“Suwa Diary/War-Ending Diary” by Hirabayashi Taiko

trans. N. Murray

Translator’s note:

Lately I have been reading memoirs by Edward Seidensticker and Donald Keene. Between the two of them they are responsible, as translators and scholars, for much of the Western world’s initial knowledge of Japanese literature. I should be so lucky as ever to have a tenth of their gifts and their dedication; but reading their accounts of their lifelong work with Japanese literature, I can’t help noticing one field at least where I can go beyond them. Neither of them seems ever to have had any interest to speak of in translating the work of any woman born less than one thousand years ago.

Seidensticker in particular writes with tremendous warmth and respect of his friendship with Hirabayashi Taiko in her last years; he does not, however, mention her writing at all (perhaps because much of her best work deals with her left-wing youth, and he was leaning right at that period), and he certainly never proposes translating anything she wrote for publication. Perhaps he thought it wouldn’t sell, and at that date he was probably right, but is that enough? As Ursula Le Guin writes, “No matter how successful, beloved, influential her work was, when a woman author dies, nine times out of ten she gets dropped from the lists, the courses, the anthologies, while the men get kept. If she had the nerve to have children, her chances of getting dropped are higher still. ⋯Most women’s writing—like most work by women in any field—is called unimportant, secondary, by masculinist teachers and critics of both sexes.” Le Guin is busy with a polemic, but she has a point.

Taiko and the modern women writers who were her predecessors, her contemporaries, and her successors deserve the hearing in English which it never occurred to Seidensticker and Keene to give them. I do not propose to argue over whether or not their works average out to “great literature,” or whether or not they are better than Mishima, Tanizaki, Kawabata, and the others to whom Seidensticker and Keene devoted their time and effort; as far as I’m concerned, they are good enough, interesting enough, more than worth knowing.

Historical background: Born in 1905 in Suwa, Nagano Prefecture, to a good family fallen on hard times, Hirabayashi Taiko left for Tokyo upon graduating from high school at age 16. She became involved with left-wing activism, leading to imprisonment with her (common-law)

husband Yamamoto just after the great earthquake of 1923. Dismissed from Tokyo, Taiko and Yamamoto wandered as far as Dairen in Manchuria, where Yamamoto was once again imprisoned (for a singularly inept attempt at labor organization) and Taiko gave birth to a baby daughter (conceived in the Tokyo jail) who died shortly after birth of malnutrition. Taiko subsequently returned alone to Tokyo and lived hand-to-mouth with several different men, would-be artists, writers, and activists, before making her name as a writer of fiction and essays through the left-wing magazine *Bungei Sensen* (Literary Front) and marrying Kobori Jinji in 1927. Once again seized by the authorities during the increased repressions of the war, she became ill in prison and nearly died, recovering only after several bedridden years during which Kobori, who felt a responsibility for her prison experience, nursed her devotedly.

Taiko's "Suwa Diary" and "Shusen Diary" form a more or less continuous account of the last few months of the war in Japan. In her typical acerbic and deeply felt style, full of small vivid details, she describes the way of the times in a northern farming village. By 1945, the year of the two "Diaries," Taiko had recovered physically and evacuated to her hometown in Nagano, to avoid the frequent Tokyo bombings and to take care of her widowed mother, Hirabayashi Katsumi, who was then verging on seventy and ailing. Kobori remained in Tokyo, but came up to visit the household—Taiko, Katsumi, and Taiko's thirteen-year-old nephew—as often as possible.

Taiko's record of the last months of the war captures the small details of the time—women in mompe, "volunteer" labor and the tithe, food and materials shortages, wild and untrustworthy news stories, the disconcerting flip-over of attitudes around the pivot point of August 15th—from her unique perspective. Not intended as a work of great literature, these two short "Diaries" form both a valuable record of the times and an appetizing introduction to the larger body of Taiko's writing, demonstrating in small most of the qualities which characterize her best work.

(I have assumed a basic knowledge of the facts of the time on the part of the reader, but have added some simple footnotes to clarify a few historical facts. By no means is this a complete annotation.)

Suwa Diary (1945)

20 April

Pointless days continuing. The living room full of evacuated luggage is crowded and dirty, west wind whistling through the cracks from the earthquake, no heat, can't possibly set up my desk there. The swelling in Mother's mouth turns out malignant, none of the doctors in town willing to take on the operation. The worry over Mother's health, stress of finding someone to take on volunteer labor [1] and tend the mulberry leaves, the reality of the house has taken me over. Part of what I have to go through as a resident of Fukushima, a member of this family, I think, but my heart isn't in it.

And then with Tokyo being bombed day after day [2], my husband will have to come up here at

some point, but what are we to do about living together? The Kanekos have looked after Mother long enough, would rather I took care of her from now on and disapprove of our living separately; but it’s clear Mother has no mind to live with my husband. I too would rather live separately. And he doesn’t understand the problem: thinks it’s all simple enough. For his reference, described Mother’s preferences in a letter to him. She can be selfish. But she’s the head of the family, must give some respect to her feelings. I hesitated, afraid this letter would make him lose his chance to come up from Tokyo, but had to mail it in the end. Probably he’s reading it around now and rethinking wryly all the worrying we did over Mother. Nothing to be done.

