

Yoko Tawada. "The Bath." From:
Where Europe Begins. Trans.
Susan Bernofsky and Yumi Selden.
New York: New Directions, copyright
1989-2002. pp. 3-55.

THE BATH

1

Eighty percent of the human body is made of water, so it isn't surprising that one sees a different face in the mirror each morning. The skin of the forehead and cheeks changes shape from moment to moment like the mud of a swamp, shifting with the movements of the water below and the footsteps of the people walking above it.

I had hung a framed photograph of myself beside the mirror. The first thing I would do when I got up was to compare my reflection with the photograph, checking for discrepancies which I then corrected with makeup.

Compared to the fresh complexion shown in the photograph, the face in the mirror looked bloodless and pale, like

the face of a dead person. Perhaps this is why the rectangular frame of the mirror reminded me of a coffin. When I held up the candle to look more closely, I saw that my skin was covered with fine, overlapping scales, smaller than the wings of tiny insects. Carefully I inserted one long thumbnail beneath a scale and flicked it off. In this way I was able to strip off the scales one at a time. When I unbuttoned my pajama top, I saw the scales covered not only my face but my chest and arms as well. If I began removing them one by one, I would be late for work. I decided to take a bath to soften the scales and then rub them off.

Once upon a time there was an impoverished village in a valley where no rice would grow. A pregnant woman was so hungry that when she found a fish one day she wolfed it down raw without sharing it with the other villagers. The woman gave birth to a lovely baby boy. Afterwards, her body grew scales, and she turned into an enormous fish. She could no longer survive on land, and went to live all by herself beneath the river. An old man took the child in. Boys have always swapped insulting comments about their mothers when they quarrel. "Your mother's a whore!" "Your mother doesn't have a belly-button!" They don't know what those things mean, but they say them anyhow. This boy heard the same contemptuous words over and over: "Your mother has scales!" One day the boy asked the old man what it meant to have scales, and where his mother really lived. Once he had discovered the secret of his ori-

gins, the boy could think of nothing but how to change his mother back into a human being. In the end, he decided to break open the rock of the surrounding mountains to irrigate the fields and make a rice paddy. The villagers' poverty would end if they could grow rice. The boy went to see his mother to tell her about his plans. She was very happy and wanted to help. The boy drew a map and decided where to break open the rock wall. His mother threw her large, scaly body against the rock again and again, and little by little it began to crumble. Day and night she threw herself against the rock. The scales that were scraped from her body flew up into the air and danced in the wind like blood-stained cherry petals. This is how the village, which had no cherry trees, came to be called the Village of Cherry Blossoms. Once they had irrigated fields, the villagers no longer had to starve, but the mother, who had lost all her scales and become human again, bled to death.

When I finished getting out of my pajamas, the phone rang. Still naked, I picked up the receiver. I didn't say anything, and from the other end of the line came a man's voice I had never heard before.

"It's you?"

I thought about this for a moment and said, "It isn't."

"If it's not you, then who are you?"

I put down the receiver. That was my first conversation on this strange day.

Slowly I got into the hot water, starting with my big toe.

As long as I don't move the water around, I can stand even very hot water. I closed my eyes, held my breath, and submerged myself entirely in the long bathtub. I thought: burial at sea is fine, a grave beneath the earth is fine, but not cremation—cremation I couldn't stand.

When I got out of the bath, the scales had softened. I scraped them off with a pumice stone. They came off with relatively little effort. I would have hated having to throw myself against a rock wall and die. It was a good thing I had no son.

When I returned to the mirror, the scales were gone, but on my nose I saw a large number of tiny blisters smaller than ants' heads. I popped one with my nail, and a greasy white substance came out. It smelled like rancid mayonnaise. Once I started I couldn't stop and popped one after the other. Outside I could hear the birds beginning to chirp and flap their wings. Unless I hurried I would really be late for work. When I had popped the last of the blisters, what remained was not smooth skin but a desolate desert landscape scattered with deflated balloons.

The telephone rang again. I picked up the phone and didn't say anything until the caller said, "Hello, it's me." It was a familiar voice.

"Excuse me, may I ask who's calling?" I couldn't help asking, even though I knew who it was.

"It's me," the man's voice said. "Is it all right if I come over tonight?"

"That would be fine, but I won't be home till late. You have the key?"

"I'm working late too, so I wouldn't have time earlier, anyway. See you then."

I wondered how I already knew I wouldn't be home till late.

I washed my face with white sand. This is the only way to smooth a skin that's become like a desert. This sand was supposedly made of whales' bones that had been tossed up by the sea and bleached in the sun. When I scooped some up in my palm and held it to my face, the sand spoke to my bones through my flesh. I distinctly felt the shape of my skull in my hand. Beyond a skin made of light and flesh made of water, there is another body. Only, as long as that body is alive, no one will be able to hold it close.

Sometimes other people's skulls look transparent. At such moments I fall in love.

When I had moistened my skin with milk lotion, the face in the mirror began to look like the face in the photograph. This lotion isn't a pharmaceutical product, it's made of real mother's milk. So it not only moisturizes the skin but also soothes the nerves and gives one energy.

I finished my makeup and combed my hair. In the grasslands of a dream, I painstakingly combed out the spores of poisonous mushrooms and the carcasses of winged insects. When I was a child, I never combed my hair. This was because it made me feel as though my head had just been

emptied of its contents. It was not really the brain, but the hair, that did the thinking. At school the teachers always said to comb and braid your hair, probably because they were afraid of the children's hair. They say that hair has strange powers. In the old days, people used to cut a lock of hair to give to someone setting off on a journey, to ward off harm. They also used to touch foreigners' hair to cure illnesses.

Once, a long time ago, there was a village in which lived a gluttonous woman. She worked hard and had a good disposition, and so she was well-liked in the village, but she ate so many helpings of rice that her husband thought it strange. Moreover, she forbade others to watch her eat, and would take her meals alone at night in the barn. One night the man crept up to the barn to watch, and he saw that each of the woman's hairs had turned into a snake and was eating rice. Astonished, the man got out his rifle and shot the woman dead.

They say hair is the part of the skin that has died and hardened. Part of my body is already a corpse.

2

The photograph beside the mirror is one Xander took of me several years ago. He appeared before me one day with

three Leica cameras slung over his shoulder. This was the first encounter between the photographer and his model. He explained that he was really an activist photographer, but he couldn't live on such little pay, so now he was working for a travel agency and had come to take pictures for an advertising campaign. He handed me a homemade business card. I didn't know how to pronounce the "X" in "Xander." Since it was the first letter of his name, I couldn't begin to speak at all. Xander was already squatting on the ground, unpacking his cameras and other equipment. My eyes were still crucified by the X. Until the day I learned Xander was short for Alexander, I was tormented by the question I had first encountered in my junior high school math book: "Find the value of x ." If x was *durchein*, it meant *durcheinander* (mixed up); if it was *mitein*, then *miteinander* (together)—but I couldn't help suspecting there were even more horrifying words. When the camera's eye stared at me head-on, I turned away in embarrassment, as if I'd been caught gazing into a mirror. The bulb flashed. After that, only the black hole of the lens remained in my field of vision.

