

“Summer Holiday”

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As I was picking pears in Harada-san’s orchard, something small ran around my ankles.

“Ah, they’ve come out, have they.” Harada-san had said, alerting me to their presence. They had white fur. There were three of them.

“They come out from time to time.” He said as he placed an unsellable waste pear on the ground. Out of the three, two of them came over and sank their teeth into it. Each one of them was about twice the size of a pear. They went on munching the pears. But the third did not move, no matter how much time passed.

“G’on,” Harada-san picked a pear from a tree and put it in front of the third one. Even then, it didn’t budge. It was trembling.

Eventually, Harada-san went to get boxes to put the sellable pears in. Watching as I sorted through the pears, I saw the two that were chomping on the waste pear polish it off before my eyes and descend upon the pear Harada-san had picked off the tree. The third was still trembling. It didn’t make an attempt to move.

“This one s’no good,” a voice startled me. Out of the vigorously munching two of them, one had spoken.

“This one s’no good” “Pretty much s’no good” “S’a shame, the pears’a so delicious” “S’a shame, the pears’a so big”

They went on chatting like this in shrill voices.

Harada-san had returned carrying boxes, so I asked him.

“They come out sometimes. I don’t know much but they seem to come with the pears. They’ll eventually disappear so you can just leave ‘em be.” was his reply.

They can talk, I said, and Harada-san nodded like he couldn’t be bothered.

“They talk, but that’s about it.” He said and started packing the sorted pears into boxes.

Once the day’s work was done, I picked up one of the three that were still wandering around my feet and placed it on the palm of my hand. It was warm. My tired palm felt like it was stretching out. When I asked if I could take them back with me, Harada-san’s eyes grew round.

“What’re you planning to do?”

Nothing in particular. To this, Harada-san shrugged his shoulders but didn’t say anything else. In my palms I cocooned up the one that didn’t try to eat the pears and walked back to my room. The other two followed after us, hopping as they went.

They wouldn’t eat my leftovers from dinner, so I gave them pears again. They took to the pears fiercely. They ate them skins and all. This time, even the third one bit into a pear. All three of them devoured the pears at an incredible speed. In no time at all, six pears had been gobbled up.

“Pears” “More pears” “More, more”

The livelier two were fussing loudly, so I put out even more pears. The shyer one didn’t try to eat any more pears. As I watched their messy feasting, I stuck a moist compress onto my back. About ten days had passed since I had started working on Harada-san’s pear orchard.

These days, when the night fell, I would get this feeling as though something was shifting out of place. What it was that was shifting – it felt like it could be time that was shifting, or maybe it was that the air was shifting, or it could be that sounds were shifting, or maybe everything was shifting altogether. And so, I decided to start working at the pear orchard during the day.

I stuck out my hand and the shy one climbed on. It came up to my shoulder and touched the nape of my neck. It touched with a small paw covered in white fur. As it touched me, it began to speak.

“I’m no good” Its breath touched my neck.

“I’m all sorts’a no good” It said this and shrank its body into itself.

What’s no good? I asked, and the explanation came babbling out. Once it began speaking, it was unexpectedly talkative.

“S’no good that if I eat pears then there’ll be no more pears” “S’no good that I’ll get thinner the more I move” “S’no good that when the time comes it’ll get dark” “S’no good that it’ll change back to light when more time passes too” “S’no good that whether I go in or come out that place’s gonna change”

I went on passionately explaining all kinds of things.

The lively two cleanly finished off the extra pears and fell asleep on their backs on the floor. Soon enough they started snoring loudly. Aren’t you sleepy, I asked the one that was still awake, and it shook its head.

“Can I stay awake here? Can I stay awake here forever?” it said. Yes, yes, I replied, and it climbed down from my shoulder and sat neatly on the desk. It watched me as I washed up after dinner.

When I looked over after I finished washing the crockery, it was sleeping. It was snoring much louder than the other two and was fast asleep.

The next morning, as I prepared to head to the pear orchard, the three of them ran toward the entryway. It seemed like the weather was going to get hot. As I opened the front door, they flew out, each for their own. When they were all gathered like this, I couldn't tell apart the shy one from the other two. Wiping my sweat as I went, I walked to the pear orchard.

