Photosynthesizer : a novel

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Photosynthesizer

A Novel

by

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Abstract

Part I is narrated by the protagonist, Kotoba, a 33 year old male translator of twenty-two languages living in Tokyo while travelling all over the world. The novel is mainly about the pursuit of a language called Baki+T, which is believed to be the language of trees, as well as a spiritual calling or a means of spiritual development. The chapters in Part I juxtapose Kotoba's current life after receiving a phone call from Baki+T University and his experiences since his childhood in various countries where he mastered his twenty-two languages.

In Part II, the narration changes to the perspective of Jed, a librarian chosen as a facilitator of the class. Part II describes how the six plus students are internally transformed while considering who is the Photosynthesizer. In the end, each student has their own Photosynthesizer. At the same time, Kotoba, as a manipulator of language, turns out to be the Photosynthesizer that the trees have designated. Kotoba undergoes a spiritual quest in the deep mountains and experiences orgasm for the first time in his life.

Epilogue
First person narration by Kotoba. Kotoba now has a twin girl. Through his conversation with an old friend, readers come to know that Kotoba is now a poet, giving readings all over the world.

Critical Essay: “Language and Authenticity”
In the relationship between human beings and language, two approaches are possible; One is looking at language as something which is naturally or unconsciously spoken. The other is looking at language as something that itself speaks or “lets loose” in speaking especially through poetry or the ecstatic or inspired speech of religious ritual. In this essay, I will first discuss language and authenticity primarily through a consideration of Heidegger’s writings on poetic language and authenticity of language. Secondly, I will expand the authenticity discussion to religion as discussed in contemporary theory and postmodern theology by looking at Faith by Derrida and Vattimo. In the last chapter, I will look at language from the perspective of translation mainly discussing the seminal essay, The Task of the Translator by Walter Benjamin.
Part I
Chapter 1

Phone Call

I could still feel the blood pulsing, surging from my heart out to every part of my body. I was not sure if the resonant vibrations in my head came from the phone call I’d just finished or from running. It felt like the sound of wind, or more precisely, the sound of wind rustling the branches of trees in the forest. Later, I’d understand that it was the language, Baki+T, a language I would, in time, come to learn.

In the match box sized office in my condominium in Ginza in Tokyo, I sat on the carpeted floor in the Japanese manner, knees tucked under thighs, and stared at the receiver of my old-fashioned rotary dial telephone.

I knew that I must not allow the sound of this new language to slip away. But how could I hold on to this moment? How could I retain this sound?

And then the memory of the summer Baki+T course from last year came back. “When you hear Baki+T for the first time, you cannot believe that it is even a language,” Mr. Takamizawa, the instructor, had said. “Don’t focus your attention on a particular word or group of words when you listen. Take in the feeling, the sensation of it; make a point of grabbing hold of the atmosphere it creates in your mind. And relax! That is what is most important. Later, when you are taking a walk somewhere, you may feel the language suddenly come back, but it will return with meaning. At that moment, you will experience the real thrill of knowing the language of Baki+T.”

The class had been held in an abandoned elementary school building. On the wall were marks from metal pushpins and scraps of paper. They were the remains of children’s drawings, hurriedly torn away. Clinging to the open window were the tattered shreds of origami for the Star Festival. On hot days, an odor like the entrails of dead fish rose from the river
underneath the classroom window.

Now, sitting on the floor in my office, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to “grab hold of the whole atmosphere” that resonated in my mind. The image of a sand dune appeared in my head and I could hear and feel the sounds traveling over its surface. It was like the sound of wind, which is how linguists describe the sensation of Baki+T to those who understand it. The image of the sand dune was empty of context but I sensed it had some particular meaning for me. In my mind’s eye, I stepped into the scene. I could feel the sand. I was afraid, for a moment, that I’d sink into it and it would swallow me up, but it was moderately damp and, to my relief, firm enough to support my weight.

Was this a good sign? I wasn’t sure, but trusted to instinct and kept my focus on the firmness of the sand.

That I could walk on the sand, what was this telling me? Did it mean that if I kept walking, I’d eventually reach the Baki+T college I wanted to attend? No. I should remember the instructor’s words and not concern myself with what the vision meant.

From outside my window the noise of cars and people, the sounds of the Ginza Street on a Saturday began to distract me, so I put the receiver down and covered my ears with my hands to shut it out, then contemplated whether I should keep walking on the sand dune.

I could still sense the sounds of Baki+T from the telephone. It felt as if it were somehow locked inside the canals and channels of my ear. I worried that this might be something bad and then realized I was again trying to force meaning onto these new sensations.

Suddenly, I understood that what was coming through the phone was a message about my admission to the Baki+T University; but I could not tell whether I was accepted or not. At the same time, in my head, I was still
walking, almost floating over the sand dunes, but I saw nothing up ahead. Is this what the future held? I wondered.

I recalled more of what Mr. Takamizawa had said during that first day of the class of Baki+T.

"When you are not sure what is said, don’t force yourself to try to understand it. In the language of Baki+T, trying too hard, in the moment, to understand the meaning will make it harder. Trust that the meaning will come to you later."

"Then it isn’t suitable for day trading," a man with a Korean accent had said.

"Day trade!!" Mr. Takamizawa exclaimed, grinning. "If you are trying to learn Baki+T for day trading, you should quit this class right now. Day trading is most certainly not in the Baki+T dictionary!"

The class exploded with laughter. By then we all knew that Baki+T and day trading were, in an almost spiritual sense, contradictory.

"But you told us that there is no dictionary for Baki+T," the man with the Korean accent, protested.

"There isn’t any concept of numbers in Baki+T!" Other student shouted. He was followed by a cacophony of questions from the students. Mr. Takamizawa had then gestured to quiet the class and said, calmly, with a sly smile, "The concept of numbers does not exist in Baki+T. Hence, there can be no day trading."

As my recollection of that class faded away, my memory for the sound of Baki+T also faded, and with it, the image of the sand dunes. I took my hands away from my ears. In the distance, I heard a garbage truck; it had a heavy metallic sound that was oddly unfamiliar. I opened my eyes and soon I heard the normal bustle of people out and about on their weekend
errands on my street which would soon start its car-free hours.

This all had happened during a sliver of time when the morning sun shined into my tiny office. I sat in the sunlight like a prison inmate who’d been privileged with a rare warm shower.

Earlier that morning, still suffering from jet lag, having come back from Africa the day before, I had seen the sun rise as I was running by Hamaguri-gō, a corner of the moat surrounding the Imperial Palace. The sun rose on my left and the brick building of the Tokyo train station was on my right. I woke up every morning before dawn so I could see the rising sun while I jogged, as if this proved that I was okay. I had created a complex series of rituals and customs —like shaving each morning (not on the weekend)—to feel that I was doing well in my life. Running at sunrise was one such ritual and carrying around my own chopsticks so as not to waste the disposable chopsticks given out at restaurants was another.

While I was running alongside the Imperial Palace, I had recalled a conversation I had when I was in Sierra Leone with a middle-aged truck driver whom I met on a bus ride from the capitol, Freetown, to the Kenema district, some many miles away. I don’t remember how or why I brought up the subject of the Imperial Palace to the people in the bus, but it led to this question:

“Does your king expect you to do something for him if you live nearby?” the truck driver had asked. He used the word “king” because that was the word I’d used in Krio, the native language, not knowing the word, “emperor.” So I asked him, in English, “Does your king expect certain deeds from you if you live near his palace?” but he ignored me. I was surprised. Not by his question, but by the fact that I never think of my country’s emperor. I don’t even remember his name! And certainly, I’d never thought of his expectations toward me or to Japanese people in general.
But the truck driver continued to stare at me, so I said, “I don’t think the Japanese emperor has any expectations of me. I think, perhaps, that he hopes I am happy, which, now that I think about it, is what he often says in public.” The truck driver kept staring and I worried that my answer made me look naïve or, even worse, stupid.

Finally, after he seemed to give my answer some thought, he asked, “Does he make sure that you are happy?”

“I don’t think so,” I’d said. “He does not truly have the power to make anyone happy. Besides, I don’t think happiness is in his vocabulary. His life is all filled with duty.”

Sitting in my office, I shivered; my sliver of morning sun was gone. My thoughts about the emperor and the memory of that conversation I’d had in Sierra Leone felt so far away. It was clear to me, now, that I had to turn my attention this morning to the intensive summer course at the University of Baki+T, and put aside irrelevant thoughts about the emperor.

But first, I needed a shower.

I squeezed myself under the stream of hot water into the narrow shower stall. While shaving in steam against looking into a small piece of a mirror, I thought of my work schedule, which was packed with several projects. I was a translator of twenty-two languages, after all, which made my services very valuable. This may sound like a lot of work but the subject matter of these projects was solely software manuals, which made it simpler for me because the language in them was, typically, simple and repetitious. To make my work even easier, I had asked a colleague in Norway to develop multi-language, translation software, especially for computer terms. I received large assignments, several times a month, to translate manuals from English to many other languages, such as French, Italian, German, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. My Norwegian colleague’s software
can automatically translate all those languages at once. All I had to do was translate the occasional words and phrases it couldn’t handle, which were usually subtle or complex expressions. Lately, I only took jobs from three clients: large translation agencies in Boston, London and Vancouver. They liked my work because I could produce, very quickly, accurate translations in as many as ten languages. I knew enough linguistics to understand that even though I understood twenty-two languages, it would be best for me only to offer my services on computer software manuals.

At the moment, I had three projects going on at the same time. On rare occasions in the past, something would come up—usually overbooking or a friend’s emergency—and I’d have to find a substitute. That was very hard, because the agencies almost always demanded a very short turnaround. I decided I now had to hand-off these three projects to someone else so I could concentrate on learning Baki+T. This wasn’t a real emergency, of course, but I was filled with a sense of urgency: I felt that all the work I’d done in the past to learn twenty-two languages was all in preparation for this one new goal: to master Baki+T.

But did the phone call I had received earlier this morning in Baki+T indicate I’d been accepted into the University? I wasn’t sure. Even if I’d been turned down, I decided with a feeling of clarity that taking a three month break from work to concentrate on Baki+T study—even if it were to be on my own—did not seem to be a bad idea.

While in the shower, I found myself wondering what time it was in Europe. In Italy, it would be about 2 a.m. I wondered if Sara Drioli was still working or if she was waking up after a late evening nap with her two year-old daughter. It was an odd hour, but that is how many translators work. I also wondered about Alain Depont in France; he would definitely not be awake at that time of night. Because of the late hour in Europe,
I decided to write them both an email and to write it in Italian, because Alain understands Italian, while Sara does not know French.

When I was done with my shower, I went to my computer and wrote an email to them both: *Can you take on a translating job for me? It’s about 20,000 words. I’ll need it finished in ten days. Is that enough time?*

When I was done, two newspaper sites, which I’d setup to display on Monday mornings, appeared on my computer screen: one was from Brunei, the other from Malaysia. The headline in Malay stated that there was a brawl and several workers were stabbed; witnesses said that the victims were Vietnamese. The suspects were still at large. I looked up the word “tarung” (brawl) on the CD-ROM dictionary I’d bought five years before in a bookstore in Bandar Seri Begawan, the capital of Brunei, and wrote the word down on a large white piece of paper, along with another new expression, “jenayah belum ditangkap” (at large). I pinned the paper on the wall, then went back to reading the news, when the computer made a pinging sound to announce that an email arrived. It was from Sara in Mandria, Italy.

“Probably, I can. Call me. Let me know the details. Let’s chat!”

I called right away. She picked up after only one ring. “Moshi moshi,” she said, the standard Japanese greeting when answering a phone call. I apologized about the time. She said not to worry. “Anche un tuono non può svegliarla.” I imagined her young daughter, sleeping so soundly with her many stuffed animals that even a thunderstorm wouldn’t wake her up. I quickly looked up Sara’s contact information on my computer and found her daughter’s name.

“Come è Isabelle?” I asked.

“She’s fine,” Sara replied, in a whisper. “But a monster. Quite a handful.” Sara’s muffled voice made me feel like we were having an intimate conversation in her bedroom. I recalled the video posted on her blog where
she’s holding a new born baby in her arms. She wore no makeup and her face was smooth and white like ivory, her features sharp, as if sculpted. She looked younger in the video than in the photo she’d posted on the translators association site. She cradled the baby, telling her that that was her day one and a whole new world was awaiting, just for her. “You have your father’s eyebrows,” she’d whispered in the video. But the baby’s father was nowhere to be seen. Occasional comments from the unseen person holding the camera—which fidgeted at times—sounded like they belonged to an older Italian woman, probably Sara’s mother. Curious about the baby’s father, I’d once asked Sara about him:

“E sposato.” (He is married.), she’d said.

The difference between “è sposato” and “è un scapolo” had confused me and I’d asked, “You mean he has a family?”

To which she’d replied, “Si. Lui ha una famiglia.” Her tone of voice was exactly the same as when she’d told me how she’d translated a manual about how to set-up a vending machine that dispensed freshly squeezed milk.

Now, she told me about how Isabelle was starting daycare for the first time, in September, and her worries because the child was allergic to wheat and flour.

“I told the teachers that they’d have to prepare special meals for her. They were quite understanding. Nowadays, you can choose from a menu of vegetarian, Chinese, Muslim, special allergy diets,...” Sara paused. “But I must be boring you with all this. The answer is yes. I’ll take the job. Don’t worry.”

“That’s such a relief!” I said.

Sara sounded tired and sleepy and I remembered it was past 2 a.m in Italy. I recalled the time we’d talked until dawn, her time, not long after her baby was born. She’d done most of the talking. I’d heard from another
Italian translator that Sara had gained a lot of weight while pregnant. She admitted she had and sounded discouraged. So I said, “Don’t worry about it; as long as you are spiritually transformed, the weight does not matter.” “Then, apparently, I’ve been spiritually transformed through childbirth,” she’d replied. “But I went through hell for that transformation! God it was sooo depressing to know that the world hasn’t changed at all even after I gave birth to a baby! I’m still totally fucked up. My mother is still totally crazy and I feel that I’m on the verge of going nuts, myself. I think my spiritual transformation is the effort I put into remembering every day what I went through and reminding myself never to repeat it again.”

Now, we were silent for a moment, and I was wondering if Sara had fallen asleep, and also if she was still feeling spiritually transformed, when she asked:

“Are you going to be traveling somewhere exotic again? What’s the language this time?” she asked, not waiting for me to answer. “Etruscan?”

“Baki+T,” I replied. “Have you heard of it?”

She paused for a long moment; I thought that she might be wondering what I meant, but when I heard her softly exhaling, I realized that she’d lit a cigarette.

“Yes. It’s that totally green country. Weren’t they the first country that mandated the highest standards for organic products of any in the world? Actually, now that I think of it, is Baki+T a country? Or is it a self-governing community?”

“Officially, it’s an incorporated territory of the United States,” I answered. I didn’t know about their standards for organic products, but I thought it highly likely.

“Oh, it’s a part of the US…”
I heard another exhaling sound.

"I thought it was in Canada, at least."

At least, Alemeño, I wondered what she meant by that. She probably meant that Canada was more likely than the U.S. to have the strictest green standards.

I told her that all I knew about Baki+T as a country was that it was a self-governing commonwealth of the US, and that it was very vigilant about environmental issues.

"Good luck with Baki+T. It’s too bad that it’s not Etruscan. We could have met in Italy," she said, before hanging up. "Good luck with such an obscure language."

"Si obscuro, obscuro linguaggio," I repeated the words to suggest how very obscure the language was and then I hung up the phone.

I then called Mr. Takamizawa on my old black rotary-dial phone, hoping that that number was still active. I listened to his phone ring and ring. I assumed he didn’t have an answering machine and I knew it would be fruitless to search for an email address; he’d be the last person in the world ever to go online! But out of curiosity, I googled his name in combination with "Baki+T".

The search returned 150 hits, out of which, 148 referenced articles by him on Baki+T in Keio University’s scholarly journal of linguistic research. One article, published in 1982, was titled: "Being and Time: The concept of time in Baki+T"; another, published in 1991, was titled: "Similarity between Vocal Effect of Baki+T and Homei." When I saw those two titles I thought of his worn-out shirt and his black shoes, which looked liked flattened pancakes from so many years of wear. He had probably worn the same shoes for twenty years.

I tried to open the first article with Adobe Acrobat Reader but after
five minutes of waiting while the software was launching, I opened Microsoft Outlook and learned that his address was in Okutama. It will take me about a two hour train ride from Ginza, I thought, and at the same time, realized that it did not matter: Takamizawa would not be at home.

When I went back to the Adobe Acrobat Reader I found that his article was now displayed, but it was upside down. I clicked the box to flip it over so it was right side up and read the first page, which was an outline of the article.

The two most common questions my students ask about Baki+T are: Why is there such a scarcity of records? And: Why doesn’t the language have any written form? The answer is simple: One role of writing is to build a history in order to communicate with people in the future. However, if there is no notion of history or past or even future in the speaker’s perception, there is no necessity to take a written form. That is Baki+T: it exists only in the present; that is a Baki+T speaker’s only Being and Time.

I had read the article before taking the summer course last year. I felt now that it would be helpful to reread the overview as a beginning of the relearning process I’d just started. “Focus on the present.” That was another lesson Mr. Takamizawa often repeated. And I was aware that the present I faced was often mundane.

As I so often did over the years, I now found myself recalling my experience of encountering Baki+T for the first time in Paris, sixteen years ago. Those were the most depressing days in my life. Day after day lost drinking in dingy Parisian bars. I had achieved my childhood dream of mastering twenty-two languages by the age of eighteen but found that
I had no education beyond my knowledge of those twenty-two languages; I’d spent my whole life until then moving from one country to the next: my only goal was to master each country’s language. I’d never bothered to get a proper graduate degree from any school. The only diploma I had was from an elementary school in Tokyo. And I’d only acquired that degree because my mother threatened the Principal of the school! My mother was stern and he gave in to her even though I’d hardly ever attended any classes. It was a couple of months after my eighteenth birthday and I was wandering around Paris looking for those rare adults who found it amusing to treat an eccentric young Asian man to a glass of wine or beer. One evening, on a bridge that spanned the river Seine, I saw an Asian woman, whom I presumed was Japanese, announcing that she would dance along to the sound of Baki+T. She said that it was one of the few known recordings of this rare language. I was very curious, because by that time, I knew the names of most languages; and yet I had never heard of Baki+T. The moment when she pressed a button on a bulky black tape recorder, the sound of wind filled the air and I felt a remarkable sense of peace in my mind such as I’d never before experienced. The sound had a strong presence; it seemed to create a force that exerted a strange kind of pull on the minds of listeners. Well, certainly it did on mine. I was surprised that there were many people around me who either did not like the sound or were unmoved and just kept walking by, perhaps to meet friends for dinner or some such evening plans. When I heard the sound, a realization came to me: I understood for the first time that my future life would be spent solely in maintaining the twenty-two languages I had mastered. And I saw what an unexciting life that would be; after all, mastering those twenty-two languages had certainly never changed my life. The sound of Baki+T made me realize and accept that fact.

Now, recalling my first encounter with Baki+T, I found myself eagerly
wanting to see Mr. Takamizawa again. I decided to head toward his house anyway. If he was not yet at home, I would wait for him to come home. By this time, I started to feel that my auditory senses had become keener, my ability to listen was heightened. That was the sensation some of us students at the intensive summer course experienced when we were learning Baki+T. Our listening sense had developed over time as our comprehension had become advanced. It felt as if my ears’ ability to pick up the most subtle of sounds had increased, as if someone had dialed a volume knob upwards a couple of decibels.

I ran downstairs to the kitchen to see what there was to eat for lunch. I lived in a small building I had inherited from my uncle. The first and second floors of the building were once used as a bakery and there still was a huge industrial refrigerator on the first floor. I rented the space to a nearby Japanese restaurant named Chūbō. The food was labeled and most of it belonged to the restaurant. The only food I was allowed to eat was frozen rice. I defrosted a lump of rice in the microwave and made three rice balls to which I added pickled plum. I tore off some saran wrap with which to cover the rice and the sound of its tearing, then crinkling was so intense that it seemed me as if it came from inside my ear.

When I opened the front door of my building, the cacophony of voices from the busy Ginza streets hit me as if I’d been struck by a pane of glass. The sounds filled my ears; but it was incomprehensible noise. I walked toward the subway station, making a deliberate effort to focus on the present moment rather than allowing my thoughts to drift towards my upcoming conversation with Mr. Takamizawa, or the sound of Baki+T I’d just heard on the telephone.

As I walked through the Yotsuya subway station to switch to the JR Chūō line, I heard a baby’s cry echoing in the tunnel. It was as perfect a sound
as I could imagine, by which I mean it sounded like a baby’s cry on a sound
effect CD. I was curious as to what the baby looked like. The baby’s cries
were spaced out in perfectly consistent intervals of high pitched wails,
followed by moments of silence as it seemingly stopped to breathe,
followed by another round of wailing. The baby’s cries, though, did not
sound desperate; but were certainly not carefree. The infant, I could not
tell if it was a boy or a girl, surely had something that it was demanding;
that was clear. But it did so without sounding too harsh. Yet neither did
it sound like a trivial cry. Its cry was impeccable! I followed the cry
through the zigzagging subway corridor. I caught a glimpse of a young woman
up ahead who I thought was the one pushing the baby stroller, but she was
just a flash of pink in the distance, likely from some article of clothing
she wore. I caught up with her as she pushed the stroller towards an
automatic gate, but it was not the gate that led to the JR line I had intended
to take. She was a young woman and I noticed that the heels of her shoes
were as narrow as pencils. I was in an awkward position. I wanted to see
the face of a baby who made such an impeccable cry, but to do this I had
to pass the mother and go through the automatic gate, which meant paying
an extra 140 yen only to catch a glimpse of the baby!

Fortunately, the woman paused to dig into her purse for a subway pass.
I caught up with them and looked down at the baby. It was a boy and the
infant’s features were as perfect as the sound of his crying. I looked
up at his mother and was about to comment on how attractive her child was;
but for some reason I hesitated. She was an extremely good looking Filipino
woman. I found myself imagining her father, who was probably a diplomat
or the manager of a large company, and how he’d boast to his friends,
“Whenever I walk with my daughter, people think that I’m walking with my
second wife!” That is the reality of most Filipino women in Tokyo. For
a few seconds, I was not sure if I should speak in English, Tagalog, or Japanese; or if I should speak at all. I almost thought of leaving them without saying a word, but I’d been staring intently at her for several seconds and I felt that I had to let her know that I was not following her but rather that I was curious to see her baby. She gave me a look that was both stern and suspicious. And then, suddenly, the baby stopped crying.

“He is a perfect baby,”
I said, in English and then repeated the same sentence in Tagalog. She smiled, a smile that spread across her face like a blooming lotus flower.

“Yes, he is. He makes up for his mother’s imperfections,”
she replied, also in Tagalog, still smiling, as she passed through the subway gate in a practiced manner.

“Now I remember who you look like!” she added, unexpectedly.
I looked back at her through the gate. And still smiling her bright, broad smile and looking me right in the eyes, she said,

“Ken Chu!”
And then she disappeared into a crowd of people all rushing down the platform to catch the train that was just arriving. The way she said this showed me her warmth and her affable personality.

I was satisfied with my brief encounter with the woman and her baby, and I turned back and retraced my steps to head towards the JR line, which would take me to Mr. Takamizawa.
Chapter 2

Radio

I was two years old when my mother discovered my extraordinary talent for learning languages.

She was raising me by herself, while working as an administrative assistant in the accounting department of a newspaper printing company. After the daycare center where she’d leave me was closed because of a child abuse scandal (I was not a victim; or rather, I have no memory of it), she decided to move to a housing project closer to her office. It was around that time that she was avidly researching the traditions of the Ainu, a native tribe in Japan’s northern island of Hokkaido, which gave her the idea that a six-month old baby does not have to be with his parent all the time. I was left in a crib that hung from the ceiling in the Ainu tradition, pretty much all day, although years later she claimed that she came home every day during lunchtime to breast feed me. That would surely be considered child neglect in our own time. I could have fallen from the crib and broken my neck even though it was hanging low. However, my mother had always been sure that none of those things would happen to me, because I was protected. What protected me? To this day, I’ve no idea and I’m not sure she does, either.

“You were born with tremendous fortune,” is all that she’s ever told me. (Her confidence in me led her to trust me to travel to foreign countries by myself since I was very young.)

In any case, while I was alone, to keep me company, she left the radio on. It was tuned all day to NHK, which is a public broadcasting company. That station was devoted to education programs including foreign languages. Apparently, I was in a good mood when the language program was on. Or rather, I cried when she’d change to another station.
In those days, NHK broadcast eight different language courses, each for one half hour. I assume this was the case, because according to my mother, I could “converse” in English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, German, Russian, Chinese and Hangul. Probably she was right. My earliest memories start around the time when she began to take me to the YMCA and other places where foreigners reside to promote my unusual ability. I remember how I could somehow communicate with people of all sorts of different races and ethnicities, including kids around my age, all over Tokyo.

According to my mother, one day I greeted a Korean family at a local park, in Korean. She figured I must have picked up the language from the radio. I was three years old. The Korean couple were warm-hearted (or forcing themselves to act warm-hearted) and devoted evangelical Christians, and are still one of the nicest couples I know, despite having one of the meanest sons I’ve ever met. They praised my ability to speak Korean, and said I was a genius. Whether I was really a genius or not did not matter to me, because their boy, Minho, who was my age, was apparently raised with the same degree of praise despite his rather average intelligence and comprehension. There was a time when I visited the Korean family’s house almost every day, because of Sikhye, a Korean rice drink, that Minho’s mother mixed. Minho often reminded me that his parents and he were doing a great favor to an illegitimate child like me by accepting me into his family, but I did not care about this insult because it gave me an excuse to knock him down. I hit him with an open hand instead of a fist, because my mother had told me it was a way to avoid getting into trouble. (That was an example of the practical advice she gave me when I was a child.) With good concentration, timing, and aim, I slapped his cheek. That always got him to start wailing, while rushing toward his mother.
saying, “He hit me. He hit me!!” This was a good opportunity for Minho’s mother to instruct him “to forgive people.” She’d put him on her lap and had me stand next to Minho as she prayed to Jesus Christ: “Please teach them to forgive each other and become best friends.” I didn’t care much about forgiving, but I was glad that our scuffle gave her an excuse to pray, as that seemed to make her happy.

A year or two later, my mother decided to place me in a kindergarten class located in Yanaka, a downtown section of Tokyo where low-income families from foreign countries lived. That led us to move to central Tokyo and live in an even smaller apartment. Despite its size, I came to love that apartment more than any place we’d ever lived. (It may be the reason why, as an adult, I chose to live in a matchbox-sized condo in the middle of Ginza.) I savored the feeling of loneliness I felt, my mother off at work, and me living in the middle of central Tokyo’s hustle and bustle. Often, when my mother had to work overtime, she’d call me in the evening and say, “Meet me at my office.” All I had to do was take a train to the next station, heading in the opposite direction from the crowd of rush hour workers going home. This routine began when I was only five years old; but she believed that mentally I was three years ahead of the other children. I had a Walkman in those days and often listened to foreign music on those subway rides.

Sometimes, a Vietnamese guy named Ronald, who was a gardener to several rich families in Azabu, accompanied me to my mother’s office. That was how I learned Vietnamese. There were always groups of foreigners in our life, especially men who were attracted to my mother.

“It’s good that you are nice looking like me,” my mother used to say. However, I know that I look exactly like my father, whose picture, which I can still recall, sat on top of the chest in our tiny apartment, where
one room served as both a living room and a bedroom.

My father was Irish-American. My mother fell madly in love with him when he served at the American military base in Fussa, and, where nine months later, I was born. In the photo, my father is in his army uniform; my mother, stands at his side, only as tall as his chest, looking at the camera. His eyes are squinting, as if he were dazzled by the sunlight; while my mother is smiling and seems almost giddy with delight, which now I take to mean that she was a complete slave to love.

"Your father was quite knowledgeable about almost every subject," my mother used to say. "He was great at Jeopardy," she'd made a point of adding. That may have been true, but at some point, as I grew older, I realized that she lied when she said that after many years of dreaming of becoming a poet, he published a book with a forward by William Carlos Williams. My mother lived in a world of lies about him: she told me that once, when they were walking down the street, a movie scout spotted him and invited him to Shôchiku Studio in Seijô for a screen test, where he was offered a major role in a film; another time, she claimed that he was asked to define the term, "lyric," for the 1958 revision of the Modern English dictionary; and yet another time, while they were waiting for a bus, a black limousine pulled over and there was the famous writer, Mishima, gazing at him with an intense look through the rolled down window... or something like that.

Despite my mother’s intense, fantastical admiration for my father, she had a long series of boyfriends, always foreigners, until she finally married her current husband, Surinder, who owns three Indian restaurants in the center of Tokyo. It was as if having many boyfriends from around the world was another way to help me learn languages. And it did help.
I’ve spent most of my time in foreign countries since I was eight years old, traveling on my own. Whenever I came home, I could keep up with what I had learned by conversing with her boyfriends, whom she somehow “procured” from somewhere in Tokyo. Mostly they were “friends,” I’d like to believe, although I often saw them brushing their teeth in our bathroom in the morning or flipping channels on the TV on our tatami mat floor late at night. Once (I think it was when I was around nine years old) I saw my mother throw an Asian guy out of our house, yelling, “Out!” I remember how she’d wanted me to translate for her so that she could tell him that she’d call the police unless he stopped following her. Which language was I speaking at that time? It must have been either Korean or Chinese, because my Tagalog at that time was not very good and I hardly spoke any Vietnamese. Now that I think about it, it must have been Chinese, because I mentioned the Taiwanese mafia to him.

I was just a little kid but I shouted at him: “My mother says that she and I are the last people who a scumbag like you should deal with!” I was happy for the opportunity to use a phrase from a Taiwanese mafia film I had watched in Taipei with my friend, Song. But the man continued to smirk. He said something about my mother that I didn’t understand exactly, but I knew from the way she blushed, that he’d hurt and embarrassed her. (Now, I know it was a crude sexual insult.) A strong hatred toward him arose in me.

Despite my young age and my rage, I didn’t lose my nerve: “You don’t know Jiang Ma, do you? He is the biggest mafia boss in Taipei,” I said. I had heard this from Song. The smirk changed to a mocking smile on the man’s face.

So I took a deep breath and added, “Would you believe it if I told you he’s my father? Last week, in a junkyard, I saw a man flattened like a
pancake because he’d made my father angry!”

My mother watched my face, because the supposed translation of one sentence ended up so long. He murmured something just to show that he had not been convinced or scared by a nine year old boy.

“‘What I wanted you to know is that I enjoyed watching it. And I’d enjoy just as much watching your brains and guts all squeezed out.’”

I had said this with a calm voice and a cold stare. We never saw him again.

That was an exception to the rule. Usually, my mother had a taste for fairly harmless men, although many of them may have been losers in the real world. And many of them seemed to enjoy the paternal role towards me: I learned that a man shouldn’t laugh too much, from a Russian; how to do chin-ups, from a Basque guy; how to bargain, from an Italian; that fruits should be bought in daylight, from a Vietnamese man; and the basics of wood carving, from her Swiss boyfriend.

My favorite was Mr. Beyerbach, a German who was teaching biology at a college in our neighborhood. I am not sure if he had a physical relationship with my mother, although I had seen him cooking in our kitchen early in the morning. I often went to his house and spent time listening to baroque music or helping him chop Japanese vegetables for sauerkraut.

“You have a heart of gold,” he said to me, one time; I was speaking German with him and didn’t understand what he meant, although the word ‘gold,’ in English, was also spelled ‘gold,’ in German. He asked me how gold was translated into Japanese and I said it was kín. I also said that balls are called golden balls in Japanese. But I still didn’t understand what he meant.

“You are very strong, but you know how to be meek. That is very important. Some people can never be meek. Or at least be both meek and strong.”

Sometimes, people mistook my meekness for timidity. I may have seemed
timid because I knew how to be quiet. It was my mother who first taught me this when I was in the second grade to avoid being bullied at school.

“Shut your mouth and observe the kids around you. Be like a fly on the wall,” she’d say, when she sent me off to elementary school; which only lasted a few months before I started to travel to foreign countries on my own.

“I know you are way smarter and more mature than other boys your age, but don’t show it. Act dumb. OK?” That evening, when I had come back from school, I had to report to my mother that one could not fool children.

“They already knew we were different and froze us out of all their games,” I said at the dinner table. I don’t remember if one of her boyfriends was at the table that night.

“Who are ‘we’?” she asked.

“Me and a Brazilian boy. His name is Hosea. He is the only foreigner in the class. I speak in Portuguese with him.”

I was in the second grade. Four years had already passed since I’d set myself the goal of mastering twenty-two languages.

“It’s good that you made a friend,” she’d said. “One good friend is better than thirty fake friends.” I nodded. She was right. The bullying grew worse, but I could handle bullying from classmates by protecting Hosea or by analyzing how I would do better than him to avoid bullying. But even that effort was too hard when my teacher joined the bullies. And even harder when Hosea switched sides and became one of the bullies. That was when my mother found a school in Sakhalin, which, for political reasons, gladly accepted my request to learn Russian.

How did my mother manage to get a student visa for me during the Cold
War? (It was near the end of the Cold War, but no one knew that at the
time.) The short version of the story is that she and I were helped by
a certain Mr. Shirahata. He was the son of a Japanese soldier who had
remained in Sakhalin after World War II. Precisely speaking, those soldiers
and their families were “abandoned” by the Japanese military, but such
details were not known to me as a child.

It was a long trip to Sakhalin. My mother and I changed trains several
times, before we boarded a ferry to Wakkana City in Hokkaido, the
northern-most island of Japan, where she put me on a ship bound for Korsakov,
in the Soviet Union. I remember my mother, standing on the shore, weeping
and waving her hands at me as the ship sailed away. But I wasn’t sad; I
was very happy, for the first time in my life, to be on my own.

In Sakhalin, I lived with two middle-aged Russian sisters who were
friends of the Shirahatas.

One day, I received a call from an official of the Japanese government.
Many years later, I’d learn that it was the Ministry of Welfare who called
me, but at that time I only knew that a Japanese man was asking me questions.
It was also years later that I learned that someone in my mother’s
neighborhood reported to the police that they no longer saw me around.
My mother explained to the police that I was studying overseas. But what
kind of mother would send her eight year old kid overseas? She’d already
roused suspicion by having so many foreigners to her apartment.

“They just wanted to make sure that you aren’t in a trunk in the closet,”
my mother later told me.

When I was younger, I would sometimes temporarily forget how to speak in
languages other than the one I was learning at the time. So I could
understand what the officer was saying, but I couldn’t answer in Japanese.
I looked in dismay at the black phone in my hand and then at Vera, the
elder sister.

"This man wants to know why I’m here."

Luckily, Mr. Shirahata’s wife was visiting Vera, so I gave the phone to the old lady, but that made things more complicated because of her longstanding grudge against the Japanese government.

While listening to her belligerent words, though, Japanese gradually came back to me. I tapped Mrs. Shiharata on the shoulder and asked her to give the receiver back to me.

The official already knew, from Mrs. Shiharata, the reason for my stay in Russia (studying Russian), so he asked me, “Did your mother ever hit you?”

I immediately answered, “No!”

“Did she take care of you while you were with her?”

I told him that I didn’t understand his question.

“Did she wash your clothes and cook for you, and take you to the clinic when you were sick? Things like that.”

I still didn’t understand what he meant: I could wash my own clothes and cook for myself. The truth was that I made the meals for both me and my mother. I liked it better that way because I could eat what I wanted to eat. So I explained this to him and then said, “My mother always finds good people who can help me learn foreign languages: like taking me to the YWCA or to the homes of foreigners. She’s been very supportive of me in that sense. She has to live in a housing project so she can save enough money to send me overseas.” I almost felt like crying and realized that I was missing my mother. I thought of saying that to the official, but didn’t. Probably it would have the opposite effect on him, I thought.

“Your mother told me that your goal is to master twenty-two languages by the time you become a grown-up,” he replied.
“Yes. That’s true, sir.” I did not tell him which languages I had mastered, because I didn’t want him to test me, but I could already speak about ten languages. “Do you go to school in...,” he tried to pronounce the name of the town in Sakhalin, “...Telpenia?” I said yes. Next, he asked me what were my favorite subjects, to which, I replied, “Gym and biology.” In the end, my mother was not arrested.

As to my father, many years later, I learned that my father was an insecticide salesman.

It was seventeen years ago when I met my father for the first time. It was on the second floor of a Chinese restaurant in Yokohama. I was sixteen years old and had just come back from France. He sat across a table from my mother and I. My mother had not seen him since he’d left for the U.S., when she was pregnant. On that day in the restaurant, she learned his true occupation, as well as the fact that he had a family back in the States. As my father talked, she kept eating her dried mushrooms as if she did not understand a word of what he said. And it was likely that she didn’t really understand a word: she had forgotten most of her English and I had to translate their conversation. From his coat pocket, my father took out a picture of me as a new born baby and a letter, yellowed with age. In the black and white photo, my unfocused eyes looked like two black marbles. On my mother’s head there was a large hairpin, silver and shiny. I carefully wiped grease from my fingers with a napkin. When I opened the letter I recognized my mother’s handwriting: every word ended with an upward flourish on its right hand side.

I had boy. He has green eye and black-brown hair. He is extraordinary healthy. I will grow him by myself.
“I’m glad that you are extraordinarily healthy,” my father said to me. (I was taller than him by this time in my life.) He went on to tell us—and I continued to translate for my mother—that he had twin daughters who were in the eighth grade and a wife who was a social worker. Concerning his marriage, he said that it was as good as could be expected.

“Everybody else in my house is female,” he said. “So I feel isolated, but life is more or less like that.”

After a while I grew tired, so at some point I stopped translating. My mother, with her chin and cheeks all greasy, kept devouring vegetables with all the grace of a horse; between mouthfuls, she drank a cup of soup in three slurps.

The restaurant was crowded and we had to share the table with a man and a woman. She was evidently not his wife; the man seemed eager to talk to my father in broken English.

“Freon,” the stranger said, repeatedly, in English, as if he were practicing this strange and newly learned term. I clearly remember this word because I had to translate his awkward pronunciation to my father. When he learned that my father sold spray cans of insecticide, he lectured him about how they caused harm to the ozone layer. My father patiently answered each of his questions, showing no signs of annoyance, even though this stranger was disturbing our precious family reunion. Finally, the man stood up and left, saying, “America Banzai,” which I translated as, “Long Live the U.S.”. My father seemed to like what I translated.

The last time I saw my father was four years later. It was winter in Michigan. My father’s face looked pale and dried out from the cold wind off the lake. He had divorced his wife and was living with another woman. While holding the leash of a big German Shepherd, who growled through scary teeth, he said that his girlfriend’s son had a problem with drugs.
“Have you done any drugs?” he asked. I said no, although that wasn’t completely true. I had used drugs a few times.

“That’s good,” he said.

On leaving, I tripped on the steps that led from the porch to the street and banged my hip. While helping me stand, my father said,

“Nice boots, but poor traction.”

“No,” I said, “It’s not the fault of the boots, it’s because the stairs are too icy.” We stared at each other and I noticed that his eyes were red and swollen.

—He is unhappier than three years ago, I thought.

“Come again,” he said.

But it was the last time I made an effort to see him.
Chapter 3
The Park

I studied the map at park’s entrance and learned that the Children’s Museum, for which Mr. Takamizawa worked as a superintendent, was located in the center of the park. He once described where he lived as a “shack.” It was hard for me to associate that word with the neatly maintained park. Guessing from the address I wrote on a piece of paper, his “shack” should be somewhere in the park.

I noticed women, who were around my age, walking toward a large building, holding their children by the hand. The kids seemed to be pulling their parents along and this eagerness on the part of the youngsters, suggested to me that something special was going on at the museum today. I hung back and observed all this for a while. At one point, when a large group of families departed, the park became quiet, and the only sounds I heard were cars passing by, and cicadas, which were still early in the season. The air was warm and my underarms felt sticky.

For a moment, I regretted that I’d not called the foreign language school, where I took the basic Baki+T course, to confirm that the address I had was the most recent one. When I’d called the school a few months before to ask about a summer intensive course in intermediate advanced Baki+T, the woman who answered the phone hastily switched me to another person. I could tell from the voice on the other end that I’d been connected to the same woman I had often seen at the school office when I was taking intensive courses in several other languages. She’d always looked very sure of herself, yet unhappy, despite this superficial look of confidence. It was rumored that she was a spinster, as if being unmarried at her age was a crime. Apparently, she had been working for the school for as long
as anyone could remember. One of the other teachers once said, “She’s been here for centuries.”

“Takamizawa sensei is no longer offering a Baki+T class,” she now said, solemnly, as if she were an ancient oracle.

“I don’t think there’s anyone else who can teach the language. Did he switch schools?” I asked.

“No. He probably decided that he could no longer teach a language that doesn’t even exist.”

(Oh, that’s bullshit,) I thought, immediately realizing that the prevailing notion about Baki+T had finally hit the school. Mr. Takamizawa himself had expressed surprise that one of the major language schools would offer such an obscure language. I hesitated for a moment, wondering what the best strategy might be to obtain the information I wanted from her without wasting too much time and losing my temper. While contemplating a strategy, I recalled how my mother would immediately start cursing if placed in a similar situation. I remembered what she’d said to a school superintendent who had blamed her for my total lack of “spirit of harmony” with other children:

“It’s people like you who’ve created so many cookie cutter children in Japan.”

I was about to say something more diplomatic, such as, “I’ve always admired how liberal your school has been,” but before I could get the words out, the woman on the phone asked,

“Is that you, Kotoba?”

She remembered me by my nickname! I answered yes, and she said the school now had an advanced Arabic course if I were interested.

“Arabic has become essential for international business people. Imagine if you were kidnapped by Al Qaeda on a business trip!” she said,
laughing at her own joke.

—Bullshit, I thought again. Hadn’t she read the recent newspaper story about Al Qaeda members arrested in Indonesia? Plus she had no idea that I was already fluent in Arabic.

“So,” I said, “You, who has worked at a foreign language school for such a long time, still believe that Al Qaeda members speak only Arabic?”

“Don’t they? They are Muslim.”

“Of course! No wonder many Japanese Buddhists speak only Sanskrit!” I shouted into the phone.

“Anyway,” she continued, apparently not noticing my sarcasm, and went on to tell me the fee for the advanced class in Arabic. The fact that she apparently had no clue that I was being sarcastic, led me to think that her hard-line attitude and strong defenses were a means of hiding her insecurity.

Her last words before hanging up were, “I’m glad you sound OK, unlike that girl.” I’d wanted to ask what she meant, but the line had already gone dead.

Despite some doubts, I was almost certain he still lived at the same address. And, even if he didn’t, I did not regret changing trains and coming all the way here, to the outskirts of Tokyo; I wanted to see the shack where he lived.

Once inside, I barely had time to notice that the museum walls were painted white and looked rather sophisticated for a children’s museum, before I was assailed by an onslaught of color and excitement: the corridor was flooded with kindergarteners. I saw a tall figure in a frog costume moving in the crowd. I was close enough to hear a child ask him, “What do they pay you for this job?” The figure in the frog costume was Sergeant
Kelolo, one of the most popular cartoons on TV, whose name I would not have known if I had not played with Tai, the son of the bar hostess, who lived on the top floor of my building.

Sergeant Kelolo was sent down to Earth from a distant planet with a mission to conquer our world. However, he ends up befriending a human boy and his family, the Hinatas, while not giving up on his original mission. I liked the cartoon because all kinds of bizarre things happened to this seemingly normal Japanese family.

While watching Sergeant Kelolo being mobbed by kids, I recalled a conversation with Tai’s mother on the rooftop the evening before last. That was the first time we’d had a chance to talk at length, despite the fact that I’d so often played with her son. Because of his mother’s job, he was usually watched over by his grandmother. His mother’s name was Sonya and she owned a small bar in Ginza. She was Chinese and spoke some Tagalog, which she had learned from the Filipino women working at her bar. When we met two years before, she was happy to hear that I’d also been raised by a single mother like herself.

“Poor Tai-chan,” she’d said, “Raised by a single mother… a bar hostess… a foreigner… all the conditions for being bullied.” Sonya spoke in broken Japanese about her son and sighed, gazing blankly at the small table where I had placed my drink.

“Do you have a cigarette?”

“No,” I said, wondering if she had been looking around to see if I had any ashtrays. “I threw them all out after I quit smoking and drinking nine years ago,” I said.

“Good,” she replied. “Otherwise I’d have killed you right now for a smoke,” adding, as if she had looked at my face for the first time,
“Nine years? You must have started to smoke very young.” By this point in the conversation, she’d switched to Standard Mandarin, knowing I could speak it. The smooth transition, without asking how I had come to learn the language, indicated that many of her customers were businessmen working for major Japanese trading firms with business in China.

“I started smoking and drinking when I was sixteen,” I said. “And quit when I was twenty-two.” During our conversation, she repeatedly asked me if she should go out and get a pack of cigarettes. But each time, I said no.

“Being raised by a single mother, weren’t you bullied when you were a kid?” she asked.

“Oh God, bullying, yes!” I said. “A single mother, and one who was very opinionated; and I was an eccentric child who had way too many of my mother’s boyfriends showing up at school events. Oh, yes!”

“How did you deal with it?”

“I think it helps a lot if, as a mother, you act strong and confidently.”

“I think that makes things even worse,” she objected. “I’m trying to act as gracefully as possible, like the other mothers around here, who are wives of consular officials,” she said. Then, again asking, “Should I go out and get a cigarette?”

“No. Being strong doesn’t mean being outspoken about everything. It’s more about carrying yourself with pride. You can be proud of being a hostess.”

“That’s it! That’s the hard one for me. I think I’m smoking to hide from the real world, where being a hostess is considered a lowly job. I really need a cigarette, right now!”

“I’ll acknowledge that you are strong if you’d only stop talking about needing a cigarette. But you must admit that being a hostess is, indeed,
a lowly job."

"It's not as if I'm prostitute!"

"I know. Well, prostitution is an ancient profession, but that doesn't matter. People think that hostessing is lowly because it takes advantage of human desire, men's desire."

"But how is it different from taking advantage of men’s desire to get rich by doing investment work?"

"Investment work doesn't involve bodily fluids... although some aspiration...? Yes. But you can be proud that you are financially independent and are raising a decent boy like Tai-chan all by yourself."

"I am proud of that. I’m making more money than most of the fathers of the other children at school. In fact, some mothers respect me because of that. But the kids don’t care. So, tell me now how did you deal with bullying?"

I tried to remember. "There must have been many times I had to deal with bullies, but I can’t remember right now. What I can recall clearly is the advice my mother often gave me. If being strong is hard for Tai-chan, he can at least follow some simple rules. My mother often gave me simple rules. She still does that with people, and usually they greatly appreciate her for it."

"What are they?"

"Ignore the bullies. That is very important. Also, count to one hundred when you’re upset. Then, if necessary, take revenge with precision and determination."

"Tai-chan can only count up to 20. And he wouldn’t know how to take revenge in a precise and determined manner," Sonya had replied that night, with imploring eyes.
In the museum, I looked past the children surrounding the person dressed up as Sergeant Kelelo, and saw, towards the rear of the crowd, a woman passing out gifts. I walked toward her, threading my way through the crowd and asked where I might find Mr. Takamizawa.

"Mii-chan is on an errand and will be back soon."
She was wearing an old style pair of glasses with green frames. There were beads of sweat on her forehead and she had clear eyes that stared straight back at me. It took a few seconds for me to understand that Mii-chan and Mr. Takamizawa were the same person. I was surprised, because Takamizawa seemed like the last man you’d expect to hear young women calling by some silly pet name.

I decided to wait outside. It was about noon, and the sun was hot. I sat under a big tree and opened my lunch. Even in the shade I soon felt myself sweat uncomfortably. While eating, I was distracted by the feeling that there was something important that I had to remember.

I thought about it for a while, but could not articulate what it was, so I decided to focus on the present. I saw some children leaving the building with gift bags carrying the museum logo. They didn’t seem to care what they had in their hands. They ran toward a playground. One boy spun himself around a lamppost, stepping on its base. Another, looked at it and started to do the same.

"Get out!" the first boy, shouted. "This is my place!" he said.