And how am I supposed to deal with my husband here in the middle of this kind of situation, that’s what’s fretting me now. He’s not going to care for the Hachigatake cultivation work, but there’s nothing to be done. Will go inquire at the local offices again tomorrow, never mind how far it is to walk. Mother to volunteer labor again in the afternoon. I thought of going myself instead of having to watch her go, but remembered how tired I was after going the other day and called a halt. Cold windy day, picking leaves for the rabbit in Kanekos’ fields and fixing my kimono hem, and the day’s all but over already.

Notes

1） volunteer labor: part of the work of the Volunteer Corps (created by an act of the Cabinet in March 1945, the late-stage version of the various war-work organizations formed to support the war on home ground; officially composed of men under 65 and women under 45, doing agricultural work in the country, factory work in the cities, firefighting and evacuation assistance, and other jobs previously done by men and younger women). “Volunteer” was a misnomer, since the work was construed as community duty.

2） Tokyo was firebombed on a large scale from the 14th to the 16th of April, following similar bombings in February and March.

21 April

Yesterday’s volunteer labor seemed to pep Mother up, today she’s working like anything. Me, I didn’t go to town, didn’t settle down to anything, sat in the firebox and read John Paris’ *Kimono*.[1] Anti-Japanese. Decided the cause of my restlessness was in not knowing how to handle things from now on, planned to go to town again and put out some feelers.

Note

1） *Kimono* (1922): novel about an Englishman who marries a Japanese woman brought up in England. John Paris was the pseudonym of a British Foreign Office man, Frank Ashton-Gwaskin.

22 April

Read *Kimono* all morning, finished before lunch. Started on *Prehistoric Japan*. Cousins sent a cherry tree branch in full bloom.

23 April

Took Mother to the hospital, searched for a place to stay during the radium treatments. Mother seems satisfied. Went to the local offices in search of strings to pull but none offered themselves. Changed buses, with two nieces. Too tired to talk. Other than pleasing Mother, a thoroughly worthless day.

24 April

Borrowed the two-volume *History of Suwa* [1] from Kanekos'. The first volume, by Professor Torii, goes well with *Prehistoric Japan*. Called up to dig pine nuts. Went to ask how long it would be; the lady official of the Ladies' Association [2] must know I don't care for volunteer labor and told me it would be two or three days. I can't help thinking they're doing it on purpose, but it took me by surprise. This evening, they let me know it's to be the 26th. No one to hire. At a loss for what to do. False equality to demand volunteer labor from a family with no one but the old. Old Auntie came this morning to look for someone to help out, distressed to find there was no one.

She came again when I was getting ready for bed. Received fish and a bottle of sake as compensation for volunteer labor, tried to refuse it on account of she couldn't go herself, upon which one of the neighborhood association workers told her sarcastically that if passing up a bottle of sake would let her off volunteer labor everyone would go without it—very distressed. Can't let it be, will go and plead with Mr. K tomorrow.

Notes

1) The *History of Suwa*, published 1924 for the Shinano Educational Association, was a small part of the vast oeuvre of the archaeologist/anthropologist/folklorist Torii Ryuzo (1870-1953) and his wife Kimiko, who left a body of work covering almost the whole of the Japanese Empire.

2) The Greater Japan Ladies' Association was formed in 1942 as an umbrella organization for all the various women's patriotic organizations, including the Greater Japan Union of Ladies' Associations and the Ladies' Defense Organization. It was subsumed in March 1945 into the Volunteer Corps, but Taiko still uses the earlier phrase.

25 April

Went to see Mr. K first thing, offered to pay the going rate for two workers but was turned down. After eating went to Kanekos' to ask for Chii's help. She went home yesterday to help with digging pine nuts there, so may or may not be able to take it on, but hope for the best. Mother home from the hospital. Sent an express letter to the nieces, also to my husband, suggesting it's about time he comes up here from Tokyo. Thought of living separately from Mother in this house. Nothing else for it. One B-29 overhead. Heard they dropped leaflets in Tokyo saying they'd bomb the Nagano area on the 25th. [1] Not too trustworthy. You hear this kind of thing a lot, usually it's only rumor.

Note

1）B-29s did eventually adopt the practice of dropping leaflets three days in advance announcing the next bombing; they bombed Tachikawa (near Tokyo) on April 24th. No Nagano bombing followed, however.