The three followed me around my feet, sometimes moving ahead, sometimes hanging behind. They were chattering about something in high, quiet voices but I couldn't quite make out what it was.

I picked pears all day. Harada-san arrived in the afternoon and sprinkled some pesticide. While the pesticide was being sprinkled, the three of them climbed up the trunk of a pear tree and stared intently at Harada-san's hands.

"How was it then?" Harada-san asked. "Anything happen with them lot when you took 'em back with you?"

Not really, they just ate pears and slept. Harada-san laughed at this.

"Why don't you just leave 'em today?" The moment he said this, the three of them erupted into an uproar.

"No" "No, no" "Going back!" "Going back home!" "Sleeping at home!" Harada-san laughed again.

“Well, they’ve completely set their hearts on that now.” He sprinkled the pesticide from the brass rod attached to the hose into the ground as he spoke. The cicadas were singing fervently. Harada-san wiped some sweat with the hand towel hung around his neck.

The three of them, what are they? I thought to ask this, but I hesitated to ask in front of the three of them. Having finished spraying the pesticide, Harada-san stuck his head under the tap’s spout and drenched himself head-first. Cupping handfuls of water in his palms, he drank in big gulps. Soon it would be the evening. Bats were flying low. The three of them were yelling unintelligible things at the bats. They were stomping about.

When the work was done, Harada-san gave me more waste pears than usual. Should eat these too, he said, and gave me a sweetcorn and an aubergine as well.

I went back to my room and gave the three of them the pears. I tried boiling the sweetcorn that I got from Harada-san and giving it to them, but they wouldn’t eat anything besides pears. The livelier two appeared to be more settled in than yesterday, and they did things like scrambling up onto the cupboard, grabbing the telephone and putting it to their ears, but eventually they plopped down onto the floor and fell right asleep. The shy one was sat on the desk with its eyes wide open.

You were snoring rather a lot last night. As I say this, its face grew angry.

“That’s embarrassing, don’t say that” “Leave the snoring” “Leave it”

Over and over, leave it, leave it, it said angrily. I became a little irritated. Pulled on by the darkening night, the feeling of shifting had arrived. Since I had started working at the pear orchard I had been sleeping better, but probably because I was excited by the presence of the three of them, I couldn’t sleep, and I sensed that a worse shifting than usual was coming. This is bad, I thought and took to polishing the crockery, but it seemed I couldn’t get through it. I would go outside and walk to the orchard, I decided.

I felt the presence of the one that was still awake was coming trailing after me. With the darkness and the shifting, I couldn't make out whether it was actually there. I walked fast. The air was lukewarm with the midday heat lingering in the air. In the middle of the night, it felt like countless shadows of myself were layering upon themselves.

I arrived at the orchard and dug into soil. Once I grew accustomed to the darkness, I could clearly see that one of them that had followed me there. The moonlight shone on their white fur. Every time I threw down the spade, it flinched, shrinking its body.

I wrung my strength – “hah!” – into digging. “Hah! hah!”, I wrung out my strength.

“Why are you digging so much?” After a while, it spoke. When I continued digging without a reply, it asked the same thing again. If I remained silent, it would repeat itself incessantly. It asked one too many times, so I yelled “Go away!”

It looked up with its mouth open in an “Ah” shape, then turned itself around and vanished into the dead of night.

The next day and the day after that, the shy one of the three didn't come back. At the pear orchard, I worked harder than usual. The remaining two ran round and round the pear trees every day. When the sun set and my work finished, the two of them and I went back to the room. As usual, the two of them ate a heap of pears. I wonder what the other one is doing, I said to them and they replied, unphased, “Who knows” “Who knows” “They'll come back eventually” “They'll come back, they'll come back” “Might be crying someplace” “Might be crying”

Three days passed, then four, but the other one didn't come back. I took to working with even more fervour, so Harada-san raised my daily wage.

“You can take it a little easier. The plants won’t grow any faster than they do.” He said this and raised my daily wage by one thousand yen.