Suddenly, I felt a tap on my shoulder and looked up at the huge tree behind me. I noticed that it was a Japanese red pine and recalled again how Mr. Takamizawa explained that Baki+T was the language of trees. (It’s such an important concept. How could I forget it?) I wondered. Then I recalled that I tended to forget so many things about Baki+T. I’d never had trouble keeping up with other languages. Language learning was in my
very nature and intricately entwined with my daily life: recording new
classary and expressions, reading foreign language newspapers,
listening to tapes and videos, and spending time with foreign friends to
have and conversations in their language. But Baki+T had never been a part
of that routine. The way the brain was used was totally different when
it came to Baki+T. Rather than concentrating on understanding words and
phrases, as I’d do in other languages, I had to free my mind, as if my
thoughts were floating in the air. But I kept forgetting this. Even though
I always found tremendous peace when in that state; but, still, I always
forgot.

I was startled out of my reverie by the sound of a pine cone dropping
behind me. It was a subtle sound. I expected it to be followed by the sounds
of a squirrel running, scratching the surface of the bark. But my ears
cought no further sounds. Then I realized that I was in Tokyo where there
are no squirrels in the parks, unlike countries Europe I had spent most
time in. I looked over my shoulder to find a pine cone, still green at
its tip, lying on the ground. Suddenly, I thought, it doesn’t really
matter where I am; and then I realized that this was the notion Baki+T
had given me when I heard the language in Paris when I was seventeen. At
that age, I’d felt I didn’t belong anywhere. I was completely lost... Baki+T
taught me, on that day on the bridge over the Seine, that this sense of
feeling lost is the normal state for most people. After that, I began a
strict daily routine. Or, at least, I tried to stick to a routine. I tried,
to begin with, to wake before dawn; but I was still drinking, which proved
an obstacle. Back then, I moved often, always to find free lodging, and
wherever I lived I would divide the wall of my room into twenty-two
sections, each representing different languages, and I’d pin newspaper
articles from foreign language newspapers with words that were new to me,
which I’d underline. I worked at odd jobs, most often as a waiter, but sometimes as a house painter, and in construction. I smoked nervously in those days and drank a lot too. Maybe just another way of holding on.

I looked up from the pine cone and noticed a man in his late fifties, holding a cloth bag in his hand, who was walking toward me. I saw that it was Mr. Takamizawa and realized that I’d felt his approach in some unfamiliar part of my body, well before my eyes and my brain had taken notice of him. There were fine wrinkles around his eyes, and his face was shiny with perspiration.

“Sorry I kept you waiting. I went out to buy some energy-saving light bulbs,” he said, as if he had known that I would be waiting for him. But how could he have known? I didn’t mind, or rather, I was disappointed that he had appeared so early. The whole notion of time had changed for me since I’d received that mysterious phone call this morning.

He sat down next to me on the grass and continued, “Yes, waiting can be good, I think. I waited often at the bus stop for my elder sister to come home from school when I was small and, looking back, I realize how precious those moments of simply waiting were to me.

“Congratulations,” he said, and extended his hand.

“Thank you,” I replied, taking his hand and shaking it. The moment I spoke I knew that I had been accepted to the University of Baki+T. And further, I understood that the realization of this had not happened in just this moment but had gradually come to me after leaving my apartment and while traveling to this spot. It was like how one senses a snowfall: when it first begins, you’re not sure if it will add up to much, but then without quite realizing it, you notice the snow has completely covered the ground and buried the landscape.

—if I’d chosen to stay home and work today, if I’d not come looking
for Mr. Takamizawa, would I have had this insight?

"Maybe. But not today," he said. He was reading my mind! Again, I noticed I’d only realized this about him in the brief time since I’d spotted him walking toward me. That was another thing I had forgotten about Baki+T: the students often found that Mr. Takamizawa, in class, answered their questions before they were even asked.

“But your enthusiasm for Baki+T is clearly very strong and I can see that it’s quite necessary for you at this point in your life. Quite necessary, indeed. You would have eventually realized you were accepted."

“I’m fine,” I said.

I was not replying to what he said, but to what he was thinking. He was thinking of my health, and wondering if I’d developed malaria after coming back from Sierra Leone.

“Although…” we said at the same time and smiled at each other. We were both going to say that the incubation period of malaria could be anywhere from three days to a month in some cases.

—If I am still OK in three weeks, I’ll be able to begin Baki+T classes next month,

I thought. I was not sure how I came to know that I would be leaving in a month, but again the knowledge took root in me as mysteriously as snow covering the ground.

I sensed that Mr. Takamizawa wanted to ask about my experience hearing Baki+T for the first time. But sixteen years had passed since then!

“It’s returning to you. You do realize that? Ninety-nine point nine percent of people forget about their first encounter with Baki+T. And I daresay that includes the Japanese woman dancing to the music that day in Paris.”

Now, I was not sure if he was talking out loud or thinking.
He was, though, clearly reading my memory, scanning through my mental images, which apparently appeared in his mind. How does he do that? I looked at his face. He was smiling and waving at a woman with a child leaving the museum.

I felt that Mr. Takamizawa was silently urging me to go back to the time when I encountered Baki+T and not be distracted by any other thoughts. I closed my eyes to avoid noticing the people in the park and whatever events were unfolding in front of me.

Quite gradually, the wind blowing through the branches of the red pine tree became louder within me, then, just as gradually, subsided. I recalled that sense of being lost. In the middle of Paris. In the hustle and bustle of Saint-Germain. The high watermark of the Seine after a flood. The stone stairs to my dark apartment with its small window.

"When I was a child and travelling to all sorts of countries, I was OK as long as I was in the system."

I was talking out loud, I realized, with a start.

"System?"

I was not sure if he was speaking, or thinking.

"The system of being a foreign student. Or no... more precisely, the way in which a foreign student manages to live within the system of a particular country," I explained.

"People would often tell me that I must have led an exciting life, living in all sorts of countries. But they didn’t understand that most people throughout the world live very routine, simple and quiet lives. I was good at identifying that routine and becoming a part of it. I’d adapt to the local culture so thoroughly that my presence was almost completely invisible; whether it was living with two old sisters and knowing I should wash the dishes after every meal; sometimes, it was staying with a family
that lived by strict routines because the father was a military man and I knew I had to finish all of my homework every night; and sometimes it was living with a homeless man addicted to drugs and knowing how to resist the temptation of taking those drugs."

What did I hope to achieve? I wondered to myself, and was startled when, as if reading my mind, he asked, "What did you want to achieve by mastering twenty-two languages?"

"I don’t know.." I said. "I never knew. Wandering through Paris back then, I’d think, ‘I can speak twenty-two languages. But so what?’ This wasn’t an existentialism question. I was broke and had no college degree. I hadn’t even graduated from high school or junior high. I had no money to start a business. That’s when I noticed people carrying devices that I soon learned were laptop computers and discovered that I could use a computer to get work as a translator. But I had no money to buy one."

—Now that your business has been established, is it true to say that you no longer feel lost?

—Yes, I thought to myself, but quickly realized how a part of me still felt lost, despite my career as a translator.

I looked at Mr. Takamizawa. An image of thick fog on a highway appeared in my head.

"Once," I replied, "I was driving from Achene to Luxemburg on highway 411. I was alone. The highway was almost completely deserted. A thick fog obscured the road as well the guard rail so I had to follow the tail lights of the car in front of me. After car took an exit, I was stuck in the middle of this thick fog. I couldn’t see any markings on the road to guide me. My life has been like that. I know that there is a road out there. But I don’t know where it is leading. All my life, I’ve been desperately trying to move forward without crashing into that guard rail. I’ve learned that
if I think too much about the guard rail, I’ll crash into it. So I focus on inching forward up the road, which I know is there somewhere, technically speaking at least. And that was how I reached Luxembourg.”

The sound of the radio under my helmet changing from French to Luxembourgish recurred in my head. It was a warm day for January. That was why the thick fog had formed. But the air was still very chilly.

“So when you reached the town, where did you go?”

It was uncanny how the image in Mr. Takamizawa’s head was recreated in my head. It was an image from my own memory, showing a gray box printing out the long pages of a ledger. Along the periphery of the image it was hazy like that fog from the highway.

“That’s an exhibition at a small museum I went to in Luxembourg. I also saw…”

“A naked artist, dancing in a video.”

“Yes.” I laughed.

That day, after such arduous driving in the fog, I’d reached a silly, meaningless work of art: printed ledgers and a naked body dancing! When the image faded from my mind, I said to him, “When I first heard Baki+T, I realized that I had mastered those twenty-two languages only to understand that knowing all those other languages was pointless.”

“And that’s the danger you have to get through.”

I was not sure where that voice came from. I nodded. To Mr. Takamizawa. And to something beyond him.

“I no longer feel lost, probably because now I realize that feeling lost is the normal state of people. And I am aware that can stop feeling lost when I realize that my ability to speak twenty-two languages really doesn’t make any difference,” I said.

Mr. Takamizawa was silent. His mind, to me, was a blank page. I was
completely drained: I’d never had a conversation so unusual and demanding. “That is because you’re still new to Baki+T,” he replied out loud to my thoughts. I stared at him and saw a trace of fatigue on his face. “So,” he continued, “you wanted to see my ‘shack’, right?” He smiled and stood up and began to walk away; he was headed, presumably, to his cottage in the park. I murmured an excuse in my mind for how I had imagined his living conditions. He apparently could see the image because he stopped, turned toward me, smiled and said, “I like my humble cottage… It’s like something you’d see in a Kurosawa film.” Now, I was puzzled. Did I know what his home looked like? Was I seeing what was in his mind? Or was the image a memory of scenes of villages in the Seven Samurai, which often recurred in my head? “I do not, or cannot, communicate like this all the time, of course,” he said. “When I told you that ninety-nine point nine percent of people forget about Baki+T, that includes me, too. Yes, I, too, forget about Baki+T ninety-nine point nine percent of the time. And that’s despite that fact that I teach it! There was even a time when I forgot that I was teaching Baki+T.” “One time you didn’t show up to class,” I said, as I walked beside him. “That I don’t remember,” he said, chuckling, and continued, “But I’m sure that was one of those occasions I forgot about Baki+T. You have to let something outside of you lead you. That’s the trick.” On the way going to the cottage, I saw a woman holding her daughter’s hand and bowing to Mr. Takamizawa. I could literally hear her thinking as if with my own ears: —So as usual, he was sent by his wife to buy something. He is good for
nothing! Keiko-san is a fairly attractive woman. And, with her thoughts—and Mr. Takamizawa’s thoughts that arose in response—I came to know that it was his wife and that she is the assistant to the Director of the museum, a civil servant in the town of Okutama.

“Apparently, many people think of me this way,” he said, without emotion. Knowing his wife’s position, I wondered, now, how Mr. Takamizawa earned a living.

Suddenly, I could feel something that was not quite a thought, something that was different, flare up and then subside in his mind: it was an emotion, it was his pride. Then, the images of children appeared, along with words of encouragement, spoken in Mr. Takamizawa’s voice:

“Hang in there.”

“OK. Ten more balls!”

“This is the most perfect butterfly specimen I’ve ever seen!”

And this was followed by women’s voices, who were apparently mothers:

“Can you come to our house and talk to Kimihide? He hasn’t been out of the house in more than a year.”

“Thank you so much. He has gained so much confidence!”

“Mr. Takamizawa, listen! Takako bought me a bag with her first pay check! Takako... we were so worried about her...(and her weeping.)”

In the images I saw, the children’s faces were happy and smiling. However, I sensed that his feelings of pride came from elsewhere. But I was aware that he was suppressing this emotion. And that it took a great deal of effort.

Now, we had reached his shack. It looked more like a small storage room or a shanty at most. But the wild flowers, which were neatly arranged so that they grew along the walls made of dark wood, gave it a certain charm.

“I’m glad you like it,” Mr. Takamizawa said, reading my mind.
Inside it was even more charming. Children’s artwork covered the walls and there were books everywhere. From the ceiling, an abstract mobile was hanging, and there were, between the walls, laundry lines with colorful clothes pinned to them. I did not see a kitchen and assumed that they used the museum kitchen for their cooking.

“This is our bed,” Mr. Takamizawa said, pointing to the couch where I’d sat down, and replying to my next thought. He opened a dark wooden cabinet built into the wall and pulled out a camping stove. I caught a glimpse of neatly arranged cups. They appeared to be handmade and looked quite expensive in interesting contrast to the surrounding environment.

“I’m grateful that we have received a lot of gifts from people who visit the museum,” he said, a container of green tea in-hand, already knowing that was my preference.

“Now, since you have been accepted by Baki+T University, I can tell you this,” he continued, after coming back inside with a kettle. Apparently, they used an outside faucet for water. He started a fire on the portable stove and put the green tea leaves in a teapot. Soon we heard the water starting to boil.

“What we forget most is the fact that Baki+T is the language of trees,” he said.

I contemplated his words and then replied, “I remember you said that in reality, Baki+T is closer to a religion than language. Do you think faith, in a religious sense, is required to believe that Baki+T is the language of trees? The woman at Nobo Language School said…”

“I know. Baki+T doesn’t exist. Right?”

I nodded. There are always people, I thought, who are blind to the quieter aspects of reality. And in the case of Baki+T, its presence in the real world is indeed quiet. Almost to the point of silence.
“You are right,” he replied. And again I was startled. When would I ever get used to his reading my mind?

Because of the heat, Mr. Takamizawa had left the front door open. Leaving the museum, through its rear entrance, I could see a young man appear, his hair wet with perspiration. The inside of the museum’s rear door was red and it flashed briefly against the stark whiteness of the building’s outer walls. He carried Sergeant Kelolo costume under his arm and was walking toward the park entrance. Mr. Takamizawa called out to him from the window, “Have a good day!” The young man looked around to see who was calling out to him. A few families, children and their mothers, continued to play in the park. The young man saw us, paused, bowed deeply, then continued to walk away, a stern look on his face. He seemed too serious to act as Sergeant Kelolo for the children.

“I’ll probably leave Narita Airport for Baki+T sometime next month,” I said, looking at Mr. Takamizawa pour hot water in the teapot. “I know it doesn’t matter exactly when I leave: the students will all appear at the same time, like flocks of penguins at the south pole.” By this point, I’d lost track of when I was speaking and when I was just thinking. In Baki+T, time has no meaning, so the University never designates a time to arrive, depart, or when a class starts. When we were first learning Baki+T, we all tried to get together in a small municipal baseball field one weekend. A student named Tomoe and I arrived at the field on a Saturday morning about the same time. She and I waited for half an hour for the others to show up. Students managed to gather around the same time not because we could communicate through “trees,” but because we were able to employ common sense, as well as knowledge we’d picked up from previous classes. There was one student, a Korean, who, by the time we left, we’d assumed never showed up. Later, he told us that he’d gone to the field
in the evening. And he stayed to watch a Little League game. A boy had hit a three-run home run. He looked at the faces of the excited parents and was surprised to see that one of the fathers was a classmate of his from high school in Seoul. He went up to say hello and ended up with an invitation to his former classmate’s home.

“The whole experience was really Baki+T,” Takamizawa told us later.

I looked at the piece of cloth I used to wrap my lunch laying on my lap to find that nothing remained. Then I realized that Mr. Takamizawa had picked up and eaten the last rice ball I had kept. I was no longer hungry and felt a strange sensation of detachment between my body and my mind. I had noticed that sensation before when I was reading Mr. Takamizawa’s mind. Now, I felt that curious state of being, again. My mind was tapping into his mind. Or more precisely, my mind’s eye began to see and move over an image in his mind. I wasn’t sure how this happened. Was it controlled by the tree, or was it simply because I’d taken a break, during which I’d regained the energy to tap into his mind…?

“Did you know that a Baki+T convention was held in France 120 years ago? Takamizawa asked. “It was the same year in which Esperanto was invented by Zamenhof.” I recalled what I knew of Esperanto. It was a language created by a Polish doctor early in the twentieth-century as an attempt to diminish the conflicts in Poland amongst Poles and Russians, Germans and Jews. But was this knowledge I’d learned on my own, or were these facts that came along with reading Mr. Takamizawa’s mind? In my mind, I saw scenes with Russian Orthodox churches, cobblestone streets, and reflections of streetlights against brick buildings.

“I read Esperanto for the first time in Kaunas, in Lithuania,” I told him. The city of Kaunas is where Zamenhof once lived, and the city guidebook was written in both Esperanto and Russian. I was twenty-two years old.
I had an old motorcycle, for which I’d paid a few thousands rubles to a friend in Belarus. I went to Kaunas from Minsk, in Belarus, to see a play that was about a Japanese consul who issued transit visas to thousands of Jews at the Japanese Embassy in Kaunas, just before the Nazi occupation. The play portrayed the fifty days when large numbers of Polish Jews, who’d fled to Lithuania, stormed the Japanese embassy to request transit visas. The consul had sent a telegram to the Japanese government, requesting permission to issue visas, but was turned-down. Despite the rejection, the consul decided on his own to issue the transit visas; six thousand Jews took passage to Japan, and survived the war. I can’t remember the consul’s name, but I do recall how I joined the crowd in giving the Japanese theater company a standing ovation at the end. After the play, a local journalist with rosy cheeks approached me and asked a question in Russian.

“горжусь?” I responded in surprise. He was asking me if I felt proud of being Japanese. The journalist had tried to say the word, ‘pride,’ in English.

“I know what you mean,” I answered in Russian. I was surprised because no one had ever asked me if I was proud of being Japanese, before. Back then, I was living in different places in Europe, interpreting and translating. The internet was in wide use by this point, so it didn’t matter where I worked. In Europe, no one cared what nationality one had, and, needless to say, whether one was proud of one’s nation. At least that was true among my friends, many of whom were urban nomads, like myself. If I had been proud of anything, it was of this: being a nomad; living outside the system, although consuming all the alcohol, coffee, and cigarettes the system could supply.

But if being asked if I was proud of being Japanese was a surprise, even more of a surprise was realizing that I was, indeed, proud.
“So Kaunas was a memorable town for you,” Mr. Takamizawa said.

I nodded.

“What’s especially fascinating is that two people thought of a creating a language for the purpose of peace, both in the same year: Zamenhoff held the Esperanto convention in 1905; and, in the same year, the yogi, Andhra Tiwari, held the first Baki+T convention.” Mr. Takamizawa continued.

In my head, I was recalling the trip I took from Kaunas to Nida, by the Curonian Lagoon and the Baltic Sea. The image of the blustery coast of Nida, its white sand, like marble, gradually transformed into dark blue water. I looked at Mr. Takamizawa, and again was startled to realize that this was an image from his mind, not my memory. His mind revealed an image of a busy port, where many ships were anchored. I knew, somehow, that this was the west side of Nida.

“I told you that nothing has been written down in Baki+T,” he said.

“So there is nothing to prove that the Baki+T convention was held in France. I’m aware some notes were taken by people who attended, and there were copies made, but they were lost in a fire. Among Baki+T speakers, we have a very specific sense of the language, but our version is likely from images that have been passed on to us, mentally, from the original speakers.” The images in his head were now of old steamships, and dark blue water beyond a port.

“Is this the Strait of Dover?” I asked. Mr. Takamizawa closed his eyes and said he was not sure. “It should be,” he said, because the convention was held in the northern part of France.

“It’s so blue…” I murmured, as if dreaming.

“These are the memories of trees…” Mr. Takamizawa said, also murmuring, as if he too was dreaming.
Memory is such a strange thing. You never know when a memory from your past is going to surface. I have so many fragments, images in my head from childhood: in a backyard, I am drinking milk from a jar as large as my head; on my bicycle, I’m racing down a hill with my friend’s dog; from the top of a big tree with my friends, I’m looking out over a faraway town; in a park, I’m spitting watermelon seeds and staining my T-shirt all red….

And when I follow those images, I’m led to other images, as well as sounds and smells, which also surface and tell me which country I was in and who I was with.

Recently, I was taking a hot bath in Azabu, a fashionable area in central Tokyo, to soothe the muscle pain from running a marathon. I dove under the water and at that moment, I remembered doing exactly the same thing in a bathtub in some country whose name eluded me. And then the image of a boy’s face appeared, laughing and looking down at me underwater.

“Don’t open your eyes under water. It may contain chlorine.”

I heard an adult’s voice, speaking in Mandarin.

It was the first time I had gone to the men’s side of a bathhouse. I was with my friend, Ding-Shinn and his father.

Going to the public bath evokes nostalgic memories of my childhood. I always entered the women’s side of the bathhouse when I was with my mother in Tokyo. But after I came back from Taiwan, I started going to the men’s side on my own. When I went to the public bath with my mother, I was always looking forward to her buying me a chilled coffee milk afterwards. She could only afford to do that if it was right after payday.

As for my memory of the bathhouse in Taiwan, I have no other
recollections surrounding it other than the vague memory that we went there by train from Taipei.

I asked Ding-Shinn about that memory; he now runs a garment business that he inherited from his father. He is one of the few foreign friends I still keep in touch with.

“It’s Xin-Beitou where we went. Don’t you remember? We went to Jiufen after that. The town was more memorable for me. In the bathhouse, everyone was wearing bathing suits, but you didn’t. You embarrassed our whole family!”

I vaguely remember that.

When I was in Sakhalin, I had already decided that my next destination would be Taiwan. I wanted to go to the foreign country closest to Japan. Korea was not a candidate because I had enough opportunities to keep up with my Korean through Minho’s family and their friends.

While I was in Sakhalin, my mother became worried that I was forgetting Japanese. She could only afford to call me about once every ten days, but, even so, she realized that I was already forgetting my Japanese. She insisted that I write letters in Japanese to her every day.

“Do you understand what I said?” she asked in Japanese.

“‘Юс. я понимаю.” I answered. She sighed.

She mailed a dictionary and a guide to Kanji (one of three types of Japanese characters), with a note explaining how to use a dictionary. That became a good way of lulling myself to sleep. When the air became too chilly to sleep well, I often opened the dictionary and began reading from page one. Always from page one. I even memorized the first page.

“A” is a way to get someone’s attention. “A, chotto kimi. (hey you.)

“A” abbreviation of Asia.
“A” abbreviation of America.

And this memory leads me to another: the first page of a Russian dictionary, which I also liked to read in bed.

My mother’s letter contained a lot of Kanji characters so it sometimes took forever for me to understand her exact meaning. I had to count the strokes in each symbol, then look up the character in the Kanji dictionary, and finally look up the word itself in the dictionary, to understand its meaning:

望郷の念に駆られるようなことがあったら、白樺さん宅でビデオを見せてもらいなさい。

“If you become homesick, go to the Shirahata’s and watch Japanese videos,” she would write. I understood the second half without looking it up in the dictionary, but I had to look up the Kanji she used for “homesick.”

At one point, a dozen unread letters had accumulated. My mother became upset and warned me that I’d never be able to learn Chinese if I didn’t read all of her letters. That motivated me and I read them all in two days. What she wrote was always interesting. Once, she included photos of the lunch boxes she made with pieces of baloney, cut into the shapes of faces of famous people: one was in the shape of the birthmark on Mikhail Gorbachev’s forehead. I showed the picture to my host family. The younger sister, Agnessa, burst into laughter upon hearing my explanation; but the elder sister, Vera, rolled her eyes and warned me not to show it to anyone else

“You’ll get us in big trouble,” she’d said.

My life in Taipei was more difficult than in Sakhalin despite the milder
weather. When my mother was helping me pack to leave for Taiwan, she insisted that I wear a heavy coat that Vera had bought for me at a secondhand shop in Telpenia.

“By the time you come home, this’ll be too small anyway.” I gave in without a second thought. And the coat did come in handy, serving as a sleeping bag during my stay at the home of a family in Taipei.

When I returned to Tokyo from Sakhalin, a Taiwanese man was waiting for me at Narita airport, just as my mother had told me to expect. He said his name was Ken. We took an express train back to my house and chatted on the train. It was sort of like an interview. My mother had told him that I would work as an apprentice or “housekeeper” if one of his relatives in Taiwan offered a place for me to stay. His family owned an apparel store in Taipei.

“You already speak fairly good Chinese,” Ken said.

“I had Chinese friends in Sakhalin,” I answered. After I had decided that Taiwan would be my next destination, I found Chinese speaking people in Telpenia.

He then tested me to see if I could count by pretending to be a customer at a store. He put money down on the upholstered seat of the train. First he took out bills in Taiwanese gen, but switched the bills to Japanese yen, knowing that I’d never used Taiwanese currency. He found it amusing that I counted out loud in Russian, but still gave him the correct amount of change.

“There is a song we learned in Russian to learn the multiplication.” I sang the song.

2 x 2 is 4

Not 6 and not 7

Everyone knows this in the whole world
To that, he spread his fingers and explained how I could learn multiplication using my hands. “You should learn how to do arithmetic more quickly, but ultimately accuracy is more important than speed,” he said. I didn’t know the word, jìngdù (accuracy) but I figured out what he meant because of the word’s similarity to another word, sùdù (speed). He was comparing two degrees of dù, which was similar to what Japanese do. I was glad that I’d learned many kanji from the letters and books my mother had sent. As we left the train, he tried to hand me the gen bills he’d put away, but I turned him down, saying that I shouldn’t accept money without first asking my mother. I’d learned that from the two Russian sisters in Sakhalin.

“Come on! Now you’ll be able to make money in Taiwan. You’ll start your own business!” he said. However, I was adamant. I may have passed the test because of that.

Later Ding-Shinn told me that Ken, who was his uncle, took the trouble to find a host-family for me, because my mother slept with him. He and his parents, before they met me, had thought that I was an illegitimate child: and that Ken was my biological father. Perhaps it was because Ding-Shinn’s father, Hayden, slept around.

When I think about it now, I wasn’t treated well by Hayden’s family, because my mother didn’t actually sleep with Ken. My stay in Taipei was trouble from the beginning. None of Din-Shinn’s family remembered my arrival date, so I had to sleep over at a police station after an airport attendant notified a police guard.

He was very kind to me and bought me hot noodles, which I appreciated because I’d had nothing to eat after I’d arrived at the airport. I wasn’t upset about their forgetting to meet me, but I was upset because I couldn’t understand the Taiwanese spoken by the locals who were detained by the
police. The room I was in smelled bad, but I could sleep fairly well from fatigue.

Early the next morning, Din-Shinn appeared at the police station to pick me up. He seemed to me like a TV celebrity because of his stylish clothing and hair style. The policeman who was in charge of me had a long conversation on the telephone with his supervisor before he’d agree to hand over a minor to another minor. Finally, he agreed to let me go after a call to Din-Shinn’s father. Din-Shinn impressed me with his worldliness as he calmly explained to the police that there had been some miscommunication between his father and uncle.

As we approached Taipei, I was not as excited as when my ship arrived at Korsakov. It was partly because I was exhausted, but more importantly, it was because Taipei looked more or less like Tokyo. But still, I was glad that I’d come, imagining that by the time I left, I’d be speaking Chinese fluently with Din-Shinn and his family.

Din-Shinn was a high school student, which I’d learn later, and was well-known for sports. Despite my limited listening comprehension, he chattered away about the student baseball team he belonged to. At that time, professional baseball did not exist in Taiwan, so the interest of baseball fans was oriented toward Japanese baseball. I could tell from his face that he was disappointed that I knew nothing about baseball. My lack of interest in baseball was about equal to his disinterest in Russia and other foreign countries; but when he said we could play catch together, I thought that would be fun. He also promised that he’d let me read his baseball comics, such as Dokaben, a Japanese comic that had been translated into Chinese.

His family lived in the Datong district in Taipei. We got off the train and walked past a series of tiny stores crammed into the small space beneath
the elevated railroad. Din-Shinn’s family owned a garment store a block away from the street than ran alongside the railway. They lived in an apartment behind the store.

Din-Shinn told me, after I’d lived with them for a while, that when he took over the store from his parents, he’d sell clothes that were more fashionable.

“‘We’re losing customers to the big department stores, so a small store has to have charm to survive,’” he said.

And he did upgrade the quality of the clothes they sold, several years later, after he graduated from a community college, by importing clothes from Europe and the U.S. But it was the success of his dress rental business that satisfied him most, even if it wasn’t that big a success, financially.

For the first week after I arrived, Din-Shinn’s mother, Ang, kept complaining about me to her husband. The word, bàibiàn, which she often used during their arguments sounded similar to fuben in Japanese, meaning inconvenience or trouble. To that, Hayden always used the word, ‘ēn,’ which was similar to the Japanese word, on, meaning ‘a favor.’ Apparently, he had a favor he owed his brother-in-law.

So I found that, for the most part, learning Chinese was way easier than learning Russian, though the subtle distinctions between the four tones proved difficult for me. The four tones still give me trouble when I speak Chinese.

“My mother will say all sorts of nasty things about you,” Din-Shinn had warned me on the first day.

“But don’t worry. You can stay. Once, mom kicked dad out in the middle of a storm. He came back after a few days and managed to get along well with her, at least, for a while.”

Although I understood less than half of what he’d said, I could tell that
my situation was very different; but I didn’t know enough Chinese to point
this out.

“So are you saying that deep down in her heart, she’s nice?”
I asked later, after looking up the words. I also had to look up the possible
answers from him, ahead of time, so that I’d be able to understand at least
some of what he’d say.

“No. I wouldn’t say so,” Din-Shinn replied. Those words were not on
the list I prepared, but I could tell what he meant.

“She can be pretty cold, but she’s straightforward,” he added.
Again, I didn’t understand what he meant, but I could sense his meaning
by how she acted toward me. I was supposed to sleep in a corner of his
parents’ store. That was OK with me, because their apartment behind the
store was very small. And I was used to small spaces because of my life
in Tokyo with my mother. But when she said I couldn’t sit with them at
the dinner table, I didn’t know how to respond. That is the best occasion
to learn daily conversation!

But Din-Shinn saved me by bringing some food down to the store and
sitting with me.

“What are you doing here?” his mother asked, coming down to the store.

“I’m showing a comic book to Kotoba,” Din-Shinn answered. “If you want
to eat with me, mom, you have to have Kotoba sit at the table!”
She sighed and just shook her head.

“Come!” Din-Shinn took my hand and brought me upstairs. Hayden was
reading the newspaper and hiding behind the large letter saying a big strike
was going on at a factory. I could tell that at the dinner table, Din-Shinn
was the center of the household.

Din-Shinn said that his mother is cold, but straight
forward.

I wrote these words to my mother, after I’d been there for a while, to explain how I’d come to understand what he meant by “looking it up in the dictionary.” “Cold” was the same as Japanese when written in kanji. So was “straight,” but the kanji, “forward,” was different from the one used in Japanese. She wrote back with a lot more Kanji than before, pointing out that I should never confuse Chinese kanji and Japanese kanji. She was worried that my education in written Japanese was not adequate and that I’d confuse the two.

She wrote.

By your age, Japanese children have learned about 800 kanji. You are a couple of years ahead of the average child when it comes to learning, so you should know 1,000 kanji by now.

She enclosed an elementary school kanji dictionary, which was easier than the one she had sent me when I was in Sakhalin.

Basic is always important. Review your Elementary School Kanji.

In the end, I think Din-Shinn’s family accepted me because when I wasn’t helping Ang at the store, I was either reading the Kanji Dictionary, looking up words to understand what they meant, or writing them down. Most Taiwanese families are eager to provide a good education for their children. Din-Shinn had spent a lot of his time playing baseball and expected that he would get into a good college because of his skills at that sport. And, my devotion to studying languages influenced him to study more.
The dictionary my mother sent turned out to be more helpful than she expected. When I mastered 1,000 kanji, I found that I could easily communicate with people in Taiwan, because of its Chinese derived pronunciation.

As for the store, it was run both by Ang and Hayden. But it was mainly Ang who sat at the counter and handled the customers. Hayden was out elsewhere doing sales or visiting schools to generate orders for school uniforms. The store was quiet during the daytime. But not after school let out. That’s when Ang needed my help, because school uniforms were their main business and the store became busiest after school. After I had spent about a month with Din-Shinn’s family, Ang’s younger sister, Vivian, gave birth to a baby girl. Ang helped out by staying at Vivian’s house for a week. Initially, the plan had been for Ang’s mother, Wong, to help her younger daughter, but Vivian had a huge fight with her mother during the pregnancy and didn’t want her mother’s help. So Wong watched over the store for Ang during the day, and I had to run back home after school and take over watching the store from Wong, which included handling the customers. That helped me to gain the family’s trust. One day, when I came home in a heavy rain, the store door was locked. I looked through the window but didn’t see Wong anywhere. I went upstairs and heard a woman moaning. I saw bare flesh through a crack in the sliding door: it was Hayden and a young woman, naked and in each others’ arms.

It was the young woman who helped Ang count inventory each month. I’d never been able to understand her very well because of her Taiwanese accent. Ang told me that she and her and her family were called, “mountain people”.

“We are waisheng ren and she is a beneheng,” Ang said, explaining that Ang’s parents were immigrants from the Chinese mainland, while the girl
was native to Taiwan.

Later, I told Din-Shinn what I’d seen.

“Wow!” he said. “Was she naked? Completely?”

I said yes sensing that the story excited him.

“Wow!” he said again. “Was my father’s thing in her thing?”

I didn’t understand what he meant. Then he attempted a more detailed explanation, saying that the reason why our penis became huge once in a while was in order to insert it into woman’s thing. I still didn’t understand, but didn’t tell him that it had never happened to me.
With eyes closed, we continued to concentrate on the images that appeared in our minds. Takamizawa said they were memories of trees, but some images, I sensed, were from the real experiences of people from the past.

"Concentrate on the images...," Mr. Takamizawa said aloud. "We can discuss questions and thoughts afterward..."

"Movies... yes..." I answered.

Then I realized that the images were the result of trees having absorbed human memories and mingling them with their own. The images were sometimes very human; the smile of a baby in a crib; the moment a large net full of fish was being loaded into a boat; a couple’s turquoise earrings and matching neck tie pin; the dark and barren room of a shack in the country empty of furniture... And then at some point, the images became like a feeling without any shape. Or there were images of nature: a breezy meadow: a creek with fish leaping up, fins flashing in the sunlight; heavy rain pouring into the nest of a small animal. I could tell when I entered the memory of trees: the feelings and sensations were pure and always peaceful. I recalled the peaceful state of mind I had when I listened to Baki+T at Pont Neuf.

Suddenly, I heard sounds, without images: people whispering, shaking me out of my peaceful state. At first I could not identify the language.

"We are short of sugar."

"And other supplies?"

"People are coming from the city."

"There is a gentleman who needs his automobile repaired."
Then a woman’s voice, speaking in French, “Let’s race sur ce rocher!”

And then it changed to a more solemn voice.

“These are the accounts…”

“They are shifting positions…”

“It’s the covenant. That counts. We humans can’t really tell right from wrong…”

“Yes, the only thing we can do is follow the covenant…”

I was overcome with nausea and wanted to stop, when Mr. Takamizawa grabbed my arm and whispered, “Open your eyes now, but do so slowly.”

I opened my eyes, and saw a child’s picture in front of me. It said, “The lion and the sun.” Despite its air of lightheartedness, the picture filled me with an overwhelming sense of distress…. I felt the world lie heavy on my shoulders. It was similar to how I felt before establishing myself in business, when I had stopped drifting and my days became busy with work. I wondered why I hadn’t felt that way for a long time.

Mr. Takamizawa sat next to me, silently, his gaze steady, but unrevealing, his hand still resting on my left arm. I felt like crying, but why? I wasn’t sure. I sat there totally at a loss. It was a different sense of lostness from the one I had felt before. I didn’t know what to do. I felt an urgent need to compose myself and fell back on the ‘traditional’ Japanese approach. I reflected on my pride as a Japanese man. I should not cry in front of people. I straightened my back and looked at Mr. Takamizawa.

“That may have been too much,” he said. “This is the first day for you: I don’t count when you were first learning Baki+T. That wasn’t real learning; what you learned back then were the shortcuts, the tricks of an enthusiastic beginner…”

I drank some more of the green tea Mr. Takamizawa had offered me, but
it was now lukewarm and didn’t diminish the chill I felt.

Mr. Takamizawa went outside and came back with a water bottle for hiking. I emptied the bottle with a few gulps, but still felt thirsty. It tasted like water from a well. The water was boiled, cooled, then placed back into the bottom of the well.

My mind was blank. Like a sheet of paper.

“Drink lots of water and avoid meat for a while.” Mr. Takamizawa said.

“Eat a lot of root vegetables, and sleep well.”

I nodded, but his voice sounded like it came from a great distance along with the cry of the cicadas outside.

“Would you like to take a nap?” he continued.

I looked at him, feeling tired, almost to the point of collapse; yet also feeling an urgent need to leave, to get myself as far as possible from him. I was puzzled: only a moment ago I’d felt such a tremendous peace of mind. But now, tired as I was, as much as I yearned to let myself fall sleep on his comfortable couch, the need to leave was stronger.

—Is his mind-reading no longer working?

I wondered, as I watched him go outside again probably to refill the water bottle from the well. His posture made him look fatigued. I considered following him to ask, but felt too tired, myself, to move.

“There are so many things which should not be asked about Baki+T. Otherwise...,” he said.

I recalled the voice of the woman at I’d met at the Nobo Foreign Language School. “I’m glad you’re OK, unlike that girl,” She was talking about, Tomoe, the only girl in the class who already spoke Baki+T with Mr. Takamizawa. When I’d first heard the peculiar long windy sound from her, I thought she was trying to be funny. Then I remembered that it was the sound I’d heard coming from the tape recorder that day in Paris at Pont
“I don’t know what drove Tomoe crazy,” Mr. Takamizawa said, passing me another bottle of water.

So he was still reading my mind!

“You once told us that we have to be careful when we learn Baki+T.”

“I’m getting tired, too. So we can talk normally, out loud, again. And I know it’s time for you to go.”

I nodded. I still felt a chill. “I’d want to leave as soon as I can.”

“I know,” Mr. Takamizawa said, sullenly. “It could be part of the trees’ instruction, and I realize that this all sounds ridiculous to you.”

I nodded, echoing his mood.

“But before you go there’s something I need to say. I don’t know what it is about Baki+T that causes some people to lose their minds. Even Andhra Tiwari ended his life in a mental hospital.”

“The yogi who held the first Baki+T convention?”

“Yes. And you may have heard this already from Hamazaki, your classmate at that time, but Tomoe Kazuhara is also in a mental hospital.”

A gust of wind blew into the room. I looked outside, and was taken over by the belief that that Tomoe was standing outside.

“I’m not sure whether the trees will continue to talk to you after today. They may leave you alone completely, which means you’ll forget all about what’s just happened and go back to your everyday life. But you’ll remember again when the time comes, that is when you leave for Baki+T.”

“I…”

“I know you don’t want to forget. You want to remember every detail of what happened today. But that isn’t how Baki+T works. Maybe that’s why Tomoe went crazy, as well as Andhra and about a dozen other people. She may well have tried to write something down against trees’ will.”
I was thirsty and drank some more water. It had a metallic taste.

"Trees don’t harm people, do they?"

"I’m glad you don’t think that despite saying it." Mr. Takamizawa smiled and stood up, graciously acknowledging that I wanted to go home.

Outside, the air had cooled from the afternoon heat; day was giving way to evening.

"Isn’t this great? he said. “Walking back to the train station. Finally, going home. Having a conversation out loud. Like this?"
He moved his arms while saying, "like this."

"Like a normal people," I said, smiling back. “Now I no longer feel the desire to run away from you.”

"Good," Mr. Takamizawa, replied, still smiling. “That urge came from a process within your body: your brain produced unpleasant proteins, which you sensed were associated with being in this house and with me, and which made you want to escape. Your body experienced something profoundly new and unfamiliar.”

I saw the park was now crowded with elementary school children who were getting out of school. Their red school backpacks bounced on their shoulders. I saw three young mothers playing volleyball. Their well mannered movements made me realize that I was now in Japan.

“My mother used to say that I should run when I sense danger. She said no one could run as fast as me. She was always giving me simple rules.”
I said that knowing in my mind that Mr. Takamizawa already knew. As we walked, I told him more about my life: how fast I’d run a marathon; my experience running from danger in Bolivia. And he told me about his wife and how she compulsively cleans.

When the Okutama station was in view, Mr. Takamizawa said, “My simple rules for avoiding mental illness are these: first, do not say anything
about Baki+T to other people unless you trust them.”

“But isn’t that hard? That would even make other people crazy.”

“A-ha! Look what you just said. You said ‘other people.’ You insinuated it would not bother ‘you’ as much as other people.”

“You think so?” We were at the ticket gate. I sensed that the train hadn’t yet arrived.

“That’s the second rule. You have been chosen.”

I looked at his face, then at the station attendant resting his chin in his hands as he gazed at a young woman.

“Trust them, they’ll take care of you. You’ll find that over time your life with them, with trees, and also with mind-reading and all the other aspects of Baki+T, will become easier.”

“You once told me that this mind-reading business is only a process to reach the tree’s mind, and that this phase would come to an end.”

Suddenly I became self-conscious. If people overheard us, they’d think we were crazy!

“Did I say that? If so, I don’t remember.” He chuckled and folded his arms. “I probably did say that, but it was because there was a time when I could no longer read people’s minds. It comes and goes, like many aspects of Baki+T.”

I left feeling that so many things were left unasked, and unsaid. And I wasn’t sure if it was OK to feel that way or not. On the train I went over the rules in my mind.

1. Do not tell other people about your experience with Baki+T. But at the same time, remember even if you do say something, they’ll likely forget what you said.

2. Trust the trees. You have been chosen.
3. Don’t write down your experiences. But even if you do, what you write will likely be lost; and, besides, trying to record your experiences may drive you mad.

4. Lead a normal daily life and wait for the trees’ instructions.

And then I fell asleep on the train.
I was probably about eleven years old when my mother told me that she was not a good mother. We were at Narita Airport. I forgot where I was flying on that day.

“If I were a good mother, you’d want to be around me all the time.”

“Me traveling around has nothing to do with how good you are as a mother,” I assured her.

My mother said, “Or maybe it’s the other way around. If I were a good mother, my feelings towards you would be so strong that I wouldn’t want to spend a day without you.”

“That could be true,” I said. “I guess many families are bound together because they naturally want to be with each other.”

However, at the same time, I knew from my experience staying with various families in various countries that many families stay together only because they cannot think of or choose any other way of living. I lived in the midst of a mixture of tension and genuine affection in families. I managed to get by despite the turmoil because I did not belong to any of these families. I was essentially an outsider throughout most of my life.

“But I don’t think having strong feelings about me makes you a good mother.” I responded, “Actually, in many situations it seems to work in the opposite way.” I said.

She wrapped her arms around me and said thank you. Every once in awhile she expressed great physical affection, fairly unusual for an Asian, and this was one of those rare occasions.

“Anyway, I don’t I don’t know how I can prove that I’m a good mother, but if there is anything which makes me feel that I am really your mother
“It’s...,” her face started to contort. “If anything were to happen to you...,
if I get a call in the middle of the night from some foreign country...
the moment I realize that you are no longer on this earth, that’s the moment
my misery starts. I’ll never be happy. I won’t smile for the rest of my
life.”
I was not sure if smiling simply meant happiness, but responded to her.

“Even in Japan something could happen to me. There’s an equal chance.
It’s terrible, but kids are kidnapped and killed while commuting to school
even in rural areas in Japan.”

“I know, I know...” Mom said. “I have never regretted letting you go
all over the world so early in your life. I’ll never stop you from going.
I don’t think I can stop you from doing anything you’d want. You’re so
pig headed.” She smiled.
I smiled back.

“Plus you’ll be financially independent soon, I guess. You’ve been
supporting yourself pretty much already. When I heard you were selling
rice bowls to factory workers in Saigon, I wondered where you got that
idea from?”
That actually came from Lien, the daughter of a diplomat in Saigon, where
I stayed after Taipei. A few weeks after I saw Din-Shinn’s father with
the girl, his grandmother, Wong, was diagnosed with cancer. She quickly
deteriorated and passed away in a month. During that time, daily business
at the store was pretty much left to Hayden and me. Hayden got me a used
bicycle and had me handle deliveries of resized uniforms and stuff. One
day Ang came to me crying and yelling that I was no good for the household.
They had expected good fortune by returning a favor to Ang’s brother-in-law,
but bad things kept happening since I’d started living with them.

“My mother is dying and my husband is leaving me. And Din-Shinn will
soon leave this house. I’ll be all alone!!”

I felt it was time for me to leave, so I went to the Vietnamese Embassy to ask about a visa. Din-Shinn came with me saying “I may run into a pretty Vietnamese chick,” and he did. He managed to get the address of a high-school student named Lien, who happened to be at the Embassy with her friend. Din-Shinn wanted me to check the grammar of his letter, which he wrote in English to her. He didn’t know that I hardly had any skill in English at the time. Instead of checking his grammar, I added sentences at the end of his letter with the help of the Chinese-English dictionary I borrowed from him.

“PS: Do you remember Kotoba? You meted him at embassy. He is my younger brother-like. He want host family in Saigon. He is a third grade. He want to learn Vietnamese.”

That was how I ended up staying at a mansion in Saigon - Lien’s family home.

“I always wanted a younger brother.” She said. She had just lost her puppy who died mysteriously of a heart attack.

When I was living with her, Lien and I never received a letter from Din-Shinn though we both wrote to him many times. Later in life, when I found him again through the internet, he explained that his mother destroyed all of our letters worrying that it would distract him from studying for the University entrance exam.

I learned a lot about cooking at Lien’s house from her mother and the house cook they had. Lien and I came up with a Vietnamese-Japanese rice ball dish combining cudweed and pickled plum. Lien wanted to sell them at the entrance of a factory manufacturing foreign clothes. All of the rice balls were sold out in half an hour. Lien attracted workers by waving a sign and I passed the rice-balls out and collected coins like a change
machine. We did it only weekends, but that gave me the idea to wake up early, make rice-balls, and sell them at the school cafeteria during lunchtime.

Going back to the conversation with my mother, I asked her what she was getting at, looking impatiently at my watch.

“So what’s your point, mom?”

My mother stood up and helped me with my jacket and backpack.

“If something happened to you and you no longer lived on this earth, then I’d know that my happiness depended completely on you. That would be the moment when I realize that I have been happy only because of you.”

“So to put it simply, are you saying that I should be careful?”

I looked at my mother, who was fixing the strap of the backpack on my shoulder.

“Yes. Call me and tell me who you are with wherever you are. I have a feeling I will be able to tell whether you should be in the situation or not.” She really had a good sense for that sort of thing.

“Is that another one of your simple rules? You want me to call you and let you know where I am?”

“Yes.”

And when I was going to board the plane she added, “And write to me every day!”

Now I remember why she started the conversation like that. It was the first trip I took without knowing who I would be staying with. By that time, I was conversant in twelve languages, English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Cantonese, Korean, Tagalog, Thai and Vietnamese. Half of the languages were Asian, simply because it was cheaper to travel there and easier to find host-families. Until that time, either my mother or I managed to find families who were willing to take
me through acquaintances or sheer luck. Whenever I arrived, there would be someone from the family waiting for me at the airport.

On that day, no one was to meet me at my destination, Umeå Sweden. My mother was especially worried because the arrival time of my flight at Umeå was fairly late - around 10:00PM. She didn’t want me to stay over at the police station again like I did in Taipei.

“It never gets dark in Northern Sweden.” I said.

“Oh that’s right!” Mom said surprisingly. It was amusing to see that she had forgotten about the midnight sun.

To go to Sweden, I had sent around a dozen letters to elementary schools in the country requesting them to accept me in their summer camp. I wrote the letters in three languages, French, German and Italian to show them how serious I was about mastering foreign languages. It worked. A handful of schools accepted my application, including ones in Stockholm, but I chose a school in Umeå thinking that people in a smaller city would be nicer. I was also tired of living in big cities. I was planning to extend my stay in Scandinavia after finishing summer camp, and hoped to make a connection with someone who could arrange my further stay so that I could learn Norwegian and Danish. Later I came to know that the three languages were similar to each other to the extent that it is unnecessary to study them formally.

“Be sure to take a cab at the airport.” My mother yelled out, but I knew that there was a bus leaving the Umeå Airport at 11:55PM for the YMCA where I was planning to stay. That was the last bus.