"Don't be afraid. The camera isn't a gun," Xander said. The lens was trying to trap me; my eyes turned into fish made of light and attempted to dart away through the air.

"Can't you look a little more Japanese? This is for a travel poster."

There was another flash. The camera was cutting time into thin slices, the way a knife slices ham. One can then

pick up these slices one by one and look at them, or eat them. For pleasure, or as an alibi. But what did I need an alibi for? I didn't yet know I was going to become entangled in a homicide case.

"Keep your eyes on the lens," Xander said. The camera in front of me was an old-fashioned Leica. It kept trying to peer into my eyes, like a psychologist. If it wanted to learn my soul's secrets, I had nothing to worry about, since there weren't any. But this camera was trying to capture my skin.

"Relax," Xander ordered. The camera was gauging its target's position and distance.

"Smile," Xander said severely. I attempted to tighten my facial muscles into a smile, but didn't succeed. They say when you fall in love your face becomes distorted and you can no longer smile naturally.

"Why do you need to take so many?"

"It makes it more likely there's a good shot among them."

"Even with such a good camera, you can't take a good picture in one shot?"

"Don't talk. It's no good if you talk."

He might have been a dentist, unable to work while the patient is talking. The camera was part of the treatment. It was trying to preserve my body from death by burning it onto the paper. There was another flash.

"That should be enough," Xander said, lowering his

camera. When his face appeared where the camera had been, it looked very much like my own.

A few days later, Xander came over again with his camera.

"You didn't come out in any of the photographs," he said resentfully.

"Why? Was the camera broken?"

"The camera was fine. The background came out beautifully, but you aren't in any of the pictures."

For a little while, neither of us said anything.

"It's all because you don't have a strong enough sense of yourself as Japanese," he said.

I looked at him in surprise. "Do you really think skin has a color?"

Xander laughed. "Of course. Or do you think it's the flesh that's colored?"

"How could flesh possibly have color? There's color in the play of light on the surface of the skin. We don't have colors inside."

"Yes, but the light plays on your skin differently than on ours."

"Light is different on every skin, every person, every month, every day."

"Each one of us, on the other hand, has a special voice inside. There is..."

"There aren't any voices inside us. What you hear is air vibrating outside our bodies."

Xander thought for a little while. Then he looked up and said, "Would you mind if I tried makeup?"

Xander covered my face with a powder base. He laid it on so thickly that it closed up all my pores and my skin could no longer breathe. Then with a fine brush he traced the outlines of my eyelids, working as carefully as an archaeologist brushing bits of dirt from an earthenware shard he's excavating. Then he filled in the area where my mouth was with lipstick exactly the color of my lips.

"I'll dye your hair black for you."

"Why do you want to blacken hair that's already black?"

"Unless it's dyed, it'll come out white as an old woman's because of the flash."

"What if you don't use flash?"

"Then nothing will come out."

When he finished dyeing my hair, Xander drew an x on my cheek.

"When I was a child, I marked everything precious to me with an x, so it would belong to me." Then he kissed the mark.

After that Xander stood me in front of a wall and pressed the shutter release button as casually as if he were pulling a trigger. The x on my cheek dug into my flesh. It stopped the light from playing and crucified the image of a Japanese woman onto the paper.

I wasn't really a model, I was only a simultaneous interpreter who was uncertified and thus got very few assignments. Every day after completing my toilette, I would go to the office and wait for work. If by the end of the day I hadn't been called, I would go home without having done anything at all. But sometimes I did receive an assignment, and then I would have a sip of whiskey and go to work.

That morning, my office received a call from a Japanese firm that had arranged a luncheon for its German clients. The company exported machines that processed fish for canning, bones and all. I was to fill in for an interpreter who had fallen ill. The restaurant had a lakefront view and belonged to a famous hotel. On either side of the long table sat five members of each firm, like children playing a war game with two opposing teams. I was seated next to the president of the Japanese firm. He had slightly rounded shoulders and a habit of nodding emphatically. On the other side of the table sat the Germans, two women and three men. One of the women wore a blouse that exposed her shoulders. Another had on a tight skirt and sat with her long legs crossed. Both sat with their backs held straight and their chins thrust out, and when they blinked, they did so unhurriedly. When they looked down, lines appeared on either side of their mouths, and they looked bitter and

exhausted from too much work, but this impression dissipated when they stuck out their chins a bit more.

On the Japanese side sat only middle-aged men in suits. Astonished, a long-faced man said in a low voice, "So the women here wear sexy clothing even to work." Since the silence had been broken, all the Germans turned toward me in curiosity. "What did he say?" one of them asked, apparently too excited to wait for me to speak of my own accord.

"He is admiring that old china and says it is indeed very fine," I said, translating a sentence no one had said.

When my work takes me to an exclusive restaurant, I always order sole. Sole, unlike flounder, never tastes bland, and it's also not fatty like salmon. I don't know anything more delicious in Western cuisine. But it's not just because of the taste I insist on sole. It's the word itself. Sole, soul, sol, solid, delicious sole of my soul; the *sole* reason I don't lose my soul, and my soles stand on a *solid* footing still... When I eat sole, I'm never at a loss for words with which to translate.

On this day, however, one large fish was ordered for the whole party, so I wasn't able to order sole.

When the waiter finished pouring the aperitifs, the president of the company gave a speech. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are very happy to welcome you here today." Head down, I began to translate mechanically. At the end of the sentence I looked up, and met the penetrating gaze of a Japanese man in metal-rimmed glasses. Interpreters are like

prostitutes that serve the occupying forces; their own countrymen hold them in contempt. It's as if the German entering my ears were something like spermatic fluid. "There is an old saying that there is no such thing as an accidental meeting. It is nonetheless now our task to turn our meeting into something meaningful." The German at the right end of the table was staring at the president of the Japanese firm, trying to look interested, but he kept fidgeting under the table, obviously bored. "I earnestly hope we will have further opportunities to continue our association." Glasses clinked. The German at the left end of the table, a little younger than the others, raised his elbow and, like an actor in front of the mirror, slowly drained his glass. The long-faced Japanese man smacked his lips loudly and said, "What an excellent aperitif." The tight-skirted woman frowned and turned her head to look at him.

"Over here, you're not supposed to make noises at dinner," whispered the man in the metal-rimmed glasses.

"Oh, yes, so I've heard."

"The ladies don't like it when you make noise."

The president of the German firm looked over at me, expecting a translation.

"What kind of liqueur is this?" Again I translated a sentence no one had said. The German president looked pleased, and explained the notion of pre-dinner drinks. When I translated, the Japanese president looked bored and said, "Look, they sell these in Japan too. Now, let's talk

about you," he added paternally. "Why are you living all by yourself in a place like this? You should go home and get married, or your parents will worry."

At this point, the master chef and his assistant carried in a large fish between them, as if they were carrying a wounded person on a stretcher out to an ambulance. The white, swollen belly of the fish looked like a fat woman's thigh, and perhaps because of this, the arrival of the fish at the table was greeted with suppressed laughter. The fish's back was blue-green and thickly covered with translucent scales. One chef skillfully slid a knife from tail to head, stripping away the scales. There was a burst of applause. The eyes had already been removed. The open mouth had no tongue in it. The chef rapidly cut up the body and divided it among eleven plates. Finally, only the eyeless fish-head and backbone remained. "Now then, ladies and gentlemen, let us raise our glasses and make a toast. To the future." Over the skeleton of the fish, glasses clinked. To the future.

