underground quarters, no one, adults or children, was surprised to see him napping in the shade of a tree in the square or walking slowly back and forth along the road. Like the hunting dogs and the children and the trees, the black soldier was becoming a component of village life.

On days when at dawn my father returned carrying at his side a long, narrow trap made of hammered wooden slats and a fat weasel with an unbelievably long body thrashing around inside it, my brother and I had to spend the whole morning on the dirt floor of the storehouse, helping with the skinning. On those days we hoped from the bottom of our hearts that the black soldier would come to watch us work. When he did appear we would kneel on either side of my father as he grasped the bloodstained skinning knife with bits of fat stuck to the handle, and, scarcely breathing, would wish the rebellious, nimble weasel a complete and proper death and a deft skinning, for our guest's sake. A last instant of revenge in its final throes, as the weasel's neck was wrung it farted a horrible, terrific smell, and when the skin was laid back with a soft tearing noise at the dully gleaming tip of my father's knife there remained only muscle with a pearly luster encasing a small body so exposed it was lewd. My brother and I, careful not to let the guts spill out, carried the body to the communal compost heap to throw it away, and when we returned, wiping our soiled fingers on broad leaves, the weasel skin was already turned inside out and being

nailed to a plank, fat membranes and thin capillaries glistening in the sun. The black soldier, producing what sounded like birdcalls through his pursed lips, was peering at the folds of the skin being cleaned of fat between my father's thick fingers so it would dry more easily. And when the fur had dried as stiff as claws on the plank and was criss-crossed with stains the color of blood like railroad lines across a map and the black soldier saw and admired it, how proud we were of my father's 'technique.' There were times when even my father, as he blew water on the fur, turned to the black soldier with friendly eyes. At such times my brother and the black soldier and my father and I were united, as if in a single family, around my father's weasel-curing technique.

The black soldier also liked to watch the blacksmith at work. From time to time, especially when Harelip was helping forge something like a hoe, his half-naked body glowing in the fire, we would surround the black soldier and walk over to the blacksmith's shed. When the blacksmith lifted with hands covered in charcoal dust a piece of red-hot steel and plunged it into water, the black soldier would raise a cry of admiration like a scream, and the children would point and laugh. The blacksmith, flattered, frequently repeated this dangerous demonstration of his skill.

Even the women stopped being afraid of the black soldier. At times he received food directly from their hands.

It was the height of summer, and still no instructions arrived from the prefectural office. There was a rumor that the prefectural capitol had been bombed, but that had no effect on our village. Air hotter than the flames that burned a city hung over our village all the day long. And the space around the black soldier began to fill up with an odor that made our heads swim when we sat with him in the airless cellar, a strong, fatty odor like the stink of the weasel meat rotting on the compost heap. We joked about it constantly and laughed until our tears flowed, but when the black soldier began to sweat he stank so badly we could not bear to be at his side.

One hot afternoon Harelip proposed that we take him to the village spring; appalled at ourselves for not having had the thought earlier, we climbed the cellar steps tugging at the black soldier's grimy hands. The children gathered in the square surrounded us with whoops of excitement as we ran down the cobblestone road baking in the sun.

When we were as naked as birds and had stripped the black soldier's clothes we plunged into the spring all together, splashing one another and shouting. We were enraptured with our new idea. The naked black soldier was so large that the water barely reached his hips even when he went to the deepest part of the spring; when we splashed him he would raise a scream like a chicken whose neck was being wrung and plunge his head underwater and remain submerged until he shot up shouting and spouting water from his mouth. Wet and reflecting the strong sunlight, his nakedness shone like the body of a black horse, full and beautiful. We clamored around him splashing and shouting, and by and by the girls left the shade of the oak trees where they had been hesitating and came racing into the spring and hurriedly submerged their own small nakedness. Harelip caught one of the girls and began his lewd ritual, and we brought the black soldier over and from the best position showed him Harelip receiving his pleasure. The sun flooded all of our hard bodies, the water seethed and sparkled. Harelip, bright red and laughing, raised a shout each time he slapped the girl's spray-wet, shining buttocks with his open palm. We roared with laughter, and the girl cried.