Around that time I had become close friends with a librarian named Kimiko-san at the local library in the Yanaka district in Tokyo where we lived. Kimiko-san had a son who refused to go to school. So she was understanding and cooperative with me when I came to the library every
day from opening to closing. Once I played ping pong with her son, Yuji.
Throughout the game I could tell he didn’t like losing. Kimiko-san was
the one who found the bus schedule for Umeå by calling the Swedish tourist
information bureau. Just before I left for Umeå, she told me she was
thinking of sending her son to a Scandinavian country when he grows up.
“I mean when he’s as grown up as you are already,” she said, though
her son was the same age as me.

I remember my stay in Umeå with such nostalgia, especially Asad who
I lived with. The city was full of energy because of the many colleges
in this otherwise quiet Scandinavian city. There were a lot of young people
there. It was one of my most favorite cities out of all the places I visited
there and in Europe. On the whole, Scandinavian cities were easy to live
in, especially during the summertime when I was there, but Umeå was
exceptionally open to foreigners. At the Umeå Airport, I was overwhelmed
by seeing so many fair-haired and fair-skinned people all at once in the
same place. I was even more surprised in the bathroom when I looked at
myself in the mirror and realized that with my features, I actually fitted
into that environment. Strangely enough, however, I felt my appearance
fitted in just about any environment.

Since the flight was delayed two hours, I had to take a cab from the
airport. I realized it was too cold to spend the night at the airport.
The driver of the cab I took was a Somali immigrant, something I came to
know later. When he said, “Somali,” in Swedish, I could not catch the word.
I tried all the languages I knew, especially French, but he did not speak
any of them. All I could guess was that he was from some country in Africa.
I was excited to know that there were people I still could not communicate
with.
He told me in Swedish that my Swedish pronunciation wasn’t all that bad.
(I learned some by myself at the local library.) I asked him what language he speaks and he said Somali and Arabic. I told him that Arabic was listed as one of the languages I wanted to learn in the future and he was happy about that. He said that he had twelve sisters and eleven brothers and that his father had four wives. I thought one of us was making a mistake in numbers in Swedish. Later I came to know that the figures were correct. He gave me his business card and told me that I could stay with him after summer camp ended.

But I ended up staying with him during my entire visit in Umeå. My entire stay in Scandinavia was seven months and seven days.

I called my mother and told her I was staying at a cab driver’s apartment. When I said he was from Somalia without knowing its correct pronunciation in Japanese, she mistook it for Samaritan. “So, he literally is a good Samaritan,” she said. I did not know how to correct her. I could not recall where I heard the word, “good Samaritan.” She said she believed it’s from the Bible, but she was not sure herself. Then a children’s picture of a man with a bandage on his head appeared in my head. He was on the back of a horse and a man was pulling the horse. I forgot where I saw the picture, but figured it must have been from the Sunday school I occasionally attended when I was with either Minho’s family, who were Korean Christians, or more recently in Taipei or Saigon.

“That doesn’t sound right, though. He is black and I don’t think black people appeared in Bible.”

“You are staying with a man with black skin...,” she said, “Why aren’t you staying with a family with blond hair and blue eyes? You’re in a Scandinavian country. If you stayed with one of those families I would feel a lot more at ease. But now I suppose you’ll say it’s prejudiced, right?”
“Absolutely,” I responded disturbed by her ignorance and conservativeness. “He’s a nice guy. Very religious.” I said this knowing my mother always felt at ease hearing that people are “religious.”

“He prays many times a day.”

“Does he want you to pray, too?”

“No, but I don’t mind going to the mosque with him.”

“You shouldn’t take light of people’s faith.” My mom said, “You should always respect their faith. Don’t go to a mosque or synagogue or temple just because you are curious. We Japanese tend to forget about that with so many temples and shrines open to tourists.”

It was good that she told me, because I was looking at his custom only from curiosity. I thought it was funny that he kept only a space of about two sheets of newspaper clean in his apartment. That was where he prayed. In the rest of the house, things were neatly arranged, but were covered with thick dust. On the second day after I decided to stay in his apartment, I offered to vacuum the place and borrowed one from an old lady downstairs who was living with a pug. I learned the expression, “housebroke” from her.

Actually, the assistant principal of Manfred Elementary school also offered a place for me to stay with his family for awhile. However, after spending a night there with his two teenage boys and one three year old girl, I found it too suffocating. His wife was a tax auditor working for the city of Umeå. She said she was hated by everybody because of that. She and the teenage daughter did a crossword puzzle for kids in the Sunday paper after dinner. I sat with them in hopes of increasing my vocabulary. Computer and TV were limited to only 30 minutes each night, and the kids had furious fights about which channel or site to look at. I did not mention that I declined the assistant principle’s offer to my mother worrying that
she may tell me that I should go back to that family.

Asad was a nice person and my life with him was fairly quiet, though he was always maniacally busy doing something.

Since the director of the summer camp allowed me to enter the third grade (there was a test and I studied like hell at the Youth Hostel) I could live on a fairly regular schedule. I woke up early with Asad, made lunch for him and myself, read the newspaper headline with the help of a dictionary (I especially liked the recipes in the family section) while he was praying, pressing his head on the carpet.

I played soccer and basketball at school after class with kids whose parents were working, and came home starving. I had to cook for myself during the whole stay because Asad, being as skinny as a match stick, hardly ate. If there was anything that bothered me about him, it was his meager appetite.

I once cooked goat meat hearing that Somali people eat goat, but he threw it away in the garbage bin. I probably cried at that time for the first time during my stay in Scandinavia. While I was sitting outside on the porch with the old lady’s pug which she left with me, I immediately forgave him because what he said was right. There was no obligation for him to eat what was cooked by a stranger like me.

At that time, I had no idea that there was a connection between his low appetite and hyperactivity, and the green leaves he chewed all day long. I asked him what he was chewing and he answered it was stuff that only grown-ups could take.

“Something like wine or cigarettes?”

He answered, “Sort of,” but the stuff he was chewing was more potent.

One night, he came back from his side job working as a guard for an armored security van for ATM machines with a big bag of the green plants.
I opened the bag and sniffed from curiosity. He hastily came out of the bathroom and snatched the bag out of my hand.

“Why? I was just curious.” I said

“You shouldn’t touch this just from curiosity. I am forgiven in taking this because my life was a mess back in my country when I learned the effect of this stuff. A Japanese boy like you who do not have any despair doesn’t have any right to take this.” He further said. “Please don’t touch this. Will you promise? I have nothing I can be proud of, but if I can keep you away from this, I can at least be proud of that.”

That’s when I learned the word, “addiction.” He said that addiction meant being a slave to something. Human beings should not be slaves to anything, he said.

“I like your lifestyle.” He told me. I was surprised because I did not know that I had a “lifestyle.”

“You don’t drink or smoke or sleep with women.” He said. I laughed and said I was only eleven.

“What do you expect?” I laughed.

When I was in Paris six years later and and addicted to alcohol, I remembered the days with him. I looked up his name in the White Pages at the a library near Il San Louis and found sixty seven Asads living in Sweden. I thought someday I would call each one of them, but never did, mainly because I did not have enough money to make so many international phone calls.

I recalled him saying that I was not in despair. The following year when I returned to Japan, I started to hear the word “Somalia” so often in the news that both my mother and I could not believe that we had never heard of it before. One time on the TV we were watching the news about the situation in Somalia and I remembered that he had said, “he had been
forgiven for his addiction.” I realized that that was the despair he was
talking about. During those years of drowning myself in alcohol in Paris,
I told myself many times that I was not nearly as much in despair as Asad
or people I saw on TV. Even so, it took me two years to get over that
addiction.
Chapter 7
Another call

I woke up on the train with a sensation of fever and urgency. I recalled Mr. Takamizawa was saying that I may have a symptom like cold for a while, but fever would go away in a day or two. I knew that my station was not coming up yet, but I stood by the door to be ready to get off to make a phone call outside. (In Japan, talking on a cell-phone on the train is strictly prohibited.) I looked around people on the train most of whom were texting on their cell phones. I was both relieved and disappointed to know that I was not reading any of those people’s mind. I was thinking of Rita. I realized that the first thing I had to do was calling her.

Rita came into my life like this: one day, a woman appeared in my kitchen. My kitchen is on the first floor of the building where I live, which I’d inherited from my uncle. The first floor space used to be a cake shop, and a large display case still remained that was visible from the street. Many people strolling on the Ginza, seeing the old cake shop’s display case, mistook my first floor living space for a retail storefront. Also encouraging this confusion is the fact that there are no signs from the street that there are apartments or that anyone even lives in the building. As it was located in a choice Ginza location, people often dropped in, uninvited wanting to know if they could rent the space as a store. They were mainly real estate brokers who represented jewelry shops, cosmetics retailers, men’s high-end apparel, and fashionable kimono stores. When one of such persons warned me that it was illegal to use that space as a residence, I went to the municipal office and asked about it. The officer grinned and said there was no rule prohibiting people from living in a store-front.
“People usually choose to rent it as a retail space because you can charge $15,000 per month. That’s enough money so you shouldn’t have work anymore.”

“If that’s the case…,” I responded and continued to live there without renting out the space. People gradually stopped dropping-in begging me to rent the space; except for a few stubborn souls who came regularly to check if I had changed my mind.

From the street, passersby could see my personal belongings randomly placed on the show case. Most people realize that my space was not a retail shop or at least it was not yet open as a store. I guess it was easy for people to tell merchandise from personal belongings. But Rita was convinced that an ornament in the shape of a sleeping man, a gift from my Malaysian friend, was for sale. She came into my living room as if her eyes and the ornament were connected with a piece of string and asked how much it was. I gave her an expensive price, hoping that she would go away; but also, at the same time, hoping that she’d stay and eat some of the curry rice I was cooking. She did stay and she did eat my curry rice, only to complain about its unappetizing taste.

“Where are you from?” Rita asked.


“I know that. I mean what kind of blood do you have?”

“Indian.”

“You liar.”

“How do you know I’m lying?” I asked.

“If you were an Indian, you would have made a better curried rice,” she said.

I shrugged. “When I was a child, I was a better cook, because asking for recipes was an easy way to make friends with people.”
Three months had passed since our first encounter.

“Hello.”

Rita’s voice was tense indicating that she’d seen my name on her caller ID before picking up. I asked how she was and she said just “fine”. I recalled her small framed body sitting neatly on my bed with a certain determination. I could tell that she was naked under sheets. When I got out of the bathroom on that evening, she was waiting for me and looked at me with clear expectation. We had been hanging around together more than three months. We went to movie theaters, play theaters, classic and jazz cafés and one-day short trips. However, I never kissed her nor hugged her.

When I saw her wet eyes with deep smile, scenes with various women from the past recurred in my memory.

“I want you. Badly.”

“I imagined all day that you touch my body.”

“Let’s make love tonight and forget all about it tomorrow.”

I felt those women’s desire from pores of their skin. It could be at someone’s bed in Amsterdam or a kitchen in Bangalore or a beach in Nice. Or it could be in a downtown alley of Saigon or a subway station in Rome. Most of the time, I could talk them out of it by talking about totally different matters like books I was reading or jokes I prepared as a list in my head for these occasions, but I sometimes had to resort to fiercely running away from them. None of them could imagine that I was impotent nor had I never had sexual desire in my life. That fact, or I would say destiny, weighed on me throughout my entire life.

On that evening, I sat on my bed next to Rita while hanging my head. All sorts of thoughts came into my mind. Somewhere in my mind I wished
I could raise my hand looking into her eyes and touch her forehead. I would comb her front hair saying that she had the most beautiful eyes in the world. Or I would just place my lips on her lips (darn! it is only 50 centimeter!) But my arms felt as heavy as lead.

(Why can’t I just love her?)

I wished I could say that out loud to her, but I prohibited myself from loving anyone just too long. It all came from my belief: All women have a right to have their own children and I should not deprive the very person I love of that possibility. I vowed that I would never fall in love. I had never failed to keep that vow.

“You probably know what is an Eskimo’s favorite food, don’t you?” It was Rita who broke the silence which I began to feel continuing forever.

“No, actually, I don’t. What is it?” Feeling relieved from the tension, I said that rather cheerfully. I felt her sweetness. I realized that feeling made me want her, but I didn’t know how.

(What is wanting?) I wondered to myself.

“It’s a rotten sparrow. They put sparrows in a seal skin and preserve them. After being fermented, a body of a sparrow turns out to be like a rubber ball. They rub this sparrow ball to completely mix rotten organs and soften bones to liquefy it and then suck the inside from its anus.”

(Yuck!)

I could not say that verbally, because I found her sobbing. It was so genuine that I felt her sadness to the level of pain as if it was mine. It pierced my heart.

“So it’s their energy drink. Like Fujiya Nectar...” She could no longer continue and broke into tears.

I imagined myself holding her shaking body in my arms. I would feel the warm tears wetting my shirt on my chest and her fast-beating heart and
mine would be in the same rhythm. But again, my arms were too heavy to raise. I felt my whole body turned into a piece of lead.

Somewhere in my mind, I vaguely recalled that I heard the Eskimo story she was talking about somewhere. There was a Japanese journalist who ate that fermented sparrow. As a result, a tapeworm grew in his intestine and he had to go to a hospital to get rid of it. He lay down on his side exposing his buttocks to a young nurse who was holding a flash light against his anus in complete darkness. The tapeworm would crawl out of his intestine toward the light and the lovely nurse carefully rolled the worm in a small broom-like tool while being careful not to cut that string like body.

However, I felt too much pain in my heart and knew that Rita also felt pain; more pain than I did.

I did not know how much time had passed. I knew that the time did not matter. What mattered was the depth of her sadness and my despair and I did not know how to rescue us from that depth. I had felt that I was losing ground. That reminded me that I could not have been anything else but a loser.

The moment I heard Rita’s tense voice on the phone, I was reminded that I had decided that I would be alone all my life. At the same time, I realized that I had called her, because I wanted to.

“Remember I told you about this obscure language I want to master?” I felt that she was thinking to herself whether she should snap at me or not. I knew she would not snap at many people by nature except at the right moment and this was the right moment. She was talking to a man who did not know what to do to his girlfriend who wanted to sleep with him.

“I think I do. Was it Baki... something?” she answered with a calm voice and added,
“I know it’s important to you,” as if to tell me that is why she decided not to snap at me.

“I was accepted by the university and I know that that is not how I should start this conversation and it is absolutely none of your business and you may not want to hear any part of this.”

I paused, although with the feeling that she was listening.

“Frankly, you may feel like hanging up the phone or snapping at me right at this moment and you probably should do that.”

She did not laugh and told me in a low tone of voice, “I won’t do that, because I’m in the office in the middle of work and I don’t want you to call me back to harass me after I do that.”

I imagined she was smiling.

“Have you been to Etaples?” She asked out of blue.

“That sounds familiar,” I answered. “I can picture that it is located on the North coast of France. Have I been there? Probably not. Pourquoi poses tu cette question? (Why are you asking that?)”

She has been learning basic French lately and wanted me to speak simple French.

“Parce-que, je research un American black painter living in France.”

She was working for a company which operates an online art site.

“You do. Quel est son nom? (What is his name?)”

“Je ne pense pas que vous reconnaissez son nom.”

She indicated that I wouldn’t know the painter.

I recalled that she wanted me to speak foreign languages in which she had no idea what was said and enjoyed that fake conversation.

“Я вижу, толстый кот на крыше. (I see a fat cat on the roof.)”

“Oh I like eating that, too.”

“Orangutangerna förstå inte människans tecken.” (Orangutans do not
understand human signs.)

“Really? I didn’t know he was such a terrible person.”

“Tôi không hiểu vì sao ấy lại làm như vậy, (Spanish textbook I used started with a funeral scene.)”

“I agree with you. I prefer summer.”

“Bạn có nụ cười đẹp và nó làm cho tôi cảm thấy muốn với bạn mãi mãi. (You have a beautiful smile and it makes me feel I want to be with you forever.)”

“Oh no way! What the hell was she thinking?”

I recalled that moment when I expressed my feeling toward her in a language she would never understand and my heart ached with that memory.

After that she hung up the phone saying that she had to go back to work.

Neither of us said anything about calling again.

My memory after that is a bit blurry because of the high fever that was gradually developing in my body. It was like floating in the air with a loud radio which was constantly out of tune. I remember the sensation I got from people’s minds when I was walking along the Ginza on the way back home from the subway station.

I stopped in front of Shiseido headquarter, a pink art deco building shaped like lipstick. I scanned people’s minds to see if I could create some kind of map as an attempt to bring some order to my mind which was on the verge of madness.

I felt a slight headache, so I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply to see if that would help. Suddenly I heard a man’s internal voice,

-I don’t give a shit! I don’t give a shit! You pig!!

I saw a man running out of the building across the street and hurriedly
walking toward the subway station. His sense of humiliation mingled with
the anger of a woman nearby contemplating her wish for the death of her
mother-in-law. Then there was more anger from a foreigner who was upset
about the Japanese bureaucracy. If I color the mind map, first there would
be red for the energy of anger, then orange, the energy of enmity. The
next color would be yellow, anxiety. For a moment, I thought of opening
my eyes, becoming sick of the color map my mind created. I was glad that
I wasn’t in a country near a war-zone. That would have made me more dismayed.
I decided that, for a few more minutes, I’d continue the attempt to
color-zone people’s minds according to the energy surfacing in my mind.

The next kind of energy I felt was the excitement of liking something.
Surprisingly, I felt the energy toward ‘stuff,’ material or experience,
rather than other human beings, was equally intense. I associated the
energy to the fact that I was standing in the middle of shopping heaven.
There were also some intense love feelings coming from teenagers and
couples of various ages. I kept my eyes closed thinking to myself that
I was eager to reach something. Underneath these energies there was a
feeling of love and longing, spreading like a thin film across the entire
field of my being. By the time I reached it I felt exhausted, but regardless,
I followed it. Someone was worrying about her friend who had cancer. Then
that worry was connected to another’s concern about her friend’s
examination. Then to another’s concerns about the health of their parents…
The connections were incessant and stable once you stepped into it.

I knew the color map would be different depending on the time, place
and situation. The attempt itself may have been useless. As a beginner
of tree languages, I was overwhelmed by the chaos created by people’s minds
and simply wanted to bring some order to that. However, the attempt made
me conclude that it was wrong.
Yes, I remember the color-mapping. I also have a vague memory of talking with Shun, the younger of the two chefs working at Chūbō. When I arrived back home, I saw the back of his head, dyed blond, in the glow of the refrigerator light. He was rummaging in my refrigerator for some fish to cook that evening. He looked back at me and raised his hand, hearing the noise I made when opening the front door.

I read his mind and knew that he was filled with both respect and contempt. The respect was toward my linguistic ability and free life style. The contempt was about my total lack of business savvy. If he were me he would have rented out the space to the most prominent retail brand and gained a hefty income to use for his first restaurant. He would then expand it to multiple restaurants, he was thinking.

“How’s this, Shun?” I talked to him without thinking. “I’ll rent this place out to a retail store for a year or two for you. I’ll give you the money. You can open your own restaurant.”

I was curious how his mind or any human being’s mind would react to such an offer. I first saw confusion. Then a flash of anger appeared in his mind,

—Who the hell do you think you are? the mind could read. His attitude didn’t betray his feelings.

“No thank you. I can take care of myself.” With this parting shot, he bolted out of the room holding a bag full of food in his arms. I regret having made such a careless remark.

I also clearly remember that I took Halfan, a medication to treat malaria, to see if that would lower my temperature. Later, after I came back from the hospital, I found the empty box of the Malaria test kit in the trash can on the second floor. I’d gotten it from a friend in Europe and brought
it to Sierra Leone. I probably decided to take Halfan because the result was positive, but I have no memory of using the test kit. The reason I remember taking Halfan is because I set an alarm to go off every six hours. I remember I woke up twice with the alarm. If I had remembered the result of the Malaria test kit was positive, I’d have told that to the member of the rescue squad who was talking into a wireless radio saying, “The patient’s friend who called the ambulance said he had come back from an African country about two weeks ago. Malaria is suspected. Over.”

Later Shun told me in front of the regulars at Chūbō that he regretted he hadn’t had me write a will on the previous evening.

“When I went to his home to get food for the lunch menu..., You know his face was all red. Bloated up like a balloon, and he was vomiting like it was the end of the world. ‘That’s why he was talking about giving me money,’ I thought. ‘Damn! I should’ve had him write a will about what he said!’”

“Maybe you still could’ve taken his hand and forced him to write it.” Motokoshi-san who ran a dry-cleaning business in Ginza said laughing.

“No way.” Shun said, “He couldn’t even speak Japanese. Let alone write it!”

Then the topic switched to the legitimacy of a will written in a foreign language.

According to Shun, I was speaking a mixture of English and some other languages he did not recognize. The reason he could tell one of the languages was English was because I kept telling him, “Call one-one-two.”

“What’s that?” Shun asked.

“Oh, It’s the emergency number in Europe.” I had forgotten the emergency number in Japan, which is 110.
I was immediately transferred to the ER when the ambulance arrived at the Tokyo Women’s Medical hospital. The treatment for cerebral malaria kicked in after that.

I have absolutely no memory of my stay at the hospital in Shinjuku except few images.

When I woke up, through the window I saw a tall modern building with lights in the dusk. I wondered why I was in Kuala Lumpur. I mistook the Tokyo Metropolitan government building for the Petronas Tower in Malaysia. I slowly shifted my eyes to the inside of the room and saw that Rita was sitting next to on my bed with a book on her lap.

“You’re a lot of trouble.” She told me in English smiling. “Do you know you almost lost your life?” I saw dark circles under her eyes.

“Why are you speaking in English?” I asked her in Japanese. She sighed with relief. While I was in the confusion from cerebral malaria, apparently I was speaking several languages which most people did not comprehend. I responded to questions in English, but for some reason, not to Japanese. When I answered, people could not predict which language I would use.

“Oh, I heard you speaking Japanese for the first time.” The nurses said coming into my room one after another.

“Your Japanese sounds as good as your German.” Doctor Sonoda said laughing. “I’m relieved. I was reaching the end of my German vocabulary.”

Soon my mother, who was resting in a nap room at the hospital, joined the crowd. With strange feelings, I was looking at Rita placing her hand on my mother’s shoulder. I’ve never seen them together like that. I could tell that they were both holding back their tears.
About half an hour later, my mother’s husband Surinder came into the room and greeted me in a language I didn’t understand. He was disappointed to know that I no longer spoke the language.

“‘We used to talk in Gujarati.” He said in totally fluent Japanese. He had been living in Tokyo for more than twenty years.

“Gujarati? That’s odd. I learned it such a long time ago.” I lied. I never learned the language.
When Surinder mentioned Gujarati, for the first time since waking up from my derangement, I remembered Baki+T and its mind-reading function. I realized that Gujarati was the language which Andhra, the Yogi who had held the first Baki+T convention in 1905, was speaking.

“What was I saying in Gujarati?” I asked to Surinder. He shrugged his shoulders. My tapping skill was still weak, but I was relieved to know what I said in Gujarati made no sense in Surinder’s mind.

“You said he was talking about a convention in France, Surinder. Oh, thank you.” My mother said receiving a cup of tea from Rita.

“Oh, that’s right. You must’ve memorized a speech or something in Gujarati. You were talking about something like the destiny of the earth and humanity.” Surinder said standing next to me.

“Quite a topic considering you were almost dying…” My mother said sipping tea.

“You also often made a sound like wind.” Rita said. “I was worried, but I didn’t think you were out of your mind. It was very soothing to hear it. Like nice background music.”

An image appeared in my head. She was looking down at me and softly caressing my forehead. In other images that appeared in my head, she was arranging flowers, typing on a laptop or reading next to my bed while I was speaking
Baki+T. Her affection and the peace Baki+T created in her mind gave made
my heart ache. Despite her cheerful tone of voice, I could tell that her
mind was filled with sadness. She wanted to leave the room and burst into
tears. I hadn’t officially introduced her to my mother who was eagerly
awaiting my explanation as to whether she was just a girl-friend or my
fiancé.
I started to get a headache even though the Malaria was no longer in my
brain.

“Well… I think I have to go back to my restaurants and see how business
went tonight.” Surinder broke the awkward silence created between the three
of us. He said so sensitively thinking to leave Rita and me alone.

“Thank you for everything to you all.” I deliberately made remarks
insinuating that I expected all three of them would leave at the same time.

“Rita-san, you may want to stay...,” My mother said.
To that, Rita responded politely, “No. I have work to do tomorrow, Mrs.
Sing.” I could tell Rita was greatly hurt by my attitude. My mother was
resentful about me in her heart.

—He is thirty-three years old. Why is he acting like a junior high school
boy to a nice girl like her who loves him!
I also could read that Surinder was feeling sorry for Rita. He rightly
sensed that Rita was deeply in love with me.

“I’ll be able to get out of here the day after tomorrow.” I said to
them as they headed toward the door.
Rita looked at me surprised, because I hadn’t discussed that with any of
the hospital staff. I had read Doctor Sonoda’s mind. She had determined
that I could be out of the hospital in two days.

“I’ll fly to San Francisco next month.” I added.
My mother responded, “Oh, for your job?” She deduced that because there
was no reason for me to go to San Francisco otherwise.

“No. To learn an obscure language.“

I saw Rita bow slightly to my mother and Surinder and leave the room. My heart ached from the fact I had hurt her. I knew she had been with me for the whole time since I collapsed. Still, the situation hadn’t changed as far as our relationship was concerned.

“How long?” my mother asked.

“About a few weeks. Could be longer. If Baki+T University allows me to stay longer I will.” I answered.

My mother sighed. She was worried about my trip, thinking of my health, but I could read that she had a tremendous confidence in my body at the same time. I could tell that her mind was thinking maybe Rita was too conservative, too much a typical Japanese woman for me who would continue traveling all over the world for the rest of my life.

After they had left and were all walking toward the hospital parking lot, my mind was half thinking of the next day’s schedule and half following the conversation between my mother and Surinder.

“Motoko, that’s his choice. I never thought Kotoba would marry a Japanese woman.”

Surinder was telling my mother while starting his Mercedes.

“Suri, I’m not talking about marriage. I just want him to be with someone who loves him.” My mother was unconsciously hitting her bag while saying this.

They were driving silently in the night of downtown Tokyo toward his restaurant.

I could read that Surinder believed I was a gay.

My mother broke the silence.

“He thinks it’s natural that he is loved by somebody. Especially by
women. That presumption has sustained him.”

“Thirty-three is still young, like a kid, Motoko.” Surinder was responding, “You married me when you were fifty-five years old, remember?”

For a week after that, I concentrated on rest and recovery. If I hadn’t had mind-reading ability, I would’ve started jogging immediately after coming home. In fact, I was putting on my running shoes when a nurse named Mika came into my room the next morning.

—What the hell are you doing? That’s what her mind was saying. Orally, she politely asked me, “You can’t go anywhere yet, if that’s what you’re going to do.”

“I won’t run too long. Just a block or so, maybe...?” I smiled back at her unconsciously trying to charm her. I was going to say that I’d run a mile until I read Mika’s mind. She was thinking,

—This kind of ignorant rat loses his life prematurely. Isn’t it enough for him to go through the hell he already went through? And burden his friends and family?

I decided to take a complete rest after internally hearing the nurses mocking and criticizing me whenever they came into my room.

“What? Is he training for the Olympics or something?” So when Doctor Sonoda came in, I was sitting on the bed like a tamed cat.

“You have to know this. It takes a full week until your hepatic function is back.” She said putting her hands on her hips.

“You have to know this. It takes a full week until your hepatic function is back.” She said putting her hands on her hips.

“Your body went through and still has to go through a lot. Don’t you think your body deserves a rest?”

She was wearing a blouse which emphasized her breasts, so I made a deliberate effort to look into her cleavage. “I think so.” I answered looking back at her eyes. I found her blushing.
-God! He is cute! I read her mind.

"I'll take a rest like it's my full time job. So can I go home tomorrow?"
I won her approval. I was glad. It was hard to concentrate on Baki+T in a room where other patients were sleeping and nurses came in and out.

I really didn’t do much for the whole week. My body didn’t at least. I took a slow walk to the Imperial Palace early in the morning to be glared at by the guards. Remembering the question by a man in Sierra Leone, I tried to tap into the mind of the emperor. This required some courage. I imagined the guards and police storming toward me and wrestling me to the ground because of my impudent act. In my mind’s eye, I saw the emperor’s room with its soft carpet and the princess sitting in a chair.

-No. Majesty, putting away his hands, she started to put work-out weights on her ankles herself. Baroque music played in the background. They were doing morning exercises. Their fitness room was surprisingly modest. I saw two men waiting at the corner of the room. Then...

Suddenly a phrase in Thai reverberated in my mind and I immediately retracted my reading from the Imperial Palace. The word, "my place -minohodo- lingered in my head for a while. The only thing I learned from that glimpse of the emperor’s daily life was the weight of duty which was beyond my comprehension, and I could not stand the feeling of being caged in which covered the whole imperial palace. I was simply glad that I was living outside the palace.

I then placed my consciousness on Mr. Takamizawa. I first saw his wife hanging the wash on a laundry line. Mr. Takamizawa was meditating on a tatami mat at the corner of their room. He immediately opened his eyes and talked to me in my mind.
-Don’t be distracted by people’s minds. He said. -It’s just a phase you go through to reach the tree’s mind. Most Baki+Tiers are trapped in that phase. And then he closed his eyes.

I was going to say I was aware of that.

It was genuinely interesting at first to read people’s minds. During the first few days after coming back from the hospital, my mind hovered over crowds of people in Ginza then over Tokyo then over Japan then over other continents especially where I had visited. At first, I was looking for a person I would want to be friends with. I could find endless numbers of people – all ages, tribes and sexes, a shepherd of llamas on Machu Picchu. The first time I did that, I was so tired I collapsed into bed upstairs and slept for about four hours until Shun woke me up from worry.

“I just wanted to see if you still speak Japanese,” he said and ran downstairs to get food for dinner from my refrigerator.

I woke up slowly and went out to a coffee shop. I ordered a vegetable sandwich and tea. I allowed my mind to hover again in the air over the crowd of people. I was afraid of allowing my mind to go beyond the countries I knew. It was just so overwhelming for me, especially in my physical condition, to see that the majority of the people in the world were struggling so hard just to make a living. It was heart-breaking to see that it was often those people who were most eager to help others. It was a relief to tap into the minds of children innocently playing hopscotch by the road. The sheer joy of play. Or a scene of a family at a dinner of only porridge. It gave me relief when I saw genuine love toward their children in the father and mother.

Soon I felt that something was wrong with continuing to tap into people’s minds. It was of course impossible to generalize about people. They were surprisingly chaotic and surprisingly peaceful at the same time.
Undoubtedly, it was the longing for stability and peace which the majority of people had. And it was also undoubtedly power and money which was driving the world, but when I looked at the individual’s mind, a different diagram would unfold. I couldn’t articulate what that diagram was. Something bothered me. Each individual’s mind was simply seeking for happiness. Longing for something that would be worth living for. And especially in advanced countries where most of the conditions that ought to satisfy those desires were already there.

-What is it? I wondered. There was something that broke down on the path from the individual’s mind to the group’s mind and the forming of a community and a world. Maybe it’s uneasiness. Maybe it’s anxiety. That makes people want more for themselves. Deferring happiness to the future, they’re no longer able to live in the present.

-What is this feeling that bothers me?

I was thinking to myself, sipping a hot tea from a dainty cup served at Takano Coffee. I was getting tired again, so I switched off the mind-tapping.

The air had become hotter after a week of absence from the streets of this town while my mind was gone in the hospital. Without tapping, I could tell from people’s remarks that they were hoping the summer nights that year were not as hot as the previous year.

I saw a young woman with a light blue blouse close her laptop. After taking a glance at her watch she started to eat the same sandwich I ordered. She was apparently waiting for somebody. I thought of Rita. I had been avoiding tapping into her mind since she left the hospital.

But at that moment suddenly my mind was pointed toward the art criticism
website she was working for.

I spoke to the young girl in the blue blouse and asked her if I could use her laptop for a few minutes. I knew she was logged onto WiFi. She hesitated a moment and wondered in her mind if the man in front of her who has been unshaven for quite awhile was a bum asking for free internet.

“"I live around the corner." I said as if that gave me some kind of credibility.

She understood I was saying so as an excuse for my casual appearance. Ginza was like my backyard.

“"I just remembered that my friend uploaded a news article. I’d like to read it, if you would be kind enough."”

—Why doesn’t he go home and use his own computer? She was saying in her mind, but reluctantly agreed.

When I opened the site, Rita’s latest article titled, “Tanner, the challenged life” was displayed on the homepage.

Every once in awhile, when we look at a work of art, we cast our frustrations and despair upon it hoping that it might in some part answer our abiding questions in life (or at least provide some comfort). The theme or figure in a work may sometimes give us an answer. However, it is just as likely that thinking about the life struggles of the artist while looking at his/her art may give the viewer a glimpse of the answer. In that sense, I find works produced by artists who have gone through a hard life most appealing. “We should seek neither to escape suffering nor to suffer less, but to remain untainted by suffering.” – Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace (1952)

And if that work is about a struggling human being by a struggling
artist, I would be all the more attracted to it. I was probably looking at Henry Osawa Tanner’s work with a question about my life - where am I supposed to go from here?

The first time I saw Tanner’s work was at the High Museum in Atlanta. The piece was entitled “Etaples Fisher Folk”. At the exhibition I went and stood in front of this painting first, ignoring the regular viewing route. It is a piece of work whose use of light reminds us of Rembrandt. The light is uniquely situated; not from the top or side, but from the left bottom where a lamp is placed on the ground. There are three figures; two fishermen in front and a woman standing in the top back of the painting. The existence of the woman can be easily overlooked and gives a calculated stability to the whole picture. Her existence also gives another important piece of information, that these people live crammed into one small house. In the materially scarce interior, we can immediately tell that their life is hard. One fisherman is presumably mending a cloth by the light of the lamp and another man is holding a bowl. On the table there is an item which is hard to recognize, probably a piece of bread. Looking at this, despite the fact that the piece depicts indigent French fishermen, I thought of the suffering Tanner and his people had to go through as African slaves in the American south in the nineteenth century. I did not have any knowledge of him other than the fact that he was a black artist and woke up at four o’clock every morning to paint.

I started to look at the rest of his works at the exhibition with curiosity about how he came to terms with his suffering. Quietly? Loquaciously? Or with apparent zeal? Tenaciously? Or with love for his family?

I want you viewers to find the answer yourselves, but what I saw there
was a serene state deep in the artist. A true artist’s spirit supported by his strong faith. Faith, probably in Christ.

Again, listening to Simone Weil on the nature of suffering - “The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering but a supernatural use for it.”
“How long had you been tapping me before I called you?”

Hamazaki asked while placing his buttocks on a stool in front of the kitchen counter in my condo. He looked plumper than the image that had appeared in my mind.

“How’s Mr. Takamizawa doing?” he asked.

“I was trying to tap to Mr. Takamizawa, but he cut off all communication, for about a week.” I told Hamazaki.

During that week, I learned various things about Baki+T functions, especially after other Baki+Tiers gradually started to tap into my mind and give me tips. Baki+Tiers can cut off reception if we wish. I was not good at that myself, partly because I didn’t have any particular set schedule and rested my body the majority of the time. Concentration and a clear mind are necessary for good communication. (Lack of sleep or any emotional ups and downs would affect this.) Whether and how long one remembers what was communicated was totally arbitrary as if it was controlled by someone else. (One might say it’s the trees.) Deep breathing is important for good reception and communication. Communicating in Baki+T is extremely tiring, so setting aside a few hours a day may be most helpful. Oral Baki+T, so-called “wind”, is basically used to communicate to regular people. It depends on the person’s gift, personality, and the trees’ selection if the right meaning is communicated or not to that person.
I had questions for Mr. Takamizawa about the purpose of the Baki+T convention in 1905, its link to the summer course this year, and Tomoe’s mental problem. However, he’d shut down his reception mode. So, I tapped into Hamazaki, but he never responded. In the beginning, he seemed to have completely lost his Baki+T ability, except when he used it to read people’s minds for his business purposes. His mind was occupied with his intense work schedule. Even late at night, after coming home, his mind was elsewhere on his business. I could tell that his newly-wed life with his wife, Saya, was already in a deadlock. His devotion to his work wasn’t the only reason for this.

While we were taking about the intensive summer course, Tomoe and Hamazaki had started to go out together. I wasn’t interested in how they started dating. By the time I noticed, they were constantly together like a pair of shells of a shell fish. Except during class, Tomoe was always sitting on Hamazaki’s lap. I had never seen them walking on the street nor standing on the train without holding hands. I looked down on their intimacy as mutual obsession. I thought I’d never been that intimate with anybody in the world for my entire life.

After I heard about Tomoe’s insanity from Mr. Takamizawa, I tried to tap into her mind. One thing I wanted to figure out was whether the mental problem I had in the emergency room was purely from Malaria. I didn’t understand what made me conversant in Gujarati, which I had never learned. I also wanted to know what drove some Tiers crazy. I tried to see Tomoe’s mind by tapping into it. However, when I tapped into Tomoe’s mind, I bumped up against total silence. Total disconnection. It was like picking up a phone that had been cut off from the telephone line.

By that time, several people who were planning to fly to the country to attend the class I’d applied to had tapped me. The communication was
initially weak when my brain was recovering from the disease. So only those people who had deeper tapping skills could successfully communicate with me. They were a ninety some years old woman named Mead in Europe and a teenage boy named Valentine in an African country. There were several native Baki+Tiers north of San Francisco who were successful in communicating with me, when my mind was clear and concentration was good. There were times I tried to tap into the minds of people who intentionally cut off communication. There were moments when I could see what they were doing. For example, when I was trying to tap to Mr. Takamizawa, at one time, a baseball was hit toward me and I reflexively tried to catch it.

I was on the train. A middle-aged woman who was sitting in front of me looked at me and slowly stood up to switch to a different seat. Another time, when I tried to tap into Mead’s mind, I could glimpse a soup bowl in front of her and family members at a table. The scene was cut off after that. Compared with those, what I received from Tomoe was just a dead end. I couldn’t tell if she was alive or not.

Later, I asked Mead if she’d ever tapped into crazy people’s minds during her ninety years of life. She’d told me that she was a descendant of Baki+T people and was conversant in Baki+T since she was a baby. She said she had been with crazy people on a very special occasion.

-Their inner world is quite disturbing, but it sure is a living world.
She tapped back her thoughts.

-‘I’ve seen many people in the camps who have dead minds like your friend. It’s often the only way to survive. To kill your own mind. It’s a horrible horrible thing to watch.

I looked at Hamazaki sitting at the kitchen counter. I was sure that he could read my mind recalling Mead’s words, ‘horrible things’ about the state of mind Tomoe was in. He didn’t mention anything about it. In people’s
minds, there were some areas that were closed and segregated. For Hamazaki, it was Tomoe; for me, it was my sexual issues, which I hid from the outside world.

“I don’t trust him.” Hamazaki said about Mr. Takamizawa, hearing that I’ve been tapping to him for about a week without success.

“He thinks I’m a loser, but I believe he is a loser. A pimp living on his wife’s income.”

“But he seems to be...”

“I know. He is working for the community a lot. He teaches kids with issues, such as refusing to go to school. He also coaches a little league team... those kinds of things.”

Reading his mind about what he wanted for a drink, I tossed him a chilled diet Coke in the refrigerator, which belonged to Chūbō, and said, “But you know, I think his Baki+T ability contributes a lot to society. When you look at how the nature in Okutama is preserved, not having been affected by development... Of course, I don’t want to be naïve here thinking that Baki+Tiers can save the world.” I said that while laughing in Hamazaki’s direction. He was not laughing.

“Baki+T does save the world.” Hamazaki opened the coke can. It splashed. He continued while shaking off drips from his fingers, “You are aware of that, Kotoba. Takamizawa believes that, too. He manipulates the mind of city councils. But I believe that we should do bigger things than coaching a little-league or playing with city council.”

I was surprised by his calm attitude despite the big words he was using.

“I just don’t like his life-style in which he is content with this ‘honorable poverty.’ I don’t buy it.”

His words sounded petty compared to what he had just said. Hearing his words, I thought of myself and about rejecting renting my place out to
retailers which otherwise would have created a hefty monthly income.

"In your case, I understand. You don’t want to rely on your inheritance. Plus, you don’t think I’m a loser exploiting Baki+T abilities for my own ego." Hamazaki continued reading my mind. What he said was a little different, but I decided not to question it. Hamazaki said he had only half an hour to talk about Tomoe’s issue. Time was limited.

At that moment, Shun, the cook at Chūbō, came in saying, “Hey, what’s up?” and walked toward the refrigerator.

Hamazaki pointed at his Coke, indicating his gratitude about drinking Chūbō’s property, but Shun ignored it pretending that he didn’t understand the signal.

“Shun, Hamazaki-san here is the guy who made that commercial; a cow wants to read a Newspaper.”

I told Shun this as a way to introduce him to my friend.

“Who caaaaarrreeees!” Hamazaki yelled like a howling dog as he read Shun’s mind, while he was holding one of the refrigerator handles.

“Oh, that commercial, where a mother and daughter say ‘I wish you were a human being, and not a cow?’” Shun replied politely.

“That’s right. I may become a good customer of Chūbō.” Hamazaki said, again reading Shun’s mind. Still, I could read that Hamazaki was happy knowing that a scene from the TV commercial he had produced instantly popped up in Shun’s mind.

I raised my glass of water to Hamazaki and said,

“To the entrepreneur and the king of commercials, who can read consumers’ minds.”

He started an advertisement agency taking advantage of the fact that he could read buyers’ psychology and expanded it to a sizable company of about 50 employees in a year. Being able to read consumers’ minds, his success
was guaranteed. That was what Mr. Takamizawa didn’t buy about most ‘average’ Baki+Tiers. According to him, they were only stuck in a mind-reading scheme and he took advantage of it.

“How about that commercial? A cell phone commercial. A white dog plays the father’s role in a family.” Shun asked while taking food from my refrigerator.

“That one was done by Dentsū. The big player.”

Hamazaki answered swinging the stool in a circle under his buttocks.

When Shun was going to leave the room, Hamazaki called out to him and said,

“Imaoka-san is a good guy. You should go ahead and take his boxing lessons.”

Both Shun and I looked at him in surprise. Shun glanced at me and then looked back at Hamazaki.

“What are you talking about?”

I haven’t been tapping Shun’s mind for quite some time, but a picture of a guy in a boxing ring instantly appeared in my head. That was an owner of a boxing gym named Imaoka Boxing. Last night, on the internet, Shun was looking at a photo of Imaoka during his active period as a pro-boxer. A referee was holding his hand. His opponent was knocked down on the ring. Shun had been thinking of taking boxing lessons since he watched a boxing match, which recently recorded its highest audience ratings in quite some time.

“I’m a big fan of Naitō myself,” Hamazaki said about the former world champion whom Shun was a big fan of, “but Imaoka-san has a philosophical aspect about him unlike simple Naitō. I don’t know how it helps as a boxer, but it helps as an instructor. You can learn a lot of things from him.”

An interesting thing I found out about Shun’s mind was that he no longer
questioned why Hamazaki knew his secret plan about taking boxing lessons. His mind was already preoccupied with the setup for the evening, but tonight after work, he may send the application over the internet to take lessons without realizing what had made him decide to do so.

After Shun had left, Hamazaki said,

“See? Takamizawa would have said I shouldn’t abuse Baki+T.”

“Probably.” I answered, but if it was used to bring out a person’s true desires in life that itself didn’t seem to be that bad. While tapping Shun’s mind, I noticed that he had a fighting instinct despite his lighthearted appearance. I wondered how many Baki+T would read people’s minds. To an extent where that person himself didn’t notice…?

“So that’s what you’ve been doing? Reading people’s true desires and giving advice?”

“Not so much ‘advice’, although I’m sure my staff would appreciate that once in a while. I don’t read their minds as much as I try reading the minds of the ‘general public’ out there.” He waved his hands toward the car-free street outside where a mass of people were strolling looking for after-work fun.

“After Tomoe went crazy, I tested myself many times to see if abusing my mind-reading ability would also drive me crazy. I read people’s minds and communicated that to people to see what would happen. I thought I wouldn’t care if I went mad like Tomoe.”

“But later, you yourself forgot what you did,” I said. After Tomoe became insane, Hamazaki abused his Baki+T ability for a while from despair, but completely forgot those incidents.

“Yes, I did. I did forget about that until I noticed you were tapping,” he said. I nodded.

I was recalling the time I talked with Tomoe for the first time. It was
after the first Baki+T class. It was raining and she offered to share her umbrella with me on the way to a subway station. She was proud, almost boasting that she was one of a few people who had mastered Baki+T.

“Those people who are pure in their minds can master it.” Her over-confidence made me a bit uncomfortable, so told I her, as a person who had mastered twenty-two languages, I was also sure that I could master it.

“Maybe so.” She shrugged her shoulders and switched the topic to her experiences at various ethnic tents she had stayed in: A Sami tent in Finland, a Tibetan tent and a Yurt in Kyrgyzstan.

“I like living in small enclosed spaces. The Sami tent was the place I slept most deeply in my life,” She’d said.

I told her about my experiences taking foreign tourists to Bedouin tents as a tour guide when I was living in Tunisia. I wanted to tell her that I decided to live in Tunis on a whim when my Macedonian friend in Italy took me sailing from Salerno, but she kept talking about how comfortable reindeer skin was.

“Takamizawa said she impudently tried to write down her inner experiences of Baki+T. That’s why she went mad.”

Hamazaki said, crushing the empty Coke can in his hand.

“Did he say that? Or did he think it?” I asked.

“I forgot,” answered Hamazaki. I thought that as long as Mr. Takamizawa didn’t say his thoughts aloud, he should be forgiven. That was the rule among Baki+Tiers, although I was already aware that several disputes around someone’s “thoughts” were a matter of everyday occurrence among Tiers.

“That made me wonder…” I had a feeling that other Tiers were tapping our conversations.

“What were other Baki+Tiers’ attitudes? Were some of them accusing her
of doing so?"

"I forgot, but a sense of isolation without any empathy still lingers in my mind, so I may have felt that before... although as you have just noticed, that sense of being abandoned always lingers in me. Just like my nature."

Until that moment, I didn’t know that he had been abandoned by his father when he was small. In a sense, we were the same, I thought.

When Tomoe had started to live in a tent she had set up on top of the trees in a suburb of Tokyo, her parents didn’t worry about her deed itself. Tomoe had always liked living in unusual settings, like living in a shelter made of snow in Hokkaido. Or living in a cave with her friends. She developed that habit when she was a child. She once found an abandoned house and made it into a secret space with her friends. Hamazaki, who had been busy starting his own company at that time, went to her place only on weekends.

"I didn’t notice her change until later. If I had aimed antennas at the trees, I would have noticed her change through our communication via Baki+T."

"Did you often communicate with her via Baki+T?"

"No. You are aware this, I guess, but my Baki+T ability is fairly weak. It’s because somewhere in my mind I doubt the very existence of this language. I know that right after I leave this place, I’ll start thinking that this is brainwashing even though right at this moment, I believe this effect is very legitimate. That’s what Baki+T does to me if not to you. Or somewhere in my mind, I may be hoping that my mind completely forgets about this."

"Except Tomoe." I said for him.

"That’s right. I never want to forget her. That’s why I cannot completely forget Baki+T. In a sense, it could be the trees’ mercy that I still keep
that ability although I use its mind-reading effect only for business purposes. For me it’s like a trade-off between me and the trees for losing my lover.”

It was painful to see Tomoe’s smile in Hamazaki’s mind. The image was so vivid telling me that he recalls her smile every day.

“I cannot imagine anything you can’t do, Hama-chan!”

“Congratulations for the commercial contract with Hoshi Clinic! They are so big!”

Along with those voices by Tomoe, I heard Hamazaki’s whisper.

“No woman other than you will ever catch my eye; not even top models will ever be attractive to me, Tomoe.”

I saw Hamazaki biting his lips tightly so as not to show that they were trembling.

I was relieved that I saw no contempt in my mind anymore, as I had once had about their intimacy. I sat there on a stool at the edge of the kitchen counter feeling that the time of his business meeting was getting closer. That was why he had told me he only had half-an hour. I read that his mind was no longer thinking about the meeting.

“You have to be pure in mind.” I was recalling Tomoe’s words in the rain when we met.