“Come to think of it, there’s only two of ‘em here.” Harada-san said and I looked down. Looking down, I could see the livelier two running amok. Harada-san didn’t ask any more than this.

“Why don’t you take a day’s rest or so?”

I’m okay not to rest, besides if I rest then I won’t be able to get any pears. To this, Harada-san laughed, “You’ve really become their guardian.” The two of them were running about at an astonishing speed.

In the dead of the night, I woke up all of a sudden. My chest was painfully heavy. Through the crack in the curtains, the moonlight pierced inside. The two of them were fast asleep on the floor. The outline of everything inside the room was unsettlingly clear-cut. The ceiling light, the basket full of pears, the glass bottle on top of the desk, I could see all of it as though reduced just to outlines. My chest was horribly heavy.

I went to touch where my heart was, and there was something there. As I jumped upright, something that looked like the one that had disappeared hopped off my chest.

As I let out a startled sound, it clung to my pillow.

“I’m home” “I’ve come back” “Are you angry?” “Are you still angry?”

Gently, I lifted it up and pressed my cheek against its small face. Obediently, it allowed the cheek-rubbing to happen. The white fur was ticklish to the touch.

“So you’re not angry” “I’m glad” “I’m sorry” “I’m sorry”

Over and over, it repeated apologies. I’m not angry in the slightest, I replied, and with a finger no bigger than a chickweed’s leaf, it poked my cheek pointedly. I’m sorry myself, I said, and the poking got a little harder.

“I was a little bit sad” “I cried a little bit”

While speaking, it kept poking continuously. As I let it keep going, the strength of the poking became less and less restrained. That hurts, I said, and it stopped and whispered.

“I’m hungry” “Can you give me pears” “Pears” “Pears”

I pointed at the basket and in one leap it arrived upon it and began enthusiastically devouring the pears.

“Pretty soon now,” Harada-san began to say around the end of August. “The peak season’s gonna end, so I’ll manage with just meself. There’s a bit of a gap before the strawberry season starts.”

Harada-san leaned against the trunk of a pear tree and smoked tobacco. With narrowed eyes, he watched the three of them running around.

“You’re still alive, eh.” Harada-san said. As though I’d been struck, my face snapped upward and in turn Harada-san’s expression became deeply shocked.

“Oh, had I not told you about that? When the season ends, they disappear, these things.”

Even though it was the daytime, I felt the shifting. It was as though from out of my standing self, an identical sized me might slip right out and just go walking away.

“You see, they’re sorta like bugs. Have you ever had a pet beetle? You know how they die once the summer is over? Same as that.”

Harada-san stubbed out of his tobacco on the rim of an open can, and as he did so he gently kicked one of them as they ran about. Having been kicked, it flipped over neatly. Seemingly entertained by this, it flipped over again by itself. The other two began to copy it by leaping up and down.

“Don’t you fret about it, that’s just the way it is.” As he said this, Harada-san reached into the box of sellable pears and took out about ten particularly big and juicy-looking ones.

“You can have these. If you’d like, please do come and work here again. You were a real help.”

I received my last daily wage and went back. When I got back to my room and opened the envelope, there were three thousand more yen than usual in there. I put the pears on the floor and the three charged about feverishly. Splashing juice into their fur, the three of them gobbled up their pears.

That night, a violent shifting came to me. It wasn’t like the usual subtly strange feeling, but more like the terrible shifting that I had experienced at lunchtime at Harada-san’s place. Rather than the air or the earth’s axis slipping away from me, it was a shifting as though my whole body had cleanly slipped out from itself.

I had slipped out and was standing next to my body. The three of them were leaping around my sleeping body. They were meant to have been snoring away much earlier in the night, but here they were spiritedly bounding about in the dead of night.

“Let’s go” “Let’s go, let’s go” “The pear orchard” “Pear orchard, pear orchard”

They were chattering over each other and shaking the body that was lying there.

I’ve already come out, I’m standing right here, as I called out to them, the three of them looked up at me all together.