Suddenly we discovered that the black soldier possessed a magnificent, heroic, unbelievably beautiful penis. We crowded around him bumping naked hips, pointing and teasing, and the black soldier gripped his penis and planted his feet apart fiercely like a goat about to copulate and bellowed. We laughed until we cried and splashed the black soldier's penis. Then Harelip dashed off naked as he was, and when he returned leading a large nanny-goat from the courtyard at the general store we applauded his idea. The black soldier opened his pink mouth and shouted, then danced out of the water and bore down upon the frightened, bleating goat. We laughed as though mad, Harelip strained to keep the goat's head down, and the black soldier labored mightily, his black, rugged penis glistening in the sun, but it simply would not work the way it did with a billy-goat.

We laughed until we could no longer support ourselves on our legs, so hard that when finally we fell exhausted to the ground, sadness stole into our soft heads. To us the black soldier was a rare and wonderful domestic animal, an animal of genius. How can I describe how much we loved him, or the blazing sun above our wet, heavy skin that distant, splendid summer afternoon, the deep shadows on the cobblestones, the smell of the children and the black

soldier, the voices hoarse with happiness, how can I convey the repletion and rhythm of it all?

To us it seemed that the summer that bared those tough, resplendent muscles, the summer that suddenly and unexpectedly geysered like an oil well, spewing happiness and drenching us in black, heavy oil, would continue forever and never end.

Later in the day of our archaic bathing in the spring an evening downpour rudely locked the valley in fog, and the rain continued to fall late into the night. The next morning, Harelip and my brother and I kept close to the storehouse wall with the black soldier's food, to avoid the rain that was still falling. After breakfast, the black soldier, hugging his knees, softly sang a song in the dark cellar. Cooling our outstretched fingers in the rainspray sifting through the skylight, we were washed away by the expanse of the black soldier's voice and the sealike solemnity of his song. When the song was finished there was no more spray coming through the skylight. Taking the black soldier's arm, we led him smiling into the square. The fog had swiftly cleared from the valley; the trees had absorbed so much rainwater that their foliage was plump and swollen as baby chicks. When the wind blew, the trees trembled in fits, scattering wet leaves and drops of rainwater and causing small, momentary rainbows from which cicadas darted. In the heat beginning to revive and the tempest of shrill cicadas we sat down on the flat stone at the cellar entrance and for a long time breathed the air that smelled of wet bark.

Scarcely moving, we sat there until, in the afternoon, Clerk, carrying his rain gear, descended the road from the woods and went into the headman's house. We stood up then, leaned against an old, dripping apricot tree, and waited for Clerk to burst from the darkness of the house to wave a signal. But Clerk did not appear; instead, the alarm bell on the roof of the headman's barn began to clang, summoning the adults out working in the valley and the woods, and women and children from the rain-wet houses appeared on the cobblestone road. I looked back at the black soldier and saw that the smile was gone from his face. Anxiety suddenly born in me tightened my chest. Leaving the black soldier behind, my brother and Harelip and I ran to the headman's house.

Clerk was standing in silence on the dirt floor in the entranceway; inside, the village headman sat crosslegged on the wooden floor, lost

in thought. As we waited impatiently for the adults to gather, we struggled to maintain an expectation that was beginning to feel somehow hopeless. From the fields in the valley and from the woods, dressed in their work clothes, their cheeks puffy with discontent, the adults, including my father, who stepped into the entranceway with several small birds lashed to the barrel of his gun, gradually returned.

The minute the meeting began Clerk floored the children with an explanation in dialect to the effect that the authorities had decided the black soldier was to be turned over to the prefecture. Originally the army was to have come for him, Clerk continued, but as a result of an apparent misunderstanding and general confusion within the army itself, the village had been ordered to escort the black soldier as far as the *town*. The adults would have to suffer only the minor inconvenience of bringing the black soldier in. But we were submerged in astonishment and disappointment; turn over the black soldier and what would remain in the village? Summer would become an empty husk, a shed skin!