If neither Hamazaki nor I was pure in mind, at least his mind was pure to Tomoe. I thought of Rita. That may be the kind of love she had toward me. I was too afraid of tapping into her mind. I didn’t want to see such “purity” in her mind.

“I feel sorry for my wife, Saya.” Hamazaki finally opened his mouth.

“It’s pathetic. Of course, she cannot read my mind, but she is aware that I don’t love her... I love someone else... with the same degree of clarity or even more clearly than Tiers who can read my mind.”
-Why can’t we love others? I wondered. I could tell that Hamazaki’s mind reading ran out. As he said, his Baki+T ability was fairly limited. Probably only half an hour a day. He had systematically been using that time for his business. However, what he said was surprisingly in synch with what he was thinking,

“I can’t love Saya, because her love is conditional.” He laughed to himself sarcastically. “Unconditional love! What am I? A saint? Tell me Kotoba, what percentage of wives out there remain in a marriage because their husband earns bread for them?”

“Hamazaki, I pretty much stopped tapping into the minds of anyone other than my fellow Tiers. But let’s say that I stand on top of the roof today and scan married women’s minds in this country. Maybe half? I don’t know... At least more than half...”

Hamazaki laughed loudly. “Kotoba, you’re too naïve when it comes to women. It’s 85%! I surveyed it. 85% of wives would rather divorce their husband once they stop gaining money! Who can blame Saya for sticking with me because of her living conditions?”

I could tell that he was talking about the survey he conducted among a certain demography in Japan. From my experiences of staying in various countries, I was aware that there were many women, especially in developing countries, who were the bread-earners of their households. In such cases, maybe their “condition” of love was for their partner to be a good father or good lover.

“What is unconditional love? I wondered. – If I tap into Rita’s mind, will I find it? I doubted it.

“Are you thinking that my love is so conditional that Saya cannot love me?” Hamazaki said gazing at the crushed Coke can.

“No,” I answered. “I never thought of such a thing; unconditional love.”
“Neither did I, until Tomoe went crazy.” He stepped down from the stool to make a phone call to his staff. His mind was thinking of an excuse to get out of a meeting, which his client was attending.

“When Tomoe went crazy, I said to myself that I’d love her, whatever happened to her in her life. And I still do... Hello?? Oh, Kaneko? Is Mr. Hanano already there?”

Hamazaki stepped out into the street from the front door. He was doing so merely out of custom though I would be able to read their conversations anyway. However, I tried not to read his mind. I made a conscious effort in focusing on “things” in front of me. I aimed at a metal garbage bin and tossed the crushed Coke can into it. I tried to wipe up a brown pool of Coke and gazed at the shape for a moment. It looked like a horse head. I wiped it up with a dry cloth. I felt that the phone conversation he was having would take long and Hamazaki was going to take me somewhere. I went upstairs to change into a clean shirt. I even mended a missing button.

The aroma of pork boiled in soy sauce broth floated from Chūbō at the next building. Stewed cubes of pork were their specialty. I stood by the window and looked down on the street. It was already dusk in Ginza and people were walking about after work. The flow of people was separated in two opposite directions. Hamazaki’s head with his cellular phone pushed against it seemed to be stuck or lost in the crowd. Suddenly an acute pain penetrated my mind. I was not sure where it came from.

“That’s the tradeoff of being able to see.
Being able to read.

I heard a voice somewhere. I wondered if it was Mead. The voice instantly disappeared into the air along with the mixed aroma of evening in Ginza. I placed my arms on the windowpane and took a deep breath.

“No, I don’t want to lose it. I said that aloud about my Baki+T ability.
The voice said being able to read people’s minds would often conjure up sadness. This caused people conversant in Baki+T to try to forget their communication ability.

-“I’d like to dwell in there forever.” I repeated in my mind. I took another deep breath. I turned around and looked at my tiny room. I felt a hint of multiple presences withdraw at that moment. It was as if a cluster of bugs hid at the moment when a kitchen light was turned on. The air in the room was warmed by the setting sun and stagnated in the floating aroma of food on a breezeless day.

I didn’t feel like crying, but I thought about it. Then realized that as long as I was “thinking” about it, I probably wouldn’t cry. However, my mind was still desperately seeking for a place to vent my internal pain. The vague recollection of a color map I’d made a week ago recurred in my mind. I tried to recall what the stage I finally reached was, but the whole experience was nebulous.

With a sound of the front door opening, I went downstairs and saw Hamazaki just come in. I saw that his hair above his distant looking face was a little wet from perspiration.

“What?”

We said at the same time. The moment I saw his troubled look, I felt that my sadness was mitigated, as if half of it was transferred back to him.

“You look like you recently got sick,” he said and immediately his mind was recalling that I indeed had contracted Malaria and had gone through a lot just a week before. I could also read a moment of genuine concern for my body in his mind.

“Let’s go.” He said, picking up his car keys on the kitchen counter. By that time, I knew he was going to take me to the mental hospital where Tomoe was staying.

-111-
“The visiting hours are until 8:00PM. It’s 6:30PM now.”

His mind was thinking about an hour and a half of driving. I also could tell that he had visited her so many times and bribed nurses there with Godiva chocolate, so he could stay until lights-out at 9:00 PM. A picture of the whole hospital building appeared in my head. It was hypocritically idyllic.

We walked to the distant parking lot in the crowd of people without a word. Melancholy still lingered heavily in my mind. The sound of a car horn, the high-pitched sound of a young woman laughing and the loud propaganda blaring from a right wing truck all deepened that feeling. When we got on the car, I told Hamazaki that I was no longer reading his mind. I realized that his Baki+T mode was completely off. I was tired also.

“Ah,” he made a sound as if he had been awakened from deep thoughts.

“I didn’t believe you would.” He touched the ignition button in his hybrid car. It started noiselessly.

“You know, in our job...,” He opened his mouth when the car slid into the illuminated night, “we create desire in people’s minds. Desire to buy. Desire to make their lives better. Desire to make them look good. Desire to create their own identity or make them belong to an identity.” I nodded and added. “And fill their houses with junk.”

“Yeah, you’d laugh at it. Kotoba, I hardly see any ‘things’ in your house.” Hamazaki laughed depreciatingly. I was thinking to myself how I’m always thinking about how much I would like better running shoes. I also told him, “I still clearly remember the excitement when I got a brand new Mazda motorcycle for the first time in my life in Germany.” I said I remembered that it was in the town of Leverkusen. “I felt that I had gained the world.” I clearly could recall the breeze from the prairie when I zipped down the country roads.
"The tighter our identities are connected to material, the easier it is for us to do the job." He said.

"And the blinder we become to what is going on." I added.

"You’re absolutely right. We create these commercials differently depending on what the demographics are. Sometimes they’re quirky, and other times they’re weird, cute, or exciting. We often pretend that we don’t care whether the audience buys it or not. We love living this way! Life is fun! That is the message we send. We have to love things to draw their hidden identities out to public eyes. Coke - excitement, Shiseido - subtle beauty, cellular phone - happily connected family. I really have to love things to be able to pull out their substance. We make a popular American actor into a five-year-old kid to attract both kids and adults so that adults end up buying the noodle because their kids ask them to do so at a supermarket. Or we shave a model’s head and put it on a billboard to attract people’s attention. You know the word we recently created? That’s Phyto-biotics.

"What? Is that a new type of plant that somehow makes you healthy?" I said, laughing about the word, ”phyto.”

"Close. It’s a medicine for menopause using soy ingredients to lighten the symptoms. Phyto-biotics… Ha!"

"That’s actually a clever word." I said. Hamazaki continued.

"I don’t just love things, Kotoba, it’s convenience that I love." "Other than my shoes, I like my light computer," I said. "I pretty much feel like my whole life is in it and it’s as light as a paperback."

"Yeah, I noticed your MacBook Air, Kotoba. What I want to say is…” We were going through the tunnels of orange lights. I saw his face was glowing in orange and then gray.

"We create a monster, Kotoba. We create an insatiable monster who never
feels full. And in order to do so effectively, we have to be insatiable monsters ourselves.” I looked at my reflection in the side mirror of the car. That tired look… The melancholic feeling I had was mitigated when I spoke with Hamazaki. I thought of my Macbook and its multiple external drives loaded with hundreds of different kinds of dictionaries. Then I thought of my running shoes. Then the airport lounge I was entitled to use because of my accumulated mileage. Suddenly I attempted to forget all about Baki+T. I wouldn’t go to see Tomoe in her mental dismay. There’d be no communication with an old woman who is a concentration camp survivor or Takamizawa who manipulated the city council’s minds to protect the trees. No pursuit. My mission was done. Or even work. The Nihonbashi City official was right. I wouldn’t have to work if I rented the first and second floor of my building. I would buy a house elsewhere in Tokyo with a large bathtub, embedded CPU in the furniture with a touch screen on the wall that gave me access to all kinds of dictionaries. Or I would be able to donate all the money I got to developing countries to gain a reputation. Schools with my name; a bridge named after me; or a whole city with my name.

If I ever became melancholic, I would simply take a trip somewhere in the world. I recalled the most beautiful sunset in Santrini in Greece, the white wall, the bells hanging from donkeys’ necks, sailboats… I would sit on the cliff with my friends to wait for the sun to set.

Or like I did one year in the past, I would drive from city to city in Europe to attend a marathon. Or I would stay at a hotel in Banff Spring to ski with Rita in the most beautiful snow.

-I’m not sure why I’m doing this. This wasn’t what I expected from Baki+T. Why am I going to see Tomoe?

I thought to myself. Again, I felt the multiple presences of Tiers’ tapping in the darkness now on the suburban road.
"Here we are." My daydream was broken by Hamazaki’s voice. We had arrived at a small parking lot at the hospital where Tomoe was staying. The building looked more barren than the picture that had appeared in my mind earlier. I got out of the car and tapped out to scan the nurses’ minds in the building to pick up the one who was closest to Tomoe. The nurse, in her mid thirties, was named Takako. Her mind was filled with her care for her two-year-old girl, her husband, and her daily routine, especially the rule of medication to multiple patients. She tried to keep a proper distance from her patients. She had developed that proper distance over the course of her long career.

Tomoe, who did not communicate with others, was the most serious case in the ward. But Tomoe was placed at a lower priority in Takako’s mind, because the patient didn’t participate in any activities in the ward. Occasionally some of the nurses put nail enamel on Tomoe, but in their minds, they were aware that this only satisfied themselves, and that Tomoe didn’t care. They also dressed Tomoe in clothes with tasteful color coordination. It was Hamazaki who had bought those comfortable clothes made of high quality materials. The nurses had sympathy for Hamazaki, who diligently visited Tomoe every other week. Some nurses thought it was romantic that he kept visiting Tomoe even after his marriage. However, if they were able to tap into Tomoe’s mind, they would have found that Hamazaki’s visits did not give any emotional or intellectual stimulation to her. She ate. She seemed to be sleeping well after lights-out, but nurses sometimes found her staying up in bed with her eyes wide open. She strolled through the small yard, walking back and forth and sat at the roots of the trees. Nurses and other people often found her gazing at stray cats at the hospital. They found that she was smiling slightly. She also showed a smile when a volunteer brought a shepherd into the ward every Tuesday. Occasionally -sometimes, it happened every day or multiple times a day-
she wept hard, straining her voice. When that happened, people had to give her tranquilizers and place her in an isolation ward where she slept for about half a day. Her weeping was so painful that it shook other patients’ emotions. No one, not even Hamazaki nor Kotoba knew that these fits were in synch with the moments when aging trees were cut down somewhere in the world.

Tomoe was sitting in a corner of the ward. I hadn’t explored any recent images of her in my mind. All the images that I had seen in Hamazaki’s mind were from before she lost her sanity.

Her skin looked whiter and more lucent from being inside for a long period of time. Her skin also looked ostensibly vibrant from vitamins, which had been regularly administered to her.

Hamazaki walked toward his lover and kissed her forehead. Tomoe didn’t even stir an inch. Hamazaki held her hand until he finally opened his mouth to speak.

“She refused to eat when she was moved to a large ward with other patients.”

“You don’t like the other patients talking to you, right?” Takako came in with a glass of water and a light-orange-colored pill in a small plastic cup. I read her mind to find that it was a sleep inducing drug.

—*Can she not maintain sleep through the night?* I wondered, then, at that moment, I heard a voice,

—I wake up around 4:00AM. Then I can’t go back to sleep. But it’s not that bad. I like talking with trees early in the morning.

With surprise, I looked at Tomoe who was gazing at the glass of water and the orange pill placed on her bedside.

—*Tell these people to go outside.*

I heard again. I looked at my watch and noticed that it was about twenty
minutes until lights-out.

“Hamazaki, do you mind if I ask you guys to stay outside? Maybe three minutes?”

I felt guilty about taking away precious meeting time between the lovers, but he didn’t object. The nurse was going to protest saying that it was against their rules to let outside people and patients be left by themselves in a ward. But Hamazaki said,

“I know him. He won’t do anything, I assure you.”

When they closed the curtain behind them, I was wondering how I could be so sure that the voice I had heard was from Tomoe. Then I heard another voice,

“When I first met you, you had a beard. She tapped as a way to communicate that it was her. — You also had a ponytail.

It was odd to hear her voice internally while looking at her body, which was supposed to be the source of the voice. Tomoe, from what I could see, just had a blank face.

I was recalling that I had a beard for a short period of time, early that summer when I started to take the Baki+T intensive course. I shaved the beard and had my haircut, because it was too hot that summer.

—I forgot about that. I tapped back smiling.

—I remember clearly, because I asked you if I could touch your beard.

That, I remembered. It was raining and she was sharing her umbrella with me. She said she wanted to touch my beard before disappearing into the subway station. I didn’t remember her touch, but recalled the incident.

—So it’s me. I just wanted you to know that Mr. Takamizawa was right. I was chosen to show a warning to you.

—What do you mean by warning? I was hasty to know the answer. I was aware that if I lost this chance, I would again encounter the usual dead
communication with her, as I had experienced before.

It was a week after that when I left for Baki+T.
Part II
When the Baki+Tiers woke up in the morning in early June, they knew that a librarian at the San Francisco library named Jed Schmidt was elected as the facilitator of the Baki+T intensive summer course.

—Who is this guy? Why a non-Tier?
—The facilitator of the last convention in the early 20th century was also a non-Tier. It’s traditional.
—But he was at least a yogi.
—A Librarian! How symbolic!
—Well. He works for the Universe, “which others call the Library.”

The Tiers who were tapping with one other were gossipers as usual. The eleven students had already received either their acceptance note or an invitation note. Most of the students did not tap each other about the announcement. They had already been tired of constantly being tapped by other Tiers, so they pretty much closed down their communication. And they had been aware that it did not matter who would be the facilitator.

(A facilitator is a facilitator. He is not a teacher or a consultant.)

Some thought. They were aware that the purpose of the course was to find the voice of the trees beyond the noise of the human mind. That could be achieved only through the collaboration of the Students themselves and several Tiers who would support the class from outside. They also knew that the Students themselves, most likely the senior Tiers, would lead the exercise.

The morning came as usual to Jed. And with a memory. The memory of Baki+T in his life.

Knowing his upbringing, some of his friends thought that he decided to become a librarian – the opposite end of the spectrum of money making – as a form of rebellion against his father. Neil was a retired financial broker and a private investor co-owning a private jet with his millionaire
friends.

When Jed was four years old, his father got a position at a leading investment bank in San Francisco, and the family moved from Fresno to the City. At that time, Neil was getting along well with his wife, Sophie, his high-school sweetheart. She was a beautiful and quiet housewife who, during Neil’s MBA program, financially supported him working as a receptionist at a telecommunications company while raising Jed. She had happily switched to full-time house-keeping after Neil found a stable job, and read books all day long. Moving to San Francisco was a positive change for the family. In all aspects, San Francisco was a nice city to live in even for Jed’s mother, who just kept saying (and this is what bugged her husband the most) “I am happy as long as there is a library nearby and I’m healthy enough to walk there.” His father was especially excited with the change, which included a nice view of Alcatraz Island from his office in addition to the hefty income. Initially it was a nice change of mood for him, leaving the hectic office each evening to see his wife, whose life was so distant from the hard reality of world outside. But as Neil became more involved in his demanding job, and the gap between his interest in the stock market and Sophie’s absorption in the history of the Balkans or short stories by authors from around the world grew larger, relations between the two became aggravated. It was at this time that Neil got a late night call from the police telling him his girl-friend Tina had slit her wrists in the bathtub. Sophie left the house for a small apartment with Jed, and Anna Karenina stuffed in her bag. When Tina, a young clerk at the bank where Neil was working, was crying and screaming, Sophie was calmly reading where Anna Karenina convinced her sister-in-law to keep her marriage intact despite her husband’s infidelity. Neil soon broke up with the woman who left the bank shortly after that, but his parents’
separation lasted until Jed entered college. It had left a big scar, which Jed himself didn’t recognize for a long time.

While Jed was growing up, he occasionally heard about Baki+T, a self-governed, unincorporated territory of the U.S., located north of San Francisco near Cotati. There was a brief description of Baki+T in textbooks on the history of California - “an area which escaped many attempts at consolidation with the state of California”.

All in all, Baki+T was a synonym for the environmental and anti-development movement in Jed’s understanding like any other American, if they knew of the existence of the country at all. The area also had a negative image, its people having a reputation for being difficult.

In the fifth grade when he was learning California history, his teacher gave the class a group assignment. She divided the students into five groups; four out of which were assigned to study Northern and Southern California history with a focus on the people and the economy. They had to find out what the historical contributions were of ethnic groups, as well as the main industries in each area. Jed’s group was assigned to study Fresno county, where they lived, or another county of their choice. Jed suggested to the rest of the group members that they study the area of Baki+T. He was surprised that two out of the five students did not even know of the existence of the area. The teacher was reticent about his suggestion saying that “It’s an area people do not bother to even think about.” But he was persistent and found out that there was an old lady in Fresno who was born in Baki+T and spoke its language. He suggested to two other students that they visit and interview the old woman, but that morning, both of them became gravely ill. He decided to go on his own with his mother driving. When they approached the address, his mother started to shiver and told him that she did not feel good about Jed visiting the...
old lady. By that time, they were in front of her house. The front yard was neatly trimmed and flowers were all in bloom like a picture in a fairy tale. Its innocent air seemed almost detached from reality.

“It’s a nice house.” Jed said,

“Yes it’s nice, I suppose.” his mother replied. Jed asked her how much she did not want to enter that house. She said if he does not feel bad about going in there, it may be a sign that nothing is wrong.

“I don’t want to take a good opportunity from you just because I feel cold.” She said. It was the end of May. “In fact, now I feel a bit better having said that.”

So they got out of the car and approached the front door. In the end they were warmly welcomed by an old lady who acted as if she had known they were coming. First, she showed them her backyard which was arranged neatly.

“You surely have a green thumb,” Jed’s mother said with admiration, “I can’t even remember how many plants I’ve killed.”

The lady smiled hearing that.

Later she brought out some cookies saying, “I baked these cookies for you hoping you like them.” They were made of bean flour and natural sugar extracted from exotic flowers. They were not that sweet, but extraordinarily delicious. They probably stayed at the house about an hour, but strangely, Jed and his mother remembered hardly any of the conversation. He remembered that he asked probably about a half dozen questions. He also remembered that the old lady (whose name they also forgot) said she did not have anything to write with at her house when Jed asked for a pencil.

“But don’t you ever write things down?” Jed’s mother asked with surprise. The old lady just answered, “We don’t have the habit of writing things down.”

“Then what do you do when you want to remember someone’s phone number?”
The old lady said she had two daughters and a son who lived in various places in the U.S.

“If I really want to call them, I’ll remember the number. If they really want talk to me, they’ll call. In fact, one of them hasn’t. So I guess she doesn’t want me talk to me.” She giggled.

After they got back home, they realized that they did not remember anything else about the responses she had given Jed. It was a strange feeling, because he never doubted that he could remember all of the responses despite the fact that he did not write them down.

“I should have gone back to the car and got a pen,” he said half crying. He was so sure that he wouldn’t forget anything the old lady said while he was listening that he hadn’t even thought of going back to the car to get a ballpoint pen. In the end, Jed’s attempt to study Baki+T did not pan out, and the group ended up giving a presentation on Fresno County.

It was when Jed was going to high-school that he heard his father talking about Baki+T. As an experiment, his father and mother started to spend time together at a ranch in Mendocino every other weekend to see if that would help their marriage. Most of the time, Jed was left behind with Sean, who was Neil’s cook as well as Jed’s tennis opponent.

“He said your mother was the most sophisticated and intelligent woman in the end.” Sean had passed along to Jed what Neil had said about his wife.

One weekend they took Jed along with them. When they were passing a place where they could get a glance of the border of Baki+T, Neil started to talk about an analyst in another investment bank he had worked with.

“At Cross Mayer (that was a large investment firm even Jed as a high school student had heard of), there is an analyst who came from Baki+T. Naturally, his field is green industries. Now green is hot, but when he
was hired as an analyst, I don’t know how long ago it was, but no one would have cared what green was then.”

“Do you invest in any company in the green industry?” Jed asked wondering if his father would be the type to do so. He often felt that he did not know anything about his father, despite the fact that he always talked about his business. Or more precisely, he did not talk about anything else. And probably, because he did not have anything else in his life but work, he decided to go back to his wife who seemed to have something despite spending all day at home. Once Jed was looking for a book like, “How to Play a Good Son for an Investor Father” only to find that there is no such book. So he rummaged through several Dummy series, investors psychology and Wired magazine and combined all of them. He also made a habit of looking through HighEnd Teen magazine at the bookstore and tried to adopt the mindset of a successful investor. He could play the role without much effort, because he only saw his father once a month at most.

“That is what I was going to say,” the father said about Jed’s question about investment in the green industry.

“My friend Todd called me a couple months ago and was talking about Walter. Yes that was his name, the analyst from Baki+T. ‘If you are thinking of investing in green, I can refer you to an interesting guy. I’ve been investing according to his analysis and so far so good.’ How long? I asked. He first couldn’t remember how long he had been using Walter’s data. It took a long time for him to remember, but it turned out that he had been investing in green for about ten years. Ten years! For ten years, Walter did not make any major errors in his forecast. If you invest in an industry, you have to know that analysts aren’t always reliable. Ten years is damn good. I asked Todd what companies he had been investing in for example. ‘I don’t remember.’ He said. ‘What do you mean you don’t remember? You
always list up at least a dozen for me!’ I yelled. He still said, ‘I don’t remember. Or I don’t care.’ He said.”

“Is he a sorcerer or what?” Sophie asked from the back seat of their Jaguar placing her chin on her arms placed on Neil’s shoulder. Jed felt that his mother showed her interest not in his father’s talk but in the guy named Walter. Jed had been aware that his mother apparently listened to only twenty percent of his father’s incessant talk about the business. His father did not seem to notice or or else he didn’t care.

“Could indeed be.” His voice sounded murky. “When I think about how he suddenly appeared.” Jed looked at his father’s face which looked at the street ahead of them having noticed that the pace of his talk slowed down like a tape player with a low battery.

“Late at night, after I had a drink with one of my staff at Union Square, I could not find my damn car in the parking lot. Then a tall guy walked toward me. He seemed to be looking for his car as well. ‘Can’t find your car either?’ he asked me. It was Walter. He asked what model of car I drove and I answered a Jaguar and he said his car was less noticeable because it was a tiny plug-in vehicle. That was the first time I heard there was such a thing. Walter said, ‘In ten years, companies developing hybrids or plug-ins will be good candidates for investment,’ he said. ‘Are you saying that knowing that I’m a private investor?’ I asked him. ‘Of course not, are you?’ he answered looking into my eyes, but I felt that somewhere in my mind he had known that.”

Neil stopped and gasped, panting for air.

“Neil, are you OK?” Sophie asked with a concerned look. Jed saw his father’s lips turn as gray as the pavement. He drove off at an exit in Santa Rosa and vomited on the side of the road.

“I wonder if the hamburger he ate for lunch was bad.” Sophie said,
looking back at Jed while tenderly rubbing Nick’s back. Jed was happy to realize that he actually felt somewhat sympathetic about his father’s condition. He also realized that it was the first time he saw his mother being kind to his father for a long time. He saw the gray hair on his father’s temples and his dry skin. He looked helpless. After Neil let everything out, Sophie sat on the driver’s seat and drove the car to a nearby grocer to let Neil go to the bathroom. While waiting for him, Jed suddenly recalled that he and his mother visited an old woman from Baki+T. He asked his mother if she remembered their experience in Fresno.

“Now I remember you suddenly got sick too, when we approached the house of the old lady from Baki+T,” Jed said. “Remember? Britney and Kurt also suddenly became sick that morning.”

“Which restaurant did you say it was?” Sophie asked while petting a stray cat curling into her legs. Jed saw his mother looking back at him squinting in the sunshine. Something was not clicking in her head. Nothing like this had ever happened to her before. She had always been so intellectually attentive.

“No. it wasn’t a restaurant. We went to the house of an old lady from Baki+T.” Jed said slowly feeling sick to his stomach.

“Oh, yes, that’s what you said...,” Sophie put her sunglasses back on and repeated the brief memory Jed had said in an absent-minded sort of way.

“Mom,” Jed called his mother to get her attention. He wished she were not wearing sunglasses because he couldn’t see her eyes.

“When dad became sick on highway, do you remember he was talking about an analyst from Baki+T? Do you remember you asked if he was a sorcerer?” Jed saw through her sunglasses that Sophie looked into his eyes while answering. He felt that she was trying to break through something.
“You know, most of what Neil says goes in one ear and out the other.” Sophie said with a feeble smile pointing to her ears and making a sound like a bullet, “like a bullet going through a helmet. Or it’s even worse. My helmet is so hard that it repels the bullet.” She laughed at her own words. Then the next moment she showed a surprised look on her face as she watched her son tapping his chest as if gasping for air.

“Pen, pen…” she heard her son murmuring. “Shit! Where is my pen?” Jed was tapping his chest pocket looking for a ballpoint pen.

“It was Will, no…, but it started with W… Walter! Walter from Cross Watson! Mom! Don’t ask me why. Just try to remember that name. Walter from Cross Watson. OK?” He ran into a nearby bookstore and grabbed a pen and a business card from the cashier’s counter and wrote down Walter of Cross Watson on it.

“Shit! Who was this guy? Why am I writing this?” Jed found himself saying out loud as several surprised shoppers stared in his direction.

“That’s right. It was Baki+T! He was from Baki+T.” With a trembling hand, he tried to write ‘Baki+T’ next to Walter’s name on the backside of the card. At the moment he wrote the letter, “B” he started to feel that the pen was as heavy as lead. He resisted that force with all his might and wrote down the whole word which ended up like letters on a contorted mirror. Then he looked back over his shoulder feeling that he was being watched.

“Are you trying to write something down about Baki+T?” The calm voice was in stark contrast to Jed’s frantic mindset. Jed looked up at the direction of the voice. A middle aged Asian man with tanned skin was looking at the card in Jed’s hand.

“There’s no use. Don’t even try. When you have to remember, you’ll remember.” He said with a smile in his face.
Jed found himself looking at the guy as resistance to his power of memory slipping away began to fade.

“Do you want me to explain why Baki+T has been able to keep its autonomy? In the state of California? Where people have much more power than them, at least economically?”

The Asian looking guy kept talking while walking away from the bookstore.

“It’s because Baki+T is a language only a few people can master! Other times, people completely forget about it!”

That incident had slipped out of Jed’s mind even on the day when the first message arrived requesting that he act as facilitator for the Baki+T summer course. It took three messengers to convince Jed that the request was a serious one.

“Professor! Professor!”

Jed kept walking up Van Ness street toward the Civic Center station when an Afro-American man was yelling.

“Professor! Professor!”

Jed saw the dark skinned man crossing the street from the other side dodging a flock of cars. His nimble movement showed that he was not intoxicated, but Jed decided not to wait for the man when he came close and saw how filthy his clothes were.

“Professor, professor!”

He was still calling out while walking after him. Jed sped up, but he slowed down when he heard the man say,

“I said professor, because I cannot yell at you, ‘Hey, librarian’, man!”

While Jed kept walking without looking back, the apparently homeless man kept yelling such sentences as

“The San Francisco library finally contains all the books in the world!”
“The general theory of the library was discovered three hundred years ago!”

“After all those centuries, I, an eternal traveler, found the same volumes are repeated in the same disorder!”

Jed stopped and looked back at him, saying, “OK. So you read Borges. Now, what do you want?” He found that the man who, from a distance he thought was an Afro-American also had a feature of a Middle Eastern. At the moment, when he noticed that, the guy said,

“Yes, I speak the Samoyed-Lithuanian dialect of Guarani. No, I’m kidding”.

His white teeth gave him a healthy look, but Jed decided to keep walking again with solid determination not to giving away even a penny to this filthy man.

“Man, I just don’t know how to talk, man… If I did, I wouldn’t have ended up being like this.” Jed looked back at the man who sagged like a deflated beach ball. “But listen to this. Baki+T wants you to be a facilitator for their intensive language course this summer.”

Jed stopped. He saw the guy behind him had already stopped. “My name is Pias,” he said.

“Are you from there, that region, Pias?” Jed asked pointing to the north beyond the Golden Gate bridge. Pias kept staring at him for awhile and said abruptly, “Oh, that’ right. I have to actually SAY it loud. No sir. I don’t, but I do speak the language.”

“Then why don’t you become the instructor, not me.” At that moment, Jed noticed that Pias had used the word, “facilitator,” not “instructor.” That means it didn’t matter if Jed did not speak the language.

“Man! I’m schizophrenic! I can’t organize a thing! But you can.” Jed knew from several books that schizophrenic patients cannot be objective.
Pias also seemed to have a humor which is rare among schizophrenic patients. Jed looked at Pias who was singing a lyric to himself, “Oh, yeah... we have good days and bad days...”

Jed was feeling the whole encounter with this unknown homeless man was somewhat heart-warming despite the odd circumstances. He couldn’t explain why. He felt that the experience that morning somehow fit in like the right piece being placed in a jigsaw puzzle. However, at the same time, he felt that he needed to go through several stages to confirm that indeed he was at the right place. In a light manner, he told Pias who was still singing in a low voice.

“I got the message, Pias. Tell them to send somebody wearing cleaner clothes. Neat clothes. Like a business suit. That is how this century and this area of the world work. They often think that trust comes from appearance. I know this sounds superficial, but I don’t speak Baki+T. I can’t tell if it’s authentic. I know they can’t write a letter to me. But tell them to send somebody a little more decent.”

Jed did not expect a second messenger to appear. His life was overtaken with other priorities; picking up his three year old son at the day-care and preparing for a presentation to the City council about the collection of books in the new wing. However, he became interested again in Baki+T. One evening, he searched the library catalog to locate a series of tapes, which had not been digitized. He took the tapes out of the library catalogue and suddenly remembered that his old Sony Walkman was sleeping at the back of the drawer of his desk. He listened to the tapes on the Muni bus and found that the language only sounded like wind to his ears. The recordings were all short and the first five were in male voice followed by three short recordings of a female voice. He became interested in how they exhaled...
and inhaled while making the wind-like sound and listened to the rest of the tape. When he got off the bus, he saw the setting sun staining the sky over the west end of the city an almost transparent orange. A few people stopped and looked in silence. He joined the small crowd until the sun disappeared behind the roofs of the houses on the coast. When he went home, his boy, Jason, wanted to play with the Sony Walkman, so he had his son listen the tape. After changing his clothes and going back to the living room, he saw Jason sitting in the middle of the room giggling while listening to the tape. He was making a tree-like sound himself.

“What is it?”

Jed’s wife, Midori, walked up behind Jed and wrapped her arms around his waist. Jed suddenly recalled that he had felt that he had found another piece of the puzzle when a homeless Baki+Tier talked to him about the request from the country. He also realized that he would never feel things fit so completely in any other part of his life, including his marriage. He thought to himself that it didn’t matter.

“It’s a tape of the language called Baki+T.” He said while gently kissing his wife’s forehead. “It sounds exactly like that. Like wind...”

At that moment, he felt that he needed something else other than books and his family.

*****

About three blocks from L’Ardoise, a fine French restaurant, where local people gathered, people walking on Fourteenth Street often stopped in front of one of the houses to admire the esthetic sense of its owner; a red Prius, a red front door and a large abstract painting by Takeo Yamaguchi in which red was a dominant color in the living room seen through the window. That
was the house where Walter Lake, a seasoned analyst at Cross Mayer, lived by himself when his partner, Ken, was not spending time with him. Walter had an air of being ageless. Though in his early forties, he still looked like a man in his early thirties. He was known among his colleagues for his individual taste, both in work style and in fashion. He was the first to adopt the firm’s new work-from-home policy, and came to the office only on Wednesdays to attend several meetings organized like a road show, where companies seeking investment would give presentations about their business strategy and financial results. With the ability of Baki+T, he already knew the contents of presentations, (such as what was the newest technology they were developing, what was the challenge, management personalities and overall financial statement), but it was useful to find out what arises in the presenter’s mind when answering Walter’s questions. The presenters were often impressed with his knowledge of the industry.

“I know you wanted to acquire a manufacturer in the US to fulfill the ‘Made in USA’ requirements to be eligible to receive the stimulus package. But why company A, furnace manufacturer, over B, robot manufacturer?” He would ask to a representative of a large company in Germany which offers a turnkey solution to solar panel manufacturers.

“In fact, you had a meeting with the Chief Operating Officer of company B also, right? Why did it fall through?”

“How did you know?” the general manager of the Investor Relations would ask with concern about how such sensitive information was leaked. Then Walter would say,

“Actually, I didn’t. Sorry. I tricked you.” The Investor Relation person would burst out laughing looking at a slender analyst wearing a stylish glasses. “But when I think that the COO of company B had been just hired around that time to find a good buyer of the department, then it would
have been natural that he would meet you.” He would say.

“He knows every detail of the industry.” The person would say to the female manager of the brokerage which arranged the meeting as the limousine sped on to another investment firm in San Francisco.

“Oh, Walter Lake is the most seasoned analyst in Cross Mayer. In fact, he could actually be a portfolio manager. But he once told me he preferred to work as an analyst.”

“He sure has a brain. He would make five times as much as a portfolio manager.”

It was Saturday and he was watering the petunias in his small backyard when Kip Tarazi tapped into his head. Walter had followed what Jed had been going through to be appointed as facilitator for the summer course. He had been acquainted with Kip, an officer of the Ministry of Education, for a long time since they were classmates in high school in Baki+T, in which a city, county, federal are all fall in one country.

“So I appeared in this expensive tailored suit at the front door of Jed’s apartment. Kip tapped with a chuckle. This was something Walter had not been aware of. Hardly any Tiers paid attention.

-It really didn’t matter for Jed either what suit you were wearing, right? Walter tapped back.

-Of course not. The whole thing was a joke. I don’t know who in the department did it, but someone manipulated the mind of a guy at Wilkes Bashford, you know this high end tailor in Union Square, and had him post their $4,899 suits on eBay. I knocked the price down to $47.89. The immigration officer at the U.S. border couldn’t believe I was really born and raised in Baki+T.

In the two men’s heads, the scene of the small customs office of the
US and Cotati, a town in Northern California, appeared. In the scene, an officer with disbelief was taking a second look at Kip’s passport. Kip smiled back at the customs officer. It was his first trip out of the country.

“So what do you think?” he was asking, reading the officer’s mind and showing off his brand-new suit which did not quite fit him.

“I don’t know.” The officer answered, “I’d guess a man coming out of Baki+T wearing a business suit like that is usually an American.”

“Folks in Baki+T usually look like they’re wearing rags, that’s what you want to say?”

“No. I wouldn’t say ‘rags.’ Maybe distinctive?” The officer sent from the California side said.

Kip drove his converted plug-in vehicle to San Francisco as if he had done it millions of times without looking at a map even once. He spent about two hours at Jed’s apartment when his son and wife were away at a birthday party for one of Jason’s friends. The family cat attentively listened to their conversation. Kip explained the purpose of the intensive summer course in Baki+T, a brief history of past intensive courses, the expectations of the course, and the role of facilitator.

All these practical details made Jed almost forget how bizarre the whole request was. Because of Kip’s air of importance (he certainly had the attitude of an officer from the Ministry of Education despite the fact that his expensive suit and his large frame made him look more like a mafia boss than one in government service), after an hour had passed, although still feeling a bit shaky, Jed found himself becoming used to the mode of communication. Kip always answered Jed’s questions before he said them out loud. So most of the time, it was Kip who was talking. This explained why Kip wanted to have the conversation in Jed’s apartment when no one was around. When the meeting finished, he made sure to tell Kip that he
still needed reassurance.

“So let me summarize what you said. Allow me to say it out loud. We human beings - I’m sorry I’m not saying that you aren’t human - we have a tendency to bring our thoughts together by saying things out loud.” Kip nodded saying “Remember, we do that too.”

“Baki+T is a language used by trees. When I think of it, actually, I feel that I have heard of it somewhere. And I know that some people believe that they speak the language.” Jed had noticed that there was a second delay in Kip’s nodding. That delay made Jed correct, he had said. “Or, some people do use Baki+T language for communication. Communication between humans and trees. And you say an intensive course for novice learners occurred in the past. In 1905, was it?”

“We call it a convention rather than intensive course. There may have been more between then and now, but that was the biggest one, which occurred in the same year as…”

“The first Esperanto convention,” Jed took over. “Esperanto was invented by a Jewish man in Poland hoping that he could create a language which would lead to world peace.”

“Baki+T was not artificially invented like that, but no-one knows the origin of the language.”

“Obviously not,” Jed said. Kip read that Jed’s mind went through several theories about the origins of the language which he had read. He could have recited those theories to Kip to show how well-read he was, but obviously Jed’s mind was elsewhere.

“So you are going to have this summer intensive course almost a hundred years after the last course was held. You don’t know how many times this kind of class was held before that, because there is no record.”

“And no one knows what the origin of Baki+T is for sure.” Kip added
and Jed nodded to that.

"You’d like to have a non Baki+T speaker as a facilitator like the first class. You told me there was no reason other than that it’s a precedent. Will you repeat that?"

Kip nodded and started the explanation. That was one of the questions he assumed would be asked by Jed, so he had already thought it all out in his head.

"Human minds are really really complicated. We have so many fixed ideas, grudges against certain people, social assumptions, unconscious discrimination. We deal with people constantly, but imagine if you could read all those people’s minds. Would you really want to know what’s going on inside them?"

"Honestly, I don’t think I could live a normal life anymore if I could really tell what other people thought about me."

"Exactly. We’re human beings. When we talk to people, even our friends, we are often thinking about something we don’t want others to know."

"Of course! And you said it’s difficult for a person who can read all the participants minds to facilitate the class, because…,"

"Because you know what they are thinking. Some students think of you favorably while others think what a nerd you are."

"Or how two-faced I am."

"Exactly." Kip laughed and nodded. He knew that Jed would not be bothered by that.

"Or as a failed scholar, how much effort I make to sound erudite." Jed continued being slightly aware that he was testing Kip.

"That, I’m not sure. We don’t choose a person of vanity. We know you don’t act following vanity. Or if you do, we know you are ashamed of it in the next instant."
Kip read that Jed’s mind was genuinely flattered.

"Is there a committee of some sort working on the Intensive Summer course?" Jed asked out loud. Kip read that his real question was who selected him as a facilitator. Who did Kip mean by "we?"

"The trees selected you." Kip said with a clear voice looking Jed in the eyes. He read that his mind was flattered even more. And then in the next moment, he was surprised that after a few hours of talking with an unknown man, he was convinced about trees enough to be flattered.

"There may have been other people who trees considered as candidates. There were rumors floating around out there. A guy in India, a monk in Tibet, an insurance agent in China, or a mechanic in Utah... but that could simply be gossip. Gossip... that is another reason why we –sorry– trees chose a non-Tier. Too much gossip among Tiers. That’s one of the weaknesses of Baki+T."

Jed did not care much about who else were candidates. Kip wondered if Jed had inherited his non-competitive character from his mother. And then, he found that Jed’s mind was preoccupied with trying to recall books he had read about the brain-washing methods of a cult group. None of the conditions written in the book applied here; such as sleep deprivation, group pressure, isolated environment or no chance to talk about their confusion.

-Let’s assume that there is a tree language, Jed was thinking. -Then how...?

"You are wondering how trees thoughts are known to us."

Kip said taking off his jacket and tie. He now looked more like a high school teacher than a mafia boss.

"It’s like a regular announcement. You heard from Midori-san, your Japanese wife, that Jason’s new teacher will be Heidi. You imagined various
things upon hearing her background. More than 15 years in pre-school education. Being on the board of the teachers association. When you met Heidi, you were slightly disappointed knowing that she was a middle aged over weight woman. But nonetheless over a time, you developed a general trust in her. She is a responsible and conscientious teacher familiar with how children learn at that age.” Kip explained while worrying too much detail may scare Jed, but Jed found it amusing.

“I guess in your case, the moment you heard my name, you had the correct image of me, though.”

“Correct image... I’m not sure about that. Each of us has our own perception. Your image is widely different among us even though we sure read your mind.”

“What’s your perception of me? That question was raised in Jed’s mind, he didn’t ask it out loud because the next moment, he thought it didn’t matter. He had his own perception about himself and he himself wasn’t sure if that was the right perception. However, he at least knew that he wasn’t sure about it.

“It was the monk who led the first class.” Kip said abruptly. Jed raised his head with curiosity. Kip recalled that the monk went out of his mind a few years after the class and thought it was too early for him to tell that to Jed. He will, in fact, forget all about having lead the class at the Baki+T intensive course.

“He must have trained himself to reach the stage not to be bothered by his mind being constantly read.” Jed said.

“That was the point I was going to make.” Kip followed.

“My wife often complains that I analyze everything too much. Especially her mind. Probably that’s true. ‘You think too much.’ That is also true.”

“You are always thinking of what is human happiness, but if thinking
about it too much destroys the opportunity to enjoy life, then what’s the point of thinking about happiness?’”

Kip quoted what Midori had said to Jed. He laughed uncomfortably at Kip’s words, saying, “That’s right.”

“I’m sorry that I made you feel uncomfortable by quoting your private conversation.” Kip apologized.

“That’s OK. I know you’re trying to make a point that you do read human minds.” Jed continued.

“You didn’t use this allegory in your explanation, but it seems that the network created by ‘trees’ (he made quote mark by raising his index fingers) is like a social network on the internet. We actually don’t know each other, but we feel that we do. And probably we do, because we are dealing with actual human beings who are alive and breathing.” Jed saw Kip nodding and then slightly raised his chin as if to ask what it is, before he said, “But I have this question. Why can it be a language if it doesn’t have any letters for a record or even hardly any sound.” In the two men’s heads, the sound of the breeze gently stroking the trees could be heard. It made sense to one of them, but not the other.

“This language seems to communicate things with high precision at least from my experience of spending two hours with you.” Then Jed made a deliberate effort to come up with a six-digit random figure in his mind.

“Don’t go there,” Kip softly warned Jed. “We aren’t circus acts. Trees think too big to worry about little things.” Jed ignored Kip’s warning and made another effort to visualize the figure he had thought. He visualized a random series of numbers 846732 which looked like a tattooed number on human skin.

Kip sighed and spoke fast. “I don’t want to do a test-test. But OK. That was eight, four, six, seven, three. I can’t read the last one.”
“It could be because I forgot myself.” The two men laughed out loud together.

“I’m not a linguist, but maybe you can think of it this way, since you used the metaphor of a computer. It’s like a programming language, like C++ or Java. People can use a computer without knowing either of those.”

“That doesn’t explain why Baki+T has no letters or sound and yet can still be a legitimate language.” Kip already knew that he would say it even before reaching to the end of his statement.

“OK. This isn’t what I think. This is beyond my knowledge. I mean… the knowledge residing in me.” Kip closed his eyes moving his lips and opened his eyes again before Jed started to feel suspicious.

“Kristeva…, that is how you pronounce it?”

“Yes, Julia Kristeva, Bulgarian-French philosopher. How about her?”

“Oh boy, she is a beauty… But anyway, she used this theory called Chora, was it?”

“I read several books by Kristeva, the most representative ones. And I know that in one book, she wrote about Chora.”

“That was in Revolution in Poetic Language” Kip recited closing his eyes as if he was reading from an imaginary wall in his memory. His slightly opened eyes made Jed shiver. Kip flipped open his eyes, saying, “Sorry…”

“The only thing I know about Chora is,” Jed interrupted, “that it is a chaotic stage in a baby’s mind before it learns how to speak. Oh… you say that stage is still a language even though it does not yet have a form of speech or sound. OK.” Jed nodded to himself.

Kip was sweating in the low-quality shirt he had been wearing under the expensive suit. Before he left Baki+T to convince Jed to be a facilitator he had a strategic discussion with other Tiers who were involved in administration of the intensive summer course. It was a kind of committee
though no one gave it a formal name. They all expected that Kip had to
go through some unforeseeable questions and promised support when it was
necessary. Kip had closed his communication with Tiers until that point,
but he had opened the path again to cope with the metaphysical questions
Jed cast upon him. He had received the answer about Kristeva from a Baki+T
student in Scandinavia who was planning to attend the intensive course.
Her name was Mia. She had locked herself inside her father’s condominium
for about seven years, never going out. She was considered a brilliant
philosopher in a virtual world both in Baki+T and her social networking
on the internet. Now Kip felt tapping from another student in Japan named
Kotoba. He continued his answer by communicating Kotoba’s suggestion.

“Also, you often experience that matters people leave unsaid dominate
communication.”

“What do you mean by that?” Jed asked despite the fact that he sensed
the meaning. “You mean like let’s say… when people apologize superficially,
that infuriates the other? That kind of thing?”

Kip continued what Kotoba was pouring into his head, “That’s one thing.
But let’s say… you speak Spanish, so you must have experienced this once
in a while… Yes, you used to communicate with your mother in Spanish
when you were both learning it. When you are communicating using two mixed
languages you often forget which language you used.”

“OK. I got it. There is unsaid communication, inarticulate
communication, but you say it is still based on language.”

Kip nodded. He was relieved to know that Jed was interested, although still
with strong suspicion. Kip found that Jed’s intellectuality saw the whole
concept of Baki+T interesting. But that very intellectuality mocked that
he was going to believe such ridiculousness. His intellect stopped him
being so gullible.
“Would you like to talk to another Tier? Would that help?”

Kip asked and instantly saw the vacillation in Jed’s mind. He was worried about brain-washing, but somewhere in his mind, he was feeling again that the right piece of the puzzle had been found. He just could not articulate what made him so interested other than intellectual curiosity. It was as if opening a new book, which entices the librarian in him.

“Here is the address of another person you may want to meet. His name is Walter Lake. You can meet him anytime you want.”

-Man, you had to go through a lot.

Walter moved from the garden to his living room while listening to Kip’s talk in Baki+T.

-I just wanted to warn you about what you may have to go through. Kip tapped back and stopped the communication seeing in his mind that Jed had parked his car on the street and started to walk toward Walter’s house. Walter did not open the front door to welcome Jed, who was wondering if Walter had known that he was coming and how he would react to that. Knowing that, Walter had to make Jed aware that what Baki+T does is way beyond that sort of thing. In the intensive course, Jed would have the role of leading students so that they would go beyond reading people’s minds and finally reach the message of trees. Jed was not sure how a non-Tier could do that. The only thing he knew was that the trees would take care of the rest.

Walter did not believe that trees were constantly sending messages. Walter, like many other Tiers, had his own ritual of meditating early in the morning, followed by deep breathing throughout the day to remind himself to check if there were any messages from the trees. As it became natural for him to open his mind to trees over a period of time, he became
aware that it was more important for him to fulfill his role when the occasional messages were sent to him rather than attempting to read the trees’ messages every moment. He had been aware that there were other Tiers who were constantly tapping with each other. Often minute by minute. And he did not disagree that it worked for them. He knew that trees themselves encourage each other’s advice, but constant tapping was a misinterpretation of the trees’ message. He knew that like one of his two cats, which silently sat next to him and nudged his elbow when it became hungry, trees messages were so subtle that one would not notice unless one deeply cared about them. As one of a few Tiers who were working in the financial sector, he was aware that dealing with his own greed was enough of a burden. He didn’t want any other Tiers interfering with his judgment which, in his mind, should come directly from the trees. Also, his outbound tapping was completely capped so that his decisions or judgments did not influence the market in a drastic manner. Being able to communicate in Baki+T or being able to read the trees’ minds does not mean one becomes free from greed or custom in a materialistic society. So his connection with other Tiers was naturally less frequent than others. However, it did not mean that he took light of other Tiers tapping. He also could detect how serious other Tiers requests were. And when he received tapping from Kip, he had been aware this was one of the few occasions that he had a clear role to play. He knew that he should not mess up this meeting with Jed, who the trees had selected as a facilitator. Walter kept sitting in his living room with his eyes closed. Apprehension… that’s what Walter was reading in Jed’s mind.