“You’ve come out” “You’ve come out, you’ve come out” “Let’s go” “Let’s go, let’s go”

All three of them climbed up onto my legs at once. They pointed at the door. Leaving behind myself who was lying down, I stepped outside with the three of them perched on my shoulder. The summer air glided past my body, heavily, slowly. In the night, the pear trees were standing lined up at regular intervals.

“Let’s go” “Let’s go, let’s go” “Faster, faster”

The livelier two jumped down at once to the ground. They climbed a pear tree swiftly up to its highest point and there they became still. The shy one still remained upon my shoulder. Aren’t you going, I asked, and it shook its head.

“I’m no good” “I’m scared” “Scared” “s’no good”

The two up in the tree began to nibble at the pears that were left on the tree for the winter. Unlike their usual ravenous gorging, they ate like they were quietly savouring the taste. I asked once more to the one that stayed on my shoulder, aren’t you going?

“s’no good” “I’m no good” “s’no good that I’m not going to be me no more”

If it’s no good, shall we go back to the room? I said this, and it became quiet.

You’re not going back? This time, it nodded.

Well then, what shall we do.

No response. The livelier two had finished all the pears left in the tree. Glued to the trunk of the tree, their silhouettes looked to me like white burl tumours growing there.

My body was light. It was lighter and lighter than it had been the moment before. If I wasn't careful, I felt I would be sucked up into the sky, drawn away to some unknown place from which I could not return. The one on my shoulder was trembling. Trembling just like the first time I had seen it. Where the tremors connected, my body warmed and began to loosen. From my shoulder to my chest to my stomach to my arms to my legs, one by one they began to loosen. Like I was submerged in hot water.

“Come with me to the tree at the end”

It said this to me, so I walked over with it still on my shoulder. After a slight hesitation, it jumped across from my shoulder to the tree, and hastily started eating the pears left in the tree. It munched hurriedly like it was trying to catch up with the other two. As usual, it ate with a blank, unthinking expression.

“I'm still no good” Once it finished eating, it turned to me and said this.

Well, if you're no good, I started to say again but I stopped myself. I was no good myself too. I couldn't say it – if you're no good – to another living being.

“S'no good but I'm going to go.” After a silence of about five minutes, it spoke with an uncomfortably serious expression. It's small mouth and nose and eyes were sparkling in the moonlight.

You're going now, and a feeling of loneliness came upon me. The thought of being left behind was horribly lonely. Please don't go, I almost blurted out.

“See you then” it said this and quietly closed its eyes. And before my eyes, it became a burl. It became a white burl on the pear tree. I tried touching it, but it didn’t move anymore. Ah, you’ve become a burl, I thought while touching it, then my body became lighter and lighter, and I felt as though I would be sucked right inside the burl.

I’m being sucked in. I thought. It’s going to take with me away.

In that moment, I reflexively hit the burl. I wanted to take myself far away from it. Let’s go, I thought I heard one of their voices saying, but I shouted back, I don’t want to, don’t want to. The moment I shouted, suddenly my body lost all sense of weight and flew back to the room at an incredible speed.

I returned to my snoring body in the room.

It was drenched in sweat

The next day, I went to visit Harada-san. Instead of wearing farming clothes as usual, I dressed as though I was going into town. Harada-san let out something like an “Oh” and served some tea for me.

I expressed my thanks to him for hiring me, announced that I was looking to search for new employment, and drank my tea.

“S’ nearly the typhoon season, isn’t it.” Harada-san looked up at the sky while smoking tobacco. “I thought I stopped seeing all them kids playing about, but maybe they’re doing their homework now? Maybe they’re doing all that homework that they’ve been saving up all summer in one go.”

Harada-san kept looking upward at the sky as he spoke.

I passed through the pear orchard on my way back, but by now I couldn't tell which trees had those white burls attached to them.

Thank you for everything, I mumbled quietly, and I knocked on one of those pear trees. I felt like I saw a flicker of those three running across my vision, and I turned back but there was nothing there. A small dragonfly was gliding low to the ground. Just once more I stroked the pear tree and then I began to walk.

Translated by Maya Caskie