I had to warn the black soldier. Slipping past the adults I ran back to where he was sitting in the square in front of the storehouse. Slowly lifting his dull eyeballs he looked up at me halted in front of him and gasping for breath. I was able to convey nothing to him. I could only stare at him while sadness and irritation shook me. Still hugging his knees, the black soldier was trying to peer into my eyes. His lips as full as the belly of a pregnant river fish slowly opened and shiny white saliva submerged his gums. Looking back, I saw the adults leave the dark entranceway of the headman's house with Clerk in the lead and move toward the storehouse.

I shook the black soldier's shoulder as he sat there, and shouted at him in dialect. I was so agitated I felt I would swoon. What could I do, he merely allowed himself to be shaken by my arm in silence and peered around him, craning his thick neck. I released his shoulder and hung my head.

Suddenly the black soldier rose, soaring in front of me like a tree, and seized my upper arm and pulled me tight up against himself and raced down the cellar steps. In the cellar, dumbfounded, I was transfixed for a brief moment by the flexing of the black soldier's taut thighs and the contraction of his buttocks as he moved around swiftly. Lowering the trap door, he secured it by passing the chain on the boar-trap he had repaired through the ring on the door and

fastening it around the metal support protruding from the wall. Then he came back down the steps, his hands clasped and his head drooping, and I looked at his fatty, bloodshot eyes that appeared to have been packed with mud, his expressionless eyes, and realized abruptly that he was once again, as when the adults had taken him prisoner, a black beast that rejected understanding, a dangerously poisonous substance. I looked up at the giant black soldier, looked at the chain wrapped around the trap door, looked down at my own small, bare feet. A wave of fear and amazement broke over my vital organs and eddied around them. Darting away from the black soldier I pressed my back against the wall. The black soldier stood where he was in the middle of the cellar, his head drooping. I bit my lip and tried to withstand the trembling in my legs.

The adults gathered above the trap door and began to tug at it, gently at first and then abruptly with a great cackling as of chickens being pursued. But the thick oak door that had been so useful for locking the black soldier securely in the cellar was locking the adults out now, and the children, the trees, the valley.

A few adults peered frantically through the skylight and were immediately replaced by others, bumping foreheads in the scramble. There was a sudden change in their behavior. At first they shouted. Then they fell silent, and a threatening gun barrel was inserted through the skylight. Like an agile beast the black soldier leaped at me and hugged me tightly to himself, using me as a shield against the rifle, and as I moaned in pain and writhed in his arms I comprehended the cruel truth. I was a prisoner, and a hostage. The black soldier had transformed into the *enemy*, and my side was clamoring beyond the trap door. Anger, and humiliation, and the irritating sadness of betrayal raced through my body like flames, scorching me. And most of all, fear, swelling and eddying in me, clogging my throat and making me sob. In the black soldier's rude arms, aflame with anger, I wept tears. The black soldier had taken me prisoner. . . .

The gun barrel was withdrawn, the clamor increased, and then a long discussion began on the other side of the skylight. Without releasing his numbing grip on my arm the black soldier went into a corner where there was no danger of a sniper's bullet and sat down in silence. He pulled me in close to himself, and, just as I had often done when we had been friends, I kneeled with my bare knees within the circle of his body odor. The adults continued to talk for a long time. Now and then my father peered in through the skylight

and nodded to his son who had been taken hostage, and each time, I cried. Dusk rose like a tide, first in the cellar and then in the square beyond the skylight. When it got dark the adults began going home several at a time, shouting a few words of encouragement to me as they left. For a long time after that I heard my father walking back and forth beyond the skylight, and then suddenly he was gone and there was no further indication of life aboveground. Night filled the cellar.