(Why am I doing this?) Jed was wondering.

After Kip had left, with beads of sweat collecting on his fat body, despite doubts and confusion, Jed’s mind was filled with a kind of peace he had
not felt for a long time. It puzzled him.

(How could I be so comfortable with people who can read my mind?) He wondered. He knew it was not Kip who gave him that feeling. It was something hovering behind Kip which gave him that feeling.

He sifted through his memory to find a time in his life when he had had such feelings before, and reached into his childhood. Bedtime when his father had read Peter Rabbit to him. The time when he had seen his parents looking at a sunset holding each others’ hands. The time when he came home from school to find the aunt he adored sitting in the living room. The time when he looked forward to going to a new pool which opened at the corner. He recalled the discussion about Chora, a chaotic mix of perceptions, feelings and needs of an infant. He thought of re-reading the article by Kristeva, but decided not to, thinking that it is that chaotic mind of an infant that he would like to re-experience.

(There was a time when I was not worried about anything.) He thought of his life. Then Jason’s life. In his mind, he walked to the room in which Jason was sleeping. He saw his wife who had fallen asleep next to him while reading a book to him. Jed suddenly recalled the moment when Jed was born. That was without a doubt the best day he had ever had in his life. That was a time when everything looked different. But soon that feeling subsided and had been replaced by day-to-day mundane things.

“There was a time…” he said out loud, feeling that someone was listening to him. “I believed that I could change the world.”

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It seemed to Mia that Walter had left this tapping venue open to some Tiers like Kip and herself while he was talking with Jed. She felt the presence
of a few Students and some other people whom he trusted, but could not
tell exactly who they were. It was like participating in a teleconference
by punching in a conference code on the phone without other parties not
talking out loud. She sensed someone who was also given the secret code
was present on the other end of the line.

-Kotoba, are you there?
She thought of raising her mind-voice, but didn’t do so sensing that Walter
did not like the supporters behind him tapping to each other. She had been
aware that Walter was more particular than Kip or other Baki+Tiers about
silence and privacy.

Mia also knew that Walter wanted her to be there to help him when Jed
asked metaphysical questions like he did to Kip. And she appreciated
Walter’s thoughtfulness to respect her expertise. In the real world, she
was considered a mere loser.

(Or could it be the trees?) She wondered.
Thinking about physically traveling to San Francisco, then to Baki+T for
the summer course made her feel completely drained. But helping others,
especially by using her knowledge of philosophy, mitigated her sense of
helplessness. About ten days were left until the departure date printed
on the British Airways ticket in the top drawer of her desk. She felt so
overwhelmed. She had not left her father’s small condominium for seven
years. Thinking of going out there amongst those crowds of people made
her feel like she wanted to die.

(And being on an airplane!)
That was the scary part. She wished she could just wake up one morning
and find herself in Baki+T. She would do her best to cope by concentrating
on the daily assignments they were giving her, like the one today.

“Hello, Jed. I’m Walter. Walter Lake.”
Mia heard Walter’s voice as if it were generated right in her room. She thought of the distance from her place in Scandinavia to his house in San Francisco. A distance of fifteen hours by plane! Suddenly she gained some courage. (It really doesn’t matter where I am physically) she thought.

(I’ll follow the invisible string. I’ll make myself detached from whatever is happening in front of me –visible things–, as I always have.) As if being pulled by a magnet from Baki+T, she thought. Right at that moment, she was pleased and flattered by the fact that she was part of this important process. To convince a non-Tier that Baki+T, the tree language, really existed, and have him work as a facilitator. She didn’t know what the facilitator’s role exactly was, but it didn’t matter. All she had to do was wait. Wait for Walter’s tap asking her for help.

She looked out of the window of her room toward the apartment she had always gazed at through a pair of binoculars. For a moment, she imagined a conversation being held in that room.

“Nice house.” Jed complemented and Walter responded with gratitude. He offered some refreshment, naming a few brands of tea. Jed chose huckleberry and said, “You know that I don’t drink coffee.”

“In fact, yes, I do.” Walter responded pouring water into the kettle.

“Then you know what I’ve been thinking, too.”

“Yes and no.” Walter responded. Jed noticed that the yellow accent on the frames of Walter’s glasses matched the cream color of the T-shirt he was wearing. At the very same moment, he sensed that Walter noticed this. He also sensed that the man in front of him who had just turned off the burner was suppressing feelings of attraction toward him. It was a temptation that Jed himself often felt toward women, but that day, he vividly felt that in the other.

“So...” Walter looked at Jed in a determined manner, crossing his arms
as if to hold himself back from the young man in front of him, and continued,

"You may want to explain it anyway. I know that the business card with
my name was a big factor in your coming here."

"The business card. Oh, yes! I forgot about that." Jed said.

After Kip had left, Jed’s mind vacillated between skepticism, curiosity
and expectation. Any way he sliced it, the whole thing was absurd. He
thought of telling his wife about what was going on, but in the end, he
didn’t. He just didn’t know where to start.

Then on the following weekend when he was putting together some old clothes
to give away, he found a business card from a bookstore in Petaluma in
a pair of jeans he hadn’t worn since college. It said, "Walter at Cross
Mayer," in his own contorted handwriting and by it the word “Baki”. At
that moment, the memory of that weekend in Mendocino came back to him.
His father’s sick face, his mother patting his back. That worried look.
The Asian man’s tanned face. ‘You’ll remember when you have to remember.’

While Jed was recalling his recent experience, Kip tapped and suggested
to Walter that he tells Jed that he had been working with his father
investing in green industries. Walter declined, tapping that raising the
subject of his father would not produce a positive effect when it came
to Baki+T.

-I agree. It’ll work negatively. Another Tier tapped,

-Jed doesn’t trust any of his father’s acquaintances. The other Tier
tapped.

Jed had a female intern at the library do some research for him on the
autonomy of Baki+T. When and how often was the consolidation of the
self-governing community with the state of California discussed in the
Assembly. Who was the sponsor. What was the outcome. Why had the
consolidation bill never gone through. The intern, named Aminata,
displayed good research abilities, and came back with a succinct report, having spent about half a day at City Hall.

Bills were presented twice since 1905. Once in 1932 and again in 1961. In 1932 a committee was formed, but no hearings were held. In 1915, the draft went to the sub-committee and hearing were held, but when the sub-committee met again, they decided not to recommend it to the full committee.

“In 1932, the first sub-committee decided not to bring it to the full committee, because not enough people gathered at the hearing. In 1961, the sponsor (a Senator named Gregg Harper) was forced to resign due to accusations of embezzlement.” Aminata said.


“That’s my question.” Jed said.

“Do you want me to investigate?” Jed shook his head saying, “No, you shouldn’t really spend too much time on this. It’s my personal matter. And it’s enough to know that some records about Baki+T remain...”

“What do you mean?” Jed explained to Aminata that hardly any records about Baki+T remained. He also told of his experience of failing to write down the contents of his interview with an old woman from the area for his elementary school assignment. Aminata was listening intently.

“You know in my dad’s country, it’s only the last hundred years or so that our oral folklore was recorded.”

“Oh, that’s probably right.” Jed looked at the young girl’s dark skin and her darker eyes assuming that she was from an African country. “Where
“Is your father from?”

“Senegal.”

Walter broke into Jed’s recollection about the research. Mia, who was observing from a distance in her country, lost the chance to tap Walter about the language theory related to oral traditions. She looked up at the clock. It was time for her to take her antidepressant medication.

Walter said to Jed, “Aminata also mentioned folklore about trees speaking, right?”

Jed answered “Yes,” and was surprised not by the fact that Walter knew the name of Aminata who he never met, but by the fact that he accepted Walter’s knowing this as a merely something natural.

“That night, you talked about us to your wife.”

-Midori-san, Kip tapped into his head, but Walter ignored it.

Jed was nodding at Walter’s comment and said, “Surprisingly, she also said she had read in the Kojiki about trees speaking. You know the Kojiki, right?”

“I don’t.” Walter said immediately. “But these guys out there...,” he waved his hand over his head. He was specifically waving at Kotoba, the only Japanese among the Students, but of course there was no way for Jed to know that.


“Other Tiers.” Walter answered without hesitating. “Specifically speaking, one of the students who will be taking the course.”

“And what is he saying about the Kojiki?”

“The ancient myth of the origin of Japan.” Walter cited closing his eyes. That reminded Jed of Kip when he was citing Julia Kristeva. “But he says he didn’t know the book referred to speaking trees until your wife
mentioned it.” Walter added.

“Are you saying that you can... communicate with each other like that whenever you want? You can pass any exam! How do people leave you alone? Terrorists. Presidents, Authorities out there... You could conquer the world!”

“I know.” Walter said calmly. “That’s not our... trees mission. And unfortunately, we are pathetically honest. I got a C in biology in college. Oh.. and...” Walter paused while receiving a tap from Kotoba. “This guy says the Kojiki is about kami. What is kami?”

“I don’t know.” Jed answered being again confused about the whole thing.

“OK. Kami is gods. Yes, you were trying to say Midori-san encouraged you to lead the course.”

“Encouraging isn’t the word. Unless, of course, you really know that she was encouraging me. I have no idea myself. To me, she just seemed to have naturally accepted the concept of trees speaking with each other or to human beings. ‘Tens of thousands of people pray to an invisible God and people kill each other or love each other because of hearing messages from that invisible thing. Why not a tree then?’ she said. ‘At least we can see it. We can touch it.’”

Walter didn’t mention to Jed that the whole Baki+T crowd was applauding his wife at that moment as she was standing in her kitchen.

“Seems like you are ready to be a facilitator.”

“Yes, I am.” Jed didn’t know that the invisible Tiers behind Walter gave a sigh of relief. They all knew that Jed was a kind of person who would carry out what he had said.

“At this point, my feeling is like opening a new book I never heard of. And you probably know that I’m pretty much excited about it. And you probably know that I’m a kind of person who hardly gets excited about
Walter gave a noncommittal nod, because he never cared much about what kind of person Jed was. He had been busy in dealing with the financial chaos of the world.

“So now we can talk about practical matters here. When will this Baki+T summer course start?”

“In ten days.”

“How long?”

“Seven days including the weekend. But two of those days will be spent in celebration. Like dancing and chatting.”

“Walter, are you getting answers from somebody else... somebody ‘out there’?”

Walter nodded. “Kip. He is in charge of all administrative things. In fact, I have no idea why I have to be sitting here and conveying his messages to you.”

And Walter added Kip’s comment. “And he is apologizing about drinking up the last pack of grape juice for Jason.”

“You mind readers!” Jed laughed, because he indeed immediately remembered Kip as a fat man who drank up his son’s last grape juice and put Jed and his wife in hot water.

“Now this is my question.” Walter said, “Why doesn’t it bother you that your mind is read by us. Of course, the trees selected you because of this quality of yours. The reason why I’m asking this is because I always believed that non-Tiers would be bothered to know that we read their minds. In fact, quite a lot of effort has been spent in my life avoiding the suspicions of non-Tiders that I’m reading their minds. It’s not too much to say that my entire life has been spent avoiding those suspicions. Now when I am sitting in front of you, it makes me wonder what all that effort...
was for? It may be that they never would have been bothered.”

-Oh no. no...

-You don’t know Walter.

-There are tons of Tiers who came back to the home country because of that.

-You may easily be put in insane asylum!

Since Walter opened the tap since gaining the assurance of Jed, quite a large crowd of Tiers were now tapping into Walter’s room. He just let it happen. From Jed’s point of view, it was just Walter sitting in front of him crossing his slender feet in a mahogany chair.

“I like exploring my mind infinitely. In fact, that’s what I like about Baki+T. Knowing that someone is reading my mind makes me try to read my mind.”

“Are you trying to be objective about your mind?”

“That, I’m not sure. How much can one be objective about yourself? Can you, Walter? By being able to communicate in Baki+T, can you be more objective?”

“I know that I can be objective enough to know that I’m a subjective person.”

Tiers heard Mia shriek with laughter and were surprised she could laugh in such a light hearted manner.

“What am I supposed to do during the class? What is my role as a ‘facilitator’?”

In response to Jed’s question, Walter only looked at him with a blank facial expression. Jed was waiting, expecting a long answer to come back. During that time, Walter was quietly listening to the tapping which was now growing like an ant heap. Now, relieved that a facilitator had been chosen, people suddenly realized that they didn’t know what was supposed to happen next.
The only thing they inherited from the past regarding the convention were fragments of pictures and voices.

—Now what are we going to do?
—Do we have to know?
—We don’t have to know, but HE has to know.
—Kip, are you going to give some course materials of some sort to Jed?
—The students won’t need them.
—In fact, they’ll be resentful!
—Course materials! That’s a written material!
—Don’t worry he won’t remember any of his experience in Baki+T anyway.
—But this is going to be a class more or less, right?
—No. it’s a process to reach tree communication. You’ll never reach it anyway.
—What? That’s something I can’t pass up!

Walter cut off the tapping.

“Honestly, we don’t know exactly what your role as a facilitator is. We know you treat the students equally. By the way, their age ranges from teenager to quite old. You have to know, physical conditions and social conditions really don’t matter here. As you are already aware, you may face some situations where your shortcomings become overwhelming, but nonetheless, we’ll help you.”

“What is the purpose of this course?” Jed asked.

Walter gave a direct answer. The same direct answer he had gotten from the trees.

“To find a photosynthesizer.” He said.

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Unlike the mundane appearance of the customs from Baki+T into the United States, the customs from the United States into Baki+T, near Cotati, did not have any features of a regular customs building. One finds that it’s more like a hut of a bathhouse, because it indeed used to be a bathhouse in Thailand. The selection of this structure was left solely to Louky, the only customs officer in Baki+T.

As with many things in Baki+T, the bathhouse was chosen for two simple reasons; first, Louky had wanted a new customs house with shoe boxes for foreigners coming in to take off their fashionable shoes and change into walking shoes. (The shoes were made with all-natural materials processed in a developing country in a humane manner.) The second criterion was to choose a house belonging to a family that was in a desperate situation. Louky, had searched all the bathhouse buildings in the world in his head and chose one bathhouse. The family needed money for the medical expenses of their youngest daughter.

Jed got off the bus from San Francisco and walked toward where the sign, ‘Baki+T Customs,’ was pointing. He ran across with a man with work clothes and saw a ladder angled to the top of the roof of the customs house, which was covered with solar panels. Another worker was wiping the surface of a solar panel with a mop.

—Hey, what are you doing?
Jed silently and deliberately made the question in his mind, but the man on the top of the roof kept working without looking down at him.

He walked on, and he entered the well-lit interior of the customs house. A middle-aged man wearing a folk costume was sitting the other side of the counter.

“He isn’t a Tier,” the man said. “The guy on the top of the roof.”

Jed nodded thinking, —OK. Now it started!
“He is cleaning solar panels for maintenance. We hire him and some others to clean up all the solar panels in Baki+T every other week. They drive our electric car,” the custom guy explained. He realized that Jed was wondering where all the brightness in the room came from.

“All the buildings in our country are lit by skylights. Of course, light engineers always claim that the solar light is the worst for working, but our experience shows it works just fine.”

Jed nodded again as he took a longer glance at what the man was wearing, noticing it did not quite fit his role as a customs officer.

“We buy clothing from developing countries, so you will see a mixture of clothes and styles in this country,” he explained.

Jed hardly ever traveled, but when he did, he found that the custom officers were not the most friendly people in the world. And Louky was not friendly either. In fact, he was so selfish that no one wanted to do customs work with him. He was so proud of himself and thought himself so special that he believed no one deserved to work with him. He attributed this pride to the fact that his parents and ancestors were time-keepers, an occupation which required standing in the middle of the town and telling residents the time by tracking the movement of the sun. His last name, Heliostat, which he inherited from his ancestors, was from before solar technology was even developed.

“Don’t worry,” Louky said to Jed, reading his mind. “People inside,” (he pointed toward the back of his room), “are much nicer than me.”

“Now, what am I supposed to do with my shoes?” Jed asked, looking at the shoeboxes and not paying much attention to what Louky had just said.

“You leave your shoes off here. We’ll give you new shoes, although your shoes look just fine. Also, your cell phone has to be left here. We don’t have a network in our country.”
“What a surprise!” Jed said sarcastically.

-Of course! They don’t need any physical network!

Leaning over, he took off his shoes and removed his cell phone from his pocket.

“We did build a broadband network for visitors at some point,” Louky continued, “but we found it’s just too distracting. Most visitors come here to benefit by disconnecting from outside. Of course, any messages from your wife will be communicated through someone working near you.”

-Good lord…, Jed thought, Now all privacy in our household is compromised!

“That’s not true,” Louky said reading his mind, “We have secret lines of a sort. If you choose not to become a part of a gossip, you can stay fairly private.”

“What kind of people visit Baki+T? Do they require the trees’ approval?” Jed asked out loud.

“Yes,” Louky answered, “visitors are mostly faculty members of universities, and engineers and entrepreneurs who are interested in environmental issues. Baki+T has established scholars and engineers in renewable energies, although the roles and functions of workers are not dissected like outside. You’ll eventually hear that from the Tiers. As far as other visitors, though…there aren’t many linguists here. I think we have some psychologists once in a while.”

He placed Jed’s cell phone and shoes in a shoe box, closed the top and gave him a key that looked like a wooden board, with the number of the box written on it. “I know you don’t have any pens and computers in your backpack,” he said.

Jed nodded and said, indicating the key he had just received, “Do I need this? I heard there hardly is any crime in this country.”
"That’s right." Louky said, without a smile, “This shoe box came from a country where crimes are common, like it is in so many other places. And, more importantly, I think handing someone a key is aesthetic.” Jay put his brand-new sneakers on. They fit like they were born for his feet.

“We had them made at the moment when you accepted the offer. We usually have shoes made in Guinea Bissau, but we had these made in Berkeley because of the time constraint,” Louky said, confirming that a map of western part of Africa appeared in Jed’s head.

“They fit very well.” Jed said. He noticed Louky had never smiled once.”Now you can choose to either bicycle or walk to your hotel. It’s forty minutes on foot. It seems like you have plenty of guides outside.” When Jed opened the door to the back, the deep wood with brick pavement was spread out before him. There were about a half dozen kids waiting for him. Most of them looked like Westerners, but for two, who had darker skin. What struck Jed was the variety of their clothes.

A girl from the crowd jumped toward him, exclaiming, “My mom had me wear this, because you’re special!!” The girl showed her bright-colored cloth, which was apparently made of silk.

“That’s beautiful. Looks like somewhat East Asian,” Jed complimented the girl. As he spoke, the eldest boy signaled to Jed by raising his chin, and began to walk away. Jed followed him in his path, and the other children hurried along with them.

“No. It’s from Myanmar,” the girl answered.

“Myanmar is in East Asia, stupid!” another boy exclaimed. The girl ignored the boy and started to dance, raising her tiny hands while singing a song that Jed couldn’t comprehend, saying, “They dance like this!”
“Do you speak Burmese?” Jed asked the girl who was apparently singing in that language as one of the younger boys slipped his hand into his, and held on.

“No. What’s Berneys?” The girl kept dancing stepping her feet in the pavement.

“If you don’t want these kids, I can chase them off,” the eldest kid said while walking besides him. He had apparently read the mind of Jed, who had been caught off-guard by the crowd of kids. When he was on the bus coming to Baki+T he had expected that he would have time contemplate and mull things over while he was heading to the hotel by himself.

“No, it’s OK, I guess,” Jed murmured while another boy yelled, “Solomon, you have to take turns holding his hand!”

“Tommy, Tommy, how long can I hold his hand?” the boy asked the eldest boy, who then, apparently, conveyed the answer in silence.

“Thirty five minutes divided by seven!” another boy exclaimed.

“You don’t have to count me, man,” Tommy said with a wry smile. “Are you sure it’s OK these kids are around? Just so you know, they ignore whatever you think about them. People’s thoughts don’t affect them.”

“It’s OK,” Jed answered.

“Thirty four minutes divided by six!” another boy exclaimed. “That’s about five minutes.” The boy who was holding his hand looked up at Jed, who was wondering if the boy had figured it out himself or had got the answer from somebody ‘out there.’

“No, I didn’t calculate it myself, but I know five minutes is very short,” the boy said in a sad tone of voice, “So I’ll hold your hand with both of my hands.”

That reminded Jed of Jason, and suddenly he was slaughtered by a strong sense of guilt.
-He always wants to be with me. Why don’t I just spend more time with him?

He saw the girl had abruptly stopped dancing and drooped her face. All the other kids looked sad now, too. For a time, they walked silently in the dark wood towards the avenue, with sunlight reflecting on the ocean.

“My dad is busy, too,” one boy said suddenly.

“You’re OK, because he works in his shop at your home,” an older girl said.


“He works on cars,” the boy answered.

“His dad changes hybrid cars to plug-in vehicles,” the eldest boy explained to Jed. “You know, electric vehicles you can charge overnight?” Jed had already known that only electric vehicles were allowed in Baki+T hearing from Kip.

“Tommy, when did you start reading people’s minds? How old were you?” Jed asked out loud, because the conventional communication mode was more comfortable for him. Tommy, paused, and seemed to be thinking.

Jed and the kids reached the bright ocean avenue, busy with people jogging and strolling on the sandy pavement. When he and the kids stop talking, Jed was struck by the silence. Most people who passed by showed him a knowing smile. With that, he could tell that people already knew who he was, without him saying a word. Unexpectedly, he felt an intense loneliness. (I’m outnumbered here), he thought.

“No, you aren’t. We’re all with you,” one boy exclaimed.

“Stupid! You just made him so uncomfortable!” the elder girl said.

“No! You just made him so uncomfortable!” he yelled back.

“All right, all right,” Jed tried to calm down them. “We seem to make
everyone uncomfortable here. So let’s be quiet.”

The kids began to poke each other, and didn’t say anything for a little while apparently still tapping each other in silence.

Jed saw the highway in California, far inland from here, and nearer, within Baki+T on adjacent roads, he saw electric vehicles passing by, every single one painted white.

“White is good, because it doesn’t absorb the heat, and doesn’t use too much air-conditioning,” the boy whose father was a mechanic explained, yet again reading Jed’s mind wondering if people were not frustrated not to be able to choose their favorite color.

“I want to choose the color which is good for the environment when I grow up,” the girl with the Myanmar costume said, again apparently reading Jed’s mind.

“I don’t,” another boy said, “When I visited my uncle in New York, I saw a lot of cars with a lot of shapes and colors. I’d paint my car light blue. That’s more fun!”

“Jed, I like black,” said a kid as he took his turn to hold Jed’s hand, no doubt aware of the color of Jed’s car. The boy who insisted on holding his hand in the first place had let go and disappeared somewhere.

“Yeah, kids’ attention spans are rather short,” he heard an elder woman passing by murmur to him. It made him uncomfortable, but then, he realized that was how people regularly communicated in this country, by reading each other’s minds and responding to what they found there.

“Your question, about when I started to read minds...,” Tommy said, finally answering Jed’s question. “One of the Students from Japan asked us the same question.”

“Face to face?”

“No. Via our communication. I really don’t remember clearly when it
started. But when I was a baby, I remember this sensation, a fear of someone attacking me. Do you remember the incident when a bunch of bad guys tried to land onto our country from the Pacific Side? The navy was called and shut the bad ship down. It was about sixteen years ago.”

“No, I don’t remember. I should have heard if it was such a big event.”

“All of incidents related to Baki+T are wiped out of people’s heads.”

“Why is that?”

“To protect the integrity of our language. Otherwise, we’d easily be abused by people’s greed and curiosity. In any case, in that incident, all us infants started to cry and alerted the adults, and soon the navy was called.”

By then, they were again on the path towards the deep wood, moving alongside the ocean. He saw a stone building ahead, half of it covered by leaves and the other half exposed to the ocean. Jed had never seen such unique architecture.

“I remember that fear, a sheer terror of someone attacking us. When I think of it, it makes me want to be attached to the trees and their message. I wouldn’t want to be standing in the open with no protection, all stripped and vulnerable without our communication to stay safe. So many Baki+T people want to go outside, but they forget the importance our communication, and often wind up being turned around and misled by the exciting world out there.”

They reached the entrance to Baki+T University. Tommy concluded their conversation, by, once again, reading Jed’s mind and answering his new question before he even said it. “About that, why no Baki+T predicted 9-11...or any of the other calamities in the world...”

Tommy paused and looked over the ocean, and Jed did the same.

“We really don’t know. That’s the trees’ choice. But the reason why
the Baki+T convention is being held now may be related to answering that question.”

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“Before starting, we have a problem to address.”

Jed noticed a tall and handsome Student sitting at the right corner raised his voice. His British accent and black skin reminded Jed of one of his friends, who was originally from Guinea and now lived in London.

“No, I’m not from Guinea. My name is Damascene,” he said. Jed walked up to him and they shook hands.

“You probably know my name and where I’m from,” Jed replied, trying to convey a sense of dignity and levity about his mind constantly being read.

“Yes, and my father has…. Oh, sorry….” Damascene stopped as other students leaned in to quietly scold him. As he paused, Jed found himself recalling that his black British friend had forty siblings. All the Students in the classroom followed that recollection as it ended in a faint shame about having profiled Damascene.

A Student spoke up into the silence, saying, “Why don’t we start with introductions? Apparently no one has told you yet, but…”

Jed turned, and saw the source of voice was a plump man with light skin. Jed couldn’t figure out what language he was speaking and wondered which Student was supposed to work as his interpreter. Kip had told him that there was a translator who knew twenty-two languages assigned to the class.

“I guess no one has told you yet, but we don’t tell which country we are from, because you have fixed ideas about that country politically, even unconsciously.”
“We even thought of placing paper bags on our faces so you couldn’t see our skin color. But we thought you wouldn’t stand for such oddness, and in any case we have to breathe.”

Jed observed an Asian man with tanned skin talking at the same time the other Students were. Jed walked to his seat and stood next to him, holding his chin and lowering his face so he could hear the translated English more clearly.

“My name is Kotoba. I’m your interpreter.”

Jed shook hands with him, and gradually, other Students introduced themselves.

“Hi, I’m Mia.”

“Furqan.”

“My name is Mead.”

“Hi, I’m Yuan-Yuan.”

“Philippe.”

“Tadej.”

“Vikulya.”

Some raised their hands while others crossed their arms in front of themselves or supported their chin, but all of them looked right into Jed’s eyes. Jed did likewise, and found that the students’ age varied greatly. The youngest boy, who looked to be in his early teens, sat in silence the whole time, not saying a word. Kotoba introduced him, saying, “His name is Valentine. He cannot hear nor talk, but he understands our conversation.”

“Probably more deeply than anyone else, or at least more so than me,” Damascene added.

In contrast to Valentine, the eldest Student, Mead, was a woman with white skin who looked to be in her early eighties. She spoke so faintly
that Jed could barely hear her introduction.

“And there is another woman who couldn’t make it this time,” Kotoba said. “I mean physically couldn’t make it. Her name is Amrita.”

“She just said hi to you,” said Yuan-Yuan.

In the Students’ mind, an image of a middle-aged woman appeared, her skin brown and scorched by an intense sun. To the Students, it seemed like she was tapping from home, but Jed, of course, could see none of that and remained in the dark.

Back in San Francisco, during the meeting at Jed’s apartment, Kip had suggested to Jed to go through the rules and purpose of the meeting in the very first orientation. Now, taking that advice, Jed said, “I’d like to address the issue which Damascene was talking about, but before we get to that, let’s spend three minutes to go through some rules.”

The Students already knew the three rules Jed had in mind;

1) Be ‘physically’ punctual.

2) Commit; attend all the classes. (although Jed was now concerned that an old lady in her eighties couldn’t physically make all the classes)

3) Be courteous in your time allocation when you state your opinions; don’t speak too long.

“I thought of making it a rule to be courteous in your speech, but I realized you guys read each others’ minds anyway, so there’s no point in just being verbally courteous. Given that you can read my mind, I think it is fair for you to be equally open with me. Are there other rules you can think of?

“This is a rule for myself as an interpreter,” Kotoba said. “I interpret whatever is ‘spoken’ here. So if you want me to communicate something to Jed, don’t forget to ‘speak.’” He finished, knowing that the Students had already been aware of his function.
“If I remember how to speak at all,” someone said in pidgin English, prompting both Jed and the Students to break into laughter.

“And Kotoba was just thinking that he will translate only what people say. He won’t insert any of his opinions. You can trust him about that,” Philippe said in French, before being duly translated into English by Kotoba.

“Boy, you’re gonna be busy,” Jed said to Kotoba, who shrugged his shoulders and said, “Well…I do this every day. So my brain muscle in this area is built up. But this is my first time ‘interpreting’ in a Baki+T setting. So I’ll ask you for a break, if I get too tired. And, before we go on, I just wanted to tell you that there is one exception.”

The eldest woman murmured something. Jed and Kotoba faced toward her, with Kotoba frowning. “I don’t exactly understand the language Mead speaks,” he explained. “It’s a combination of languages I know, but we have been communicating in Baki+T for all these weeks and now I’m pretty much used to that. So when I interpret for her, just know that it is through Baki+T, and not through her spoken language.”

Jed nodded and walked toward Mead, taking both her wrinkly hands in his. She had already read his mind, and communicated through Kotoba, “I may not be able to make it to all of the classes. And let me tell you…”

By this point, Students were already laughing. “I am not in my early eighties. I’m in my early nineties. You haven’t been the only one who thinks I look younger than my age.” Jed smiled with amusement, and thought, “Gosh, she looks relatively healthy, but she’s ancient. Attendance aside, I hope she can make it through the class okay!

The Students, including Mead herself, were also aware that it was a legitimate worry. Mead herself had made preparations if the worst should happen.
-Seriously, I’ll ask later where I should call if an emergency…oh, well. These guys already know or will let me know if there’s a disaster…

While Jed was still thinking, Yuan-Yuan spoke up. “Amrita says that she’s thinking of proposing a rule that you be given a chance to ‘speak’ your thoughts. That way, maybe you could feel more equal, but seems to me like you aren’t that bothered by us reading your mind before you speak.”

“‘Not being bothered’ isn’t quite the right expression,” Jed said. “I am a bit jarred by it. Somewhere in my mind, I may feel unfairly imposed on. And sometimes I may feel intimidated, because in the end I am one and you are eleven.” As Jed spoke, the Students found that his words were in complete synch with what he was feeling.

- Seems like we agree upon the rules. So let’s address the issue you started to mention, Damascene. What’s the matter? Jed thought.

Some Students, including Damascene, turned their heads to the Student who had introduced himself as Tadej. “It was a problem, but now it seems…” Kotoba trailed off, as if waiting for something.

There was a communication going on among Damascene, Tadej, Philippe, Yuan-Yuan and Kotoba. It was apparent even to Jed, because in spite of the fact that they were completely silent, they began to shrug, frown and shake their heads. Other students began looking at Tadej and then back to Jed, who found himself thinking back Tadej’s introduction, which had been filled with a bold tone that Jed had taken as challenging.

-OK. This is Baki+T 101 for me. Seems like the issue we’re talking about is Tadej’s and it’s about me. Tell me what it is, Jed mentally urged the students. He waited and braced himself for the response.

Tadej spoke out loud, first in a language that Jed did not know and then, noticing Kotoba’s lag in translating due to unfamiliarity with the language, he switched to pidgin English.
“OK,” he said. “You’re right. This is my issue and I have come to terms with it. But some people here approached me to raise the issue in class, because they’d like to hear what you think and say about it,” he explained.

“When I received the notice from Baki+T soliciting this summer intensive course, I did not think it was worth attending. Some of us, although not me, can communicate with each other perfectly or almost perfectly without physically coming here. Plus, I have my own business, which is currently in financial hot water, because my accountant tricked me and cooked the books. Now I’ve lost all my money and I’m being investigated by the government. My wife has wanted to divorce me for over two years and my kids are rebellious. They hardly attend class and my younger daughter, who is sixteen, acts almost like a prostitute. So when I found the air ticket from Baki+T in the mail, I figured I would never go. How could I possibly have time to meditate with trees? But then the government delayed their investigation to fall, and I grew more and more tired of spending weeks in my house, which soon will be taken away by creditors, sitting around and waiting for my kids to come home (or hoping they don’t come home at all). I started to think, ‘why not?’ I figured that I wouldn’t lose anything more by spending a week here. I had enough comprehensive ability to hear from other Baki+T people that the food here is healthy and very tasty. I started to feel that coming here would be a good retreat. But I didn’t care much about you, Jed. Honestly, I still don’t. Don’t take it personally. I’m that kind of person. Maybe that’s why my wife and kids don’t want to spend time with me. Maybe that’s why my accountant tricked me. I don’t know. But here in Baki+T, I’ve found that so far, it’s gone well. At least people here seem to be more enlightened than me, with calmer lives. What’s more, I feel that some important change is occurring, because, more and more, I feel better about the situation I’m in. I’m finding some
hope now, at last. It’s not that I’m certain that creditors won’t take my home anymore, but I’m getting certain that it won’t bother me as much as it used to do.”

Tadej related all of this with occasional vocabulary help from Kotoba and Damascene. Once the speech ended, the Students noticed a sense of relief coming from Jed, finding rather genuineness in Tadej’s speech. Jed was quietly listening, standing still with a blank wall as a backdrop, his arms crossed over his chest.

-I thought that Baki+T ability protected Tiers from all kinds of harm, but apparently not, Jed thought.

-What will the Students gain by being able to speak Baki+T? What about me? What will I get by spending time here? he wondered as the Students picking up his every thought.

-Did I expect that I’d be free from harm by accepting this offer? No. It’s more like what the guy said, ‘it won’t bother me as much much as it used to do.’ Besides, do I ever question what I’ll get out of a book each time I open it? Maybe I just need to give it a try.

“I should express my issue, too.”

Jed paused at the words, which were spoken in an unfamiliar language, and looked to Kotoba, who continued to translate, saying, “Some other students here think that it’s a good idea for me to raise this topic, because we would like to see how it will effect you mentally.”

Jed perceived a malicious intent in the Student’s mind. Although Jed had no ability to read feelings, it wasn’t hard to tell that this Student and some of the other Tiers were expecting him to fall apart at some point during the class. At the same time, though, he also sensed that there were others who would do their best to help him along.

“OK,” he said, looking into the man’s eyes and again bracing his arms
in front of him. “What’s your name, again?”

“My name is Furqan. Yes, fur…like fur.” Kotoba went on to add his own explanation, saying “F-U-R-Q-A-N.

“There’s something that I need to convey from him to you, Jed…it’s hard to express. It’s something like….”

Jed caught yet another silent exchange between Kotoba and Damascene and the other students. Afterwards, Kotoba said, “I’m sorry, but I’m having a hard time coming up with the right word in English, and these guys are teasing me about it. Man! It’s hard having to do this without electronic dictionaries…” The Japanese interpreter placed his fingers on his chin, as if listening into an invisible ear-bud. “Ill-feeling… grudge is too strong a word…yeah, I think ill-feeling is best.”

Jed could tell that Kotoba had just received advice from people “out there” about English word choice. Jed sighed and said, “OK. Furqan has some kind of ill-feeling towards…me? Towards this class? Or what?”

“Towards America,” Furqan said with a clear voice. “How can you be a moderator? You’re from the country that’s dropped bombs all over the world.”

Jed gasped, mentally if not physically. The Students noticed the flare of emotion in his mind, which had been fairly calm until that moment.

-But he isn’t the one who bombed Furqan’s country.
-No, and anyway, that’s impossible, his country hasn’t even been bombed by the US.
-Yeah, it’s NATO who bombed it.
-It doesn’t matter. Furqan just wants to clarify that he has ill-feeling.
-That’s right. It’s good for us to see how he handles this.

Jed, of course, couldn’t hear any of these exchanges between the Tiers
and the Students. Nonetheless, the first thing that arose in his mind was

(It wasn’t me who bombed your country.) The second thing that came to
mind was that he had voted for the presidential candidate who was against
the bombing. However, this line of thinking didn’t persuade Jed of anything,
let alone the others. He knew that he had to think more deeply than that,
especially here in Baki+T. Suddenly, he felt relieved that he didn’t have
to verbally explain what he was thinking, because he wasn’t sure that he
could. The Students would scan his feelings, and that was that….

A woman raised her voice in the silence, and Jed glanced at her,
remembering she had introduced herself as Mia.

“That’s right,” she said out loud, with Kotoba translating. “Just be
yourself.”

He felt that the trust he apparently received from the “trees” were
verbally expressed with her words and confidence gradually seeped into
his mind. Jed looked at the Students, most of whom seemed to be totally
absorbed in their thoughts and mutual exchanges.

“What Furqan is questioning is whether I can claim I am fully innocent,
simply because I didn’t push the button that launch the bombs.

He kept thinking.

“However, Furqan has to come to terms with the situation, too. I wonder
if he was aware that I was not the one acting on my own.

As Jed thought, Furqan remained sitting in his chair, gazing intently
at the floor. Jed got the impression that he was the topic of Furqan’s
single-minded focus.

“The question is….”

“Actually the problem is….”

Both Furqan and Jed spoke up, their sentences clashing with each other.
Jed looked at Kotoba as he continued to translate Furqan, who hadn’t stopped
speaking after the verbal collision. “The problem is, I am aware..., more honestly speaking, I’m jealous of you. Don’t misunderstand me. I am not envious of your materialistic abundance. Nor your economy. Nor even the peace that most people in your country take for granted. You know what I’m most jealous about? It’s the fact that you can love your own country.”

-Do I love my country?

Furgan’s words prompted the mental question from more than one Student, including Kotoba, Valentine and Philippe.

“Do I love my own country?” Jed spoke out loud. As he talked, the Students were aware of a mass of thoughts rising in Jed’s mind: criticism of the former administration, his frustration with the narrow intelligence and interests of his fellow Americans, and his abhorrence of materialism.

-But would I give up my father’s fortune and donate it to poor people? Jed wondered. At the same time, he found himself remembering a beautiful experience with his friends, hiking in Yosemite Park with a newborn Jason in his back. And last, he found himself thinking of his time with his wife.

“As you all can tell, all sorts of thoughts just came up in my mind,” Jed said. “And I love my country.” The moment he said that, the Students found that his words took root in his mind and became a conscious, noticeable part of his thoughts. “And I appreciate that I can love and live in this country,” he finished.

“You know,” Furqan said, “That’s a privilege which most people don’t have.”

By then, Tiers were furiously tapping with each other.

-What are we supposed to do? It’s not our fault that we weren’t born in a peaceful, prosperous country.

-Is he lecturing us to have proper patriotism?

-No, he isn’t lecturing anything, idiot!
Oh, you’re just acting all goodie-goodie again!

Then, without warning, tapping from outside was cut off by Kip. Kotoba silently exclaimed, -My dictionary!

Jed, as usual totally unaware of exactly what was going in the Students’ heads, said slowly, “Probably the most terrible thing about being from a violent country is that you cannot go back to your home and be sure of your own safety, or the safety of family and friends. And, if you are a decent, conscientious person, you might be ashamed of your country, even while living there. Furqan, I am lucky that I do not have to be ashamed of my country as much as you do, because of all of the great people from my nation who rose above their own mistakes to shine. And I know my nation is not unique in this, because there probably have been a lot of great people in your country. Furqan, you could be one of them. But the system destroys them, completely nullifies it. However, my pride in my country doesn’t mean that my country is always right. I am deeply ashamed of some of the things my country has done the past. I don’t know what country you are from, but yes, as you all know, I can guess…sorry…from how you look…. I can guess what my country did to your country indirectly or directly, and I’m ashamed of that.”

There was a long pause, and the Students could tell that Jed was vacillating. He was waiting to see if what he was about to say was in a complete synch with what he was thinking. Finally, he opened his mouth.

“If you couldn’t read my mind, I would have apologized to you verbally, hoping that it would raise your respect for me and hoping that it would further mutual forgiveness in this class. But as you can see, I’ve tried and I cannot truly apologize, because I didn’t launch the bomb. Even I can guess that a moment ago, you were thinking something like, ‘what does this guy know? He hasn’t gone through what I have gone through….’ You are
right. But be patient with me, and with my situation. Just as it is not your sin to be born in a country of turmoil, it is not my sin to be born in a peaceful country.”

“Peaceful! You only do all your fighting and bloodshed and killing elsewhere to keep the peace inside of your borders.”

The Students could tell that Furqan’s verbal criticism had already surfaced in Jed’s mind as self-criticism. “There was a power imbalance,” Jed said softly. “It was wrong that we used it...and...” As he spoke, images flashed in both his and Furqan’s minds; one was the face of a young man, and the other was the face of an aged woman. “And... I am terribly, terribly sorry if that imbalance hurt someone you loved.”

There was a long silence.

“أنا شكرًا,” Furqan said. Kotoba did not translate it, knowing that Jed already knew some vocabulary in that language.

“You passed the first test,” one of the Students said in English, Jed wasn’t sure which one.

“This is tough,” said a woman’s voice.

“The first issue has indeed been addressed,” said Damascene.

“I need a break,” said Kotoba with a tired smile.

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Jed again noticed the variety of clothes people were wearing; silk materials with bright color like Africa, earth tone cotton which made Jed think of Scandinavia, black linen looking like Asian fashion. Some were patched together, sewn together, or combined with matching head cover. Big company logos were nowhere to be seen.

A Sri Lankan architect, Daphnetsin Bawa, designed the Baki + T
University campus, the federal plaza, and many other public spaces in the late 50s and early 60s. Their design was based upon a theme of harmony among trees, sunlight, space, and human beings. Rocks imported from quarries in South America were used to make the pavement. They appeared harmonious among the indigenous rocks, which were kept in their original places and gave a sublime atmosphere to the spaces between them. Trees were literally everywhere and provided natural shade. A gardener trimmed branches to attain an optimal amount of sunlight through the leaves. The benches were made of bamboo taken from the floor of a rice warehouse in China.

“Eighty percent of our administrative hours are spent on maintenance,” Kip said to Jed. “And we are happy about it.”

Food was waiting for them in the courtyard of the school, consisting mostly of locally grown vegetables and whole grains. There was also fresh juice, carbonated water and locally grown wine. These were all placed on hand-made ceramic plates that had been bought from developing countries.

“Out there, so much money is spent on security and communication. Think about the Sarbanes–Oxley Act.” Kip was referring to the U.S. law enacted in 2002 to set standards of accounting integrity for public companies.

“Now companies have to spend huge amounts of money to comply with the law, not to mention the loss of funds from contract breach, patent infringement, embezzlement, and all the other sorts of crimes… To comply with the law, the government has to spend too much money on oversight to even begin to prevent these crimes. In Baki+T, we don’t have to spend any money to prevent these things. In that sense, each of us here is watched over by the trees.”

Jed watched Kip dip a vegetable stick into lima bean dip. “I know, I know…” Kip said, apparently reacting to somebody ‘out there.’

"Oh...well, there are many countries in the world that function with trust. For instance, there are many places on the earth where you can leave your house unlocked and feel OK about it. But when it comes to corporatization, it’s a different story. Then, there’s a responsibility to countless stockholders, which is a world away from leaving your house unlocked, it’s hardly a fair comparison. If your house is broken into, you’re the only one who would suffer from it, whereas corporations can hurt many people if something goes wrong. And so, countries outside have all these regulations and laws."

Their conversation had started when Jed asked Kip how they could afford to treat so many guests. It seemed that people from all over the country had come to the opening night of the Baki+T summer course, and they were all being treated. The magnitude of ‘the convention’ made Jed wonder yet again why he, an insignificant librarian, was chosen as the facilitator. However, given his company, he made a deliberate effort not to think about the purpose of his presence.

"It’s like reading a book, Jed thought to himself, the second time that day he’d thought of books in relation to making sense of Baki+T.

"I shouldn’t try to make too much sense out of the reading experience itself."

“You know there are self-serving registers in supermarkets these days, right?” Jed said to Kip and Damascene, who had just walked up to join their conversation.

“Yes, I know, because we made them.”

“What?”

“No, you didn’t make it! Come on!” Damascene chastised Kip.

“I mean the general manager of the supermarket that made that system
first was from Baki+T. Come on, you can say we made it, brother!” Kip said, playfully pushing Damascene’s belly.

“I’ve seen those systems in Europe, too,” Damascene said. “The people who invented it aren’t always Tiers!”

— Anyway, what I wanted to say was, I always wonder how many other people scan the items as honestly as I do, Jed thought.

“That proves how mediocre you are,” Damascene said, reading Jed’s mind while showing a toss to Vikulya as she passed by. Jed found himself wondering why Damascene’s comment didn’t make him upset in the least. He figured the reason was that even in Damascene’s abrasive words, he sensed trust and candor.

“What he means is that most people believe that they are very honest unless they are disparate and when they are moderately peaceful,” Kip said.

“The self-checking system actually works fairly well for us while significantly cutting costs. Of course, some people cheat, but the damage in terms of financial loss is much less that the wages they’d otherwise have to spend on human cashiers.”

“You’re thinking that self-checking is similar to the self-surveillance system of Baki+T. The answer is yes and no,” Damascene elaborated. “The Baki+T system is actually explicitly based on the premise that humans are dishonest.”

“So is the Sarbanes-Oxley Act,” Jed said.

“That’s right,” Damascene continued. “But the difference is in the tolerance factor. Our system tolerates some dishonesty. For instance, the system doesn’t rigorously say ‘ah-ha, you cheated and took two zucchinis.’”

“Or, ‘you input the conventional vegetable price instead of the organic price!’” Kip said as he snacked and murmured, “Oh, this organic pear goes well with this quinoa cracker.”
“Or, in other words, the system isn’t surprised if we feel tempted. A flamboyant party with top models in the Caribbean Island! What a boring temptation! Oh really...?” Damascene’s last question was apparently addressed to Kip, who silently communicated something back.

“There was a guy on the Enron management team who was born in Baki+T,” Kip said in low voice, as if he was concerned about being overheard.


“Oh, he was released after staying in jail for three months and thirteen days. He paid a hefty bail, and came back to our country. Now, he teaches current events to high-school students.”

“He’s quite good at sensing temptation in others, he can detect it and issue a warning before it gets out of hand.”

“Jeff, would you like to introduce yourself to Jed?” Kip asked, raising his voice and tilting his face, as if Jeff was hovering overhead. After a moment, Kip laughed loudly, and said, “He says ‘hi’ to you. Now he’ll pat your head when you feel tempted.”


“That’s exactly the problem many of us face.

“That’s why many people get out of this country.

“But many of them come back, eventually.

Jed didn’t hear any of those voices; he was left to face his uncertainty on his own.

“If you were connected to the trees,” Kip said, “you would eventually figure out what we mean by ‘temptations.’”

“I take it that a temptation isn’t always something as simple as a wild party in the Caribbean.”

“That’s right. Temptation doesn’t always come in a clear form. Like
the snake...or a devil with a tail...or a beautiful woman who turns into a
drinky magician in your arms. Sometimes, temptation can take the
appearance of your own kid, and that’s when it becomes truly dangerous.”

“But all in all,” Damascene said, “if you were raised in Baki+T you’d
be taught from childhood to...” He cut short, noticing that the dance had
started.

“To what?” Jed prompted curiously.

“Altruism.” It wasn’t Damascene who answered: Jed turned to find Kotoba
standing nearby. “I was translating for him,” the interpreter clarified,
pointing to the teenage Student, whose name, Jed recalled, was Valentine.
Without saying anything further, Valentine ran off to the crowd of dancers,
wearing a big smile that he hadn’t shown once in the classroom.

Jed, feeling lost, resigned himself to staying in the dark for the time
being on the topic of temptation, and focused his attention on the dance.
A mysterious scene was unfolding in the courtyard. A group of young people
were holding sticks in their hands and dancing in unison, in spite of the
fact there was no music move to. Jed, peering closer, realized that the
‘sticks’ were celery sticks. They were using them like wooden clappers,
keeping time as they gracefully carried out their movement, a combination
of dancing and marching.