4 May

My husband came on the 26th, went home on the 30th. Did good work chopping wood and tending mulberries. No future plans made. On the spur of the moment, took on a billygoat from the people by the well. Drives me crazy bleating for its mother every day, but it’s incredibly sweet. Soothing to have around. Went with niece evacuated from Tokyo to the Girls’ High. The new buildings are splendid, but it doesn’t feel like my school any more. [1)]

Stories every day of the awful ends of Hitler and Mussolini. Did they meet the same fate? How Mussolini’s corpse was displayed for days on end to the populace, and so on. Hitler’s supposed to have died fighting, but there’s no clear report of what happened. [2)] Nothing to be surprised at in Himmler’s proposal for surrender, but can’t help trembling at the feeling of being present at a critical turn in history. [3)] Nazism is already vanishing from the face of the earth. In reverse. In reverse. Finished skimming *History of Suwa* today. Picked sagebrush for tomorrow and played with the goat.

Notes

1）Taiko graduated from Suwa Girls’ High School in 1921. The school moved to new quarters in 1933; it remains at that location now, as Suwa Futaba High School.

2）Mussolini was put to death in Milan on April 28; Hitler commited suicide on April 30.

3）Hitler’s henchman Himmler made a secret proposal of surrender to the Allies on April 24. Hitler subsequently learned about it and ordered Himmler shot, an order ultimately not carried out.

5 May

Rain, clearing up later. Cold wind.

Mother making grass buns all day. After eating, went to pick leaves for the goat. With umbrella. Stuffed the leaves basket and all into the firebox to dry, fed them to the goat later. Gradually clearing skies.

一四五

Vivid descriptions in the newspaper of the collapse of Nazi Germany. [1)] Sunny weather after lunch. Tied the goat up by the creek. “Research on Suwa Shrine” interesting enough to reread tomorrow.

Note

1）The city of Berlin surrendered to the Soviet army on May 2nd. German troops surrendered one after the other all over Europe.

18 May

The third anniversary of my sister’s death; went with her widower and relations to Koizumi

Temple. My first time to visit a temple that way, didn't know what to do. Yoshiharu, the priest, knew my sister when they were children; he's grown up into a gentle man, a good priest.

Entered the central temple and began the sutras. Next to Amida Nyorai, noticed another shelf draped in white, with one large and one small urn wrapped in white silk. Our family name just visible. The urns of my brother's wife and daughter, which he brought back from Korea when Mother was ill last summer. The countryside was dismayed by the whole business, and the temple seems not to know what to do with the urns. I was interested in the sutra reading too, but the sight of those two urns struck me to the heart and left me emptied out. Unhappy mother and child, whose souls if we have such must be wandering lost now. Mother and child, who trailed in the wake of my brother's flight from reality as far as the depths of Korea. It's sad not that there wasn't a funeral but that there can't be one. Unable to bear seeing what our family has been reduced to under the shaky control of my mother and my brother, I daydreamed for a while of putting on a funeral myself. But that would be wrong too.

The service finished, we ate grass buns and Yoshiharu talked about the war. Fiercely anti-military. Lately they're making hand grenades of ceramic, he says. Intelligent, well-informed. I kept watching him, thinking he might not appreciate my presence, but no sign of any such.

20 May

Drizzly, chilly weather.

The top of Hachigatake looks white. All the paths too well-kept, no grass to be found; I walked the goat almost to Naka-Kaneko. No paper today, but according to the radio Himmler finally captured. Should be burned at the stake.[1)] Horribly inconvenient being forced to take the Shinano Daily News, no good at all for foreign reports.[2)] Another gift from the good will of the village Ladies' Association.

Lying down with a headache, I heard Mother's voice saying "So it's you, eh?" and who should appear but my husband. Mother had obviously thought him her other son, my younger brother in Hokkaido. Wry amusement at her disappointment. Relieved to see him, but what are we to do about food? Showed him the goat and the rabbits, the sparrows we started keeping yesterday.

Notes

1) Himmler committed suicide on May 23rd.

2) The Shinano Daily News was and remains in fact a well-regarded regional paper, former home of the columnist Kiryu Yuyu, who in 1933 published his famous (and prescient) opinion article there about the pointlessness of air raid drills and the extreme vulnerability of Japan to bombing from the air. The management was ordered by the military to fire him but refused (although he left the next year).

21 May

My husband already working. All day spent tending the mulberries out back.

30 May

Bad weather is a nuisance for the goat and the rabbits. Somehow feeling limp, spent the day lying down. Cannot live just to please Mother, lose something in myself in proportion to what I do to please her, what an odd way of being unfilial. Read Commander Hirose’s *Navigating the South*. [1] Interesting, the part where he describes in detail the storms he ran into at sea. Letter from my husband, a lot of people we know burnt out, including the Enchis. [2] Dismayed to hear they weren’t able to save a thing.

Notes

1）Hirose Takeo (1868-1904) was a navy commander and a hero of the Russo-Japanese war, subsequently venerated as a minor god. *Navigating the South* is a record of his 1891 training voyages in the South Pacific.

2）The writer Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986) was a close friend of Taiko’s. She and her husband Yoshimatsu lost their house in the Tokyo bombings (probably during the May 23-26 episode) and relocated to their Karuizawa summerhouse.