The black soldier released my arm and peered at me as though pained by the thought of the warm, everyday familiarity that had flowed between us until that morning. Trembling with anger, I looked away and remained with my eyes on the floor, my shoulders stubbornly arched, until the black soldier turned his back on me and cradled his head between his knees. I was alone; like a weasel caught in a trap I was abandoned, helpless, sunk in despair. In the darkness the black soldier did not move.

Standing, I went over to the steps and touched the boar-trap, but it was cold and hard and repelled my fingers and the bud of a shapeless hope. I did not know what to do. I could not believe the trap that had captured me; I was a baby field rabbit who weakens and dies as it stares in disbelief at the metal claws biting into its wounded foot. The fact that I had trusted the black soldier as a friend, my incredible foolishness, was an agony to me. But how could I have doubted that black, stinking giant who never did anything but smile! Even now I could not believe that the man whose teeth were chattering in the darkness in front of me was that dumb black man with the large penis.

I was trembling with chill, and my teeth chattered. My stomach had begun to hurt. I squatted, pressing my stomach, and I encountered sudden dismay: I was going to have diarrhea, the strained nerves throughout my body had brought it on. But I could not relieve myself in front of the black soldier. I clenched my teeth and endured, cold sweat beading my forehead. I endured my distress for such a long time that the effort to endure filled the space that had been occupied by fear.

But finally I resigned myself, walked over to the barrel we had laughed and hooted to see the black soldier straddle, and dropped my pants. My exposed, white buttocks felt weak and defenseless, it seemed to me I could feel humiliation dyeing my throat, my esophagus, even the walls of my stomach pitch black. When I was finished

I stood up and returned to the corner. I was beaten and I submitted, sinking to the bottom of despair. Pressing my grimy forehead against the cellar wall, warm with the heat of the ground above, I cried for a long time, stifling my sobs as best I could. The night was long. In the woods mountain dogs in a pack were barking. The air grew chill. Fatigue possessed me heavily and I slumped to the floor and slept.

When I woke up, my arm was again in the numbing grip of the black soldier's hand. Fog and adult voices were blowing in through the skylight. I could also hear the creaking of Clerk's artificial leg as he paced back and forth. Before long the thud of a heavy mallet hammering the trapdoor merged with the other noises. The heavy blows resounded in my empty stomach and made my chest ache.

Suddenly the black soldier was shouting, and then he seized me by the shoulder and pulled me to my feet and dragged me into the middle of the cellar into full view of the adults on the other side of the skylight. I could not understand why he did this. The eyes at the skylight peered in at my shame that dangled there by its ears like a shot rabbit. Had my brother's moist eyes been among them I would have bitten off my tongue in shame. But only adult eyes were clustered at the window, peering in at me.

The noise and tempo of the mallet heightened, and the black soldier screamed and grasped my throat from behind in his large hand. His nails bit into the soft skin and the pressure on my Adam's apple made it impossible to breathe. I flailed with my hands and feet and threw back my head and moaned. How bitter it was to be humiliated in front of the adults! I twisted my body, trying to escape the body of the black soldier glued to my back, and kicked his shins, but his thick, hairy arms were hard and heavy. And his shrill screams rose above my moans. The adults' faces withdrew, and I imagined the black soldier had intimidated them into racing to put a stop to the smashing of the trapdoor. The black soldier stopped screaming and the pressure like a boulder against my throat eased. My love for the adults and my feeling of closeness revived.

But the pounding on the trapdoor grew louder. The adults' faces reappeared at the skylight, and the black soldier, screaming, tightened his fingers around my throat. My head was pulled back and my opened lips uttered a shrill, feeble sound I could do nothing about,

like the scream of a small animal. Even the adults had abandoned me. Unmoved by the sight of the black soldier choking me to death they continued to batter the door. When they had broken in they would find me with my neck wrung like a weasel's, my hands and feet stiffened. Burning with hatred, despairing, I writhed and wept and listened to the sound of the mallet, my head wrenched back, moaning without shame.