“They can listen to any music in the world in their head, all together,”
Yuan-Yuan said as she approached from behind Jed. She spoke in Chinese
and was translated by Kotoba. Yuan-Yuan noticed his confusion and explained
the details of the dance. “Right now they are listening to music by an
unknown musician from Lithuania...wait, now they’ve switched to something
else...this time it’s a Tanzanian song!”

Someone in the crowd started to sing, and the young people joined
in, creating an impromptu chorus.
Yean ka madomaka madoanza. Wan-shanba, nayanka kurdo, matayonza.
Kanbo sa-sa, Yodoma!
Wayenge!!
Wayenge!
Yenge, yenge,
Manata bora!
Wayenge Manma!

“That’s called the Adudo,” Someone explained to him.

As the singing wound down, a number of people filtered into the courtyard carrying instruments, including guitars, keyboards, drums and several string instruments. Jed noticed, with a start, that all the electric instruments were cordless.

“One of the good things about this country is that you don’t have to plan and pre-arrange the entertainment. It’s self-sustainable. Whenever there’s an event going on, there’s always people willing to come over and play music with it, and contribute their talent,” Kotoba explained and walked to the crowd to join the handclap.

As the music began, girls began to swing their bosoms and boys shook their waists.

I love you baby!
Don’t leave me baby!

The music changed to a slightly different tone, but retained a similar African beat. Valentine was dancing in the middle of everything, at first just moving like everyone else, and then balancing himself on his head
and spinning. Other boys, eager to match him, followed suit.

Yes, we can. Oh, yes we can. Yes, we can!

"That’s Prince Fornah’s music, from Sierra Leone," a young boy nearby explained to Jed.

Soon after that, the music smoothly changed to Mongolian, and then Canadian.

When society constructs human nature...!
Let it go. Let free of your body. Move yourself.
Let it go. Let free of your body. Move yourself.

Then, all of a sudden, many of the musicians stopped playing, leaving only guitars and girls whispering in a way that reminded Jed of recorders.

"It’s your favorite music, it’s for you," someone whispered into Jed’s ear as he watched in awe.

As the guitars played and the girls hummed like recorders, some of the musicians started to sing.

There's a lady who's sure
All that glitters is gold
And she's buying a stairway to heaven

That familiar sound grabbed at his heart, and, all of a sudden, he was thinking of high school, of a day when he’d been sitting on the grass at a charity event with his friends, Joey, Steven and Kevin, listening to a band play that song...
Jed joined in the next verse. There were some places where he forgot the lyrics, but the more he sang the more the words came back to him, and he soon found himself able to accompany the singers without stopping.

In my thoughts I have seen
Rings of smoke through the trees
And the voices of those
Who stand looking

Two girls pushed him from behind and propelled him closer to the dancers and musicians, where someone had set up a drum kit for the other songs. The person sitting there got up and handed him the drumsticks and the girls indicated for him to take a seat. It had been long time since he had played the drums, but he was caught up in the energy of the moment, and joined in when the right moment came. As he drummed and music built, the people around him roared with excitement.

And a new day will dawn
For those who stand long
And the forests will
Echo with laughter

As he played, he sang along with others.

Dear lady, can you hear the wind blow?
And did you know
Your stairway lies on the whispering wind?
And she's buying a stairway
To heaven...

The song wound to a close, and Jed got up from behind the kit, grinning as everyone broke into applause.

That night, Jed slipped his tired body into cold cotton sheets. The linens had a faint scent of jasmine and soap. As he settled in, he could hear the wind blowing softly and branches rustling through the open window. Somewhere outside, a howl was hooting. Before he went to bed, he began to mentally compose a text message to Jason.

- In Baki+T, they eat mostly vegetables.

After he said it, he imagined he heard Jason’s response, and thought out a reply.

- Yes, even spinach. They make delicious juice out of spinach here.

Lying there, he thought he heard Jason’s reaction; ‘yuck!’

- All the dogs here are loose, they wander the streets and do what they want. No, they still may bite once in a while, but only if you are mean to them.

He touched a scar behind his right ear, thinking of the time when a dog had attacked him, back when he was just a little boy. He had always felt that Jason was afraid of dogs because he was reflecting Jed’s own fear. As Jed considered his role as a father, he thought back to the action that his own father had taken when he’d been attacked; the memory was vivid to him, even all these years later.

He must’ve first instinctively thought of protecting me, Jed reasoned. Somewhere in his mind he must have been calm enough to know that merely pulling the dog away would only tear my wound. Jed wondered that if he
spoke Baki+T, could he have been able to ask the trees to show the images that had probably disappeared from father’s head, but always stayed in the trees’ memories.

In his mind, Jed saw an image of a man grabbing a dog’s collar and yelling something incomprehensible. The man kept his eyes on the helpless boy and showed visible relief when the boy started to wail after a moment of stunned silence.

In spite of being in Baki+T, Jed was certain that the scenes unfolding in his head simply came from his own experience of the dog attack, of watching his father save him. At that moment, he abruptly realized that his situation satisfied all the perquisites necessary for being deluded and “brain-washed.” He was outnumbered. He was a stranger in the territory of ‘others.’

“But there hasn’t been sleep deprivation, he thought to himself. And when have I really been brainwashed?

He wondered why he had never been influenced by his father, never turned out like he had. Still thinking of his childhood, he recalled that when the local anesthesia injected behind his ear ran out, his father had berated him. “Don’t allow yourself to be attacked, OK?” he had snapped as Jed had been holding onto his ear, trying to stop the pain.

Thinking back, he couldn’t remember if his mother had been around when this had been said, whether she had done anything to stop it or not.

Animals can sense weakness. When they discover your weakness, some animals won’t hesitate to attack you.”

In retrospect, Jed could tell his father had applied this same philosophy to building his financial fortune. His father could tell which CEOs had the best ideas and the best strategies to win over investors and make profits. His father had consistently predicted the direction and trends
of the market, because he had such faith in his philosophy that strength was the greatest virtue of all. His father had been a strong man in the financial sense, and he’d been able to recognize strength in others; he’d created a fortune that way.

A swell of anger rose in his mind. He wasn’t entirely sure if it was because of his father, as usual, or because of the Students in class who had secretly mocked him.

“Don’t let them step over you,” his father would say. “You should always create an atmosphere in which you can beat others. Be strong. That’ll open up possibilities, and keep you on top.”

His mother, on the other hand, would probably just give a wry smile if she knew about this belated anger toward Furqan.

“Being in late is depicted as a good thing in Bible.”

To which his father would say, “We aren’t living in the Bible, we live in the real world, where we have to win.”

Jed shook his head, and consciously switched his thoughts back to the trees.

-Will I forget all about what happens to me in this place, just like the other visitors, the scholars, dieticians, engineers and spiritual seekers?

He didn’t hear any answer to his question.

-I don’t want to forget any of this. Even Furqan and his argument, or Damascene, who called me mediocre.

He felt tears falling onto his cheeks.

-Trees, trees...let me know what to do. I don’t want to forget any of this.

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The next day, they held class outside in the woods. It was Jed’s idea, although he found himself wondering if proximity to the trees would interfere with the Students’ ability to communicate amongst themselves.

“In a sense, it does,” Philippe answered him, via Kotoba’s interpretation.

“When I was going through a lot of emotional turmoil, it helped me to talk to a tree in the woods near my house,” he explained. All the Students and some of the Tiers knew exactly what he meant by “emotional turmoil.”

For a time, his wife, Karen, had continued to sleep with her ex-husband, even after her marriage to Philippe, an act that was grounded in her sense of weakness, her inability to let go of the past and her former self. Philippe had been able to picture them in bed together, and that had tortured him for years, until she finally broke off the binding. That was the fourth tree, a cypress, on the edge of the woods, which he had designated as “an advisor.”

-It may be easier for you to forgive her body, if not her, the Tree had said.

-But her body and her soul are in unity, Philippe answered, painfully imagining Karen’s ex-husband cupping her well-shaped breasts, and picturing her face as she groaned with pleasure.

-This is a test that Karen is putting you through.

-I hope she knows that this is a test for herself, too, Philippe said.

After that he went to the East Bank of the nearby river, where old taverns were lined up along the shore, and ordered a cheese plate and white wine. As he sat there, a little girl walked by and asked Philippe if he had seen her guinea pig. Philippe said “no,” and asked her what it looked like.
The girl answered that she did not know.

"That’s why I keep looking for it," she answered simply.

He asked if there was any specific guinea pig she had in mind. She shook her head, saying, “hmm....”

"Would you like a pink guinea pig?" Philippe asked. The girl giggled.

"What about green?" he pressed.

She answered looking straight into his eyes, “Hmm...hmm...there isn’t any such thing as a green guinea pig. I just want my guinea pig.”

"You know what I want?" Philippe said, “A girl like you. Exactly like you. In a pink dress and pink shoes, looking for a guinea pig.”

After the girl left, Philippe ate a piece of cheese. It tasted good. The glass of white wine was pleasantly chilled. The setting sun cast warmth and brightness onto the surface of the river.

He thought of his work. Soon, his team was going to receive the results of the test they’d conducted on a defective product, which had been recalled from shelves. He and his team had already hypothesized that a chemical instability had caused the disconnection of the chip on the product. They had yet to figure out what other chemical would be more stable, but they knew it was out there.

He went home and found Karen at the table, eating a salad and drinking Perrier. The fact that she didn’t eat dinner with her ex-husband made Philippe feel a little better, but it remained hard for him to look at her. She was so beautiful, and it was all spoiled by her selfish lust, a lust that he knew he had, too.

“I know who you were with,” Philippe said, looking outside through the window. In the glass, he saw a reflection of Karen standing with bland and downcast eyes.

“I just wanted you to know that it gives me tremendous pain,” he said.
“I know somewhere in your mind you want me to be in pain, because that will make you feel how valuable you are.” He continued taking care to watch the tone of his voice. He felt resentment coming from Karen, and he knew it was because he had yelled at her for this before, and now she was bracing herself for his anger. Once, she had shouted back at him that he couldn’t sexually satisfy her.

He took a deep breath, and looked back at Karen as she stood up and walked to the sink with her plate. She started to set it down in the bottom of the sink, and Philippe could tell she was thinking of leaving the room. Then she reconsidered and rinsed the plate, as if trying to regain a small measure of order in her life.

“I’m a mess,” she had said.

While the memory raced through Philippe’s head, some Students opted to fall into their own memories, while others followed Philippe’s. Jed, of course, didn’t even have the choice, but he could at least sense he shouldn’t disturb them.

-He is somewhat weak as a leader….

-But sensitivity counts here more than initiative, or strength. The Tiers were whispering.

“You can say something, Jed,” Mead spoke up from her reclining couch, which she had discovered by scanning all the furniture in the country. The owner of the couch, a couple who had just lost their aging father, had woken up that morning, looked at each other in bed and said,

“Someone needs our couch.”

“Yes, the one your father was always sitting on,” the wife said.

“Who is this someone?”

“You know a class is being held at the University. One of the Students
is apparently very old.”

“Do you think she selected our couch?”

By then, they’d left the bedroom and were standing in the middle of the living room, looking down at the old couch with a reclining function.

“I guess so. Remember? Dad always said this leans back at just the right angle.”

“Why would she need a class, if she already knows how to tap in our heads?”

But still, they pushed their couch through the open door and waited until the two dispatchers from the Ministry of Education arrived. The men pulled up in a white Sienna, which had been converted from a hybrid car to entirely electric.

“She doesn’t need a class,” one of them said as they loaded the couch.

“We need her in the class.”

Now Jed was talking with Mead as she lay on that same couch. He didn’t know that last night she had a hard time falling asleep because of too much bowel movement, but he could tell she looked feebler than the day before.

“Tell me, what should I say,” he asked Mead.

“You were wondering what the role of the photosynthesizer is,” she said.

The Students were all laughing, because one of them had communicated, -That’s the conversation stopper, not the starter!

“We don’t know,” Vikulya said through Kotoba, who was sitting on the grass at the edge of the circle.

“Jed, Amrita is suggesting that we go through what photosynthesis does in scientific terms,” Damascene said.

It took a few seconds for Jed to recall that one of the Students was a woman tapping from somewhere in South Asia. The Students seemed to be
pondering Amrita’s question, apparently in conversation with those outside, including a Baki+T scholar of photosynthesis in China. With that knowledge inaccessible to him, Jed decided to focus on his own understanding of photosynthesis. The memory of an experiment in science class in junior high school came to him; they’d placed waterweed in test tubes, wrapped one tube with aluminum foil and kept the other untouched, and then checked on them to see how the color changed...  

“Why don’t you say that to Jed, Tadej?”  

Jed looked at Damascene, who had raised his voice to the Student. Tadej glanced toward Jed and spoke, with Kotoba translating. “It isn’t a big deal. I just thought I did the same experiment at school.”  

“Oh...” Jed said to him, “Using different test tubes?”  

“No. Ours was simpler. We put aluminum foil around a leaf on...you know...some kind of plant in the school yard.”  

“Then his bicycle was stolen,” Vikulya said. Tadej laughed. “And my bicycle was stolen after that, yes.”  

“So your memory of photosynthesis is pretty much associated with a stolen bicycle?” Jed asked Tadej, still laughing.  

He had hoped that speaking casually would narrow the distance between them, but instead, he found himself facing a heavy silence from all of the Students. Kotoba and some others gave a strong sigh, almost in unison. Jed became extremely uncomfortable, and he abruptly felt that it was unfair for him to be totally outnumbered by these ‘Tiers,’ who could all participate in something he couldn’t.  

“What is this about? Tell me,” Jed asked in a stern tone of voice. Kotoba sat down and began picking grass, his face gone sour. “You are the one outnumbering us,” he said. “Valentine wants me to tell you that.” Mia spoke next, and was translated, “You outnumber all of us, because you
have the support of the trees."

"And that means 'shut-up,' too..." Damascene said, waving his hands over his head to indicate he was speaking to the people "out there."

As if reading Jed’s mind, which was baffled by Valentine’s words, Yuan-Yuan spoke up, giving him a reprieve from his confusion. "Let’s continue the discussion of photosynthesis. That is..." Her clear and loud voice overlapped with Kotoba’s quiet tones as he translated for her.

"Photosynthesis is the process that converts carbon dioxide into organic compounds using the energy from sunlight. In addition to maintaining normal levels of oxygen in the atmosphere, nearly all life either depends on it directly as a source of energy, or indirectly as the ultimate source of the energy they get from their food."

Furqan took over the narrative, speaking in heavily accented English. "The amount of energy trapped by photosynthesis is immense, approximately one hundred..."

"Terawatts," Kotoba interrupted. "Sorry. I shouldn’t have taken over, but it isn’t gigawatts, which is what you were going to say."

Silence fell again, as if a wet blanket had been cast over the whole class. As they paused awkwardly, a girl exited the school building and walked toward Mead, who had stood up and begun to murmur to herself.

"I have to go," Kotoba began interpreting for her, breaking the quiet.

"But before I leave, I’d like to suggest that the class think about what Yuan-Yuan and the other Students said about photosynthesis, about energy from sunlight. Photosynthesis is vital for the Earth. All life depends on it... ."

Jed and the Students watched Mead be led away by the girl, back towards the room where she was staying.

"The girls are taking turns," someone explained, referring to Mead’s
caretakers, who helped her with everything from dressing to bathing.

Jed wasn’t listening, and most of the Students were preoccupied with
discussing whether or not they should reveal some of Mead’s background.

-It would explain what she just said; it would give her words
authenticity.

-Jed seems to respect her and her words enough already.

-But he doesn’t know any of our backgrounds. He doesn’t know my house
was bombed and my girls are still suffering from the trauma.

-He doesn’t know Valentine’s hands were almost cut off by a
revolutionary group, either.

-Why should he know about Mead, then?

The specific experience of Mead being debated, known to the Students
but not Jed, was her 90th birthday party, when she had announced to her
family that she would no longer take care of her grandchildren, or her
great-grandchildren. This declaration astounded her four sons, especially
the three of them who were married with families. They had gotten used
to having Mead around to tend their children, it had saved them from
spending money on nannies. Above all else, they believed that they had
been doing her a favor by giving her something to do with her time. They
were all worried that she would decline into senility if she stopped looking
after her grandchildren or great-grandchildren.

“Mom, what are you going to do with your time? You’re still so healthy.”

“I know your back bothers you. But that’s why you wanted us to put a
bunch of toys in your house, so you can just sit and watch the kids play.”

“If you want to take a nap, take a nap. The kids are big enough now
to take care of themselves for...oh, for an hour.”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. I won’t get senile,” she said. “I just want
to spend my time and the remaining protein in my brain on more important
things before they ‘poof,’ disappear…”

“What do you mean?” they all asked.

By then, other visitors at the party had gathered round to listen.

“I’ll pray for world peace!” she said loudly.

If there was anyone there who had laughed at that, it was because they did not know Mead very well. Those who were close to her recognized that she was serious, and knew that she had deliberately chosen this venue to announce her plans. Among those in the crowd was Hanna-Maria Gray, a genocide victim who had recently been reunited with Mead, through a survivor society.

At her sudden announcement, her son Shep, the only child still unmarried, thought back to one morning when his mother had called and asked him to take her to the local library. She’d wanted to find the address of a man named Hans Kollman. At the library, she first looked at the enlarged map of Poland and then asked Shep to pull out the microfilm of the Polish yellow pages for a place called Czestochowa. There were three Hans Kollmans in the town and his mother wrote down all the numbers on her memo pad. Somewhere in his mind, Shep knew that his mother had already decided which one of them she wanted to write to.

In his car, on the way back to her apartment, neither of them had talked much. Shep knew what was expected of him in moments like that, his mother had always made it clear. It was a moment of “don’t ask any questions.”

“Well…everyone needs forgiveness,” Mead said as she stepped out of the car. She had a hard time getting up from the seat, but he didn’t offer her a hand, knowing she would refuse it.

“Mom,” he called after her. “Is that the executioner who killed grandma?”

His mother paused for a long moment before turning around. A fire truck
approached down the road. Mead waited for it to pass by, leaving a Doppler
effect in its wake, before she asked, “Well... do you have to know?”

“I don’t have to know, but I do want to know,” Shep said. He thought
of his own life, which had been poisoned by the grudge he held towards
a colleague who had stolen a promotion from him. He glanced at his mother,
who had now placed her arm on the roof of his car and was looking into
his eyes through her dangling fingers. He realized that she had come to
her own resolution to let go of her grudge a long time ago.

“Well... let’s say he is. Although he wasn’t the one who was responsible
for it, directly,” Mead answered, and that was all she would say on the
subject.

A couple months later, Shep had found an unopened letter on his mother’s
coffee table, and he could tell by the “Polska” on the stamp where it was
from. He knew there was no point in opening the envelope, the letter was
probably written in Polish. In any case, Mead had walked into the room,
and said, as if it was nothing special, “My letter has arrived on time.”

“On time for what?” Shep asked, feeling tension rise in his chest.

“On time before he passed away.”

So now, Shep thought bitterly, Hans Kollman could die knowing that at
least one of the families of people he executed forgave him.

“His son wrote to me to say that his father wanted to call me to apologize
directly, but they couldn’t find my phone number.”

All these things were running through Shep’s mind as he stood there
at his mother’s 90th birthday, listening to her decide to spend her time
praying for world peace.

Shep looked at his mother’s wrinkled face with a sad smile while she
was telling to people.

“I don’t know what my prayer would do about changing the world,” she
said, “It probably wouldn’t make any difference at all. But I think I really will pray, for my family’s sake and my own. Whatever it means.”

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During the break, refreshments, such as cut-fruits, roasted nuts, dry beans and diced tofu steak were served in the hallway. Each one of the dishes set out for serving was unique. Jed was wondering if those were also imported from developing countries. Somewhere in his mind, he was wondering which was better for the environment: washing the dishes with detergent, which would contaminate the ocean or using compostable dishes.

However, his mind was mostly preoccupied with thoughts he had felt in the air during the class; irritated faces of a few students, the wry smile of Tadej and Yuan-Yuan, and Damascene waving over his head saying, “shut-up.” He sensed that something was going on behind him.

—So many people here, who were supposed to hire me, would like to see me falling apart. Would that be possible? Of course! What made me think so naively? So many people are malicious… It’s not surprising that most Tiers are malicious!

At that moment, he caught a glance of Kip who was crossing the courtyard.

—Hey, Kip!

Jed said in his mind, but Kip didn’t turn his face. There were several students and a few faculties in the hallway. Jed felt that they were silently looking at him with curiosity.

—Professor, has he shut down his communication?

He asked in his mind to a middle-aged professor type man standing in the
hallway with his student.

He looked up at him and said in a disinterested tone of voice.

“ ‘I don’t know... Actually... nope, he hasn’t cut down the communication. He’s making it wide open!’”

“ ‘Until now.’”

The girl took over her teacher’s words looking at Jed over her shoulder. Jed looked at the back of Kip who seemed to run away from him with a flurry. All of a sudden Jed noticed that Kip was nothing but an official of the Ministry of Education. In the end he was just a bureaucrat. Jed recalled Kip’s face with beads of perspiration when Kip had asked metaphysical questions.

―If Kip is not on my side, who should I turn to?

Jed was thinking when he heard a man’s voice from behind him. Jed looked back and saw Furqan was standing there.

“ ‘They are slaughtering a lamb for me now.’” Jed had to ask twice what he had said due to his strong accent.

“ ‘I told them I cannot live like this; tofu, bean sprout, nuts,... millet?? What are we? Birds or something? I said this adamantly ‘I need Shish Kebab!’’”

Jed finally understood that Furqan was talking about the food served for the Students.

“ ‘Yeah, they have to meet our pagan spec,’ Kotoba joined their conversation putting a few almonds in his month and said, “Do you think they’ll slaughter a cow for me? For my favorite Kobe beef hamburger?”

“ ‘I don’t know. You know those dogs wandering around? Poor dogs! They can sense when other animals are butchered! They go berserk all day!’

“ ‘It must be awful for their sensitive noses. The smell of blood!’”

Jed looked at Kotoba and Furqan with puzzlement. Two questions arose in
Jed’s head.

-Don’t they know my concern?

And

-Do people slaughter animals each time guests are here, instead of buying them at a supermarket?

“The answer is yes to both.” Vikulya had appeared and poured water filled with lemon slice in her cup, which she had brought from home.

“You mean they slaughter animals when they have guests from outside the country.” Feeling some kind of relief without exactly knowing what was going on, Jed continued his question.

“They don’t have a supermarket,” Damascene joined and said,

“It’s like my country.” Valentine jumped at Damascene from behind. Damascus said his words out loud for him.

“I’ve been to a supermarket in your country.” Kotoba said to Valentine.

“Choitram? You went to Choitram!” Damascene said for Valentine. Not sure, whose comments were whose, Jed looked at Valentine. He was laughing and shaking his head. “I’ll never go to Choitram. Ever.” Damascus’s voice overlapped. Kotoba explained it’s a supermarket in Valentine’s home country.

At that moment, Jed heard a clamor in the hallway. He heard a girl screaming and then a man’s deep voice followed by the yelling of crowds.

“You are all fake!!”

Jed saw a young man with blood on his nose lying on the floor with his head against the wall. He also saw a tall man getting pulled off the young man’s body.

It took a while before Jed realized that the tall man was Philippe and he had just knocked down the young man.

“Fake scholar! Whore! Impotents! Beggar! Psychotic! You’re all losers!
You can never change the world!"

-Fake scholar? Me?

Jed didn’t pay attention to some Students who flinched at the young man’s words.

-This is great! Now I can start a fight without degrading myself by yelling back at him!

Jed thought in his mind and stood next to the buttocks of the young man to stare down at him.

He firmly said in his mind,

-Hey kid! Watch your words. I’m not even a fake scholar, because I’m not a scholar. I’m not any scholar, period. I’m a librarian, OK? About changing the world? You go back to your mom and suck her breasts and ask mom if you can change the world! She’ll assure you, sure you can! In your own comfort zone! Never get out of there and bother us!

The crowd who was watching Philippe calmed down and walked away while the young man continued to grumble something.

Jed found in his mind that without saying things out loud, it was easier for him to keep his cool. On the way back to class, Yuan-Yuan talked to Jed through Kotoba’s interpreting.

“I liked what you just said to him in your mind, but he never understood it. He doesn’t read people’s minds. He doesn’t speak Baki+T.”

-Oh, he doesn’t? Why is that?

“Maybe at some point he was cut off by the trees. Or he may not be a type trees would even bother to do so. Purely looking at what he did, it’s pretty benign. Immaturity. Philippe knocked him down (because you know, he never had a chance to do it to his wife’s ex-husband), but he didn’t have to. He did that, because he enjoyed it.”

“People are cut off from communication by trees due to more
serious ‘crimes’. That’s what she wants to say.”

Vikulya said out loud again through Kotoba.

“What he said was all gossip. That’s nothing. It’s not even a ‘crime’ from the trees’ perspective. When the kid said ‘whore,’ he meant me, because I’m a singer at a night club and used to sleep around with men. Not any more... but I’m still going out with a married man. He heard that from other kids who can read our minds and just expressed all the gossip behind this class.”

“You know what you felt just before the class...? That wasn’t simply gossip or negativity.” Damascene said. “There’s a lot of ‘talk’ out there. Many Baki+T ‘guys’ out there are always whispering and chatting... They want to see us all fail.”

“They want to see you fail, Jed.” Tadej said through Kotoba.

“I thought you wanted to see him fail.” Damascene said.

“Yes, somewhere in my mind, I do. So I’ll tell him what he should do to fail.”

The whole class, now sitting on the grass in the woods, burst into laughter.

“I thought you didn’t give a damn about me, Tadej!” Jed said out loud.

“No, I don’t give a damn about you, Jed, so I’ll tell you what to do to fail...”

“Just give up.”

Everyone looked back at Mia who was resting her chin on her hands, lying on her belly and staring into the air. Jed didn’t know that some Students wished Mead had been there with her to hold her hand. She was the Tier whom Mia had trusted most. The communication from her had been cut off since she had disappeared behind the door with the girl.

“It’s so simple. Let’s just give up. Let’s all look at the reality. I barely could make it here.”
“But you made it here resisting all those words...” Vikulya said through Kotoba.

“What were the words?” Jed asked,

“You had never been out of your father’s house for seven years. How could you make it overseas?” Yuan-Yuan said the words for Mia and added,

“But you did, Mia.”

“What are the other words you would hear?

Jed asked the other students.

“You need economy and peace to achieve the mission. These guys have it, we don’t.” Furqan said about the tapping he had heard.

“What’s the point of talking about Hiroshima?” Kotoba said.

“All the other people are happy and content simply enjoying life. Why can’t I?” Philippe said.

“That’s right. I still don’t see what’s wrong with it? I’ve been telling the trees, ‘I’m gonna use this mind-reading thing only for my benefit. I’ll become rich. But I’ll promise I’ll return the profit to society. But I have a feeling that I won’t.” Yuan-Yuan said.

“This is totally crazy. How could I even believe that Baki+T exists. That’s what Amrita was saying,” Damascene said about another Student tapping from her home country.

“Mead never gave up.” Mia said in a faint voice.

“That’s right. She never did.” Said Damascene.

“She told me she had never doubted that she would be out of the camp. She never thought that such insanity would last forever.”

The Students saw in Jed’s mind, a recurring flash of a memory of the number tattooed on her arm.

“Where did I see it? And how didn’t I ever recall it until now?”

He was wondering.
“Valentine never gave up.” Damascene said turning his head toward the teenager. Everyone looked at the young man, who was gazing in the air without any facial expression.

*****

This is Valentine’s story.

Valentine’s memory of his childhood was all in the rain forest. That was where his mother, Fatmata, and their friend’s family were hiding during the civil war. Later, on one of those occasions, when Valentine acted reasonably despite his complicated juvenile days, his mother said to her friends, “Valentine saved our lives, by running into and getting lost in the forest. While we were living there, he was the one who always knew where to find food. He was a great hunter. Without him, Kai and I would have been raped, and all of our kids would have been sent to a child soldier camp or into prostitution.”

Valentine was born with impaired hearing, so he could not talk either, in an environment where no speech therapy was available.

However, he knew the air of war was coming to his district since he was a baby. That came in the form of a black breeze, which had appeared from nowhere, and whenever he felt that breeze appear, he would run to his mother. He was scared, but the only thing he could do was cling to his mother’s skirt. The people around them, who were mostly women, thought he was just a momma’s baby. His mother, Fatmata, was not beautiful, but was a loving woman. Like other women in the village, she worked hard not only for herself, but for the community and expected Valentine would do the same. Since she did not hesitate to help other people, she did not have any problem in getting help from others when their tin roof leaked
or when part of the wall of their hut crumbled. Later, when he was able to read people’s minds, Valentine found that most people were not as giving as her. Unlike his mother who forgot what she did to other people by the end of the day, other people remembered what they gave or did and would be resentful if the same amount was not returned in some form. He also found that oddly enough, the same people, who would remember the favor they did, often helped more than they did for Fatmata, because her mentality affected those people.

There were always rumors about the war. However, in his village, which was on a small island, people knew that the war would start when rebels landed on their island. Each day, villagers believed that it would not happen on that particular day, even though they were painfully aware of the destiny of their lives. For adults, it was like waiting for a death sentence, but for the kids, the reality of war was more like nausea. Boys would say, “If the rebels find us, they will chop off parts of our bodies,” while girls said, “They would force us to put their big pee pee into a hole in our bodies.”

In Valentine’s inner ear, premonition of the war was sensed like the distant roar of thunder. That sound, which his deaf ears could not actually hear, was carried by trees. However, kids were busy playing or helping their adults work. When it came to play, Valentine would lead his closest friend, who did not bully his deafness, to the forest and showed him the spot where they could find the most beautiful butterflies and birds. He could be in and out of the rain forest without ever being lost there.

One morning, he was woken by a whisper, which commanded him to run. He had no idea where it came from, but he immediately awoke his mother and got up from a straw mat. He led his mother and dashed toward the forest on the yellow and dusty road. He wanted their friends who were living in
the same hut to come along with them, but he could not talk and he knew there was no time to spare.

"Where are you going?" his mother asked.

By that time, Fatmata was vaguely aware of her son’s super-natural ability, because he always knew what she wanted him to do and did it before she said anything. She and people in the village believed it was because of his deafness and disease, which made his body convulse and mouth froth. When that happened he was soothed when his mother would say, "Now he is new again."

In the forest, they sat at the bottom of a big tree and listened to small yellow bird singing until they realized that they were extremely hungry. Again, Valentine led his mother and went to the nearby creek. His mother was thinking that Valentine and other boys must have often played in the forest, because he knew how to get around. He tried to catch a fish with his bare hands, but his mother said, "wait," and started to look for a branch. She found one of a proper length, peeled the skin from one end, and started to stab the fish, which were swimming in the creek.

"I don’t like fish, but we have to get used to this." He was aware that his mother had already known what to expect in the future.

While spending their first two days in the forest, Valentine had been suffering from nightmares, where village people were slaughtered by rebel soldiers who looked exactly like the villagers themselves using machetes. He woke up with sweat all over his face and clung to his mother who was dozing in a shallow sleep. A few days later, they went back to the village again following Valentine’s instinct to find his mother’s friend with whom they had lived, killed by a rebel. Her kids were at their uncle’s home.

"You should live with us." Fatmata with broken heart proposed to the kids and their uncle, who did not protest. When the kids tried to leave
the hut, the uncle’s wife Marie followed them and asked Fatmata if that was OK for them that she stayed. The mother consented saying, “Valentine would lead us to a safe spot in the rain forest when the rebel comes again.” And they again hid in the safe spot for a few weeks.

When he thought back, mysteriously enough, his childhood memory in the rain forest was not any worse than staying in the village, because he no longer had to work in the field to help grownups to harvest cassava and rice, which grew meagerly. He attributed that somewhat calm mind despite the nightmare to the trees’ support. He was always hungry and on the alert, but so were most people in the village even after peace arrived. It was dangerous to live near the creek, because rebels knew that villagers who escaped into the forest would live nearby for access to water. So they put together branches and made nest-like rooms for each of them on top of trees so that they could escape when Valentine sensed that the rebels were coming. He knew where to go in the forest to look for good trees to live in. He forgot how much time had passed when he was looking at a large family of Chimpanzees. When he woke up in the morning in wet dew, the first thing he smelled was flowers. They did not have any condiments, but they always looked forward to eating bird eggs he had found from the forest. They also ate bugs raw, because they couldn’t make fire, worrying that a rebel army would see it from the far distance. He sensed that trees occasionally sent signals to him when it was safe to go to the village and take food from storage bins of houses.

When that happened he set off running toward the village while sobbing so that his thoughts would give no room to lose heart from fear. He silently wailed while trotting until he reached the edge of the rain forest at the entrance of the village. Once he was in the village, he kept gazing upon the street and followed the guidance of his hunch hoping that no one would
notice him, because someone may interrogate him and ask where he came from. While he was collecting food in an old bag he carried, he kept sobbing again from fear. He went back to the village for food every three weeks without raising anyone’s attention in the village.

After peace came to the country, his life in the forest, and more precisely, his memory of communication with trees was completely lost.

When they got out of the forest, he had a chance to get a small Walkman. Like many other kids, he did not know how old he was when the peace came, but later in a hospital in a bigger city, he was registered as a twelve-year-old kid.

A few days after they went back to the village, his distant cousin took him to a public gathering, where a man with a bright purple jacket poured fuel over a pile of guns and set them on fire. At the square in the village, Valentine reunited with his uncle whom he noticed among the rebels when he went back home to take some food. The fire started fast and furious almost burning that man’s purple jacket. Men standing there all quietly watched, looking at the blaze as if pondering over their lost ten years. A man almost started to cheer and then subsided. No one said anything.

At the end of the ceremony, when some people started to leave, Valentine hoped in his mind that people would read a creed. As if his thoughts were conveyed, his uncle started to recite the national pledge. All the other men followed.

“I pledge my love and loyalty to my country.
I vow to serve her faithfully at all times.
I promise to defend and honor her good name.
Always work for her unity, peace, freedom and prosperity.
And put her interest above all else,
So help me God.”

After that, Valentine and his group of people who stayed in the forest were sent to a hospital in a bigger city on the mainland to take care of their extreme malnutrition. The first thing that attracted his attention when he stepped into the building was the stark white color of the bandages, which children were wrapping on their hands. He realized that they were the same color as the fluorescent light on the ceiling, which he saw for the first time. The hospital walls and nurses’ clothes were also white. The color made him feel somewhat uneasy.

Many kids had their hands, ears, or toes cut off by rebel soldiers. Valentine found his cousin, Mariatu, with her hands also chopped off. Mariatu smiled feebly when she saw Valentine. She always teased his deafness, but Valentine genuinely felt happy to see her despite her impaired body and sensed that she felt the same way.

On the second day when he was lying on the bed with an IV tube in his arm, a nurse came into his room and gave him a small device. It was a hearing aid. When he could hear all the surrounding sounds, he was surprised to know that he could hear the sounds closest to him the most clearly. In the silence, he often felt that he heard the distant sounds most clearly, like a leaf floating in the air, mango fruits landing on the ground, or birds chirping in the far distant woods. He also noticed that what grownups said aloud and what they thought in their minds were different, and often opposites of each other. He also noticed that those who said nice things verbally seemed to be respected and liked. His Baki+T listening ability gradually faded, but he did not care that much, because that was how “normal” people lived. Mariatu also encouraged him to erase the sound of the whispers from trees.
“When you were deaf, maybe you were a little mad.” She said. “Now you have to practice erasing those sounds.”

Instead, he started to focus more on what he could see or how he looked in other peoples’ eyes rather than his inner listening. Mariatu was pretty, so Valentine decided to follow her advice.

At the hospital, other than the kids who were treated, there was another group of about eight kids who looked older than the group of kids who stayed at their villages or refugee camps. They were sent by the Peace Corps, which were looking after young children, but Valentine heard from Mariatu that those were kids who used to be child soldiers and grownups were expecting that they would regain their lost childhood by spending time with regular kids.

“They were at a rehabilitation center.” Mariatu whispered into the hearing aid in his right ear. “They had to drain all kinds of drugs and gun powder out of their bodies. They screamed when the drugs drained out of their bodies.”

“Gun powder?” To Valentine’s question, Mariatu nodded smugly.

“They sniffed that to keep themselves awake all the time. They killed so many people. Unlike us who were in hiding, they were courageous.” Valentine suddenly recalled those times when he ran back to the village wailing from fear to take food from food storages. He had to keep running before the cowardice caught up with him. He wanted to tell Mariatu that it required courage, but could not, worried that she would shut him up, saying that it was not courage, as long as he was crying. He also thought killing people, of course, seemed to require more courage.

Valentine’s attention was especially drawn to a boy named Abdul. Most of the time, he was listening to rap music with his group of friends and dancing in the front yard. Some of them were circling on their heads or
buttocks. Abdul was especially good at balancing his body on one arm. He did not seem to talk much. Valentine saw him practicing dancing late at night in the back yard. He would not dare talk to him. When a boxful of donated clothing was presented to the kids, Abdul carefully looked at each article of clothing and picked up the one that looked most cool. He had been wearing black shoes, black belt and a black Walkman.

After Valentine went back to the village, he started to hang around the kids dancing to music. They also knew how to get cool T-shirts and clothes from local churches and synagogues.

"Since coming out of the forest, you have become more like your father," Fatmata complained. "There are two kinds of men. Ones with faith who keep working and the others without faith who hang around without doing anything."

Valentine compared himself who survived in the forest to the children who used to be child soldiers. Since he had lost the sound of Baki+T and had no idea what nightmare those children had suffered, it seemed like there was no difference between them. In the same manner, working ten times harder than other people like some village grownups did not seem to make much difference from those people who did not.

*****

The next day, Kip took Jed to the site of a power plant and a so-called typical Baki+T residence. Jed gave some homework to the students, which was to meditate and explain what the role of the photosynthesizer was.

Kip showed him a hand-held device connected to a built-in inlet in the glove compartment. The device displayed the current mph and the remaining hours of electricity.
“That reminds me of the DOS era.” Jed said about its green and white display.

“My car is fairly old. It’s a mini-cooper turned into an electric. This is a second-generation electric car. It was already possible to click on icons when this came out, but our technician could not integrate it on this device at the time. The new model has a touch-screen type hand-held, with color coded icons.”

Kip explained without looking at Jed’s eyes. Not able to read his mind, Jed could tell that he was embarrassed about running away from him a day before. Other than the outdated display, all the changes made on the Cooper showed good workmanship as if it were made in a large factory.

Kip remembered the boy who was eager to hold his hand when he had entered the country. Jed felt that it had happened a long time ago. He recalled that the boy said his father was a mechanic. Jed wondered if he had worked on it.

“No, it wasn’t Kevin who worked on it. It was Rosa.” Kip said while starting the car.

“A woman?”

“I know there aren’t so many female mechanics outside of the country, but we pretty much have an equal number of women in all occupations. Women are more detail oriented, I think, and many of them aren’t reticent to search other mechanics’ mind to come up with better solution, unlike man who are too proud to do so. There were three mechanics who worked on the first and second generations. Two others were male. Those guys exposed the battery like a dead fish showing all its guts, but Rosie only made a little hole to access it. You don’t even notice that there are batteries back there.” He pointed behind his back.

“How many hours would the battery last, if you were to leave your car
plugged in over night?"

"If you don’t go out of the country and drive on the highway, pretty much all day. My wife’s friend likes Trader Joes, so she goes out to drive to Petaluma. She said that after coming back home, the battery can still run for about an hour or two. Our county building has a plug-in station for workers, so we can plug in our cars during the day. I plug in my car there just in case, but even if I don’t, I’m sure I can make it back home all right."

Jed felt Kip’s earnest personality in his detailed explanation and felt sorry for a moment that he had thought Kip was only a bureaucrat.

-I’m a city official, too.

Jed pondered. However, he could get out of his routine work fairly easily. He didn’t mind having a different routine now and then. Or rather, he would prefer if it if his routine changed periodically. This made him feel somewhat superior to Kip, who could not handle any matter outside his protocol.

-That was why I was chosen by the trees.

He thought about that for a moment, then suddenly felt ashamed and recalled that, according to the perspective of the world outside, Kip was in a much higher position than Jed, who was a mere librarian. Jed never felt that Kip had patronized him, which would have been the case in many situations outside.

-Did I just follow the thought process, because I know Kip can read my mind?

He wondered. Kip didn’t say anything.

-Kip, does it affect the human mind when it knows that it is read?

He asked this internal question to Kip, but he didn’t answer.

-It’s OK. Jed thought. -The Students will tell me if it’s an important
question for them.

Jed didn’t know that Kip’s mind was preoccupied, communicating with a solar engineer working outside of Baki+T.

“Usually, I’m not the one who explains all these technical things when we bring scholars and environmental groups here.”

Kip said while parking in front of a group of large dish-shaped structures built on the rocky hill facing the ocean.

“I’m merely transferring the explanation that the engineer tapped to me.”

“How many of those people do you have each year? How many visitors do you have?” Jed asked, quickly realizing that the answers to those kinds of questions would not stay in his head for long.

“You’re right.” Kip looked at Jed smiling. “That’s the kind of information that’ll definitely be erased from your head within a day or two, but let’s see... we have about a thousand visitors to this country each year besides workers from outside, such as service technicians and dispatchers.”

“And all memories about your country are erased?”

“Erased isn’t a good choice of words. Maybe repressed... held back.”

“Someone told me that the trees choose who comes into this country.”

“That’s right.”

“What are the criteria to be chosen? When do they come?”

“Most of these people come when an important technology transfer occurs. People came when the conversion to the electric car was a hot thing. Lately it’s been solar. We -including non-Tiers- believe that solar is the renewable energy with the highest potential for growth. Wind power needs movable parts and is noisy. It depends too much on erratic weather conditions.”
They stepped onto the foothold built at the bottom of the cliff. All the solar dishes were facing the same direction, as if they had a common mission to do so.

“It’s extremely hot there, on the surface of the dish. It gets as high as 800 degree C.”

“Oh, do these belong to PG&E?”

Jed asked with surprise, when he noticed the logo on the fence.

“Yes. It’s a big secret. No. It isn’t... You could talk to a PG&E guy and ask, ‘Do you own the dish systems in Baki+T?’ He would probably answer, ‘Sure, we do. We cover the whole country.’ Then next moment, he would forget what you had just said. PG&E is our utility company. We’re ahead of the outside world when it comes to renewable energy. We can now cover 60% of our energy usage with renewable sources. Out there in the US, they are trying to achieve 3% by 2013.”

Jed looked over the shining surface of the ocean. A pair of falcons were flying over the waves. He wondered if Baki+T would also become a leader of ocean energy without anyone noticing.

“Eventually we will.” Kip said. “Right now, wave power has more technical issues to overcome than solar. The first commercial wave power plant is in Portugal, but the project stalled due to the financial crisis. We consider solar energy to be more suitable and reliable for our needs anyway, because it produces energy when it is most necessary.”

“You mean hot summer days.”

“That’s right.”

Kip was apparently merely conveying the message from a Baki+T engineer, but he was speaking without stammering to show that he was used to that mode of communication.

“Out there, solar panels are more common than this CSP, (Concentrated
Solar Power). We started to pay attention to CSP much earlier, because of the conversion rate. The solar to electricity conversion rate, is much higher and suitable for utility level power generation.”

“How do you get financing?”

“Through the PPA; that’s the Power Purchase Agreement. This portion is a big secret. We have better tax incentives than they do outside. Sixty percent is covered by taxes instead of thirty percent, like the rest of California. We can get tax credit investors with higher tax appetites like your father, Neil.”

Jed almost slipped from his foothold when he heard his father’s name.

“My dad? Does he invest in the Power Purchase Agreement? Does he partly own this system?”

“For five years, yes. Until his investment is paid back through accelerated depreciation. After that, PG&E will own it.”

Jed was hoping that he would remember this later, so he could tell his father that he actually owns dish CSP in Baki+T.

-Is he aware of that? He wondered.

“Probably... no he doesn’t.” That sudden change in his answer made Jed wonder if Kip had just tapped into his father’s head. “His mind is preoccupied with a higher return investment. If I continue... Out there, the parabolic trough is the most common technology used for CSP. You know, they set tons of receivers that receive sunrays in a large field, but we have limited land, so we use dish technology, which can be built pretty much anywhere. Like this kind of steep slope.”

“Why don’t they use dishes out there more often?”

“It’s mainly a structural issue. This guy has a big head. It’s a very heavy dish on that structure. You need a fairly sophisticated civil engineering brain to prevent it from toppling over in a windy place like
“You have that brain.”

“Me?” Kip laughed.

“No. You have that brain in your country.”

“This particular civil engineering was done by a non-Tier. We had him fly from Tunisia.”

“Tunisia!”

“Remember, we can scan brains from all over the world.”

“And you again picked a developing country?”

“No. In this case, we chose him purely because of his ability. The Sousse University in Tunis produces good engineers.”

They returned to Kip’s car and headed to the next destination.

“Shannon is ready to talk with you.”

Kip said and drove a few miles inland to the zero-emission house.

Jed was thinking about energy, and what Mead had said yesterday. “Think about energy from sunlight. That’s what photosynthesis does.”

“How is she doing?”

Jed was concerned about her frail, aging body.

“She is…” Kip sounded like he was choking. “She is… fine. In her own state of mind… she is…”

Jed was worried that Kip might close his eyes while driving, so he could tap with Mead.

“She is sitting with the Students in the woods while they are tapping with each other about the role of photosynthesis.”

“Oh, good.” Jed sighed.

“She tells me that you should come up with your own answer to that question about the role of a photosynthesizer.”

—I was going to…
Jed was thinking when he saw a woman standing at the entry of a small house, which had solar panels on its roof.

"Here is Shannon." Kip said, "She is a light engineer."

Again, light! Jed thought.

*****

Jed woke up with a chill breeze coming from the ocean through the window. Four nights had passed since the class had started and each night he could sleep deeper than ever before. He attributed that to the pitch-dark night of this country that had no streetlights. Jed left the window open, but many Tiers believed that they should sleep “in total darkness where you cannot even see your own hands.”

He remembered the zero emission house, which Kip took him to. The way they take advantage of light through sky-lights; the indented plastic cover on the sky-lights to avoid the direct sun; the highest quality insulation; floor heating from pipes underneath the house… Each house had similar features, but with unique layouts, because each house was built avoiding cutting down the surrounding trees and cultivated terrain.

“We have to take time cutting branches so we have clear exposure to the sun on the roof.” Shannon said.

“Don’t people hate this inconvenience?”
To that question, Shannon asked Kip, “What do you think? Do we abhor inconvenience? Or are we more circumspect when it comes to convenience? Thanks to your ‘education’?”

“It requires training. Mental training. To place the earth as our first priority.” Kip answered.

Another feature, which each house came with was a window blind, which made
the bedroom pitch dark.

“Mine is pretty primitive. Behind this wood board... see under the fabric? Here, touch it. There is an inner pad that fills the gap between the blinds.” Shannon had Jed touch the blind board.

“Some people have elaborate systems, like machine operated blinds with low current magnets to completely close the gap. Other people close the shutters,” said Kip.

“Maybe shutters are a more common and older way. They have been used since ancient times around here. Some houses have both.”

“It helps to retain heat, too.”

Jed knew another reason why he could sleep so well was his new diet. He ate a small piece of lamb, which was butchered at the request of Furqan and it tasted delicious; however, most of the time he was only eating vegetables and grains. He was thinking of continuing a similar diet when he went home. He and Midori hardly ever ate any red meat or pork, so switching to a vegetarian diet did not seem that hard. Baki+T kids seemed to be as healthy as outside kids, even though they only got protein from dairy products, some vegetables and soybeans.

“I think they have fewer kids with allergy problems, despite the fact that acacia is everywhere here.” Shannon told Jed when he discussed his plan about a diet change.

“We also have less attention deficit disorder and autism.”

“That, I attribute to the prohibition of computers until they grow up.”

“I think I can get the credit for that.” Kip laughed.

Apparently, Tiers started to learn how to use computers when they were out of high school, but an amazing number of people turned into computer engineers after that.