2 June

Clouds in the mountains and a strong wind coming down. Drops of rain now and then. Handed last month’s board over to Mother, having forgotten about it before, and she seems ready to start paying all kinds of bills with it. The bill for the rope at the shrine, the expenses for hiring people and so on. Pathetic, borrowing this and that from here and there. Recently, when the village’s top property owner saw our cart and suddenly offered to buy it off us, I was more than a bit annoyed by his flinging money around, but I found out later Mother had borrowed money from him too and blushed for shame.

Mother went off somewhere, the rain coming down harder. Went to look for her with a ripped umbrella. The K’s with the shutters closed and a fire burning, saying Mother had just left there. Went to the cousins’ and found her there, drinking tea. We too closed the shutters and turned on the lights. Everyone does this on rainy days in old-fashioned houses with no glass in the windows. But quite a few places are putting glass in these days, especially among the nouveau riche.

〔一四二〕

4 June

Took Mother to the Red Cross hospital. Went into the examination room with her and heard the surgeon’s opinion. He looked at the swelling in her mouth and said it wasn’t much altered. Mother worried the radium would be stopped for being a placebo; in the hall outside the exam room, told me to ask them to keep on with the radium treatments, placebo or not. I agreed, of course, but felt overwhelmed with pity for her. I understood it was for this reason that even though there’s a new surgeon she’d tried to go straight into the treatments without having her mouth looked at—afraid they’d tell her it was no good. I reassured her that even if they did tell her it was no good I would take her to the Red Cross in Matsumoto the day after tomorrow.

From what the doctor in the village says I think it must be cancer, not much to be done for it, but we'll do everything we can.

30 June

Rain. Out in the fields every day pulling weeds and planting beans, chestnuts in the places the mice ate. This is my own invention. A strategy for our desperate internal food shortage. The swelling in Mother's mouth is getting worse, the flesh around it white and swollen and peeling away.

Mother is pessimistic, but there's no way to console her. Her temperature is around 100. According to the surgeon at the hospital yesterday, it must be cancer. Sent my nephew with a letter for the doctor in the village, saying that even if she doesn't need it it'll upset her to go away with nothing, prescribe her anything, even a laxative, as long as it's shaped like medicine. The doctor saw my point and sent a powder of some kind. I know things are only going to get harder. No letter from my brother, Mother says he'll show up when she's dead.

1 July

Yesterday, they came telling us the next day would be the Dawn Movement of the Volunteer Corps, and to be ready in front of Ubusuna Shrine at 3 am. Unbelievable that they'd chivvy out even Mother, seventy years old and ill. Nothing for it, I volunteered in her place. "Never dawned on me they'd ask for three o'clock, though," I punned in the garden, in a bit too loud a voice, and went alone a little after three without joining the neighbors. Dripping with rain. Just a faint light at the meeting place. A group of women in black costumes and white bandannas in front of the great hall, looking as if they were out for a day's hunting. Oh damn, was that the uniform for today? I wondered for a moment, but looking closer I saw they were all younger. Greeted a group of middle-aged and older women huddling behind them. Set off shortly with the men in the lead. Pace much too fast for me, trailed along in the rear. The women in the white bandannas are from the youth group, apparently. Maybe it was like that in Tokyo too and I just didn't know about it, but talk about being dressed to the nines. An old woman trudging along next to me. The false equality that drags out an old lady like that is typical of the ugly rationality of these parts.

The ceremony began at O-Myojin-sama (Suwa Shrine). The usual undistinguished speeches, and that was it. Prayers to follow at the shrine, but I slipped away. Tired from the forced march, but went to the fields to get mulberry leaves for the goat. The rice paddies were blurred with rain, an ordinary soft-edged scene. Something restful, soothing in it. But no one working today on account of the Movement, even while they tell us to up our production. Pathetic.

2 July

Good weather, for the first time in ages. Mother in bed for the last few days with a fever of 100 or so, but up today and picking coltsfoot in the fields. I cut the wheat. Mother wouldn't come in,

starting to weed instead, even when I urged her. Wheat straws tougher than rice plants, hard to chop down.

About noon, Mother called me from the room where she was resting. She was cold. Something wrong with the way she was shivering. I asked the lady next door to call us the doctor. Also asked for a message to the dyer’s, just to be on the safe side. I’ve had fits of shuddering myself, but she’s old. The doctor arrived shortly and pronounced it due to the swelling in her mouth. It’s growing bigger and starting to smell, flies buzzing around the house. Mother seems to be ready to go.

10 July

For the last few days, what with alerts at night and fieldwork, weeding and planting sweet potatoes, by day, I’ve been too tired even to write. It’s Mother’s last illness and I have every intention of doing right by her, but with no one to talk to and no letters coming from Tokyo, I just go limp. Last night, in the instant before falling asleep, I thought—tomorrow will be just like today was, and shuddered. Ridiculous quantities of baggage passing us by on account of the Kami-Suwa forced evacuation.[1)] Woman in mompe trousers[2)] and sandals, drenched in sweat, pulling a cart—beyond pitiful, more terrifying, speaking of women’s obsessiveness.