The sound of countless wheels revolving rang in my ears and blood from my nose ran down my cheeks. Then the trapdoor splintered, muddy bare feet with bristly hair covering even the backs of the toes piled in, and ugly adults inflamed to madness filled the cellar. Screaming, the black soldier clasped me to himself and sank slowly down the wall toward the floor. My back and buttocks tight against his sweating, sticky body, I felt a current hot as rage flowing between us. And like a cat that has been surprised in the act of copulation, in spite of my shame, I laid my hostility bare. It was hostility toward the adults crowded together at the bottom of the steps observing my humiliation, hostility toward the black soldier squeezing my throat in this thick hand, pressing his nails into the soft skin and making it bleed, hostility toward all things mixing together as it twisted upward in me. The black soldier was howling. The noise numbed my eardrums, there in the cellar at the height of summer I was slipping into an absence of all sensation replete as if with pleasure. The black soldier's ragged breathing covered the back of my neck.

From the midst of the bunched adults my father stepped forward dangling a hatchet from his hand. I saw that his eyes were blazing with rage and feverish as a dog's. The black soldier's nails bit into my neck and I moaned. My father bore down on us, and seeing the hatchet being raised I closed my eyes. The black soldier seized my left wrist and lifted it to protect his head. The entire cellar erupted in a scream and I heard the smashing of my left hand and the black soldier's skull. On the oily, shining skin of his arm beneath my jaw thick blood coagulated in shivering drops. The adults surged toward us and I felt the black soldier's arm slacken and pain sear my body.

Inside a sticky black bag my hot eyelids, my burning throat, my searing hand began to knit me and give me shape. But I could not pierce the sticky membrane and break free of the bag. Like a lamb

prematurely born I was wrapped in a bag that stuck to my fingers. I could not move my body. It was night, and near me the adults were talking. Then it was morning, and I felt light against my eyelids. From time to time a heavy hand pressed my forehead and I moaned and tried to shake it off but my head would not move.

The first time I succeeded in opening my eyes it was morning again. I was lying on my own sleeping platform in the storehouse. In front of the rain shutters Harelip and my brother were watching me. I opened my eyes all the way, and moved my lips. Harelip and my brother raced down the stairs shouting, and my father and the lady from the general store came up. My stomach was crying for food, but when my father's hand placed a pitcher of goat's milk to my lips nausea shook me and I clamped my mouth shut, yelling, and dribbled the milk on my throat and chest. All adults were unbearable to me, including my father. Adults who bore down on me with teeth bared, brandishing a hatchet, they were uncanny, beyond my understanding, provoking nausea. I continued to yell until my father and the others left the room.

A while later my brother's arm quietly touched my body. In silence, my eyes closed, I listened to his soft voice telling me how he and the others had helped gather firewood for cremating the black soldier, how Clerk had brought an order forbidding the cremation, how the adults, in order to retard the process of decay, had carried the black soldier's corpse into the abandoned mine in the valley and were building a fence to keep mountain dogs away.

In an awed voice my brother told me repeatedly that he had thought I was dead. For two days I had lain here and eaten nothing and so he had thought I was dead. With my brother's hand on me I entered sleep that lured me as irresistibly as death.

I woke up in the afternoon and saw for the first time that my smashed hand was wrapped in cloth. For a long time I lay as I was, not moving, and looking at the arm on my chest, so swollen I could not believe it was mine. There was no one in the room. An unpleasant odor crept through the window. I understood what the odor meant but felt no sadness.

The room had darkened and the air turned chill when I sat up on the sleeping platform. After a long hesitation I tied the ends of the bandage together and put it over my head as a sling, then leaned against the open window and looked down upon the *village*. The odor fountaining furiously from the black soldier's heavy corpse

blanketed the cobblestone road and the buildings and the valley supporting them, an inaudible scream from the corpse that encircled us and expanded limitlessly overhead as in a nightmare. It was dusking. The sky, a teary gray with a touch of orange enfolded in it, hovered just above the valley, narrowing it.