For a while, everyone forgot to talk and ate fish. One could hear only the sounds of metal against china, and quick intakes of air between bites.

It was a relief to me that everyone was eating. When they eat, they don't talk.

I'm not well suited to the task of interpreting to begin with. I hate talking more than anything, especially speaking my mother tongue.

Until I started elementary school, I called myself by my

name. When school began, the teachers told the girls to call themselves *watashi* and the boys to say *boku*. At first everyone was embarrassed and mumbled compromises like *atai* and *boku-chan*, but soon, at least in class, everyone was using the words *watashi* and *boku* quite properly. I was the only one who couldn't, and since I didn't want anyone to find out, I stopped talking. I spoke only to my mother. I called myself exactly what my mother called me. Soon I went to middle school, where I was no longer able to avoid speaking, so I stuttered: *Wa,wa,wa,ta,ta,ta,shi...* The *Watashi* fell to pieces with extra vowels between its spaces: that was the name for myself which I finally arrived at. When I stuttered, all the extra vowels made it feel like singing, and it felt good to speak that way.

I heard the click of a cigarette lighter. Evidently someone had begun to smoke. The faces around me were flushed from the wine. When jaw muscles relax, the atmosphere becomes relaxed as well. People's mouths fell open like trash bags, and garbage spilled out. I had to chew the garbage, swallow it, and spit it back out in different words. Some of the words stank of nicotine. Some smelled like hair tonic. The conversation became animated. Everyone began to talk, using my mouth. Their words bolted into my stomach and then back out again, footsteps resounding up to my brain. The chunk of fish in my stomach was having a bad

time of it and began to protest. My stomach muscles clenched up and I began to stutter. It felt good to stutter. "Tha, tha, tha, that," I said. The skin of my stomach grew taut like a bagpipe and I bellowed, "That ha, ha, ha, has, has." I didn't know myself whether I was laughing or stuttering, but it felt agreeable. The words scattered and rose fluttering into the air.

The others noticed the change in me and fell silent.

"Are you all right?" the woman opposite me whispered, glancing over at the company president.

"Excuse me, please." I stood up and went to look for the bathroom. The restaurant's long hallway continued into the hotel, and I found myself lost in its back corridors. There was no one else in sight. I saw only rows of doors. Finally I saw a door with the silhouette of a lady on it. I went in, pressed myself against the heater by the window, and slumped down. The scale whose pans were trembling inside my ear suddenly pitched to one side, and I found myself falling down a bottomless pit.

4

From far away came a crackling sound. I wanted to open my eyes, but from the inside I couldn't tell where my eyelids

might be. From behind the network of my capillary vessels, I was trying to remember a face.

My mouth was dry, like a scab, and my tongue stuck to my palate. I could breathe only through my nose. The smell of milk boiling. There was a lot of sugar in the milk. The smell of sugar burning. Saliva gradually collected in my mouth. My tongue grew moist and I could move it again. Something wet and soft was touching my lips from the outside. The sole came slipping into my mouth and played with my tongue, gently at first, then with more force. Finally the sole gripped my tongue between its teeth and ate it up.

At that moment my surroundings grew bright. By my head sat an unfamiliar woman who was wiping my forehead with a wet towel. The right side of the woman's face was distorted by burn scars like hardened lava. The left side had a thoughtful expression I found beautiful. This was unmistakably the beauty of a woman of forty, but every time I blinked she looked different, now like a girl and now an old woman. She wore the sky-blue uniform of the hotel staff. On the blank wall behind the woman hung a torn employee roster. I seemed to be in a room for the hotel staff. When the cold towel touched my forehead, a delicious feeling of strength began to rise along my spine like mercury.

"How do you feel? A little better? You were lying on the bathroom floor. What happened to you?" The woman fixed

her gaze on my face. Her eyes reminded me of blue gas flames.

After a little while she said, "Oh, of course. She doesn't understand." She took off her uniform, preparing to go home. I didn't want to be left alone, so I tried to ask her to take me with her, wherever she was going, but I couldn't find my vocal chords. When I sat up, my body had become very heavy.

After she changed her shoes, the woman said, "Well, let's go then. It's not very comfortable here, so let's go home."

We made our way toward the back entrance of the hotel. The woman stood in front of the punch clock, looking for her card. Apparently she couldn't find it, and after a while she gave up and shrugged. If she had had a card, I would have learned her name, I thought. Since she had no card, perhaps she was only pretending to be a hotel employee.

It was already dark outside. I wondered how many hours had passed. Although the woman had decided I didn't understand her, she continued to talk. "Some people say they don't like cleaning bathrooms, but I must say, for me it's the most interesting part of the day's work. Sweeping the lobby isn't nearly so good. Most of the customers' rec-tums aren't on straight, you can't imagine in what directions all the excrement flies. That comes from sitting in an office all day long. I used to work in an office myself, so I know what I'm talking about."

When I heard the word "office," I became sad. I would-

n't be able to go back to the office again. After all, I had disappeared on the job.

"It's certainly true that you don't see what goes on inside a person. Highly respectable gentlemen may produce the most miserable excrement, and perfectly proper executive secretaries may defecate all over the place. And of course they're all busy, I suppose, so they forget to flush."

We stopped at the red light and the woman took my arm. Several people were standing on the other side of the crosswalk, but none of them were looking at us. Even when no one is staring openly I tend to feel I'm being glanced at now and then, but today there was not even that. I felt invisible.

The woman's place was not far from the hotel. It was a basement apartment in an old gray building whose windows had iron bars like a prison.

The woman went down the pitch-black stairway in front of me, saying, "The light isn't working, so be careful where you step." The door wasn't locked. From inside came a smell that seemed familiar, but at first I couldn't place it. The woman groped for matches and lit a candle. The outlines of a chair and a table appeared against the darkness. It was somewhat lighter outside, and now and then we could see a pair of shoes pass by. The ceiling was low. I looked into the next room and saw a narrow bed. Something moved on the table. It was a black rat and had exactly the same face as the one I'd kept as a child.

"It's called Bear, that rat," the woman said. That had been the name of my rat, too—in Japanese, *Kuma*. The familiar smell was from the rat. The woman took several candles out of a drawer and lit them. With each new candle, the number of my shadows increased by one. Finally several shadows, dark ones and light ones, lay flickering in layers. I looked at the floor. The woman cast no shadow.

She put her hand on my shoulder and asked, "What would you like to drink?" Then for the first time she smiled. "Oh, of course, you can't talk." She had gone from saying, "you don't understand," to "you can't talk." It seemed I was now mute. The woman poured red wine into a glass and handed it to me. I had never seen so red a wine before: it was the color of blood. "Go ahead and start without me. I'm going to take a shower first." She took off her clothes. The scars on her face extended all the way down her back. They say that if over a third of your skin is burned, you will die, but this woman's burns appeared to cover far more than a third of her body. Only her breasts were pure white and reminded me of an infant's buttocks. The woman brought over a large washtub, climbed into it, and gingerly poured cold water from a pitcher over her shoulders. The water trickled down her breasts to her stomach, divided at her legs, and came together again at the bottom of the tub. The water dripping from her pubic hair played the xylophone. I was shivering with cold. The woman filled the pitcher again and repeated the process, but it looked less

like a shower than a snake shedding its skin. The water slipped off her body like a transparent skin. "Unless I do this, I can't forget the bad things. Instead of screaming out loud, I freeze the screams and rinse them from my skin."