Notes

1）The Kami-Suwa forced evacuation was an example of “building evacuation,” where buildings in heavily populated areas were torn down to make a firebreak for more “significant” establishments.

2）Baggy *mompe* trousers for women were a typical wartime costume, considered more practical for heavy physical work and a better way to conserve fabric than kimono.

11 July

Because Mother hasn’t much longer, my sister ordered the cleanup of the big room. Sad for Mother’s death to be treated like a business matter. Still, it must be dealt with. Asked Auntie at the cousins’ house about ingredients for rice cakes. Really I should ask my sister for that, but she isn’t about to give anything away. Auntie said she didn’t have much rice to spare, so I sent my niece to ask my sister, who replied she wasn’t likely to have any.

12 July

Pouring rain, no place for the goat to stand, bleating constantly in complaint about the damp. Enough to make me sad too. No letter from Tokyo, I keep imagining ill-omened things.[1)] Went out in the rain to work my way out to the fields and pick mulberry leaves for the goat.

Note

1）Tokyo suffered heavy bombing once again on July 10th .

13 July

Went out to the fields first thing for mulberry leaves. No letter today either, droopy. Kept on looking into the hall, wondering if the letter might not have fallen on the floor there. Sunny with frequent bombings. Regional towns terrified. Weeded out back and dealt with the beans. Message came to say four pounds of plums needed for tithing.[1] Bought some from somewhere, received about four pounds from Mr. K, added another eight pounds from home. Mother is a good person, but being around her all the time I feel as if all the big and small hopes of life, youth itself, were fading away. Perhaps that was what sent my brother to Korea, without his knowing it himself? Fixing the squash shelves while waiting for my nephew to come back. Can't stay lying down, went out to weed the fields.

Note

1) The 1942 Foodstuff Control Law specified various materials to be tithed to the authorities, including scrap metal (calling for the melting down of temple bells), nails, logs, hay and grasses, pine oil, regular foodstuffs etc.

16 July

No letter. Keep on imagining unsettling things. I'll laugh at this later, I tell myself, but write to a friend asking them to tell me if Nerima's been bombed or not. Hopeless state of affairs drags on. Not a single politician who can get the war either won or lost.

Mother's health has settled down a little and she seems to have recovered some hope. Lots of fireflies these days, very comforting.

War-Ending Diary

13 August

Mother put up the spirits' table for the O-Bon festival, but complains there's no incense and no candles. I found her an old mosquito coil. She never noticed. In the afternoon, they came to say the seventy-five pounds of hay for tithing at the August meeting had to be hung to dry until the seventeenth. Mother surprised. Me also. In our village with every inch of it under planting, almost all the hay tithed last year was taken illegally from the mountain by Q village or the embankment by I village. With my brother in the army and no men in the house, we had to rely on the kindness of Mr. Y next door, buying so many pounds for such and such from him to tithe. But this year his younger son's gone to the army too, and we can't ask for too much. Consulted with Mother and decided to ask Mr. K, went to put it to him on the grounds that we'd pay for two workers. Mr. K's wife drying squash on the porch, looking at me with a complex expression of embarrassment. Apparently guessed by instinct what I was there for even before I'd finished greeting her. Felt as if I'd heard her answer already, but had to ask. Just as I thought, she answered they were having a hard time even figuring out where to go to come up with their

own family’s portion. Left without wasting time. Thinking of Mother’s disappointment, though, I paused for a while on the stone bridge, deciding to plead with Mr. S who helped us out with the pine nuts, and when I passed the district warden’s house the garden was already full of new hay hung to dry. Impressed with their speed, I went on and found the road in front of Mr. S’s house full of the same, being run over crackle-crackle by the horse carts full of evacuees’ luggage.

Can’t be much left on the near embankments, I thought in near-panic, but Mr. S’s son told me he wasn’t back yet from the rice fields. I left a message, but I can’t believe it’ll do us much good.

Mother was disappointed at my report, and cursed out the authorities who demand yams and linen and God knows what without knowing a thing about the land.

Two bomb warnings in the night. Both times the alarm went off after the enemy planes had gone already.

14 August

My trip to the S house brought only the news that they can’t go to cut grass. These days you sell eight pounds of tomatoes to the stock groups and end up walking away the poorer by ten yen. Two days’ work only comes to about eight yen, and none of the farmers are in desperate enough straits to sneak out to another village’s embankment smack dab in the middle of O-Bon.

I made my thirteen-year-old nephew, dumped on us by his father, sharpen the sickles; then I put on a pair of navy blue cotton mompe trousers and got ready. It would be so easy, as far as I’m concerned, to refuse the tithe on the grounds that there’s no grass in the village. But for Mother, so she won’t have to feel uncomfortable in front of the neighbors, I decided to head out and steal some.