Every so often adults would hurry down toward the valley in silence, chests thrown out. Every time they appeared I sensed them making me feel nauseous and afraid and withdrew inside the window. It was as if while I had been in bed the adults had been transformed into entirely inhuman monsters. And my body was as dull and heavy as if it had been packed with wet sand.

Trembling with chill, I bit into my parched lips and watched the cobblestones in the road, in pale golden shadow to begin with, fluidly expand, then turn breathtaking grape, contours continuing to swell until finally they submerged, disappearing, in a weak, purple, opaque light. Now and then salty tears wet my cracked lips and made them sting.

From time to time children's shouts reached me from the back of the storehouse through the odor of the black soldier's corpse. Taking each trembling step with caution, as after a long illness, I went down the dark stairs and walked along the deserted cobblestone road toward the shouting.

The children were gathered on the overgrown slope that descended to the small river at the valley bottom, their dogs racing around them and barking. In the thick underbrush along the river below, the adults were still constructing a sturdy fence to keep wild dogs away from the abandoned mine. The sound of stakes being driven echoed up from the valley. The adults worked in silence, the children ran madly in circles on the slope, shrieking gaily.

I leaned against the trunk of an old paulownia tree and watched the children playing. They were sliding down the grassy slope, using the tail of the black soldier's fallen plane as a sled. Straddling the sharp-edged, wonderfully buoyant sled they went skimming down the slope like young beasts. When the sled seemed in danger of hitting one of the black rocks that jutted from the grass here and there, the rider kicked the ground with his bare feet and changed the sled's direction. By the time one of the children dragged the sled back up the hill, the grass that had been crushed beneath it on the way down was slowly straightening, obscuring the bold voyager's wake. The children and the sled were that light. The children

sledded down screaming, the dogs pursued them barking, the children dragged the sled up again. An irrepressible spirit of movement like the fiery dust that precedes a sorcerer crackled and darted among them.

Harelip left the group of children and ran up the slope toward me. Leaning against the trunk of an evergreen oak that resembled a deer leg, a tussled stem of grass between his teeth, he peered into my face. I looked away, pretending to be absorbed in the sledding. Harelip peered closely at my arm in the sling and snorted.

'It smells,' he said. 'Your smashed hand stinks.'

Harelip's eyes were lusting for battle and his feet were planted apart in readiness for my attack; I glared back at him but did not leap at his throat.

'That's not me,' I said in a feeble, hoarse voice, 'That's the nigger's smell.'

Harelip stood there appalled, observing me. I turned away, biting my lip, and looked down at the simmering of the short, fine grass burying his bare ankles. Harelip shrugged his shoulders with undisguised contempt and spat forcefully, then ran shouting back to his friends with the sled.

I was no longer a child—the thought filled me like a revelation. Bloody fights with Harelip, hunting small birds by moonlight, sledding, wild puppies, these things were for children. And that variety of connection to the world had nothing to do with me.

Exhausted and shaking with chill I sat down on the ground that retained the midday warmth. When I lowered myself the lush summer grass hid the silent work of the adults at the valley bottom, but the children playing with the sled suddenly loomed in front of me like darkly silhouetted woodland gods. And amidst these young Pans wheeling in circles with their dogs like victims fleeing before a flood, the night air gradually deepened in color, gathered itself, and became pure.

'Hey Frog, feeling better?'

A dry, hot hand pressed my head from behind but I did not turn or try to stand. Without turning away from the children playing on the slope I glanced with eyes only at Clerk's black artificial limb planted firmly alongside my own bare legs. Even Clerk, simply by standing at my side, made my throat go dry.

'Aren't you going to take a turn, Frog? I thought it must have been your idea!'

I was stubbornly silent. When Clerk sat down with a rattling of his leg he took from his jacket pocket the pipe the black soldier had presented him and filled it with his tobacco. A strong smell that nettled the soft membranes in my nose and ignited animal sentiments, the aroma of a brush fire, enclosed me and Clerk in the same pale blue haze.

'When a war starts smashing kids' fingers it's going too far,' Clerk said.