When the tub was full of water, the woman wrapped herself in a robe without first drying herself off or putting on underthings. She took a piece of cheese out of the refrigerator and placed it on the table. Suddenly rats came scurrying from all corners of the room. I couldn't tell which were rats and which were shadows.

"Come, little ones, aren't you hungry?" The woman cut the cheese into cubes and fed them to the rats. The rats took the cheese with their pink front paws and, silently gnawing, devoured it. When they had had enough, they wiped their mouths with their paws and groomed the fur on their backs. The woman sliced bread for me and held it out wordlessly. The bread was dry as coal. The woman didn't eat anything herself. "I don't need to eat any more," she said.

I gazed at her, trying to understand, but the burnt half of her face, the other half, and the third face made of bone beneath her skin gave me the impression I was sitting across from three different people. I began to feel dizzy.

"I don't know how many months it's been since I last sat down to a meal with anyone. I don't like people, usually," she said. She cut another slice of bread and held it out to me. I took it and ate it too, but it was like eating ash and

my hunger remained. The room was cold.

She placed her palms on mine. "You live alone too, don't you? Living alone isn't a bit lonely. But you can't go around telling people that. You'd be killed in a minute. Not that there are many things you can safely go around saying. They're all deeply envious, you know."

From far off came the sounds of someone practicing the saxophone, not very well.

"So at some point I just stopped talking. That was why I gave up my job at the office. You can't very well not talk in an office. At the hotel I could work perfectly well without saying a word, but for some reason once I stopped talking, the most terrifying things started to leap into my eyes. You should be careful of your eyes, too."

In each of the woman's eyes reflected the flame of a candle. The flames wavered and swam out of her eyes like red tropical fish and began to dance about her ears. When I looked carefully, I saw that they were not flames but earrings in the shape of red tropical fish.

When the tropical fish glittered, they were reflected in the skin of her face and divided into drops of light. One of the fish slid down her shoulder and began to run about on the table. I screamed soundlessly. But it was only a rat that had stolen the earring and was running away with the earring held between its jaws. Dragged along by the rat, the earring got caught on a candlestick and knocked it over. Then one by one the candles fell over. The woman didn't

move. The room grew as dark as if a curtain had fallen. I groped around for a candle. Night had fallen, and outside the window the streets were silent.

"Are you afraid of the dark?" I heard the woman say. "If you aren't afraid, leave it dark."

Now that I'd gotten used to not speaking, it was easy to get used to blindness as well. Only, perhaps because the flames had gone out, it was much colder now.

"Are you cold? The landlord turned off the heat a month ago. I don't get cold any more so it doesn't matter, but if you are, you'd better get into my bed. We can talk there."

She stood up, gripped my shoulder, and propelled me toward her bedroom. It was so dark I couldn't even make out the shapes of things. The wool blanket she pulled over me when I'd gotten into bed smelled of mildew.

The woman's outline gradually appeared in the shape of a keyhole. There was a burnt smell. I felt I had to escape, but on the other hand I was warming up and becoming sleepy.

"It isn't true that you don't have to suffer any more when you're dead. Dead people long for human contact even more than when they were alive." She slipped her hand under the blanket and placed it on my breast. My body turned to stone.

"Now close your eyes," she said. I closed my eyes and saw a desert. I felt as if I'd been tied up and couldn't move.

"Stick out your tongue. Let me lick it."

The bed turned into a sled that was being pulled across the sand by black rats. The rats grew wings and became bats. Drawn by bats, the sled flew up into the sky. So this is what it feels like to die, I thought, and suddenly I was terrified and tried to scream, but a big hand covered my mouth. "Don't scream. You're mute, don't you remember."

I couldn't breathe and pushed the woman away. She simply collapsed to the floor, almost too easily. I sat up and looked down at her. I felt as strong as a five-year-old boy.

The woman said, "I don't want to be dead all alone." She threw herself on the floor and sobbed. When I heard her sobbing, the strength went out of my knees and my eyes burned as if hot poker had been stuck into them. I got out of bed, knelt on the floor and stroked the woman's back. Her back was hard and cold like a turtle's shell, but when I stroked it, it gradually became soft and warm.

After a while she raised her head and said, "Go home now, for tonight. Come again tomorrow night, won't you? If you come tomorrow, I'll give this back to you." She showed me what she held in her hand. It was my tongue.

5

When I arrived home the light was on. I remembered that in the morning Xander had telephoned about coming

tonight. Inside, the room was dense with smoke.

Xander sat on the sofa, smoking. "Does she know what time it is?"

I looked at the clock but its hands were missing. I washed my face with cold water to rinse off the makeup.

"So she's working this late these days."

I faced the mirror and opened my mouth wide. There was no tongue, only a dark cave continuing far back. Xander wasn't really a photographer at all, he was my German teacher. Several years ago, when I had just arrived in this city and didn't know the language, it was Xander who first taught me how to speak. Xander is a teacher at a private language school, and gives individual tutorials to beginners. The school's pedagogical method consists of giving no explanations in other languages. The student repeats everything the teacher says until she's memorized it. I still remember the first time I met Xander. He wore a pair of blue jeans with creases ironed into them and a shirt as white as paper, and in this respect looked no different from a high school student; but the neck, chin and cheeks that grew up out of his collar were covered with the skin of a world-weary middle-aged man.

"This is a book." This was the first thing Xander ever said to me. I repeated the sentence without knowing where one word ended and the next began. "This is a book."

By the time we had moved on to ballpoint pen and ashtray, I was already in love with Xander. At least that was

how I felt. I can fall in love on the spot with someone who teaches me words. As I repeated Xander's words, I felt that my tongue was starting to belong to him. When Xander drew on his cigarette, I began to cough and my tongue burned. Xander gave names to things as if he were the Creator. From this day on, a book became *Buch* to me, and a window *Fenster*.

The second class, however, did not go so easily. My happiness, which consisted of repeating everything I heard, was destroyed all too soon.

When asked, "Are you Japanese?" I would answer, "Yes, you are Japanese." The trick in this game was to change "you" into "I," but I didn't yet realize it.

Xander laughed like a bursting balloon. I didn't laugh. I repeated all of Xander's words, but not his laugh.

That day we went into town to buy dolls. Xander bought me a Japanese doll made of silk, and I bought him a blond violinist marionette. Since then when we had a conversation we used ventriloquism to make the dolls talk. The dolls talked about us in the third person.

"Will Xander be able to meet his sweetheart tomorrow?" the violinist would ask, and the silk doll would answer, "Probably not. She does not wish to meet." It went along like that. Soon I came to understand the first and second person, but Xander and I always stayed on third person terms.