As my nephew and I were putting our boots on, the bomb warning went off and we heard the neighbors’ radio announcing mobile units coming this way from the Niigata area. We waited to see what would happen, but when nothing did, I entrusted the cart to my nephew and we set off. Early grass hung up to dry everywhere you looked. The kind of grass you can use is limited, you can’t get by with just anything, I decided on the tough, fat-stemmed kind that won’t shrink when you dry it. But look how things are, last year, along the lines the authorities laid down, all the horsefeed grass was laid out to dry so carefully on sheets, and this year it’s just dumped down on the ground for horsecarts and bicycles to run over. Even the farmers themselves don’t seem to have noticed what a change has come.

We hid the cart amid the tall reeds on the side of the embankment and got started cutting the grass, with my nephew giving the sign every time someone came along. Every time that happened, we crouched down in the grass until they passed. With the water nearby, there was no shortage of reeds. We worked until midday, filling the cart and shouldering a bundle each, went home and came back again in the evening—only to find that someone else from our village must have been there and there was almost no grass left. We were taken aback, but recovered ourselves after a while and settled for cutting the deccan grass down in the path along the

embankment. From among the grass, my nephew announced that this kind of grass came in two varieties, one a weed and one for feeding chickens with. Say *what*, so which kind is this? I demanded, my sickle pausing in spite of myself, but we'd already come too far to stop, let it be whichever one it happened to be, we cut it all and came home with the sky already lightening. Here and there in the mountains we could see little spirit torches burning, in defiance of the blackout regulations. Mother was worried enough to make her way out to the edge of the village to meet us, leaning on her stick.

15 August

Bomb warnings starting first thing in the morning, telling us another mobile unit was on its way. Are they just filling in for downed comrades, or what? If they're going to invade on land, let them do it already and get it over with. This is what almost every Japanese is fretting over now.

I was setting out the grass we brought back in the cart yesterday under the eaves when the radio announced there would be a broadcast from the Emperor at noon. Unheard of. Mother and I wondered whether it would be surrender or resistance. Neither of us could guess, however much we thought. In the case of resistance, things have reached the point where only the Emperor's voice is likely to make an impression; and of course the same for surrender. Mother threw up her hands in the end, thinking of what resistance would mean to her son on the battlefield. There's no way we can win, so we might as well surrender faster for our own good and theirs, that's Mother's attitude lately.

Noon came. We left off turning the dried grasses and went to the house next door. Some of the evacuees were there too. Everyone in the neighborhood was gathering around with expressions of abnormal strain.

After a solemn announcement, the radio played "Kimigayo," that long-drawn-out song drawn out even longer than usual today. Finally, what seemed to be a recording of the Emperor's voice came through. The radio waves struggling over God knows how many mountains were ragged, full of static, could hardly make out what he was saying at all. Here and there a few strange expressions, still wondering what was going on when the announcer reappeared to give an explanation. Far too much static on this day of all days, hard to catch his words. But managed to pick up "accept the Potsdam Declaration," and though he avoided words like "surrender" and "defeat," it was clearly unconditional surrender.

I'd gotten myself ready for it, knowing it wasn't outside the realm of possibility, but it was still a shock. Outdoors was blazing hot, like an oil painting, and there were people going by with grass for tithing heaped on their shoulders. Oh God, it's finally over. It's over. The war's over, everything's over. It's over.

I wanted to shout something a hundred times over up at the sky, to dance and scream. I want to believe we've been liberated. Because of the power of the tension, perhaps, I couldn't get a sense right away of having been set free.

The neighbors, who had no idea what the "Potsdam Declaration" might be about, listened to

my explanation that it meant unconditional surrender and at last began to weep. Out front, the old lady from the house next door ran up with a tatter of cloth in her hands, wiping her tears over and over again and sobbing out that she was ready to die now, ready any time.

I felt I had the responsibility to make some kind of explanation, but my chest closed up and I turned away and shed tears. Tears of emotion at standing here, now, at the point of a great change in history. Too much to think about; I went back into the house alone. While everyone else was full of chagrin and regret, my mother alone was insisting firmly that there was nothing else that could have happened.

Somebody from the house out back, not ready to return home that quickly, came in from the back door. I fried some beans for them and served tea.

The same people who until this very moment were lamenting together in the grip of the same passion seem to return to their usual stances the instant their tears dry. Mr. So-and-so the unemployed evacuee worries without end about a run on the banks, the old man receiving a pension on account of his son having been a soldier wonders how all that will end up, will it dry up or what, as he timidly asks Mr. So-and-so. The way he’s asking so casually about the most important thing in his daily life seems to show the significance of concern. As for my mother, she can hardly conceal her happiness at the idea of being freed from the tithe and volunteer labor.

At night, we took the blackout coverings off the lamps. All the other houses were still huddled in the dark; ours alone was setting the squash leaves aglow with light, making the heavy fruits gleam.