I breathed deeply, and was silent. The war, a long, bloody battle on a huge scale, must still have been going on. The war that like a flood washing away flocks of sheep and trimmed lawns in some distant country was never in the world supposed to have reached our village. But it had come, to mash my fingers and hand to a pulp, my father swinging a hatchet, his body drunk on the blood of war. And suddenly our village was enveloped in the war, and in the tumult I could not breathe.

'But it can't go on much longer,' Clerk said gravely, as if he were talking to an adult. 'The army is in such a state you can't get a message through, nobody knows what to do.'

The sound of hammers continued. Now the odor of the black soldier's body had settled over the entire valley like the luxuriant lower branches of a giant, invisible tree.

'They're still hard at work,' Clerk said, listening to the thudding of the hammers. 'Your father and the others don't know what to do either, so they're taking their sweet time with those stakes!'

In silence we listened to the heavy thudding that reached us in intervals in the children's shouting and laughter. Presently Clerk began with practiced fingers to detach his artificial leg. I watched him.

'Hey!' he shouted to the children. 'Bring that sled over here.'

Laughing and shouting, the children dragged the sled up. When Clerk hopped over on one leg and pushed through the children surrounding the sled I picked up his leg and ran down the slope. It was heavy; managing it with one hand was difficult and irritating.

The dew beginning to form in the lush grass wet my bare legs and dry leaves stuck to them and itched. At the bottom of the slope I stood waiting, holding the artificial leg. It was already night. Only the children's voices at the top of the slope shook the thickening membrane of dark, nearly opaque air.

A burst of louder shouts and laughter and a soft skimming through

the grass, but no sled cleaved the sticky air to appear before me. I thought I heard the dull thud of an impact and stood as I was, peering into the dark air. After a long silence I finally saw the airplane tail sliding toward me down the slope, riderless, spinning as it came. I threw the artificial leg into the grass and ran up the dark slope. Alongside a rock jutting blackly from the grass and wet with dew, both hands limply open, Clerk lay on his back grinning. I leaned over and saw that thick, dark blood was running from the nose and ears of his grinning face. The noise the children made as they came running down the slope rose above the wind blowing up from the valley.

To avoid being surrounded by the children I abandoned Clerk's corpse and stood up on the slope. I had rapidly become familiar with sudden death and the expressions of the dead, sad at times and grinning at times, just as the adults were familiar with them. Clerk would be cremated with the firewood gathered to cremate the black soldier. Glancing up with tears in my eyes at the narrowed sky still white with twilight, I went down the grassy slope to look for my brother.

TSUSHIMA YUKO (1947–)

A VERY STRANGE, ENCHANTED BOY

Translated by Geraldine Harcourt

There's a song in English that begins: 'There was a boy, a very strange, enchanted boy.' I have an idea it was Nat King Cole who sang it, though I'm not sure. I heard it once on the radio, catching the beginning because the English was unusually clear; I remember being so startled by the words, and by the slow-flowing melody in a minor key, that I felt a chill. I listened intently, wistful and also afraid, as if something impossible had happened. It was a beautiful tune.

There was a boy, a very strange, enchanted boy. . . .

It was a sound that shouldn't have been humanly possible to convey, that should have gone on echoing in a closed space, yet there it was as an actual song.

Although I only heard it that one time, I still can't forget the beginning.

Now that I come to think of it, there was a book as well: The Mysterious Stranger. *Its Japanese title, like the song's, was* Strange Boy. *I was so shaken when I came across it in a bookstore, you'd have thought I'd seen the ghost of one of my family. There on the spine, printed much too boldly, were words that shouldn't have been out in the open. While strongly drawn to them, I hurried away in spite of myself.*

Yes, there was a book like that, too.

'I've found *infinity*.'

Michie was surprised by another announcement from her six-year-old.

'Infinity?' she asked. The boy nodded. 'Where?'

'Come here and I'll show you.'

He ran to the bathroom. When she saw where he was headed, she understood.

'Ah, the mirrors.'

'Come on, quick.'

'I already know.'