•

"Where has she been? He was worried," the violinist said, and hugged the silk doll. Xander had become skillful as a puppeteer, and could do this kind of thing with one hand without looking. In his other hand he held a cigarette.

"He was worried. He was afraid there might have been an accident." With nimble fingers, the violinist peeled off the silk doll's clothes. The silk, which was the color of cherry blossoms, flew up into the air and fell to the floor in layers, whereupon it became red as blood. When the last layer was gone, only the doll's head remained, since her body consisted only of her clothes.

Next the violinist removed his tuxedo jacket, his white shirt, and his pants. He had no sex organ, just two spindly legs. This is often the case with children's toys.

"I can sew one out of scraps of cloth. Isn't it strange for there not to be one? Or maybe it would be better to carve one out of wood," I said once. But Xander was annoyed and refused. He couldn't stand to hear such things spoken of lightly.

"Even without things like that, there are differences between men and women. Men are moved from above by strings, whereas women are moved directly from behind. Men are made of wood, and women are made of silk. Men can close their eyes, and women can't. These differences suffice to produce love." Since Xander was of such an opinion, the violinist's body remained untouched.

"She hasn't turned mute now, has she?" the violinist

asked, worried. "She hasn't forgotten the language he taught her?" He was trembling and his joints clicked like castanets. For a long time now we'd been living like this, forgetting the obvious fact that dolls can't talk.

The violinist said, "They should go to sleep now. Probably tomorrow everything will look different." Xander ducked under the covers of the bed. At that moment the darkness was rent in two by the ringing of the telephone. It must be that woman. Xander sat up and reached for the receiver. I grabbed his arm and stopped him. Xander lay down again.

"Perhaps she has a new lover," the violinist murmured. The phone rang seven times and then stopped. I remembered that my mother always put down the receiver after seven rings. My mother might be ill. It was eleven o'clock in Japan. I wondered if I should call her. But without a tongue?

When I heard Xander begin to snore, I put a finger in my mouth. My tongue really was gone.

6

The next day was Sunday. I heard dishes clinking in the next room and opened my eyes. Apparently Xander was making coffee.

I looked in the mirror and found reflected there a healthy woman who looked just like the one in the photograph. Her cheeks glowed like peaches and her lips curved into a smile although I didn't particularly feel like smiling. I used makeup to create dark circles under my eyes. Then I filled in the contours of my lips with white lipstick, which made them look bloodless. Finally I rubbed the edges of my eyes with a little vinegar so that the skin shrank and puckered. Then I tore up the photograph and went into the kitchen where Xander was standing with his back to me, looking out the window.

Xander's name rang inside my skull but remained unspoken. I took milk out of the refrigerator and began to warm it. Xander turned around and put his hands on my shoulders, but when he saw the milk he quickly left the room. He couldn't stand the smell of warm milk.

The violinist and the silk doll were already sitting in their places at the doll's table, dressed in their Sunday best.

"Did something happen to her yesterday?" the violinist asked. He waited a long time for an answer, but finally gave up and said with a sigh, "It looks like she's stopped speaking the language he taught her."

I sliced bread. Xander didn't eat anything. The bread had just been baked, so it was moist and not very good. I wanted old, dry bread, as hard as coal.

"Will she take him where she went last night?"

I nodded. We walked along the empty Sunday morning

streets toward the hotel. From the hotel, I remembered the way very well: out the back door, across the street at the light, then down the first narrow alley on the right. The pavement and the façade of the old gray building were bathed in morning light and had nothing mysterious about them at all. From a distance I could already see the basement window.

There was no glass in the window frames, and the iron bars were covered with spider webs. I squatted down to look into the dim interior. Nothing but a few burnt black objects scattered about, and on the floor the outline of a person in chalk. The wall, too, was black and burnt.

"It was here?" Xander asked doubtfully. I nodded. An old woman came down the stairs and looked at the two of us with suspicion. "Are you looking for something?"

Xander gestured toward the basement apartment with his chin and asked, "What happened to this place?"

"Here? A month ago, a woman committed suicide, burnt herself to death, and it's just been left like that. They say they're investigating, there's suspicion of murder. It would be better just to clean up the place. Leave it like this and the rats multiply, and before you know it it's a nest for vagrants. Just last night I was sure I heard voices; it gave me a real fright. I live right upstairs, you see."

"What kind of person was she, the one who died?"

"A woman in her mid-forties. She lived alone and didn't talk much, we said hello now and then but never talked.

They say she worked in a hotel. I can't imagine it was murder."

"Why not?"

"Well, why would anyone want to kill her?"

"So it was suicide?"

"She lived alone, you know. Could be she was lonely."

"But it might have been an accident, don't you think? For instance she was smoking and her hair caught fire."

"Who knows, really? In any case a woman living alone, no good ever comes of that."

"And it was just a month ago, you say?"

"Yes, one month exactly."

When I rubbed my eyes on the way home, I found they were wet with tears. I looked at my reflection in a shop window. My eyes were red and swollen, and my face looked ravaged like a garden after a storm.

That night while Xander was asleep I went out again, alone, to the gray basement apartment. The night was heavy with fog. When I heard someone practicing scales on the saxophone in the distance, I began to run.

The basement windows were dimly lit. I rushed down the dark stairs and knocked on the door, which opened soundlessly. The woman came out and embraced me. I was still breathing hard, and my body swelled and shrank with each breath.

"You came! If you hadn't come, I'd have felt so lonely." The interior of the room was exactly as it had been the night before, and what I had seen in the morning seemed like a dream. On the table stood a single lit candle. The woman poured red wine into a glass. The wine smelled like blood. She cut me a slice of bread. This time, too, the bread was dry and tasted like coal. Today I found it delicious. Four black rats came to pick up the breadcrumbs.

"The fog is so dense, the town is like a jungle," said the woman, and stroked the back of my hand. On the patch of skin where she had stroked me, shining scales began to grow. The scales reflected the light in red and green. Even when the woman blew out the candle, the scales still sparkled.

"Now listen carefully. I'm speaking to you because you are the only one who understands my words." The woman's breath was as cold as a night wind on my cheek. "At first everyone will praise your scales and envy them, and you'll feel glad. But one day suddenly someone will say he's going to kill you. Suddenly they'll all hate you. Out of terror, your backbone will go soft, it will not hold itself erect. Your head will hang down in front. Then it's too late. They throw stones, there's a pounding in your head, and you realize the drum you hear is beating time for the sutras at your funeral."

The woman took my face in both hands. There was a sound like sparks flying up from a fire, and my scales began

to grow. I touched them with my finger. They were rough and cold.

The woman thrust the five bony fingers of one hand into my hair. I heard the sounds of bats beating their wings, and my head became very heavy. I was overcome with weariness.

"Aren't you sleepy? Come to my bed. We'll sleep a little." The moment she said this, I heard the wooden door burst open. A dog was barking. Two large shadows threw themselves on me. I was knocked to the ground and cried out soundlessly.

"What are you doing here?" I heard men's voices. The room grew bright. I was lying in the middle of an empty burned-out room. The German shepherd smelled the wine on my lips, bared its teeth and growled. Behind the dog stood two men in uniform. The furniture had disappeared. So had the woman.