16 August

Grave-visiting. Naked in the process of changing clothes, I saw in the mirror the red marks on my shoulder. I know they were left by the rough rope I used day before yesterday to haul the grass with, but stroked them as if they were the marks left by the binding of the times on me. How much rage and grief have I forced down into myself over these last long years.

The people we met on the way to the graveyard mostly seemed to feel relieved as well. Most of them, though, were telling each other “Things are hard now,” “You’re telling me,” and words to that effect, with solemn faces. Farmers don’t go ahead and say what they’re thinking.

17 August

Rumors everywhere of American soldiers making landfall at Tokyo Bay.[1)] Rumors of Tokyo falling into panic around noon, women and children fleeing to the mountains with potassium cyanide in hand. Somebody was saying the builders’ younger son had escaped from Tokyo and come out this way by car. As if a drafted laborer would be likely to be racing up and down mountain roads in an automobile, what a fantasy, I thought, but the rumor added that he’d come by car in order to hide a superior officer or something like that.

According to the wife of the builder’s neighbor, who dropped by in the evening to collect her

portion of the sake ration, the builder's son showed up on the 16th and, after consulting with his father over something, went straight back again and then appeared again with the truck loaded down with materials of some kind and an officer in the cab. Probably something he had hidden somewhere through his father's support. Fly work. Finally the rumor actually started making some kind of sense. Also got more boring, though. The passion and excitement of the 15th are still blazing away in my head, and everything going on around me is just the shadows the fires cast. Mother, muttering she'd never cared for it anyway, went ahead and ripped out the old castor tree in the garden and tossed it into the road; I just watched her go at it, starting the stove for dinner, in a daze. Maybe it's the idea of being able to see her son with her own eyes within the month, but she's as excited and bouncy as a young girl. I look at her with as much love as if she were my daughter, tempered painfully by the thought of leaving her here in the near future when I leave the village again.

Note

1）Unfounded rumors: American troops first made landfall at Tokyo on August 27th.

18 August

According to the radio the story about American soldiers making landfall wasn't true, and the ruling rumor today is the one about Tojo being assassinated. From what the people nearer the town say, Tojo's son asked him to kill himself but he refused, upon which the son killed himself instead, and a subordinate of the son's took his superior officer's intentions on himself and stabbed Tojo, and then turned himself in.[1] Could be true or not, but what does it matter. Interesting either way. The Japanese planes flying overhead this morning were dropping leaflets on the town about opposing the surrender and fighting on together and so on.[2] However, just at that moment in Q town there happened to be a whole string of military trucks running through, hauling war goods to be sold, and the townspeople thought it was an American bombing attack on the trucks and made a beeline for the shelters. Or so they say.

Spent the afternoon doing this and that in the paddies and the fields.

Notes

1）These rumors were also unfounded; former Prime Minister Tojo Hideki attempted suicide on September 8th, failed, was tried for war crimes and put to death in December 1948.

2）Pilots from the elite fighter squadrons based at Atsugi airbase refused to recognize the surrender, commandeering planes to leaflet Eastern Japan up through August 21st. Their leaflets urged the people to die honorably rather than accept surrender.

19 August

The grasses spread to dry in the road are being eaten to bits by the oxen pulling carts. No one gets angry. Went to the field to do the last weeding for Mother. Met Mr. H from the middle farm on the road; when I said the situation would probably mean food shortages for the next two or

three years, he looked despairing. Unsolvable. The forced-growth sweet potatoes are in the wrong kind of earth and their leaves are spreading out all over the fields, no place to step. No potatoes bigger than a thumb, no rice support from the rations. Cut the vines and carried them home on my back for rabbit food. Mt. Fuji green in the distance.

A man and woman in the pear orchards talking about the situation. Taking disarmament for stripping off army uniforms, she worried “Oh dear, does that mean he’ll come home in his shirt sleeves and collar? How embarrassing,” thinking of her husband who’s been fighting in the south.

The drafted students are on their way home, and the girls I usually see at dawn and dusk have been missing since this morning. Only the ones who work in the arms factories still pass by, doing some kind of final cleanup.

Whenever Mother sees someone through the hole in the shoji screens, she says relishingly “There’s someone else who’s all over, they’re all done with them now.” She’ll repeat it over and over. Her way of making up for being left out in the cold during the arms economy.

20 August

The smoke rising here and there at various doorways is the people who had something to do with the draft burning documents on order from the town hall. The way they hand out papers in broad daylight ordering people to hide anything that can be hidden safely suggests that the leftovers of this country’s militarism aren’t good for anything much.

People are burning not just service bags and army check books, but photographs and notes from friends and relatives in the army. Savings books too, of course, how nice for the government.