“It’s because Silicon Valley is right out there,” Kip explained, but
Jed thought something else was there.

“Computer technology sure helps save the earth.” Kip said reading Jed’s mind.

“See, we aren’t Luddites. But we hate technology only for the sake of the economy. There is so much unnecessary crap out there that these CEOs try to ‘market’. It’s unfortunate, so many Baki+Tiers work for them to make a living, but we believe that technology works well if it is used for the right purpose.”

Jed drank a glass of water and walked outside with bare feet in the dusk. The air looked dark blue in the floating morning haze. It was chilly and Jed, still wearing his pajamas, brought a blanket to put over his body. He didn’t see a soul in the court yard, but when he proceeded deep into the woods, he sensed the presence of people and looked in their direction. He saw a man. Jed could tell that it was Kotoba who was wearing his running cloth.

He went in the opposite direction from him and proceeded further into the woods. He heard a woodpecker pecking at a tree far away. Bird songs started to swell in the air. He found a patch of grass in the middle of the woods and sat there, placing half of the blanket on the grass, which felt cold from the mist.

Jed first thought of Jason, who must still be sleeping in his warm bed like a bear cub. He then thought of Midori, his future with her, and Jason’s children. He also thought of his mother, who may already be awake to give water to her plants. Then he recalled Mead, feeble Mead disappearing behind the door.

“Photosynthesis is vital for the earth.”

Jed imagined Kotoba’s voice accompanied by Mead’s feeble voice husky
There is always some place that we have to go back to.

Jed realized. That was a thought for him. He realized that he always had to go back to his own thoughts.

What did I do to the earth? And what didn’t I do to the earth?

Jed kept thinking.

“It’s education.”

He recalled Kip’s voice.

“It’s self-training. You have to self-train yourself to put the earth first.”

Or who was it who said it’s merely ‘a system’?

Jed remembered it was Damascene. “When I go back home, I establish a system that makes us work from a spirit of altruism.” He said. “From a purely economic viewpoint, it may be better that everyone puts themselves as their first priority. That made the economy flourish in this country. People wanted convenience and a higher standard of living. But we aren’t in that stage now. The earth is now our priority,” he had said.

Yes, we need a system. That’s true.

Jed knew that was part of it, but he wanted to go further. He wanted to go somewhere. That was the whole reason he came here.

I feel something good rising in me.

He also recalled Tadej’s words.

I may find that what used to bother me no longer bothers me.

I hope that is the case too, Jed thought. But that was not what he was looking for, either.

He recalled words spoken by Damascene and Vikulya.

“‘That’s just immaturity. It’s nothing from the perspective of the trees.’
“What you have to watch is arrogance. That is what trees abhor.”

He made his mind blank and let his spirit float though the woods. As if he was a Tier, who could make his mind float anywhere in the world.

Then he heard breathing. It started from a tree behind him and was followed by other trees, which surrounded him. It was a subtle sound; easy to lose like the Baki+T language itself.

-This is the breathing of photosynthesis!

Jed realized.

-The trees had just started photosynthesizing for the day!

Suddenly, Valentine’s words came to his heart with a weight.

“All the trees are on your side.”

-It doesn’t matter why I was chosen. I was chosen. That’s all that matters.

Jed realized.

Later, after breakfast, he went back to the same spot where the Students were gathering. He again felt relief that he didn’t have to explain his experience. He felt that the weight of his experience would be mitigated by orally expressing it.

-Breathing… that is photosynthesis for me. To breathe in CO2, is to take in our ill feelings, sins, and anxiety of living. Then we exhale Oxygen to keep living.

“Are we all photosynthesizers?”

Damascene asked no one in particular. Jed thought to himself,

-I’m not sure.

He thought that remained as an open question.

“I’m not sure about that, either. Honestly… I feel that there should be a photosynthesizer outside us. Elsewhere.”
Vikulya murmured.

"It’s misleading to believe that we are all photosynthesizers." Kotoba said out loud and added, "That’s what Mead says. On her bed in her room."

"How’s Mead?" Jed asked out loud.

"She is..." The Students looked at each other. Jed caught that Valentine was almost on the verge of tears.

"She doesn’t have pain, that’s good."

"She feels OK."

"It’s just that she can’t eat."

Then the Students fell into silence. Jed saw Kotoba’s gloomy face.

Later, during lunch, Jed heard from Vikulya that Yuan-Yuan had left.

“She wanted to say good-bye to you, but you were at an important point in your thoughts and she had to catch the bus to the airport.” She explained through Kotoba.

—Why did she leave?

“She didn’t see any necessity to talk with the trees. She didn’t want to be controlled by them.”

Overhearing Vikulya’s explanation, Tadej stopped holding his plate and said, “That’s quite understandable.”

“Did Mia also leave?”

Jed asked, since he didn’t see her in class.

“No,” Kotoba said.

Jed saw him spinning a chopstick on his thumb. His nervous look and precise movements were in stark contrast to each other.

“She overdosed on sleeping pills,” Tadej said, sitting. In the end, he seemed to have decided to eat lunch with them.

“What?” Jed raised his voice, although somewhere in his mind, he was
not surprised. He knew that she had been trying to wean off Prozac. “Is she OK?”

“She is OK. It was a very close call. She is now in the hospital in Santa Rosa,” Tadej continued, while putting whole-wheat pasta with tomato sauce in his mouth and continued, “After her stomach was cleansed.”

“How could that happen? Didn’t you guys… tap into her mind?” Before Jed finishing his question, Kotoba answered with a gloomy face.

“We were all asleep. Mia aimed at that time. Valentine woke up from a nightmare, ran to her room, and burst through her door.”

“But it was too late.” Vikulya took over and added, “but still early enough, thankfully.”

“Her father was called,” Kotoba added. “No, he isn’t coming.” The second part was the answer to Jed’s internal question whether he was coming or not.

“I don’t feel sorry for that guy at all.” Vikulya said, “Hey, you’ve been in total denial about your life, about your daughter’s situation, about your dead wife, who also…” Then she stopped looking at Kotoba who apparently tapped something to her, “Oh, anyway… Who am I to say that? I know, I know.” Jed could tell that Vikulya was talking to people “out there.”

Jed was consciously watching his mind, searching for a clue to be sympathetic with Mia’s situation.

“But what could I do?”

He tried to approach her or talk to her, but something about her had been refusing Jed. He remembered Mia’s blond hair and her dull blue eyes. He also recalled one of a few conversations he had with her. She was worried that the healthcare hype in the United States would affect her country, which had a much more sophisticated health care system.
“If the government stops providing health care, that’s the end for me,” She’d said. “I cannot live without Prozac.”

He also recalled his distant cousin, Rea, who had committed suicide.

—If I were close to my distant cousin, that incident would have left a big enough scar for me to be more sympathetic with Mia’s situation, he thought.

—Or am I just cold in the end? Did Rea’s incident not leave a scar in my mind, because I’m cold? His thought continued, until he realized that he wouldn’t have been so conscious of this state of mind, if he had not known that his mind was being read. He would have said something sympathetic to her situation only to keep up appearances.

—Why was she chosen in the beginning? What would the trees get out of her? Jed thought.

“That is everyone’s question.” Tadej said.

“And that’s the very reason why she wanted to kill herself.” Vikulya said.

“Can she hear other people’s voices? How has she been able to put up with it, if she hasn’t even been able to get out of her father’s house?” Tadej answered Jed’s question.

“She can choose who to hear, and who to shut out. She would never open up her path to tap with me, for example.”

“How can you do that? How can you shut off one and open the other? “It’s like choosing an article you want to read from a newspaper. You only pick up the one that’ll interest you.”

“Or you’d feel safe with.” Vikulya and Kotoba explained.

“Or flip through channels on TV,” said Tadej, “She flipped through me once and closed immediately. ‘He is too mean for me!!’” Tadej made a small screaming sound, but Kotoba did not translate that.

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Jed was still incredulous.

“...I can believe that you can ‘open up’ your path. You know, I still wonder myself, ‘how can I believe this absurdity? Trees? Tapping into other people’s minds? Come on!’ But it’s because you guys proved that you indeed can read my mind.”

“Yes, you are also starting to doubt your experience this morning. ‘How could I believe a tree??’” Vikulya said. Jed looked at her with surprise, because she just articulated the feeling he had at that moment. Then he noticed that her hair, which had been straight until yesterday was curled today.

“Thank you for noticing that.” Vikulya said with her eyes half closed.

“Tadej just thought ‘you noticed it just now?’ I tell you I’ve never noticed.” Kotoba said.

“Thank you, Kotoba. That’s very kind.” Vikulya said with the same facial expression, placing her chin on her hand.

“What did I try to say...?” Jed murmured.

“You were trying to say, ‘Yes, I can believe they can read my mind, because it was proven to me. But how can someone prove that they shut out the communication?’” Damascene slipped his tall body into the small chair and said.

“Yes! Even my experience with the trees this morning... At that moment I believed it, because I felt like a piece had fit in the puzzle, he thought.

“As for that, it’s called faith, since you can’t prove to anyone that you can communicate with trees.” Damascene said in a British accent.

“That’s why you doubt it now. Doubt is part of faith.” Tadej said through Kotoba’s interpretation.

“OK. You can call it faith or whatever, but so far, I like what I’ve been experiencing. Is it because I’m brain-washed in this Baki+T country?
Or is it because I am feeling something true...

No one commented on Jed’s internal thoughts this time, because Jed himself answered them.

-**I’ll know when I am out of Baki+T.**

Jed wanted to continue to pursue what he had felt that morning. He clearly felt that he was inhaling in and exhaling out oxygen and CO2, which was inevitable for human beings.

-**I’ll keep exploring CO2 and oxygen throughout my life,** he was thinking.

“That’s a very important thing, so let’s keep discussing that in the classroom, but for now,” Kotoba said. “You wanted to know how you can believe that Mia or we can close paths toward certain people… because you can’t experience it.”

“Yeah… now I remember, on the first night, at the opening party, this very proper looking lady told me, ‘Don’t worry. We won’t read your mind. At least I won’t.’ But how can I know? Give some explanations, so I can be convinced.” Jed asked with a serious face.

“You can be assured that we have read too much of your mind and we have seen enough.” Damascene said and waived his hands, “Nah, I’m kidding.”

“It’s true,” Tadej said, “Some Tiers like gossip and have read your mind quite enough.”

Tiers again found that Jed’s mind had not flinched a bit at Tadej’s joke.

-**It’s because he is well read.** A Tier whispered.

-**Look at history. Literature. It’s obvious that our minds are often so ugly.**

-**He surely doesn’t have any illusion about what people think in their minds, including himself.** Another person said.

Jed kept asking, “Flipping through channels or picking up your favorite newspaper… I understand that. We’re talking about a ‘thing’. But about
closing your path...?"

He felt someone tapping his shoulder and saw Valentine standing there. This time, Damascene translated his mind.

“He is saying maybe his recent experience will explain it. When was it? Tuesday night? Valentine and I went to Treasure Island to see the nightscape of San Francisco, with some other teenagers. You just wondered, Jed, why do we bother, when we can SEE it in our mind anyway. I will tell you. Experiencing the whole nightscape is still different.”

“The breeze... The smell of the ocean... sounds of waves...,” Kotoba interjected. Damascene looked at Kotoba. Jed could tell that some kind of quip was traded silently between them.

“We ran into this group of young women. The young women aren’t the point of this story, Jed. They wanted us to use their digital camera and take a picture of them with the background of the San Francisco nightscape.”

“And you were hoping that one of them would receive your silent love message?”

“No, no, no... Jed!! Please!! They have nothing to do with the story!” Damascene waved his hand. “It could be anyone, old women, fat women, or some old fart. Anyone.”

“The point is the camera.” Kotoba took over. “The picture was blurred. The camera couldn’t take the picture of that beautiful nightscape, because it was too dark.”

“So we told those lovely ladies, ‘if you wait here a few minutes, we’ll figure it out. We know a digital camera expert, ladies.’ So we pretended to call someone on our CELL PHONE. No, actually, I just picked up a gate-opener we happened to find in the car and placed it against my ear.” Valentine squealed with laughter, before Damascene continued.

“‘Hello, hey what’s up Jake?’ I pretended I was calling somebody, while
Steve, a teenager Tier and Valentine frantically searched Tiers to find a digital camera engineer and frantically tapped into their minds to ask what to do. Steve could have tapped an engineer who was just about to give his girlfriend a good night kiss. Maybe this is the only erotic episode in this story… Meanwhile, Valentine did a better job. He found an expert on human eyes.” Damascene nodded toward Valentine who nodded to Jed in the same knowing manner. Damascene continued, “We all knew the camera was Olympus. We went back to the girls and said, ‘Hmmm, the nightscape setting won’t work by itself. You need an external flash.’”

“That’s all?” Jed looked at the crowd of Tiers in front of him. “Where is the punch line?”

“The punch line is…” Kotoba took over. “Valentine found out from this scientist of human eyes that a regular camera is probably competitive enough with our eyes when it comes to colors in day time. We apparently have 6.5 million cells in one eye that can detect Red, Green and Blue, and a good camera can also have about the same amount of picture cells. But, when it comes to night time, the contrast between darkness and light, can’t be beaten by any camera. And…” He looked at Valentine, who apparently tapped something. “He has a good memory. Oh, you tapped into the scientist again just now? OK. Our eyes have another type of cell… rod cells? Rod cells, apparently. Now this scientist is tapping back to me… great…” Kotoba rolled his eyes. “We have 120 million rod cells that can detect the contrast between darkness and light. So no camera can beat our night vision.”

“And the punch line is Damascene could have gotten laid with one of the girls with his superb scientific knowledge?” Jed asked with a wry smile.

“Nooooo!” Damascene exclaimed.

“I got the point Valentine wanted to make.” Jed continued. “The human
mind can be equally precise. That’s what you wanted to say?"

“You’re partially right.” Kotoba said, “Although Valentine still feels something hasn’t been explained enough. He can’t explain it further.”

Later, on the way back outside to continue the afternoon session, Furqan with a white bandage on his hand talked to him.

When Jed looked at the bandage, Furqan said, “I’ll explain that later,” and continued.

“Since you are wondering about their overly cheerful tone after Mia had attempted suicide...”

Jed looked at his face, which was covered by a beard.

“Damascene was going to cheer himself up against the voice which Mia had heard.”

- The voice?

Jed asked in his mind.

“- We all hear it. They are also Tiers, but we don’t see. They are...”

“Out there.” Jed cut in.

“I know trees let that happen. I know it’s part of the process. I just wanted you to know.”

- What voice do you hear? Again, in his mind, Jed asked.

“What are you doing there? While your daughter is suffering from a nightmare of a bombing... Why are you on the side of hegemonists? The situation is totally different. These guys have everything. You cannot change the world with beautiful idealism alone.”

With Furqan’s heavy accent, Jed couldn’t make out half of what he was saying, but his message was conveyed clearly.

“I hear that, too,” Jed said. “What can I do after this? In the end? Other than dividing our garbage between compostable and combustible? Using trains more often, instead of cars?”
Furqan and Jed looked at the group of Students who were already sitting in a circle on the grass in the woods.

Jed heard a mocking bird and blue jay singing on a nearby branch. A breeze from the woods carried the sound of a woodpecker pecking. He looked up at the tops of the tall trees to see if he could glimpse the woodpecker. Instead, he saw a falcon flying high up in the sky looking for a squirrel. He recalled a story of an falconer living in a high mountain. He used a falcon to hunt a rabbit and sold the fur.

"Long ago, I chose not to live in hatred." When Furqan started, Jed realized that he had been waiting for one of the Students to start the class.

"Yes, now when I think about it, I was born with Baki+T abilities like many other Students here. And yes, that helped." Furqan continued, half-answering Jed’s internal question.

"Because what I wanted most was peace in my mind. My youth was filled with commotion, violence and hatred. I was struggling to retain peace in my mind in those conditions. Jed, you apologized to me on the first day. It helped, somewhat. At least, it gave me my internal approval that I could stay for the whole class. But Jed, I’m sure you have no clue what I went through. And you bluntly admitted it. Yes, as you said it is not your sin that you were born in peace." Furqan paused.

"No. Furqan, you should continue, I guess." Damascene said. "He just thought it may stop here for a while until he puts his thoughts together." To that, Furqan continued. "But when I was thinking about what a Photosynthesizer is, all these strong feelings of hatred came across my mind again. It flared within me. You, Americans are allies with my enemy who killed my brother... He was shot by a soldier and bled to death in front of me. No one responded to me and my father’s cries for help."
In a flash of a moment, Jed’s mind recalled a photo from a front page of a newspaper he had seen a couple months before; the picture of a boy holding his head, weeping, in front of his friend’s bloody body. The boy’s body was the shape of bracket “<”, the living boy was sobbing hard in front of the dead body.

“Yes, that’s me. You saw that picture recently. But that boy is me. The boy had to go through the same turmoil that I had to go through.”

–Did trees send you voices during that time?

“They did, actually. But what can the trees do except tell me that his soul is elsewhere? That was the coldest moment in my life. I kept protesting to the trees. ‘Why are you doing this to me? How can you allow such horrible things to happen? Why couldn’t you stop the soldier if you can communicate with us like this?’ And did I get the answer to that? Yes. That could have been the most cruel answer, but that was probably the source of peace. ‘This is what you have to go through and I’ll give you power. You are strong.’ Did I feel strong? No. I was absolutely helpless.”

Jed thought of the boy’s picture. What a helpless moment he had to go through!

–Would I ever go through such helplessness? Probably not…

“I had feelings of such intense hatred toward everything, while you were gone with Kip yesterday. I was in the woods by myself. I spit at trees. I hit trees, kicked them… I was injured at that time. ‘Why didn’t you help my brother? Why didn’t you help me? You told me you would help me. What did you do? Take me to this class? What else? What else did you do?’” Furqan showed him his bandage while smiling feebly.

“At the same time, I thought of the moments that my brother and I spent together. When we were kids, whatever happened around us didn’t matter and we continued to play. We raised a kite. We played board games. We played
hopscotch. Later, we played the guitar together. We listened to ABBA together. I still feel guilty that only I survived. While thinking about who the photosynthesizer was, I thought he was the one for me. He is my photosynthesizer. He helped me inhale the hatred around me and exhale peace.”

The whole class was silent. Jed felt that something tear open inside him. He compared Furqan’s realization to his own. He again thought of the fact that he had never gone through a time of such helplessness. And he was again thankful that he didn’t have to say anything. He was crying hard in his mind.

Jed looked at the trees. All of a sudden they were reflected in his eyes as something extremely sad. He also thought that somewhere in the world, the earth absorbed the blood of Furqan’s brother. The earth absorbed so much blood and spoiled the memories of the trees. Again, he felt he would never want to forget that moment.

–Will I forget this like any other reality of the world? He thought and kept looking at the trees with an intense desire.

–Trees, help me remember this.

Jed didn’t know that all the Tiers, including the gossipers were quiet for a while. He also didn’t know that because Tiers were constantly watching their minds, knowing they could be read by others, learned to make their minds completely blank. The sheer silence stifled the air in the background that Jed wasn’t even aware of.

It took a while until Vikulya broke the silence.

“Can I go next?” She raised her voice. It took a moment for Kotoba to come to himself and start to translate for her.

“Mine is not as profound as Furqan... about the meaning of Photosynthesizer. Like many other students here, I could clearly read other
people’s minds since I was a kid. It was as if I were looking at a movie or something in front of me. Often, other people’s minds were projected inside me more clearly than my own mind,” she paused then closed her eyes.

“I was always aware that trees were somewhat associated. I left my parents’ home when I was sixteen. It’s because I could clearly read their minds. You can say it was partly me. I was a difficult kid. I caused all kinds of trouble for them by saying unnecessary things and being critical to everybody. I was too rebellious at school. And I hated studying. I could pass all the tests anyway. I always got perfect scores. What was the point of attending school? I could clearly read my parents’ minds and read that I was the source of much of the distress in their lives. There was a time when I was living on the street. When I think back, trees kept sending me the message… but I was sixteen. What kind of sixteen-year-old girl would be able to get the subtle message of trees? Unless she were a nun or something?” Vikulya paused. “I hardly tapped my parents’ minds at all since I ran away from home. Every once in a while, for example, on Christmas Eve fast, I would tap their minds only to find that they were still resentful of me. So I’ve decided to live on my own. I pursued my singing career and became a singer at a night club.”

She paused, and said in a small voice. “No…”

“Yes.” Damascene said.

“Vikulya! Vikulya!” Tadej and Kotoba said.

Jed saw a group of young women dash out of the door of the school building and sit on the grass with expectant looks and join the cheer.

“Vikulya! Vikulya!”

“OK,” She stood up, dusted off her skirt and closed her eyes. At that point, Jed realized that everyone was encouraging her to sing a song. He wondered if she would sing a song from her repertoire at the nightclub.
He felt the wind change its direction. Vikulya said in a small voice, while closing her eyes, “I’ll dedicate this song to Mia in the hospital.” She inhaled deeply, and then exhaled, singing her song in a deep voice.

Every day I listen to my heart.
I’ll never be alone.
We are connected deep in our hearts

Every day I listen to my heart
We’ll never be alone
We are braced in the chest of the sky

Jed heard her breathing as if it were right in his eardrum. She then switched to a language he could not recognize. He noticed that it was a familiar tune. He closed his eyes. An image of a planet appeared in his head.

“What was the name of the composer? He tried to remember.

“It started with H... Homer... no... Holst! He remembered, That’s Jupiter by Gustav Holst!”

Jed opened his eyes to find people coming out of the school building, walking quietly toward the circle of Students. Some were closing their eyes, facing up towards the sky while walking. Some were keeping rhythms.

Although there were no instruments, Jed could tell that the other Tiers were joining her with mind instruments by the way Vikulya was smiling.

Vikulya started the second verse in yet another language. Jed remembered that Kotoba had told him that Vikulya was trilingual and he only understood one of her languages.

Jed could tell that a world of music was unfolding in the Tier’s heads. They were listening to the sounds, which other Tiers began to join Vikulya’s
song.

-Who was it? Who told me that Tiers are good at music, Jed wondered.
Jed heard from somebody that Tiers develop a good ear for music by
constantly listening to the trees’ messages. He felt envious, thinking
of the symphonic music, which could only be heard in these Tiers’ minds.
He couldn’t hear any of it.

Apparently reading his mind, Vikulya opened her eyes and looked at Jed,
smiling. Now the Tiers started to sing the third verse together. It didn’t
take too long for Jed to realize that they were singing in English, although
the people sometimes had a hard time improvising the translation. Whenever
they became clumsy in the translation, they looked at each other
questioningly while the music repeated those bars. Vikulya was waiting
for someone to come up with the right English.

Jed looked at Kotoba who was standing next to him and was surprised
by his stern look. He could tell that something was going on in his mind.

What can I do with these hands?
Let me touch your pain.
Close your eyes slowly.
A sadder thing than losing a dream is not to be able to believe in yourself.
If loneliness exists to protect love, there isn’t anything that lacks
meaning.
Listen to the silence of your mind.
When you call me, I’m ready to go anywhere.
For now, brace yourself and feel the warmth of life.
None of us is alone, we’ll be loved forever.
I’ll sing a song forever for you.
While listening, Jed felt a keen pity for Mia for the first time since he had heard about what had happened. He recalled that she cheered him up by saying that he could just be himself.

- *Maybe she was chosen by the trees, because she understands pain due to her weakness.*

He thought, wondering if his thoughts would somehow reach her via the trees. It was possible that she had shut down the path.

- *If so, the trees probably wouldn’t force it open, he thought.*

- *Or would the trees push positive thoughts toward people in despair, in order to open up their paths?* He wondered.

“Yes, they do.” Kotoba answered with a sigh, “but when we are in despair, we don’t realize that someone is tapping.”

- *Are you also in despair?* Jed asked in his mind, looking at Kotoba’s gloomy mood in the middle of the cheerful crowd.

When she received a heartfelt round of applause, Vikulya bowed and extended her arms back toward the crowd of people, then over her head to someone “out there” and finally to the trees. Jed looked back at the trees and saw that the same falcon he had seen before starting the class was resting on top of a tree.

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It first appeared in Jed’s head as a drumbeat. Vikulya had been singing in his dream. However, when Jed started to beat the drum and looked at her, she was no longer holding a microphone and Midori was holding a newborn Jason in her arms. Midori said the same words that Vikulya had said, showing the baby.

“This is my photosynthesizer.” That was what Vikulya had said to Jed
that afternoon, as she pointed at her microphone.

Jed was sitting at a drummer’s seat, his hands idle, but still, he heard the drumbeat playing. Then he woke up. Somebody was banging on the door.

He opened the door to find that Valentine was standing there holding an antique lamp with a burning candle inside. Jed could immediately tell that something had happened to one of the Students. Valentine slipped into the room and placed the lamp on the floor. A simple Baki+T University dorm room emerged in the glow. Valentine went ahead and opened Jed’s closet to take out his walking shoes without saying a word. His confident movements made Jed realize that Valentine had known where Jed had put his shoes before going to bed.

“Who is it?” Jed asked, while tying his shoestrings. He wondered if Mia had attempted suicide a second time. Valentine’s face was dark with the lamp still on the floor. When they were in the hallway, Valentine, while holding the lamp in his hand, mouthed the letter E. Jed realized that he meant Mead.

The dorm building where the Students and Jed were staying was at the South side of the main campus. Valentine opened the front door and led Jed through the courtyard path that went Northward behind the main campus. The path was wet from the drizzle. Somewhere in his mind, Jed was thinking about the fact that Valentine paid attention to so many details and had him change his slippers to shoes. Jed thought he heard a bird chirping. It took a while before he realized that it was actually the sound of Valentine sobbing. Surprised, he gazed at the teenager’s small framed body. It took another few seconds for him to realize the reason for Valentine’s tears.

-Mead is dying. He realized.

As if to confirm that his understanding was correct, Valentine stopped.
Jed was watching the young man’s shoulders shake in the glow of the lamp he was holding. Without thinking, Jed extended his arm and embraced his bony shoulders. Valentine slipped out from his arm after a moment to keep leading the way. Jed searched his own mind to see if a sadness as intense as Valentine’s was also in his mind, but the reality was somewhere in the distance.

-Mead and all the other Students have been tapping with each other all these days, Jed realized.

Valentine’s sobbing, which for a time was soothed by his embrace, again became harder. Jed remembered Mia’s words saying, “Mead never gave up.” And then he came to the realization that he hardly knew anything about what had happened in the Students’ lives.

-They know that about each other, though.

It was not the first time for Jed to notice that. When he looked at the Students, it was obvious that the bond, which he did not have with the Students, was strengthening between them. Somewhere in his mind, Jed had always felt isolated. He also felt somewhat distant from the depth of mourning, which was apparent in Valentine’s mind. He never could have realized that Valentine was losing a person who had known the intense moment of fear that he had experienced when he was running back to his village looking for food.

The courtyard was quiet and wet. Trees hushed in the darkness without any rustling noise. Jed was also thinking of practical matters.

-Had someone called Mead’s kids?

He was hoping that the family wouldn’t sue the Baki+T Ministry of Education, who had requested that Mead fly such a great distance, despite her aged body.

-No, their memory about Mead coming here will be erased. He realized.
Or Mead’s family’s minds will be somewhat paralyzed and not notice the damage the long trip would have given Mead’s body.

At the same time, he knew that his mind should be thinking of something more important. Jed now saw the small, well-lit school clinic building. There were about a dozen people in sleeping clothes waiting outside of the front door. He looked back at the trees. He took a moment with Valentine who stopped sobbing. Jed heard the deep breathing sounds. Then suddenly an intense desire to hear Mead’s last words rose in Jed’s mind. In haste, he began to talk to Mead on her deathbed.

-Mead, tell me! Tell me what I should know!

The hall was filled with people. Some were sobbing, while others were closing their eyes. No one was speaking and everyone seemed wrapped up in his or her own thoughts. Jed had never before seen a gathering dominated by such stark silence.

-Were all these people communicating with her?

Jed wondered. He felt someone touch his left hand and looked back at the woman to find that she was the one who had told Jed not to worry, because “we won’t overly read your mind.” She was wearing a white linen top and pants, whose bottom was soiled from dirt.

“‘We’re losing someone very important, Jed.” She told him in a calm voice. Jed saw her face was wet from tears.

“‘We’re losing our living example,” she continued. Jed looked into her eyes and nodded.

“Hurry up, Jed!” Another woman told him. He saw Furgan come out of a room and walk outside, while wiping his face. Jed went into the room where all the other Students were standing, surrounding Mead who was lying on the bed with her upper body in a slightly upright position. Philippe was standing at the corner of the room at Mead’s foot. Damascene was sitting
on the floor covering his face. Valentine, who had entered the room before Jed, was placing his head on Mead’s belly. Mead’s left hand was weakly patting his head.

Kotoba was standing by her head, holding a bed rail. His eyes were also puffed up from tears.

“Mead….” Jed took her wrinkly hands thinking that this was the last time for him.

When she feebly extended her arms from Valentine’s head toward Jed, the sleeve slipped and revealed the tattooed five digit number on her left arm.

“Mead…” Jed whispered one more time feeling his tears falling on his cheeks. Her hands were surprisingly warm. She seemed to have lost so much weight in a few days. Her eyes had already lost their shine and a gray haze was covering them. She closed her eyes, holding Jed’s hands.

“My kids are fine. Thank you. I already said good-bye to them before I came here.” Kotoba interpreted her mind. Mead was too feeble to say anything.

“Mead, I’m so sorry… I’m not sure if I was worthy of a role as a facilitator.” Jed said.

“No, you were doing fine. Thank you, thank you for coming to this county and doing this for us,” Kotoba said. The words, “thank you” were also heard under Mead’s faint breath.

“You want to know who the Photosynthesizer was.” Mead’s words continued through Kotoba. Jed felt that Kotoba regained his calm tone when he was translating her words.

“There is a photosynthesizer in this room,” Mead said. Jed felt the Students gasp at her words. She apparently hid that portion of her thoughts until that moment. Vikulya touched Mead’s foot, covered by the sheets.
"That, you have to know. You also have to know..." Mead’s hands dropped onto the bed. Jed could see that she was still breathing. Jed looked up at Kotoba. His words and the people’s intense sobbing overlapped at the same time. Jed again heard the trees’ breathing through the open window. Jed and Kotoba were looking at each other. Finally Kotoba said, "She said, it’s also in you."

Then Mead exhaled deeply and fell into the real silence.

*****

The next morning, the Tiers realized that Mead’s soul had disappeared completely, along with the vehicle, which had carried it: her body.

No gossip was tapped among the Tiers that morning. The air was wet from the constant drizzling, and the trees remained silent, showing no photosynthesis activity. At that stage, the significance of Mead’s words, "There is a photosynthesizer in this room," only seeped into a limited number of the Tiers’ heads. Only a handful of people received the message, including the photosynthesizer himself, a ten-year old girl acting as his guide, Walter Lake, and a few others.

Throughout his career as an analyst, Walter had become keenly aware that the trees had entrusted him to handle the economy. He also felt that the degree of his influence as a finance related person had become more significant each year in the finance world, especially in the clean tech sector. Throughout his career, he was tempted so many times to use his mind-reading abilities for personal gain. There were many occasions when he succumbed to the voices. He was then thrown into a maze of confusion, but could not admit it. He believed that he was capable of keeping order while yielding to temptation and working to manipulate people’s minds for
personal gain. The dream he had during that time was sweet, but had no form, no specificity. It was like a place with no flowers that had a vague scent of floral perfume in the air.

However, in the end, the situations always changed in ways that made him incapable of pursuing his greed. One time, a company he heavily recommended to a portfolio manager went bankrupt. Another time, one of the top management people of a clean tech company had a nervous breakdown. Those incidents awakened him. In these moments, Walter quickly realized his mistakes and changed his direction. He could do that, because he never completely closed the path from the trees. Whenever his personal schemes failed, he realized that the trees had been constantly sending him messages to prevent them from happening. It was just that the messages were too subtle.

—if there is anything, that I can get credit for, that is I have never completely closed the path from the trees.

He recalled that he had had such conversations with his high-school classmate, Jeff, a former director of Enron. There was a time when they frequently tapped with each other after Jeff had returned to the country after the company’s debacles. The main topic brought up in their tapping was their experiences of temptations in the past. In rare occasions, Walter and Jeff made their tapping open to other Tiers.

—that is a big thing. Jeff answered. — I completely closed it, especially when I believed that I had gained the world!

On the previous night, Walter awoke from the sound of a Venetian shutter in his bedroom banging open from a gust of wind. He got out of bed and reached for the window. Then he saw a woman in her early twenties sitting on the top of a branch. He was startled, but not frightened. He had not seen a ghost before, but he believed in their existence.
I never had a chance to tap with you. The woman said.

Walter felt something was not right about her figure other than the fact that she was a ghost. He soon realized that it was her hairstyle and clothes. Her dark chestnut hair was styled in a light wavy form. Her stylish suit of woven wool had a large collar. That was an old classic style in the 30s.

-Mead! Walter exclaimed in his mind. But he was still incredulous that she will be gone at that moment.

The woman nodded and folded back the sleeves of her suit to expose her fluorescent white skin. There was no number on her arm.

-Mead! What do you want me... feeling a sense of direness, Walter concentrated his consciousness.

Since he had had his discussion with Jed, Walter did not think too much about the course Jed was facilitating. He was aware that the Baki+T summer course was going on, but he had never paid too much attention to it, working hard on tracking the M&A progress between a large electric manufacturer and solar integrators.

-Did I miss something important again in my work? He wondered.

At that moment, his partner groaned in their bed and murmured, "Close the window, Walter." He looked at Ken and looked back at the branch only to find that her figure was gone. Walter quietly closed the window and then felt the chilly air on his bare feet. He sat at the bedside confirming that Ken had gone back to sleep.

For a moment, the realization of Mead’s deathbed didn’t stir any deep emotions within him. He remembered the exchange of communication, which vaguely happened above his head. Here and there, the Tiers discussed Mead’s prayers, her friendliness, and helpfulness among Tiers “out there.” In fact, the first feeling that occurred in his mind was admiration when he
had realized that the woman was Mead.

Walter put a night robe on and went down to his study on the first floor of his house. The room had a wide window facing the garden and Walter could see the full view of a large oak trunk and the branch upon which the young Mead had been sitting. He sat on a mahogany chair by the window and recalled the scene in which Mead unfolded her sleeve and showed her smooth white arm. Walter finally realized what to do and opened his path to the scene at the school clinic in Baki+T. He dived into the scene to see Jed holding Mead’s hands. Mead’s inner voice and Kotoba’s voice interpreting it were overlapping and resonating in Walter’s head as if it were happening right within his ears.

“There is a photosynthesizer in this room,” The two voices said.

Then the communication died. So did Mead. Walter’s mind looked at Kotoba who was standing by her head grabbing the bedding rail.

“He is the photosynthesizer.” Walter heard the final word in Mead’s young voice.

*****

Before coming to Baki+T, Kotoba had already felt that he had been appointed as a photosynthesizer during his early morning meditation. As usual, still sleepy, he ran to Hibiya Park at daybreak and sat at his usual spot by the pond. He liked sitting directly on the ground, because it made him think that energy could penetrate through his body. He also liked following a routine; he felt that sitting on the ground at the same spot at the same time everyday was part of a ritual.

Kotoba was approaching Baki+T with the same zeal that he had always had when learning new languages. He avidly tapped with other Tiers. He
had stopped scanning people’s minds, finding that it was infinitely enticing and by that time, he noticed that half a day could easily be wasted doing this.

—I’m basically not interested in reading the minds of people whom I don’t know. Damascene said. He was one of the first Students who tapped into his mind before he came to Baki+T. He said he was in the seafood warehouse business in Dartmouth.

—It was always helpful that I could read my daughters’ minds so I could continue to be a cool father. I also read my employees’ minds to be fair.

—Can you continue to treat them equally when you find they are critical of you? Kotoba asked.

—Generally, I can, because those who are critical of me are usually critical of others. When I hire people, I tend to hire someone like me; easy-going and light hearted, almost to a stupid level. He laughed.

Kotoba learned from Damascene that he was the only one in the class who was not born with Baki+T.

—So most of us experienced being treated like crazy people when we were kids, he said.

Kotoba found that Mr. Takamizawa no longer tapped with him that much.

—You have more important people to tap with, He said.

But about that, being born with Baki+T ability, Kotoba asked to Mr. Takamizawa.

—I thought everyone had to learn it like any other language. Kotoba tapped.

—There are three types of Tiers; The ones born in Baki+T, who are Tiers by blood, the ones appointed by trees all over the world, and the ones who want to learn it. Trees usually adopt them, but most of them forget what they learned.
-Or they merely use that ability to read people’s minds. Kotoba interjected.

-Yes. Mr. Takamizawa paused. Kotoba felt some emotion in Mr. Takamizawa’s mind, which neither of them avoided articulating. Then the teacher continued.

-In any case, the point is the trees. I know that in your stage, it helps to tap with other Tiers, especially the Students. But try not to spend too much time communicating with them. Focus on the trees.

After the communication with Mr. Takamizawa was over, Kotoba wondered if the unexplainable emotion he had felt from the other side was jealousy of some sort and immediately hoped that his thoughts were not conveyed to his teacher.

Nonetheless, the same message had aptly been tapped by Mead on the same day. She was one of the other Students Kotoba had been regularly communicating with. Each communication was very short, only lasting up to about five minutes. She seemed to be busy tapping with other Tiers and, according to her word, “prayer.” She also frequently mentioned that her time was limited. Kotoba assumed from her age that she meant the remaining years left for her, but he never could have aptly guessed that her remaining days were that short. He only came to the correct realization after he had entered Baki+T and started the class. By that time, Kotoba was too busy focusing on his assignments as an interpreter to notice that Mead’s body had become gravely frail from the long trip. He regretted not having tapped to her more frequently. So did the other Tiers.

-Your teacher was right. You should focus on the trees’ messages, she said.

-What exactly can I do? Other than meditating regularly….

-Meditate. Lead a regular life calmly. Make every single effort in
placing priority on others’ interests, she said.

After finishing tapping with her, Kotoba always felt that a large portion of his actual deeds and thoughts were left to him. And probably to the trees. Basically, he had no clue. Whenever he felt confused about what to do, he went over how he had acquired his twenty-two languages. However, he soon realized that hardly any of his language acquiring experiences could be applied to Baki+T.

He wished he could spend some time in isolated woods. He thought of the more secluded spots he had found in the Alisha forest when he had stayed in Taiwan. He also thought of the Białowieża Forest, an ancient woodland between Belarus and Poland. He also thought of the forests in southern India. However, it was obvious that he hardly had any time, and his body was still too weak after recovering from cerebral malaria, so he couldn’t go on a long trip in such a short period of time.

Mead had also said,

"Spend time with people. You don’t have to talk much. Rather don’t talk at all. Just listen."

So that’s what he did, hoping that he would receive the trees’ messages more keenly. He became a little quicker in doing things, such as giving away his seat to a pregnant woman on a train. He forgave his colleague who took his client’s job behind his back. He became conscious in conserving energy. He surprised his mother by visiting her all of a sudden. He intently listened to Surinder’s long talk about his competitors’ businesses. He also thought of calling Rita. But when it came to that, he didn’t know what to do. He often recalled the days he had spent in the hospital while he was being treated for cerebral malaria. While sleeping and resting his mind he had followed Rita’s activities. Her face always shined when she saw babies at the hospital. Kotoba knew that she often asked parents, if
she could hold their babies. He knew that somewhere in her mind, Rita was eagerly hoping that she would be a mother some day. She was hoping it would be with Kotoba.

However, all these activities only made him feel better about his life in general. He was not sure if he had developed any ability to communicate with trees. Rather, he felt that he had become lazy in keeping up with his other languages. He worried that his valued goal was changing from a master of languages to something else: A messenger of trees.

One day he gathered the courage and, for the first time, tapped into Walter Lake’s mind. Mead was telling him that he would be the one Kotoba may want to get advice from when he felt stuck.

-He is entrusted with money, which is the hardest temptation to overcome for humans.

At that time, Kotoba felt that he had already overcome his materialistic prosperity. He had intently abandoned the opportunity to receive over ten thousand dollars a month from the building he lived in and inherited from his uncle.

-I know you have no interest in money, Mead tapped back reading Kotoba’s mind. But each person has a thing to overcome to become a photosynthesizer.

-What is a photosynthesizer?

-You’ll find it in Baki+T. If you leave your path to the trees open. Mead had said.

It took a while before Walter finally tapped back to Kotoba. When he did, it was obvious that he didn’t want to spend much time with anybody. Kotoba wondered what was so special about Walter. Then he immediately realized that Tiers were not superior to non-Tiers. It was just that Baki+T established a system and Tiers were destined or chose to live in that system.
-Experience. It’s all experience. Walter answered, apparently not bothered by Kotoba’s criticism. Or more precisely, time. You need time to receive messages from trees.

-Should I stand under the waterfall and pray?

Walter didn’t laugh at Kotoba’s joke.

-Meditate. And follow what you felt was received as advice for that day. Focus only on one day at a time. Walter said.

-That’s what I have been doing for more than a week. Kotoba said, realizing that he was simply frustrated with the slow progress of the Baki+T language.

-You’re right. Walter said about Kotoba’s realization.

In his mind, Kotoba saw a yellow color develop in Walter’s head.

-If you expect that you can acquire the language of Baki+T in a week, like Rosetta Stone’s claim, Walter mentioned a well-named language learning tool, while silently surprised by the influence of a daily advertisement. I’ll tell you, you have a long way to go! It’s a daily experience. Trees’ messages are so subtle. Most of the time you wouldn’t even notice them. But if you leave the path open, they will one day send a big message.

The big message came in the morning at Yoyogi Park in the middle of Tokyo, at his regular spot on the ground by the pond. Kotoba had already been taught through meditation that breathing was an important exercise. He inhaled deeply, and then exhaled. He placed his consciousness in the trees surrounding him, then over the earth, the chaotic world outside, and the peace within his mind. Then suddenly he realized that language, which was the very thing that he had been struggling to master through his entire life, was the key.

-I’m a manipulator of language.
Kotoba said the sentence aloud in five different languages.

"I’m a manipulator of language."

It was hard for him to soothe the excitement coming up into his chest.

"I’m a manipulator of language."

He again said in another language. Suddenly he was engulfed by a sense of bliss. That realization was far from the realization he had when he had listened to Baki+T for the first time after finally mastering twenty-two languages. At that time, his realization was that mastering twenty-two languages did not change anything in his life. Since then, his entire life had been spent translating and maintaining his skill in the twenty-two languages. That morning, Kotoba was not sure if he’d continue to live such a life as a translator of twenty-two languages, but he felt bliss about continuing to be a manipulator of languages, whatever that meant.

He stood up and walked around. As the sun rose, the number of strollers at the park increased as people watched him walking around the pond. He calmed down and sat at his usual spot. He again inhaled and exhaled deeply.

-I’m ready to convey the messages of the trees, he thought. Then he heard the sound.

“You are the photosynthesizer we have chosen. The world will listen to you.”

Kotoba opened his eyes wide in surprise. He saw a boy chasing after a puppy without a leash. He looked back at the pond to find a white heron standing in the middle of the pond on one foot. In his ears, he heard some people’s admiration of the bird.

-Nah, he thought. And then, he wondered if that was the big message from the trees, which Walter was talking about. He closed his eyes again focusing on the surrounding trees.
“Watch your heart,” Kotoba heard a clear voice. “Just follow our commands, however small they may be.” The trees said.

However, Walter was right. It was too early for Kotoba to understand the meaning of the tree oracle. First of all, arrogance kicked in.

*****

Kotoba was again by a pond. But this time, he was in Baki+T. He saw the flash of a fishes’ green fin under the water. The rain had ceased, and yet it left damp particles in the air. They were filled with solemnity after Mead’s funeral was over.

He was recalling the moment of bliss he had felt by the pond in the middle of Tokyo. His mood was far from that. He was aware that that was a stage he had to go through, but the weight of his sadness was overwhelming.

He knew that Vikulya was approaching him from behind. He could hear the sound of her footsteps on the wet grass.

-Here, Vikulya spread a brightly colored plastic sheet on the wet grass.
-Where did you get that? Kotoba asked about the bright pink color of the sheet.
-It’s just to cheer us up, she answered. But that artificial color only made Kotoba even more gloomy.

-So, you leaving tonight, ha? Vikulya asked after sitting and folding her knees under her arms. Kotoba smelled a slight scent of perfume when she arranged her skirt.
Kotoba nodded.

-I procrastinated, but finally, I had to face it. He answered.
-You were busy interpreting.
-I know. And it’s part of my role as a manipulator of languages. But
I was clearly expecting that I would gain time throughout the classes. I was expecting that the trees would choose someone else instead of me.

—Who else could it be, other than you? Vikulya laughed in a somewhat sarcastic manner. Mead was too old, and Valentine cannot manipulate words. Everyone else was busy with his or her own tasks. Damascene has to run his fish business. Tadej and Furqan, are in no way able to manipulate words.

—I know. Kotoba looked back at her.

—And as for me, I can sing, but I’m not a lyricist. I only sing other people’s songs.

They were pondering this for a while. Kotoba was thinking about the overwhelming sadness that he had been experiencing. He couldn’t deny it anymore.

“I may be the only one in the class who has not lost anyone important.” He said aloud.

—But I may be losing one, Kotoba thought.

“Rita is going to marry, right?” with a strong R sound, she said. Kotoba didn’t say a word for a while. An image of a Japanese man around Kotoba’s age with a confident smile appeared in his head.

“An MBA holder from an Ivy League School…” Vikulya said with the same image in her head.

“Yup. A Tokyo University graduate with a degree in material physics.” Kotoba said, placing his hand over his eyes.

“And you are an elementary school graduate.”

“Yup. Thank you for reminding me.”

They fell silent for a while. Kotoba felt that Vikulya was researching the background of Rita’s fiancé who for so many months was asking her for her hand in marriage.

“He is a handsome guy, but you have more charm.” Vikulya said.
“That’s very kind of you.” Kotoba answered.

“Doesn’t seem to be the type to cheat on his wife.”

“OK...”

“Maybe boring, but Rita can train him.”

“Thank you.” Kotoba was imagining Rita taking him to all sorts of museums in Japan and overseas.

“I knew next to nothing about art until I married.” The man would say at some point in the future. “Now, whenever I’m on a business trip overseas, I have an obligation to report on art works in museums in the town.” He would continue.

“Wow! You have such an imagination!” Vikulya said, amused.

“Thank you.” Kotoba said, with his hand still over his eyes.

“I even heard his voice right in my ear!”

“OK...”

-Kotoba, it isn’t too late for you to call her right now and tell her to end her marriage.

“I’m not Dustin Hoffman.”

Kotoba realized that Vikulya had never seen that movie nor heard of the actor. She was following a scene unfolding in Kotoba’s head: The actor in white clothes abducting Catherine Ross in her white wedding dress.

-That will mingle with her own memories, Kotoba was thinking. And then, it will become her own memory in the future.

They now fell back into silence. Kotoba propped his upper body up. He was again thinking of Rita’s smile when she was holding other people’s babies.

“Here.” Vikulya extended her arms to Kotoba and held him close to her. He felt her soft breasts under his cheek.

“Here,” she repeated. “Doesn’t it feel good? To be embraced by
somesboby?”

“Theoretically it should,” Kotoba said, “Now oxytocin, working as a neurotransmitter, should be secreted in the body.”

“I felt it do that in my body.”

“That’s good.”

“But not in your body.”

“Apparently not.”

Vikulya pushed back Kotoba’s head, which seemed to be propped up as if it had no will of its own.

“That scene you had about Dustin Hoffman,” Vikulya continued. “Did you know that that’s the scene Rita has been imagining in her mind?”

Kotoba listened silently.

“You haven’t tapped into her head? She asked.

“No. Kotoba answered. He had always believed that not tapping her mind was proof of his strength and his dedication as a photosynthesizer.

“Then of course, you didn’t know that she cried like there was no tomorrow when she finally decided to accept her suitor’s proposal.

I didn’t, but I could guess, Kotoba responded. His thoughts were preoccupied with the days he had spent in the Baki+T course. He had been trying to focus his thoughts on Furqan, who had been discussing many of the important events of his life, including his hatred toward America and the peace he had found through the class.