"Show me your papers," said a man with a beard exactly like a bush. I got to my feet. My clothing was streaked with soot.

"Your name?"

I tried to brush the soot from my clothes.

"I asked what your name is," Bush-beard snapped.

"I don't think she understands," said the other man, a beanpole. "Maybe she's ill. Look at her face, she looks like a ghost."

"Maybe she's a refugee."

"Anyway, she's not relevant to the case. Leave her alone."

Bush-beard tapped my back lightly three times with the stick he held in his hand and shouted, "Get out of here, go home! They find you in a place like this, they'll sell you." Beanpole gave a long piercing laugh like a siren.

7

"Now, begin from that corner." At some point, Bush-beard must have combed his bush and changed into a suit. I swung the heavy lead hammer and brought it down with a crash on the floor where Bush-beard was pointing. Rats scattered in all directions. The body of a rat that didn't manage to escape was smashed beneath the hammer. Beanpole wrote something in his notebook. Bush-beard pointed to another spot. I lifted the hammer and brought it down. I heard the rat's bones crack.

"A little more accurately please."

I wiped the sweat from my palms with a handkerchief.

"Please open the closet," the man said gently, so I opened it, and inside were a large number of rats huddled together trembling. When I raised the hammer, all the rats started running. The hammer fell. The last rat was too slow and gave a shrill squeal. Salty sweat trickled into them. I rubbed my eyes so I could aim where the man was pointing.

"Hurry!"

I lifted the hammer, staggering under its weight.

"Harder!"

I took aim and methodically delivered blow after blow as if I were stamping documents. There were fewer and fewer rats. Beanpole seemed to be recording the number of dead rats.

"Look, there too," said the man, pointing with his chin. A few rats were gnawing at the door, apparently attempting to escape. With my last ounce of strength, I raised the hammer. Its handle was damp. The instant before the hammer hit the floor, one of the rats turned around. I recognized its face, that of the woman who had set herself on fire.

When I woke up, my palms and hair were dripping with sweat. As after a long journey, my hair smelled foreign and I wanted to wash the smell away, but a bathtub resembles a coffin so I washed my hair in the kitchen sink. I filled the sink, dipped my hair into the water, and swirled it around. Out came dead leaves, butterflies' wings, dead ants, and dried lizards' tails.

When I stood in front of the mirror, what I saw reflected was not myself but that woman, unmistakably. I turned the mirror to the wall and decided not to put on any make-up.

I made warm milk and covered my knees with a blanket

as if I were ill, opened the newspaper and read the help wanted section of the classifieds. After what had happened, I didn't think I would be able to get any more interpreting jobs, so I would have to find new employment. Since my visa stipulated that I was ineligible to receive unemployment benefits, I couldn't turn to the unemployment office either.

"Wanted: woman with scales." A local circus was hiring women with scales on their skin. It was a unique opportunity for me. I stroked my face with a fingertip to make sure my scales were firm and in their best condition. To show I had scales all over, I put on a thin sleeveless silk blouse and a miniskirt.

The circus had seven tents set up on an empty lot outside of town. It was close to noon, but everyone might have been asleep still, it was so quiet. At the entrance to each tent was a sign indicating its function, such as "Department of Accounting" and "Wild Animals Division." I checked them one by one and finally reached a tent marked "Office of Human Resources."

Inside sat a man with a necktie and a piercing gaze.

I was about to say that I had come in response to the advertisement, then remembered that I had no tongue. The man grinned and said, "You must be the person with scales. We didn't expect to find one so soon. Last week our mermaid died of breast cancer and we've been at a loss."

The man seemed to have taken an immediate liking to me. "It's not good to touch a mermaid's breasts all the time.

And this friend of mine, a poet, insisted on drinking her milk every day, until finally she died."

He stood up and said, "Let me show you the sideshow." I remembered the sad snakes and salamanders I had seen in freak shows during my childhood. So this town, too, had such sad installations.

It was dark inside the tent and I couldn't see much. There was an eerie sound a bit like rustling grass. When the man turned on the light, at least ten women in miniskirts came into view, sitting at office desks and sorting papers. When the women saw the man, they shouted in unison, "Good morning!" They were all beauties who might have just stepped out of the pages of a fashion magazine, and their cheeks and lips were as red as if they'd just been slapped.

"This is the pride of our circus, our freak show." There were neither snakes nor salamanders, but this was clearly it. I had no idea why they needed a person with scales in this office. The women looked at me and smiled, but said nothing.

After the man left the room, the women wordlessly began to slap each other. For some reason I alone was not slapped. There were a lot of small holes in the walls. Perhaps people were watching from outside. When one of the women fell to the floor gasping for breath, the whole group threw themselves on her and dressed her in a wedding gown. This procedure was repeated with a second woman, and in the end the place was full of brides lying on

the ground. Terrified, I climbed up a pole and sat on a trapeze.

"Get down from there!" I heard drunken men shouting from outside. There had been spectators after all. "You can't run away from life! Get down!"

Then someone cut the rope supporting the trapeze. I tumbled headlong to the ground and lost consciousness.

When I came to, the mass wedding was in full swing, and I was lying on a fish platter in the middle of the table. The brides had resigned from their jobs and washed off their makeup, and the bridegrooms looked exhausted. One of the women stood up, raised her glass and announced, "From now on we intend to lead honest lives!" "Honest lives!" echoed the other women. "If things stink we'll say they stink! People with scales stink!" The men, looking terribly exhausted, sat in their chairs waiting for the ceremony to end. "If we want something, we'll say we want it! We want money!" the women shouted in unison. Glasses clinked. "A toast to freedom!"

The chef arrived with a large knife in his hand. When he took a bow, everyone present burst into applause. He placed the blade of the knife against my back and stripped off my scales. The scales flew into the air like cherry blossom petals, and my skin burned. There was a roar of applause like waves breaking.

When I woke up, I was lying with my fingers under me. They were cold and numb. I always feel relieved when I wake up from a dream. No work is more exhausting than sleep.

Since the mirror was turned to the wall, I couldn't put on makeup. I warmed some milk, sat down on a kitchen chair and opened the newspaper. In the human interest section was a photograph of that woman. There were no burn marks on her face. A photographer must have retouched the picture to make her look so unhappy. As well as unattractive. The article said that although there had been an investigation due to the suspicion of foul play, the investigation was now closed and it was concluded that her death had been a suicide. Apparently it was standard practice to retouch the photo of a suicide to make her look unattractive.

B

The mirror that was hanging with its face to the wall beside my photograph had been a parting gift from my mother.

The month before, I had traveled to Japan for the first time in years. My mother hadn't come to meet me at the airport. She always said the sound of airplanes reminded her of the Tokyo air raids, and so the airport was the one

place she couldn't bring herself to set foot in. In those air raids she had lost her entire family.

It was a strange homecoming. When at last I reached home and knocked on the door, my head full of impossible memories, there was no answer. Quietly I tried the door. It wasn't locked. Inside it was completely dark. I turned on the light and opened the sliding door. A machine that looked like a cross between a bicycle and a handloom filled the small room entirely. Behind it, on a futon, lay my mother. She pulled herself up, gazing into space like a blind woman.

"Okaasan, watasbi yo."

I hadn't spoken Japanese in a long time. In the word *okaasan* (mother) I met my old self, and when I said *watasbi* (I) I felt as though I were my own simultaneous interpreter.

My mother looked at my face, but her expression did not change. It was as if she didn't know who I was. Then she stood up slowly, thought for a little while, and said, "Oh, it's you." Then two tears the size of marbles rolled down from her eyes, but her face remained expressionless. An image from a European movie passed through my mind: a mother and daughter throwing their arms around each other in ecstatic reunion.

My mother's face was covered with luminous scales.

"You look well—as if you've gotten younger," I said. She pointed to the strange machine and said, "It's because of the daily training." She rolled up her sleeve and showed me

her muscular arm. "But I've developed more than just muscles. I have a hysterical lump in my throat that hurts and makes it hard to breathe."

I didn't know what a hysterical lump was, but I didn't have the courage to ask.

"And you, why has your hair gotten so thin?" Alarmed, I touched my hair.

"And why does it have such a reddish gleam?"

"It must be the light."

"Why the light?"

"The light's different here, so my hair looks different."

"Is that so," my mother said, looking sadly at my hair.

"What is that machine?" I asked.

"It's a training machine for body-building."

"Why did you get a thing like that?"

"I don't have anything else to do. Besides, it would be terrible if for instance I fell ill and stood in the way of your career. I decided I ought to strengthen myself a little."

"But you're fine, you're already healthy."

"I'm not in the least healthy. I read in a magazine that when new muscle tissue forms, the amount of female hormones in the body decreases, which results in a reduced rate of depression, but that's a lie. It just gets harder to breathe, because of the hysterical lump. Besides, I have the feeling that without you here I'm gradually forgetting all my words."

My mother glanced me up and down.

"How did you get such an Asian face?"

"What are you talking about, Mother? I am Asian."

"That's not what I meant. You've started to have one of those faces like Japanese people in American movies."

I looked around the room. There were no mirrors. That was why my mother hadn't noticed her own scales.

"What do you use my room for now?"

Instead of answering, my mother asked, "Why don't you cut your hair? They say the god of death can grab hold of long hair."

I was eager to see my old room again.

When I opened the door to my old, beloved room, there was a smell of mildew. The window was gone. On the floor, stuffed animals were lying in their own entrails, like corpses on a battlefield. Several wooden boxes were stacked up along the wall. I opened them and found diapers. Underneath were bibs. All were moldy.

"What's this?"

"Your old baby clothes."

"Why don't you throw them away? They're full of scales—I mean, mold."

My mother had never thrown anything away. She always used to say a person who had grown up in the war years could never bring herself to throw something out.

She picked up a bib and stroked it as if it were a precious thing. "You were still breastfeeding at the age of five. Even

in front of guests you would ask for milk and cry; I didn't know what to do."

I had no memory of my mother's breast. I wondered when I had last touched her.

"I spoke to a doctor, and he laughed and told you, 'That's not what girls are supposed to want.' Then, I don't know what you were thinking, but you took the china toy you were holding and threw it in his face as hard as you could. You injured him, and he was so angry he scowled like the prince of hell and shouted, 'I'll pull your tongue out!'"

I didn't remember any of this.

In the corner of the room stood a rusty birdcage with some thin white bones lying scattered inside. That must have been my pet rat that had died ten years earlier.

"Those are Kuma's bones. You remember, your pet rat?" my mother said gaily.

"Why don't you just throw them out?"

"But what if she came back?"

"Who's going to come back? I'm never coming back again, that's certain."

"But my daughter might still come back. She's pursuing her career, and then she'll come back."

"I'm not coming back, ever. Even if I came back, I would be somebody else already."

"Who are you?"

"What are you talking about? It's me."

"How can you say that, how can you throw words around like that?" She suddenly squatted down and began to cry.

"But what else am I supposed to call myself?"

"Oh, when did you start speaking like this." My mother continued to cry. She sounded like a broken flute.

"Mother, stop thinking about the past. Let's be practical and think about the future."

"What future? When is that?"

"You should stop crying, it makes you grow scales."

"I have nothing to wait for but death. You have a job, you have friends, but I threw away everything to bring you up." My mother seemed to have shrunk, about to drown in her clothes.

"Mother, I don't have a job."

"But you always wrote so much about work in your letters."

"I made it all up. You talk about my career, but it's all I can do to earn enough for food."

"You don't need a career, it's all right. Why do you want to go on living in a place like that? Come back home. Don't go back there!"

Just then a fly appeared. My mother took aim with a fly swatter and smashed it against the wall. My mother hates everything that flies through the air.

"Oh, it's time for my training," she said, glancing at the clock. The clock had no hands. She sat down at the bicycle-

loom and began to pedal. The pedals caused chains to move, the chains moved cogs, these moved other cogs, and soon a mechanical-sounding music began to play. The strange thing was that none of the notes had pitch or length, they were simply born in the distance like a desert whirlwind, they wrapped themselves around me and sucked me in. I began to spin round and round. I felt drunk and sick to my stomach as if after a wild celebration, but when I tried to vomit, nothing came up but laughter. It was so much fun I couldn't help it. With every revolution, I became one year younger. There was no longer any front or back, and I couldn't see. My knees grew soft, my heels grew soft, I could no longer stand. My lips and anus grew hot. I was crying like an infant, the shrieks of a dying child being sucked into its mother's vagina. Howling, I vanished into the dark hole of the whirlwind. With the last of my strength, I cursed my mother: "Death to the women with scales!"

Suddenly my body was covered with scales and I fell into my own vagina, the dark hole of the whirlwind.

9

I wasn't really an interpreter. Sometimes I pretended to be one, but really I was just a typist. Now that I had lost my

tongue, I could no longer even pretend to interpret. My work was limited to hammering out words whose meanings escaped me. After half a day's typing, my back felt like a turtle's shell. By afternoon, my neck wouldn't turn, and by evening my fingers were cold. Still I went on striking the keys of the cheap mechanical typewriter. When I struck the keys, the arms of the letters flew up like the arms of drowning people. By midnight I was unable to see. Still I went on blindly. I kept receiving more and more assignments since typists who translate the voices of ghosts into written words have become a rare commodity. Of course I had no time for sleep. Sometimes I fell asleep with my head on my typewriter. When I woke up I would continue.

One could say I had given the woman my life along with my tongue. Every evening I listened for her voice and wrote down her words. So of course I couldn't understand anything Xander was saying. Indeed, I couldn't remember whether I'd ever understood the things he said.

Xander wasn't really a German teacher, he was a carpenter. Anything that could be made of wood he would make for me. The desk and the chair I could never get up from were made by Xander. To keep me from falling out of the chair when I fell asleep, Xander attached my heels to its legs with thick nails.

My energy, though, was nearing its limits. My eyeballs

shrank with exhaustion, and the sound of my pounding heart echoed painfully within my skull. When I had to vomit, a greenish fluid came up from my empty stomach. Xander felt sorry for me and made me a bed.

The bed was a wooden box just my length with a lid that shut. Once the lid was on, it was pitch black inside and I couldn't see a thing. I couldn't hear anything, either. So no one would disturb me as I slept, Xander fastened the lid with nails.