“You think you don’t have the same caliber, the same worth that a photosynthesizer should have, because you haven’t gone through anywhere near as much despair as Furqan, Mead and Valentine have. Surely, you aren’t thinking that giving up on Rita will somehow make you the photosynthesizer, are you?”

Vikulya saw only confused waves coming from Kotoba’s mind, but amidst the
confusion, she could make out images of babies.

"If you want a medal...some kind of proof to make you think you’re a photosynthesizer, I think what you have gone through is already enough."

Verbally, Vikulya had used the word, “medal,” but mentally she was thinking of “scar.”

Vikulya could tell that Kotoba’s mind was scanning through the humiliations that he had experienced in life, humiliations that were sharpened because he could feel that Tiers were aware of his situation.

"I’ll tell you," Kotoba said. "Being incapable of reproduction is a big shortage as a human being. I know."

*****

Jonathan Pentian, the father of Beatrice, was a guide for seekers in Baki+T, and he was a path-finder. He could find the optimal path in something as small as a chip on a circuit board, and something as large as a course for an airplane. Most of the time, all it took was a glance for him to tell the shortest and most efficient route. That was how his company, Pentian Path Finder, helped the government, including Baki+T, construct roads that did minimal damage to forests and nature, and aided private companies in finding material that wouldn’t harm the environment after the products become obsolete. His engineering teams consisted of experts in material physics and civil engineering. That year, his team’s main projects came from large computer manufacturers, mid to small size solar energy integrators, and several overseas governments that had contracted them for irrigation projects. Jonathan was a quiet and solemn man who held the highest faith in the results his team would bring. As with many Tiers who had their own business, he would scan individual talents
globally and attract them with fringe benefits of good insurance and a strong retirement plan as well as nice working environment. His office faced the Pacific Ocean and had large open spaces throughout the building, where people gathered to freely brainstorm their ideas. He never micro-managed his staff, which was yet another factor that contributed to his team’s low turnover. The one damning element in his life was the premature aging of himself and his daughter, Beatrice. Jonathan had first grown gray hair when he was six years old. By the time he founded a company with his friend, who was currently the COO, he looked as old as a man in his mid forties. His condition was not as serious as progeria, because he did not have such severe symptoms as hardened arteries, alopecia or physical shortness. It was just his hair and skin that made him look so aged. The same went for Beatrice. Despite her mother’s efforts to take her all kinds of dermatologists in and out of the country, her hands already looked as old as a sixty-year old’s when she was only six. She also had a premature personality although that could be said of many children in Baki+T. However, in her case, many of her teachers avoided looking in her direction in the classroom because they felt intimidated when they met her piercing gaze.

And that was the very gaze that Kotoba had to encounter. It was midnight, as planned. Kotoba walked about an hour from his dorm room to the spot: the bottom of a steep mountain, deep in the forest where many seekers who had previously tried to explore the mountain had been lost. By that time, Kotoba knew that Beatrice had a calling, or more precisely, a destiny: to be a guide. So did he. His destiny was to be a photosynthesizer, and he was going to find his own words in the deep mountain.

He met Beatrice’s gaze without a smile and without any comforting words. She stood there in the glow of his lamp. She had no light with her, because
she didn’t need a lamp to find the place they were going: she had been there as a guide for seekers many times. As she stood there illuminated, Kotoba noticed her tanned legs and their thick tendons. She apparently had been walking that same path to accurately guide her latest client.

Some Tiers had spread the rumor that the girl had gone into the deep mountains with men to sleep with them. Even her mother had believed it, since she received no explanation from her daughter, who came back at a dawn with fatigued face. Everything about what had happened in the deep mountain was hidden from other people, and many did not care about what had really happened at all. They already had their own fixed ideas, which they were not willing to change, regardless of the facts.

Kotoba continued to look into her gaze as she started to tap. He knew that she was taciturn both verbally and mentally, because she had focused on one thing in her short ten-year history of living on the earth: finding a path.

*This road has a lot of rocks,* she explained to Kotoba. *We cannot use the lamp. I’m not sure how bright the moonlight will be tonight after the rain starts drizzling.*

Kotoba nodded, his mind prepared. As if in response to her words, the gust of wind blew out the candlelight of the lamp he was holding. Pitch darkness fell over them. Kotoba tried to overcome an intense fear of uncertainty. He prohibited his thoughts from dwelling on the deaths of former seekers.

*—Don’t give any room to fear. Believe in your body. It isn’t irrelevant that trees chose someone with a strong running ability like you have,* Beatrice tapped.

As she spoke, Kotoba found that she was deliberately trying to focus on his body rather than his spirit.

Feeling that he gained a solid starting point, he stepped forward in
the darkness. He thought of his regular running exercise. The first few miles were always the hardest, but as the body became used to the breathing process, his feet and muscles, which had built up enough strength, always achieved the day’s quota.

The night air was cold. He hadn’t asked for advice from anybody about what to wear for the night. He had layers of thin outdoor clothes that retained proper heat while keeping the humidity out. He followed the white shoes of Beatrice, which he figured she had worn deliberately so seekers could see them in the darkness. But soon afterwards, when the moon completely disappeared behind the cloud, he realized that even that wasn’t enough. Finally, he closed his eyes and opened the eyes of his mind, and he followed Beatrice by tracking the sound of her shoes stepping on rocks.

-\textit{The trees will never desert me. They never fail people.} He thought of the short history that he had spent with trees. \textit{It was me who failed them.}

Then he thought,

-\textit{Then who was me?}

Suddenly he heard the sound of a dog barking.

-\textit{It’s coyotes.} Beatrice tapped, but Kotoba could also perceive that she was thinking of the seekers who had been killed by them. She immediately and deliberately shut away the image, but not before his mind had a glimpse of blood on the snow and her intense despair at the sight of the mauled bodies.

-\textit{They smell fear. If you cannot completely shut down the fear, be neutral,} Beatrice said mentally. It sounded in Kotoba’s head as calm but an icy cold voice.

He slowed and examined his inner state of mind, and recalled countless occasions of visiting foreign countries.
-Did I have fear all those times? he thought to himself. - No. The only thing I had was hope. I always believed that something exciting was waiting out there.

They kept climbing up the rocky hill, which was so steep that he felt the surface of the ground close to his chest. He took out leather gloves from his back pocket and put them on his hands. He followed the white shoes in front of him through his mental eyes and carefully chose the same rocks she stepped on. He was not aware that by following her every step, he had already passed the first challenge.

-It’s good that you follow me exactly, Beatrice said, this time sounding like an aged woman in his head. - Some seekers didn’t think of following the steps I took, because I was so young. And in fact, I was young. So I’ve decided to spend more time on this mountain. To find the best path for seekers. Day after day. Without knowing when the next one would come.

-I know that arrogance eats up the best way to receive the message from trees. Kotoba answered. - I’ve experienced that already. After I received the message from the trees that I was the photosynthesizer, I was assaulted by this egotistical sensation of having gained the world.

-Many people went through that. Even I did.

-How did you overcome that?

-By looking at the reality. How small my body is. How young I am. How helpless I am.

In spite of his precision in following Beatrice, he slipped over a rock, and he flailed and grabbed something he couldn’t see in the darkness. Both Beatrice and Kotoba took a deep breath and heard the rock rolling down the hill.

-I have to be more careful. You’re way heavier than me, Beatrice tapped. Kotoba realized that the thing he was grabbing was the branch of a shrub.
For a slight moment he was horrified by the thinness of the branch. He also realized that the cliff was very precipitous. As if to prove his realization, Beatrice was now crawling up the surface of the cliff in a determined manner. Naturally, her pace gravelly slowed down.

Maybe, I have to be ready to die here. To prevent himself from feeling fear, he thought up the words for “death” in several languages he knew.

death
mort
décès
死命
죽음
θάνατος

He physically forced himself to believe that they were crawling on a horizontal surface. He tried to feel the gravity under his belly, not under his feet.

-Trees! This is the moment you can help me. You can tilt the earth!

He imagined himself crawling the surface of the earth, feeling the gravity pull safely at him under his four limbs.

A strong gust of wind blew and tried to peel their bodies from the surface of the cliff. They stopped and clung on tight for a moment.

-Don’t worry. It’s not as steep as you think, he heard Beatrice’s internal voice say. — You tilted the earth. You did.

Kotoba silently chuckled, because the way she said it sounded as casual as saying that he had hit a nail at the right angle.

In order to prevent the arrogance from kicking in again, he tried to think of the word death in seven different languages, over and over. However, instead what he heard was the strong cry of a young man’s voice.
“Papa, I’m cold.”

Then as if an airbag had burst, a scene appeared in Kotoba’s head. A young man was lying on the dry ground. The blood from his foot was soiling the ground with black and red stains.

“Here, it’s warmer in the car.”

The elder man’s robe appeared in front of Kotoba’s eyes. The robe was spotted by dusty sand and was bloody like his son’s trousers. Then he heard Furqan’s voice, a young Furqan’s voice.

“The help will come. The help is on their way, Zafar. You’re all safe.”

They moved Zafar to a car nearby, which looked like a beehive from all its bullet holes.

“I’m cold, I’m cold.”

The father and younger son covered the elder brother’s body with the robe.

“How’s this?”

“Yeah, I feel warm.”

The next moment, he exhaled and fell back onto the seat with his eyes wide open.

Then the scene was cut off.

-Here. Give me your hand. It took a moment for Kotoba to realize that the voice came from over his head. He extended his arm and was surprised by the smallness of the hand that grabbed him. With a strength that contradicted its size, the hand pulled him over the top of cliff. Though his eyes were still closed, Kotoba could tell he was now standing on a flat surface. He also felt that the earth had again changed its angle.

-You can open your eyes, Beatrice’s internal voice said.

When Kotoba obeyed, he saw the glowing surface of the dark ocean far away. They were standing on the lip of the cliff; they reached the top. The moon was shining. He looked down at the path they took and shivered to see how
steep it was.

-From here, you have to go by yourself.

Kotoba looked at Beatrice. She looked back at him with the same piercing
gaze, which showed no emotion. It was then he realized that she had no
more advice to give.

-You selected the best rocks to step on for me, he thought.

-But I’ll wait for you here, Beatrice said, nodding.

-Are you OK? Kotoba thought of the crying coyotes, and of the chilly
dawn waiting for them both. He looked down at her bare legs. “Here,” he
said and took off one of the T-shirts he had layered on.

-Thank you, Beatrice said without resisting. He felt that she had done
this before, and she had been ready for death every time she had to wait
for seekers who never returned.

-Will you fax this to my mother if I don’t come back by the dawn? He
handed her a white envelope. Beatrice again received it without hesitation
or words.

-Is death nothing to her? he wondered, but then realized that, in the end,
she was still a girl. She was simply chosen for her role to lead seekers
as far she could, and that was all; she was still just a child.

Beatrice pointed ahead. Kotoba looked in that direction only to
find darkness, but when he closed his eyes, gradually the darkness took
a shape, forming an image of dark woods.

-Go toward the direction of the wind. If wind stops, wait until it comes
back, Beatrice said as she sat on a big rock by the road. -And also... I
almost forgot to say this. People used to believe that there was a mark.
I think that maybe that was a big mistake former seekers made. There
probably will be no mark.

Kotoba set off to the deep woods. He was not sure if there was any point
to the trip at all, and he had never been as tired as he was that moment. He was hoping that he was half way through. He wished he had an energy bar or raisins, but he knew he shouldn’t bring any food.

After walking for a while, the moon again disappeared behind the cloud. He thought of the despair of Furqan’s father when he had lost his elder son...and then, abruptly, he thought of his own father, whom he had met only twice.

“Come again,” he had said, but Kotoba never visited him after that, because he had denied his father. He never tapped into his father’s mind like Vikulya once had, to confirm that she was completely rejected by her parents. However, Kotoba didn’t have any doubt, there was no need to tap; if he could go back to his childhood and enter his father’s mind, he knew he would have discovered that he was completely denied.

“My mother knew that he wouldn’t accept me. That is why she wrote to him that she would raise me by herself, Kotoba thought. In fact, his father had never responded to his mother’s letter. He already had a family when he had met Kotoba’s mother.

“I was indeed an illegitimate child, Minho, he had said to his childhood friend, who constantly teased him by saying that he was a bastard.

As he walked towards the woods, Kotoba began recalling his lonely childhood. He remembered the first sensation when he talked to a perfect stranger in a foreign language. Their excitement and his mother’s surprise. That had truly started his life, because he believed that by speaking a foreign language, he could be a part of any circle.

He realized that he was not following the wind, and he opened his eyes. The woods smelled of pinecones. An owl was hooting. He listened carefully in the direction where he had left Beatrice to check for any sounds of coyotes. For a moment he thought of tapping into her mind to check her
safety, but decided not to, feeling that was against the protocol of the quest.

He closed his eyes again. The ground under his feet was covered with dead leaves. He continued to walk toward where the wind blew.

He recalled his childhood room; a small space in an apartment complex designated for low-income housing. There was a spot where he could see the infinitely multiplied figure of himself, when he stood between two mirrors: one hanging on the refrigerator, the other on his mother’s dresser.

-If I were a father, would I be able to see my child an infinite number of times? He wondered. Then he thought of Rita; Rita who was trembling naked in front of him under a cover on his bed.

-I insulted her. By not embracing her, he recalled. Despite that, she stayed at the hospital while he was treated for his cerebral malaria.

Now when he opened the eyes, he could see the full moon over his head and he realized that he reached the pinnacle of the mountain. He saw a tree in the middle of the flat area on the summit. The branches were trembling under the breeze, as if to invite him.

Suddenly he felt a sensation in his body he had never experienced before. -I want to make a child with Rita! he realized when he looked at the tree.

He instinctively undressed himself. Now he was standing naked in the moonlight by the tree. He touched the bark with his eyes closed as if he was touching Rita, who was now ready to marry to another man. With a sensation he looked at his penis, standing erect for the first time. A moment later, he orgasmed.

Epilogue
I woke up when someone nudged my elbow, and I found I was on a plane. I looked at the girl sitting next to me, but it took a second for me to remember which girl it was; Hanna or Karin.

-Daddy, are we there yet? Karin tapped me, yawning.

I looked at the watch on my wrist, which still showed the time in Japan: 3:35AM. I turned back my watch six hours to match Swedish time, while saying, -- The airplane will land at the Umeå airport in fifteen minutes. Can you tell how long that is?

In her mind, a clock with a hand pointing towards 9 showed up. But then she couldn’t remember the number that was at the top of the clock.

-That’s twelve, I tapped.

-Hanna is sleeping now, she tapped back, still too groggy to talk.

-Yeah. With your little Hammurabi. That was the name of the stuffed duck Karin had left to her twin sister.

"Jerry!" Karin exclaimed suddenly as she pulled a stuffed giraffe out from under her seat. “I told you not to go anywhere. Listen to your mommy,” she chided the little giraffe.

“I thought you were his aunt, because Hanna is Jerry’s mother.” The girls had exchanged their stuffed animals before we had left Tokyo.

"Hmm, hmm..." Karin shook her head. “He has two mothers.” I wondered where Karin got that idea, because she only had one mother, Rita. I explored her mind and understood that it was because, based on what I had said in the past, she believed that I had more than one father. I had once told the girls that I felt like I had many fathers; they had mainly been people I lived with when I was young, including many of my mothers’ ex-boyfriends.

-Karin, daddy has only one father. You probably don’t remember that you and Hanna met him. You guys were still babies, I tapped.
She was silent internally, but soon, a scene of fluorescent white sand and water unfolded in her head.

—That’s right. You have a good memory, I tapped again. — That is the shore of the big lake we went to.

Then, in her thoughts, a black and white cow emerged in the water. It was infinitely pleasant for me to follow my girls’ fantasy worlds. The cow soon changed its form to a duck with black and white feathers.

—That’s a very unusual duck you saw, wasn’t it? Even as I communicated that, I thought of the time I visited my father with Rita and the girls. We had brunch in his house by Lake Michigan on a weekend, the house where he lived with his girlfriend of more than ten years.

“I no longer think of marriage,” he said, “after failing twice.” His girlfriend Susan agreed. “My kids wouldn’t like me marrying anybody either.”

After returning to our motel, I asked Rita, “Was it worth it for us to pay the airfare to come here from New York?”

“I think so,” Rita answered. She was still preoccupied with the excitement from a release party we’d had in New York for my first poetry book.

“You could give a copy of your book to your father. Do you think he would read it?”

“Probably not,” I chuckled. “But his girlfriend would. She is that type of person.”

“I think so, too,” Rita answered. “I liked the paintings she’d put on the walls. They were all by abstract impressionists.”

Since then, Rita had been in touch with Susan, mainly through Facebook, which she had begun using to interface with everyone imaginable. “That’s the only way for me to connect with people, unlike you guys,” she had
explained when he’d asked.

Almost three years had passed since that reunion.

The pilot announced in Swedish that the plane would soon start descending.

“The local time is about 10:00PM. Don’t get it confused with 10:00AM. It’s bright out,” he said, explaining the white night. I laughed along with a woman in her mid forties sitting next to me.

“Ursäkta mig,” she said to me in Swedish. “Can I ask what languages you were speaking? I was fascinated watching you and your girls go back and forth in multiple languages.”

“I don’t remember which language we were speaking. Japanese for sure. Maybe English, French?”


“That’s amazing,” the woman exclaimed in English. “You have a lovely girl.”

I lost my chance to explain that I no longer spoke as many as twenty-two languages when I didn’t practice some of them, because Karin continued, saying, “I’m a twin. My sister is still in Tokyo with my mom, because my dad is too cheap to pay for air tickets for four people.”

I was glad that the second part of her words was drowned out by a stewardess’ announcement asking passengers to turn off electric devices.

-Since mom and Hanna aren’t coming, we can use that money to build one more tutoring school in India. Isn’t that nice? I tapped into Karin’s mind. “Hmm, hmm...” she shook her head. “I want to be with mommy.”

I sighed and worried about the days waiting for us. I had been thinking of sending the girls to a school in Baki+T when they became bigger. When
she noticed my thoughts, Karin didn’t protest the idea.

I recalled the communication I had with Damascene when the girls were about a year old. I wasn’t sure if it was good thing for the girls to have their minds being constantly read by me.

-Oh, read them as much as you want. Soon enough, they’ll be sure to shut the communication down with no mercy. I’ll tell you, he chuckled.

- Take advantage of it! The time for it is so short.

Next morning, I took a cab with Karin to the hospital where Asad was staying. When we crossed the Tegsbron Bridge over the river, I was assailed by a strong nostalgia. Asad and I had walked along this river many times after we had dinner. On weekends, we sat at the café by the river for fika, little break, which was one of the big customs in Sweden. I often had a glass of milk while he drank coffee and chewed Khat as we chatted with his friends, who were fellow immigrants.

Somewhere in my mind, I missed those days when I could decide on a whim to live in a place whenever I liked. Back then, I sometimes called my friends, who would allow me to board at their places. They’d always ask me where all my belongings were.

“Are you sure you don’t need anything else?” they would all ask.

“I have a PC and a hard-drive with dictionaries here. That’s all I need,” I’d answered. Now I had a family, which was something that I could never entirely leave behind.

Asad’s wife, Khadija, had intelligent dark chestnut eyes. Her roasted butter skin was still flawless despite her age. She was wearing a striped Xijaab that matched with her striped Dirac. Her plum lips were curved with a slight smile, which showed the right mixture of strong will and affection.
I thought of the beauty she must have had when she was younger. Looking at her, I could tell why Asad had been dependent on narcotic plants when he couldn’t live with her and why he quit them after they were reunited.

Asad was sitting on the bed with his head cover on.

“Hey buddy,” he said in Arabic. We had exchanged the text messages in the language before the reunion, although my Arabic had grown rusty.

I shook his hand, which was dry and slightly cold, and then embraced him. He kissed me on my cheek without hesitation. I was glad to see that he hadn’t lost much weight, in spite of his intestinal conditions. He had more wrinkled skin and his beard was now mostly gray, but his eyes were sharper than the ones I remembered. He gave a smile which looked almost like crying. I suppressed a tear from seeing him again after such a long time.

“Twenty six years!” he exclaimed in a small voice.

“Yup,” I answered.

Karin threw her head and upper body on the bed and, in low voice, started to say something incomprehensible.

“She isn’t shy at all!” Asad said.

“No. She just had her little giraffe greet me in the lobby,” Khadija added.

“She doesn’t seem to be cranky from the long trip, either.”

“She is the more outgoing type. Her sister, Hanna, is a little more shy,” I explained.

After more admiration of Karin and a kind response to her question about what was going to happen to ducks on the river after it got frozen, I asked Asad about his condition, although I already knew it that it was not serious by tapping into his doctor’s mind. It was nonetheless a rare symptom to have swelling in his intestines, and it still caused excruciating pain.
“I never want to go through this again,” Asad grimaced.

“He can no longer eat meat,” Khadija said.

Asad asked many questions about my life and I explained that I no longer translated and now was running three non-profit organizations; one built schools in developing countries, another was a national association for clean tech, and the third was founded for the protection of extinct languages.

“But I have people who operate those organizations for me. Most of my time is spent reading and writing my poetry,” I said. I didn’t mention to Asad that I used the most of the proceedings from renting out the space in my building in Ginza for the non-profit organizations.

“Can you make a living on that?” Asad asked, just like so many other people did.

“No. We live in a shack.” I smiled. “I’ll show you the pictures. I built it with other Japanese carpenters. It’s not finished.”

I took out my iPhone and flipped through to the picture of our house.

“It’s not a shack, Kotoba. This is a great house.” Asad and Khadija put their heads together and looked at the tiny photos intently. Sitting on the bed and looking at the pictures, Karin explained the clean-tech we’d installed in our house.

“It’s a zero-emission house,” she said, but couldn’t quite explain what that meant when asked.

“I know that this is a water tank to hold rain water.” She pointed out the gray structure next to our house.

“I bet you must have a lot of rain,” Asad murmured.

“Yes. We use it for the toilet and the shower, but not for washing dishes. Mom waters flowers with it if it isn’t raining. See, these are the pipes dad put under the house,” she continued. “They make my butt warm in winter.
And this is where sun gathers.” She pointed the solar panels. “The sun is so hot that it can be used for light at night. This is the sheet that stops our house from getting cold. Dad put those sheets behind the wall.” Then she added, “Hanna put her drawing on the wall yesterday, so it looks nicer now!” The girls were constantly tapping with each other and reporting what they were doing.

I had already written him that I would stop by at Umeå on the way to Stockholm, because I had been invited for a reading at the Earth Festival.

“If I weren’t sick we’d definitely go to the reading,” Asad said. I could tell he was sincere about that. His son was living in Stockholm, so Asad and Khadija often went there anyway.

He walked us out to the hall to see us off. I could tell he was pondering whether or not to tell me that I saved his life by living with him.

—That was the hardest time I’ve ever had. God gave me you in my life, he was thinking.

I was thinking the same thing.

“You know, when you lived with me…” Asad said, just as Karin and I were about to leave.

“Asad, I know,” I said, “I just want to say, the same to you.”

We looked into each other’s eyes.

When were were back in the taxi, Karin asked me, “Dad, is he your father, too?”

On the flight heading to Stockholm, I tapped with the Students. We held a weekly gathering on Sundays since we had left Baki+T, where we tried to focus on our talk on the messages we had received that week from the trees. Otherwise, we may have merely fallen into gossiping.
We also took a turn each week to keep track of Jed’s well-being.

“I don’t want to forget any of the experiences I had in here,” I remembered him saying when we had seen him off at the customs house of Baki+T after the brief course-completion ceremony was over.

“No, we won’t forget you,” Kip said, not being able to say that in Jed’s memory, much of Baki+T would be erased.

“We…and the trees…will watch over you,” Damascene said. Jed embraced each of us and set off to the outside world, and disappeared from our sight behind the fence of the Baki+T border.

In our mind images we saw that the moment he got on the bus, all his memories about us and Baki+T were erased.

“How was your retreat, Mr. Hermit?” his wife had asked Jed when he arrived home.

“Oh, it was great,” he’d said unloading his backpack. In fact, he’d been feeling that something had forever changed in him. However, he was not sure how to explain any of his feelings.

Since that week was my turn, I tapped into Jed’s life. In the past few days, he’d been busy promoting a gathering in Phoenix in the fall. Green building designers and engineers were going to give a lecture on sustainable building. It was scheduled to be broadcast via the San Francisco library’s e-learning system, along with other lectures on global warming. Jed had been the chairman of the Green Library Consortium, and he had strong relationships with city council and tree preservation groups in the city.

—How’s your preparation going? In the airplane to Stockholm, I tapped into the mind of Valentine, who was the first attendee of the weekly meeting.
—What am I supposed to prepare? he tapped back. He had received a grant from an American Fund to go to the University of Natal in South Africa. While he was in Baki+T, he had decided to become an architect. I thought for a minute.

—Maybe a toothbrush? Did you pack one?
—Yeah, about three dozen of them. Is that enough? he answered sarcastically.

Then Vikulya tapped in. It had been a long time since she attended one of these meetings.

—I’m too busy as a single mom, she explained.

As for the other members’ lives after the class, Tadej had moved to a much smaller apartment after his house was taken by the creditors. He had gone through a lot of stress when he was subjected to the lawsuit filed by the government.

“I have nothing left to hide. That’s a good feeling,” he had said in a previous meeting.

Furqan started an occupational training school using his mind-reading skills. He hired good teachers in his school, although many of them became fed up with the stubbornness of Furqan after working with him a few months.

Yuan-Yuan, in the end, came back to the class after getting lost in the mountains in Baki+T. On the last day, she attended the small graduation ceremony with everyone else. “You are stuck with us,” Vikulya said.

“I know,” Yuan-Yuan answered. Afterwards, she opened a consulting firm for small business and became “too busy to marry.”

Probably, it was only Philippe and Damascene who continued life without any big changes after the course. However, both of them were active with environmental issues in their own way.

As for Mia, she was currently taking a philosophy course at the local
university.

“Kotoba-san, are you ready?” A young Japanese woman who was helping with the Earth Festival signaled to me.

I was backstage at the open-air amphitheater in the University of Stockholm.

“As many of you know, the best-known poem of Kotoba’s is ‘Breathing,’ which gained instant acclaim after it was first published in the US. It soon became a record-breaking bestseller in various countries in North America, Europe and Asia.”

I stood backstage, listening to my introduction from the master of the symposium.

As usual before a reading, I inhaled and then exhaled deeply. I looked back at the trees behind the amphitheater. I stepped onto the stage. I heard a sound, and I was not sure if it was applause or trees rustle.

- END -
Critical Essay on Photosynthesizer

Language and Authenticity

Naoko Kishigami Selland

In considering the relationship between human beings and language, there are two approaches: One is looking at language as something which is naturally or unconsciously spoken, and often used as a tool; the other is looking at language as something that itself speaks or “lets loose” in speaking especially through poetry or the ecstatic or inspired speech of religious ritual and shamanic trance. In the former situation, language is spoken more like a natural consequence. “We speak because speaking is natural to us.” This natural speech occurs not only when handling practical matters in daily life but also when attempting to establish the meaning of one’s being in life. And this natural behavior of human speech is sometimes used as a manipulation to gain power in the community. A stark example of this is when a politician capitalizes the words that reach out to the voters sentiment, experiences, situations and interest. In the latter, when “language speaks,” the poet (as well as the translator –see part 3) allows language speak through her. In other words, the poet resides in language rather than merely using it (as in Heidegger’s dictum, “language is the house of Being”). In Heidegger’s thought, Dasein is the coherence of Being-in-the-World. The role of poet in the contemporary world, which comes ever closer to the midnight of the world, is to let loose the language so that it speaks. Poets try to recover the communication with “the world” by making a poetic agent consciously fix the passage that connects “the I” and “the World”, but at the same time that poetic agent is rebellious against the poetry.

In Photosynthesizer, Kotoba was depicted first as “inauthentic” in his attempt to use language as a tool. He tried to establish the meaning of his being by mastering twenty-two languages. That was more like a mechanical learning mode. However, through his experience of learning Baki+T, he reached a deeper stage in his relationship with language and made up his mind to become a poet who carries the messianic message of trees.

In this essay, I will first discuss language and authenticity primarily through a consideration of
Heidegger’s writings on poetic language and authenticity of language. Secondly, I will expand the authenticity discussion to religion as discussed in contemporary theory and postmodern theology by looking at Faith and Knowledge by Jacque Derrida and Gianni Vattimo. In the last chapter, I will look at language from the perspective of translation mainly discussing the seminal essay on the subject, The Task of the Translator by Walter Benjamin.
Language and Authenticity

Authenticity is pervasive and basic to Heidegger’s existentialist concept explained especially in *Being and Time*. When we take a closer look at Heidegger’s explanation around authenticity, we find that the English translation of “authenticity” does not quite fit what he intended in the original German, *Eigentlichkeit*. John Haugerland aptly points this out as follows:

The usual translation of “eigentlich” is “real” or “authentic” (as opposed, for instance, to fake or counterfeit). But Heidegger explicitly warns that he has chosen his expressions “Eigentlichkeit” and its opposite “Uneigentlichkeit” in “the strict senses of the words” (SZ, 43) –which I take to mean their etymological senses. The root word “eigen” is broadly equivalent to (and cognate with) the English word “own.” This suggests that Heidegger’s term might better be translated “ownedness and “unownedness”.

Haugerland further explains “the difference between “ownedness” and “unownedness” is a difference in modes of disclosedness. Unowned disclosedness (the default) is called *publicness*; owned disclosedness (Dasein’s distinctive possibility) is called *resoluteness*. As is explained in another explanation of Heideggerian authenticity, the word “authenticity” according to the Oxford English Dictionary is “belonging to himself, own, proper.” Being authentic means it comes from “myself,” not anyone else, such as the public. “Authentic modes of existence, in this strictly formal sense, are those in which Dasein stands in a directly first-person relation to itself, in contrast to the second- and third-person relations in which it stands to others, and which it can adopt with respect to itself, at least up to a point.”

What we understand from this explanation is Dasein has to go back to the question of “What is Being” in its own way and disclose the notorious existentialist notions of anxiety, individuality, death and being responsible. Heidegger developed the concept of Dasein to explain the primal nature of Being. He states that Dasein has its basic structure as Being-in-the-world. This structure is *a priori* by nature, but by keeping this structure in mind, the items as phenomena which are constitutive for it will stand out. Heidegger writes that “Dasein is an entity which, in its very Being, comports itself understandingly towards that Being.” This term, “understandingly,” can be explained as one’s awareness of one’s problems as an entity that exists in the world. What is
required here is that Dasein question itself, and thereby attains its disclosedness.

In Photosynthesizer, through the question given in the intensive summer course, “Who/what is the Photosynthesizer?” each student gains his/her own realization and understanding of their being in their own way. The students have an opportunity to think about their situations in the world: Furqan came to terms with his anger against the United States after his brother was killed in the war, Tadej adopted a new perspective on his life of turmoil and Vikulya gained new confidence in her singing career.

Baki+T has a unique perspective on time such that it only looks at the present. Mr. Takamizawa, the sole Japanese instructor of Baki+T, writes in an article:

The two most common questions my students ask about Baki+T are: Why is there such a scarcity of records? And: Why doesn’t the language have any written form? The answer is simple: One role of writing is to build a history in order to communicate with people in the future. However, if there is no notion of history or past or even future in the speaker’s perception, there is no necessity to take a written form. This is Baki+T: it exists only in the present; this is the Baki+T speaker’s only Being and Time. (13)

In this sense, Baki+T may be similar to the characteristics of Haiku. Haruo Shirane explains in “Traces of Dreams” this unique notion of time in haiku, which is often called the “haiku moment,” as follows:

“Much of the haiku, which is usually in three lines, focuses on moments of intense perception, especially the sensory aspects of physically small objects, or on a particular instant in time, commonly referred to as the “haiku moment.”

What inevitably compels haiku to focus on a particular instant in time and small objects is its short form and a rule that requires the inclusion of a kigo, or seasonal word. There are thousands of seasonal words, some which also may require a set phrase to accompany it. So in reality
haikuists only have two lines of 5-7 or so syllables to create the whole universe. The effect which a haiku gives to readers is similarly instantaneous. The reader gains the same sense of present time which the author had at that moment, and then is thrown back into his/her own experience or thoughts. These thoughts may then freely develop into a new narrative without further explanation or interruption by the author.

Roses bloom
The morning
My wife’s life ends

This haiku by Hisao Ōishi gives a strong sense of present time; the morning when his wife died. (The seasonal word, rose, tells it is summer.) At the same time, probably due to its focus on present time, it makes the reader think of times when a loved one has been sick, or times spent together when the person was healthy. At the same time there is a sense of a new beginning and continuation of time due to the roses which blooming. Life goes on regardless of one life’s ending.

A haiku which appeared in the magazine of the American Haiku Society represents this sense of time in a more vivid manner.

Tuesday Tuesday Tuesday
Tuesday she dies Tuesday
Tuesday Tuesday Tuesday

Here the repetition of word, Tuesday, represents the circulation of time. Tuesday, when the author’s wife died, comes every week. Memories from the past and a discontinued life are intertwined in the head of the author and readers. The haiku also represents two different aspects of the Heideggerian sense of time by dissecting the poetry in the middle with the phrase, “she dies.” In the section titled, “The possibility of experiencing the death of Others, and the possibility
of getting a whole Dasein into our grasp,” Heidegger explains “The end of the entity qua Dasein is
the beginning of the same entity qua something present-at-hand.\textsuperscript{11}"

The former Tuesdays can be interpreted as the one that represents the end of the entity, “she” and
the latter portion after “she dies,” represents beginning of the same entity which is present in the
author’s mind.

In Baki+T this dynamic of time starting with the present is partly possible, because the
memory of Baki+T doesn’t stay in many people’s head. All memory related to language is erased.
Baki+T refuses to be recorded. People either passively accept that rule without a clear
consciousness or become mentally deranged if they force themselves to try to write something
down about Baki+T. One example of a mentally deranged Tier is Tomoe who once took a class in
Baki+T from Mr. Takamizawa with Kotoba, the protagonist of the story. Baki+Tiers can
communicate with each other through Baki+T and they call this communication method
“tapping,” and tapping with Tomoe, who stays at a mental hospital, is like a dead phone line
(102-103). When it comes to Baki+T, enlightenment or realization starts with the present. People
usually forget even about the existence of the country of Baki+T (that is how the country is able to
remain a self-governing entity in California where people are ready to devour such an ample
resource and talent), and remember the country only when necessary. Kotoba, who completely
forgets that Baki+T is the tree language, suddenly remembers it when he is focusing on the present
watching children playing in the park. (37)

This rule of not recording is important to retain the integrity and authenticity, -originality- of
the language. That point is explained by Tommy, a high-school student in Baki+T whom Jed
meets after entering the country. (163)
Religion and Language – time and religion

As is made evident in the well-known quote in the Chapter of John, “In the beginning was the Word,” religion and language are tightly interconnected. This can be said not only of Christianity but also Shintoism, in which words are believed to contain a spirit or power, Kotodama, which, when spoken, can produce an effect in the world, or Islam, in which the recital of the Qur’an is important part of religious practice. All major religions have written scriptures, and often (especially Qur’an), their verbal text is believed to be the final form of God. Obviously, these derive from the oracles of the past, but for those people who experience its effects, it is always a matter of the present. And at the same time, religion looks to the future in its concern with the eternal. It is well known that time in Christianity is expressed as linear time unlike circular time in Buddhism as can be seen in the idea of reincarnation, or in animism such as that of the Druids in Celtic culture. Linearity in the Bible comes from God having created the world with his words, “Let there be light,” and for the sequence of events leading eventually to the emergence of the Messiah, his crucifixion, resurrection and Last Inquest. We are on this linear path toward the Last Judgment, which is always in the future. On the other hand, Buddhism has its circular notion of time through the belief that the spirit reincarnates. In the Celtic culture Sacred Trees are the center around which time and perception circles. Both language and religion share these senses of time.

The book, Religion, edited by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, represents an interesting juxtaposition of time and geography. This “time” here means something more in the realms of historicity. The Institute Italiano held the seminar on the theme of “religion” at the current “our time” when “globalatinization” (a word coined by Derrida, meaning “this strange alliance of Christianity, as the experience of the death of God, and tele-technoscientific capitalism”) is clearly going on and the surge of Islam is evident. The seminar was held in Capri, near Rome, where the term “religion” was passed by partly because of its Roman Occidentality. Here we need to clearly distinguish “faith” and “religion”. In Japanese, there is an old saying, “One can believe in a sardine head with faith,” meaning “Anything viewed through the eyes of faith seems perfect. “Faith,” as experienced in the individual’s mind indeed supports “religion,” but “religion,” which has its own all-encompassing historicity, eventfulness, texts and community of faith is
different. In religion these events mean Nativity, enlightenment, revelation or other supernatural and historical events. In Religion, Derrida states that what matters is how to respond to religion or the very fact that one responds to it as a philosopher, in other words, “the strange phenomenon of Latinity and its globalization.” Here he talks about the process of universalization, especially the hegemony of the Latin (European) world. This hegemony of religion took a detour from Rome to the United States and circulates the world in a hyper-imperialist appropriation.

Leaving aside for the moment Derrida’s main concern here with Christianity as a historical and political institution, one that has been ultimately imperialist in nature, I would like to explore briefly the cultural attraction which Paul’s universalism (Badiou) also had in the ancient world, as well as the importance of the figure of Christ as a mediator who shifts the focus from an all-powerful and punishing God to the human, toward human agency and ultimately a progressive form of individuation (Zizek). Christianity achieved cultural importance through the power of language. “In the beginning was the word.” The word exercises power over individuals by presenting the supple phrases that were most appropriate to history at that point in time. When Proverbs states, “The purpose of a man’s heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out,” these enigmatic words provoke in one’s mind so many things. This can be interpreted as a phrase that aptly describes the effect of disclosedness in Heideggerian terms. A poet (or temporarily here calling “a man of understanding”) is aware that casting someone else’s perception to Dasein (or language itself) will not lead us to the truth. It is more like finding how the world discloses itself through language or “myself”. A man of understanding seeks for that relationship between the world and Dasein through forever seeking it without being aware of seeking it. Language inherently has that power.

The power of tele-technoscience is impossible to ignore at this stage of the history. It is almost to the level of nouvelle religion in current society. People now can easily experience rebirth and transcendence through the constant update of software and devices. Whenever we have a new version of iPhone in hand, we feel that our brain is renewed.

In Photosynthesizer, the country of Baki+T is depicted as a place which has a balance between technology and nature.
“Computer technology sure helps save the earth.” Kip said reading Jed’s mind.

“See, we aren’t Luddites. But we hate technology only for the sake of the economy. There is so much unnecessary crap out there that these CEOs try to ‘market’. It’s unfortunate, so many Baki+Tiers work for them to make a living, but we believe that technology works well if it is used for the right purpose.” (218)

Many of the major public places of Baki+T were designed by a Sri Lankan architect and built in the 50s and 60s. His design was based on the theme of harmony among trees, sunlight, space and human beings. Baki+Tiers know how to take advantage of technology as a mode.

As for transiency of Baki+T as a language, Jed had experienced this before when he attempted to interview an old lady from Baki+T for his school project researching counties in California. There was no stationery to write on at her house and he had forgotten everything he asked, so he had to give up the entire research project. Remembering that, when he re-experienced Baki+T, he attempted to write down what had happened, resisting the force preventing him from doing so.

“Shit! Who was this guy? Why am I writing this?” Jed found himself saying out loud as several surprised shoppers stared in his direction.

“That’s right. It was Baki+T! He was from Baki+T.”

With a trembling hand, he tried to write ‘Baki+T’ next to Walter’s name on the backside of the card. At the moment he wrote the letter, “B” he started to feel that the pen was as heavy as lead. He resisted that force with all his might and wrote down the whole word which ended up like letters on a contorted mirror. Then he looked back over his shoulder feeling that he was being watched.
“Are you trying to write something down about Baki+T?”

The calm voice was in stark contrast to Jed’s frantic mindset. Jed looked up at the direction of the voice. A middle aged Asian man with tanned skin was looking at the card in Jed’s hand.

“There’s no use. Don’t even try. When you have to remember, you’ll remember.” He said with a smile in his face.

Jed found himself looking at the guy as resistance to his power of memory slipping away began to fade.

“Do you want me to explain why Baki+T has been able to keep its autonomy? In the state of California? Where people have much more power than them, at least economically?”

The Asian looking guy kept talking while walking away from the bookstore.

“It’s because Baki+T is a language only a few people can master! Other times, people completely forget about it!” (130-131)

As there is no concrete form of Baki+T, one has to have faith to accept this strange offer to become a part of this community of language speakers, and to be able to say that “this is a language which trees use.” One person who is obliged to take the leap is the librarian, Jed Schmidt, who was selected by the trees to become a facilitator for the intensive summer course. He is first incredulous, and it takes three messengers (and their efforts to prove their telepathy by showing that Baki+Tiers are indeed able to read Jed’s mind) to make him believe that the language does exist. It is his wife who finally pushes him to accept the offer.

‘Tens of thousands of people pray to an invisible God and people kill each other or love each other because of hearing messages from that invisible thing. Why not a tree then?’ she said. ‘At least we can see it. We can touch it.’(153)
The religious experience, which is often expressed as a form of enlightenment, or epiphany, is similar to the effect which reading can have on us (thus it requires language). Through our reading experiences we find some kind of resolution to the problems dealt with in the novel, or conversely, we become aware of an ultimately irresolvable reality. Jed decided to accept the offer to become a facilitator for the Baki+T summer course, because as a librarian he associates this with book reading and thinks that it will give him the same experience as opening a book and reading through it, thereby attaining some form of clear and rational learning.

On the first day, Jed is interrogated by one of the students, Tadej, about the meaning of gathering to learn Baki+T. Tadej (whose background is Slovenian) has his own problems in his life and Religion entails its own dangers; it often becomes mere culture or community. The reason Baki+T is not a religion but a language is because of that. I wanted to avoid it’s becoming a mere community participants. (Although as long as humans are involved, “becoming a mere community” –and a community is a necessary part of life – cannot be avoided and that is expressed by Kip, an officer of the Ministry of Education in Baki+T who prepares for the summer course.)

Gossip… that is another reason why we –sorry– trees chose a non-Tier. Too much gossip among Tiers. That’s one of the weaknesses of Baki+T. (140)

In order to acquire the message from the trees, the Students have to ignore these gossip voices “out there” and train themselves to strain to hear the voice of the trees. Writers, or manipulators of language, find insight and redemption through reading or communication with others (often in a community), but the ultimate voice can only be heard via one-to-one relationship with the source of voice.

Those who can rightly hear the messages from the trees can establish the true (ideally unconditional) relationship with others in the world (or community.) That is also true in religion. About the word “World”, Thomas Merton writes;
“...it is when the Christian learns to recognize the world as redeemed and enters into an “I-Thou” relationship with all other persons in it seen as loved and sought by Christ that he obtains spiritual leverage to free the world from the tyranny of its own worldliness.”

The Students of the Baki+T summer course have to learn what these relationships are by exploring what photosynthesis is and who the photosynthesizer is for them. It turns out in the end that the photosynthesizer is Kotoba, a translator of twenty-two languages and manipulator of language who later becomes a poet and thus transcend it. He is the photosynthesizer who the trees chose. However, in the process of undergoing the training, the students find that they each have their own internal photosynthesizer. For Furqan, a Palestinian living in Gaza, it is his brother who was shot by a government soldier and bled to death in front of he and his father (229-231 and 259-260). For Mead, a concentration camp survivor, it could be the executioner who killed her mother (194-196). For Vikulya, an Uzbekistan singer at a night club, it is singing (232-235). Through their experiences in Baki+T country and their attempts to master the language, and through the I-Thou relationship with trees, they find their true calling. Jed’s memory of Baki+T is erased after he leaves the country.

“I don’t want to forget any of the experiences I had in here,” I remembered him saying when we had seen him off at the customs house of Baki+T after the brief course-completion ceremony was over.

“No, we won’t forget you,” Kip had said, not being able to say that in Jed’s memory, much of Baki+T would be erased.

“We...and the trees...will watch over you,” Damascene said. Jed embraced each of us and set off to the outside world, and disappeared from our sight behind the fence of the Baki+T border.

In our mind images we saw that the moment he got on the bus, all his memories about us and Baki+T were erased. (271)
The Task of the Translator

The subtext to Walter Benjamin’s *The Task of the Translator* suggests that the process of translation may actually provide the deep structure of poetic thought itself. The article begins with the basic question, what is translation for. “Is a translation meant for readers who do not understand the original?\(^1\) In his opinion, translation in any form is impossible. “All purposeful manifestation of life, including their very purposiveness, in the final analysis have their end not in life but in the expression of its nature, in the representation of its significance. Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the innermost relationship of languages to our answer. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form.\(^2\) The question about the very possibility of translation further goes to the argument of kinship between languages and then to his theory of *pure language*. “All suprahistorical kinship between languages consists in this: in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant. Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language.” He then pulls an example from the words, *Brot* and *pain*, which mean bread respectively in German and French, but the way of meaning is different. These words serve to exclude each other. “To be more specific, the way of meaning in them is supplemented in its relation to what it meant.(257)“ Pure language, which is a supplement for the relationship between different symbolizing and their symbolized (common notion), will have us find the meaning which otherwise is never found in relative independence. “In the individual, unsupplemented language, what is meant is…. In a constant state of flux-until it is able to emerge as the pure language from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning.(257)“ Turning the symbolizing to into symbolized itself to regain pure language fully formed from the linguistic flux is “the tremendous and only capacity of translation (261)”

In the pure language, things are expressionless and all information, all sense and all intention are destined to extinguish. Baki+T is like a pure language in a sense that all memory related to Baki+T is destined to be erased after the experience. The memory will be erased, but the experience of going through Baki+T, which has a similarity of going through a mode of the
translation, is the point. Here, the original (pre-Baki+T) is no longer matters. In A Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin, this is explained in a fairly clear manner; “In Benjamin’s idea of similarities there is no longer an obvious reference to an original; rather, the independence of the new reference is emphasized, without, however, its being completely severed from the original.” That is what Jed experienced after he continued the life as a librarian after coming back from the country of Baki+T with his memory related to that all erased. To his wife’s question asking how the retreat was, he answers:

“Oh, it was great,” he’d said unloading his backpack. In fact, he’d been feeling that something had forever changed in him. However, he was not sure how to explain any of his feelings. (271)

As all living substances, trees repeat rebirth. In human rebirth, this is often referred to as a “leap of faith.” Or if I borrow Zizek’s words, “self-transcendent.”

This notion of pure language can also be explained by using the theory of Chora by Kristeva. In Photosynthesizer, Jed, the librarian and facilitator, asked an intellectual question to Kip, an officer of the Ministry of Education which sponsors the course, why Baki+T can be “a language” instead of “faith” or “religion”. To his question, Kip answered with the help of other Tiers who are familiar with philosophy, using the theory of Kristeva’s Chora.

“Kristeva..., that is how you pronounce it?”

“Yes, Julia Kristeva, Bulgarian-French philosopher. How about her?”

“Oh boy, she is a beauty... But anyway, she used this theory called Chora, was it?”

“I read several books by Kristeva, the most representative ones. And I know that in one book, she wrote about Chora.”

“That was in Revolution in Poetic Language” Kip recited closing his eyes as if he was reading from an imaginary wall in his memory. His
slightly opened eyes made Jed shiver. Kip flipped open his eyes, saying, “Sorry....”

“The only thing I know about Chora is,” Jed interrupted, “that it is a chaotic stage in a baby’s mind before it learns how to speak. Oh... you say that stage is still a language even though it does not yet have a form of speech or sound. OK.” Jed nodded to himself. (143)

The concept of pure language can also be explained as a third element which resides in a sense “between” the original and the target language in the process of translation. In other words, translation itself is the pure language. And as represented here in this writing, Baki+T is itself Benjamin’s messianic language, existing at once within and between languages, and in a sense beyond and “outside” language, in the revelation of nature itself.
Works Cited


2 Ibid., p. 190


4 Heidegger, Authenticity and Modernity. Edited by Mark Wrathall and Jef Malpas. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2000, P. 62

5 Ibid., p. 63


13 Ibid., p. 15

14 Ibid., p. 9

15 Ibid., p. 29


18 Ibid., p. 255