My wooden box was a four-legged bird covered with scales that was called Sarcophagus. With me inside, this bird began to run about clumsily, as if its feet were stuttering, and once its speed increased, the bird's body became hot and hard, and finally it raised its hook-shaped neck and took off into the sky.

Looking down at the earth from above, we headed for the realm of the dead.

Seven-tenths of the globe is covered with water, so it isn't surprising that one sees different patterns on its surface every day. Subterranean water shapes the earth's surface from below, the ocean's waves eat away at the coastline, and human beings blast holes in mountainsides, plow the valleys for fields and fill in the ocean with land. Thus the shape of the earth is constantly changing.

I spread out a map of the world. On the map, the water

has suspended any motion, so all the cities look as if they're always in exactly the same place. Countless red lines, perhaps air routes or fishnets, run from city to city. The earth's face is caught in this net. Every day, human beings adjust the face with makeup, using the map as their model.

Like a herd of frightened sheep, the clouds hurriedly withdraw. In the distance, many fighter planes can be seen, bombs falling from their anuses.

Finally the clouds vanish entirely and the world becomes visible below. It is a sea of fire.

"Coffee or tea?" A ghost stewardess flies up to me, holding two pitchers. The distinction means nothing to me since I have no tongue. The stewardess is carrying a baby on her back. The baby is hungry and crying for milk. I also want milk, not tea or coffee. Xander's voice says, "The smell of warm milk makes me sick to my stomach." At this moment, milk as white as paper begins to flow out of the stewardess's pitchers; it puts out the battle fires that have engulfed the planet, mixes with the ash, soaks into the earth and disappears. When all the fires have been extinguished, no milk is left. I hear the woman's voice saying, "I never once got any milk." She was born the year World War II came to an end.

Finally we leave the ruins behind us and the desert's wrinkles begin.

"Meat or vegetarian?" asks a second ghost stewardess. It makes no difference if I eat the skeletons of grasses or the

corpses of quadrupeds. After a war, everything you eat tastes of ash.

In the desert someone builds a factory in which the woman, now dressed in work clothes, has sex with a handsome man. Behind him, an even more handsome man is waiting his turn. And behind him stands a man twice as handsome as the last, and so on, all of them in a long, long line. But when the five o'clock bell rings, the woman takes off her work clothes and rushes home.

The sun flees behind the globe. In the darkness, my scale-covered bird increases its speed. On the earth below, the light of a candle can be seen. When all the inhabitants of the city have fallen asleep, a single person, the woman, sits awake. One by one the hairs on her head turn into writing brushes and begin composing letters. The envelopes bear no addresses. I try reading the letters with my telescope, but the moment each one is finished, a policeman wearing pajamas comes in to take it away. Not for purposes of censorship. This country has no such laws. There is no paper in the bathrooms, so everyone uses letters instead. And afterwards they are illegible. Every time a policeman comes out of the bathroom, he gives a yawn and shoots at the woman with his pistol as if activating the shutter of a camera. More and more holes appear in the woman's head, but she never falls down. She appears to be a mechanical writing doll.

"Is it you?" Deep within my ear I hear Xander's calm

voice. The woman's voice answers for me, shouting, "Yes, it's you," and then she chokes with laughter. Apparently Xander can't hear her.

Xander's voice grows hard. "You've stopped speaking the language I taught you, haven't you?" The woman laughs herself into a coughing fit.

"You kissed a dead person."

The woman continues to laugh. I start to cry, but of course neither voice nor tears come.

"You gave a dead person your tongue."

All at once I realize that the scale-covered bird called Sarcophagus is, in fact, the woman. I push open the lid and climb out.

Sky and earth have come to an end, and before me lie desolate grasslands full of slender blades swaying in the air. I remember having felt this way when I first left my mother's womb.

With all my strength, I embrace the cold body of the scaly bird. In my arms, each of its scales becomes a wind chime that rings. Sharp, gentle, bitter, soft notes penetrate my bones, and now my bones, too, begin to ring. This ringing gradually gives rise to a strength which belongs to no one.

Then Xander catches up to me on his motorcycle and knocks me over. I fall backward and hit the back of my head

on the asphalt of the highway.

"You think everything's fine as long as you're all right? Don't you care about rescuing her? What that woman needs is an umbrella and love."

A gray rain mixed with factory smoke begins to fall. The scale-covered bird screams in pain. I open my umbrella above its head. The rain soaks my hair and makes the hair so heavy it tears at the roots and pulls them out. It wasn't the light that made my hair so thin, it was the rain.

"This is a nude bathing establishment, so please remove all scales," a supervisor admonishes through a megaphone. I see a large number of naked men and woman bathing in the gray rain and stretching out in the middle of the highway. Only the heretic women sit wrapped in shawls at the edge of the road.

Xander places a heavy kitchen knife in my hand and says, "Strip off their armor, make them naked and free so they can love life."

I concentrate as if taking an exam, trying to understand Xander's words.

"You ought to be able to understand the word for love as easily as you understand the word for umbrella. Only barbarians don't understand it."

I nod and strike at the scales with the knife. At once the wind chimes fall silent and tumble to the road—shriveled, blood-smeared plums.

The scaly bird is dead, but the knife can find no peace,

it dances wildly through the air and stabs my right eye. The eyeball's surface bursts like the skin of a plum, and a soft red substance, a surprising amount of it, comes streaming out.

10

Only adolescent girls are unable to put on makeup without a mirror. Adult women can do without. The location of the skin can be determined by touch. You just put out your hand and feel where this world ends: that's where my skin is. The skin is a membrane separating this world from the other one. I apply a special makeup until my skin becomes transparent. Of course it isn't enough to rub the creme into the skin of one's face, since when the face becomes invisible, the body appears to have been beheaded. So I'm careful not to miss a single spot.

When my skin has finally become transparent, the figure of the dead woman appears behind it.

I always put on makeup before going to bed.

Since I never leave the house, I get puzzled questions: "Don't you have a sweetheart?"

But I have no time to go out because I sleep so much.

Every evening, the woman visits this world through my skin. I can't see her because the lamp is broken and the

room is dark. I can't hear her either. I can only feel my bones become a conduit for her trembling. Then I hold my breath and concentrate on this vibrato of bones. It is a sound that cannot be transformed into music, an oscillation that can never become a note.

By morning, the woman is gone. I remain lying in bed a long while. By the time the reverberations have died down and I start to wonder if I shouldn't get up, it's already dark out. I get into the bathtub, carefully put on makeup and then go back to bed.

"What do you do for a living?"

The first thing everyone always wants to know is what I do when I'm not sleeping, what sorts of exams and theses I have to my name as if they wanted to reserve a place in my curriculum vitae for the date of my death. There ought to be a curriculum vitae whose first line is the date of death.

Since I have no tongue, I cannot be an interpreter, cannot translate what the woman says into words that can be easily understood. Since I have forgotten the letters of the alphabet, I can no longer be a typist either. The letters all look the same to me, like rusty nails twisted into shapes. For this reason, I can no longer even copy down poems written by others. And of course I am farthest of all from being a model, since in photographs I am completely invisible.

I am a transparent coffin.