Along with burning documents, people are worrying about the dirty camouflage for the white walls of the storehouses, but there’s nothing to be done. One of the village intellectuals, a certain gentleman who works for a certain public office, refused to spoil his nice new walls by rubbing ash all over them and instead painted slogans like “Eight Races, One World” and “We Pray for the Eternal Success of the Imperial Army” all over them with a calligraphy brush. He was terribly proud of his newfangled idea, but the way he’s panicking now! He comes late to the office and goes home early, clambering up on a ladder to paste on wallpaper at a frantic pace. His wife, that officer of the Greater Japan Ladies’ Association, stands at the bottom to hand up the glue pot.

They spent all night last night burning documents at the town hall, or so people were recounting gloomily.

22 August

Drafted soldiers coming home one after the other, people more concerned with what they’ve brought than who they are, looking at their hands before they look at their face. Rumors about coming home with a horse or a truck or God knows what. Mother keeps glancing out through

the hole in the shoji screen, but not just out of curiosity. Given that she's sent her son far away to the war.

Late at night, around midnight, we heard the screen door open and my little brother, thin as a ghost, opened the shoji screen and came into the lit living room. The mosquito net in the next room heaved, my mother emerging with a plaintive exclamation of "Yoshi?"

We hadn't heard a word from him since he was drafted, didn't know if he was freezing in the north or sweltering in the south, and now we were a bit startled to find out he'd been ragpicking in Tokyo. I watched them through the mosquito net for a while but finally got up and joined them, making tea over the fire.

Funnily enough he wasn't in uniform. "What did you do with your uniform?" Mother asked. "Didn't want to wear that ridiculous private's uniform home." He didn't have anything with him but a hundred-some yen in cash; Mother, visibly disappointed, told him about the things other soldiers brought home with them, and he dismissed that as what they'd stolen.

I dragged the blanket wider open in the mosquito net and had my brother sleep next to me. He smelled just faintly of alcohol. Strange for him. Asked him about Tokyo. Appalling rations for the troops there. Three slices of cucumber and a bowl of rice for a meal, and when they had to go out to the suburbs, the officers handed out money and told them to buy their own. That's a real supply troop, I laughed, and he looked thoughtful.

The news of surrender reached the troops around the tenth, apparently, and both the officers and the privates were too worked up to get any work done; [1] there was suddenly sake and red bean sweets in the canteen, and everyone used up their savings, my brother said, with another thoughtful look. I tried to comfort him, saying the land would go back to the farmers eventually so there was no point sitting around wringing our hands, and he knew just what I meant, saying that was his one hope, that when we knew what was in the armistice agreement something would happen to the army, and maybe that would be a chance for Japan to redeem itself. I dozed off at last, tired from spending the day in the fields, while my brother got up twice to pee in the garden. At dawn I felt the mosquito net brush my face and realized he was on his way to pee again. Odd.

Note

1）It was on August 10th that the Imperial Council decided to accept the Potsdam Declaration.

23 August

For the sake of her darling son, Mother rises before dawn to peel tomatoes from the fields, chop green beans, and set a fire under the pot big enough to hide the pot itself. My brother puts on the handwoven jacket Mother set out for him and sits by the fireside, smoking her cigarettes. I was startled at how worn out he looked, seeing his face in the light, but didn't say anything. Went out to wash my face and saw his down-at-heel black shoes in the porch. Can't believe how much he eats, in just a day all the red spots have disappeared from under the tomato leaves. He

goes out, comes back, goes out again. The second time he went out my mother stood there with his discarded khaki mulberry-leaf jacket in one hand, clutching its shabbiness to herself. I didn’t say anything, but couldn’t go along with the idea of a released soldier coming home in clothes like that. Guessed that it was on account of these clothes that he came home in the dead of night.

My brother came home in the evening with rice in a burlap bag over his shoulder. Mother very pleased.

24 August

My brother slept in Mother’s mosquito net last night, getting up four or five times to go for a pee. I woke up every time.

According to the local newspaper, our village has three hundred and fifty farming men for three hundred and fifty field blocks, plus another three hundred returning soldiers. Mother was much disturbed by this and told my brother to start thinking early about getting the rice paddies ready for next year. My brother assured her it was all right as he’d made arrangements with a gentleman from the farmers’ association. Yesterday’s newsletter told us the farmers’ association would hand out the land fairly, but they have no power to make anyone do anything, and just how able are they? It’s not just the small farmers who want the land. Plenty of returning soldiers in the landowners’ families, and I can just about believe the rumor that there was a small farmer who took to his bed when he heard of a landowner whose two sons had come back alive. I told my brother about it, but he just shrugged at me.

My brother brought some kind of a bundle home with him in the evening. Asked what it was but he wouldn’t answer me. Gave in to my nephew’s pleadings and went to see the autumn festival in the next village. Heard rumors on the way that there wasn’t anything happening, but went to the Chinju clearing anyway thinking at least there would be lanterns lit; just a great tree in the darkness.

25 August

Patches of rain. American inspection planes overhead, people running out to see. My brother went out in his kimono; when I was cleaning, his jacket fell off its hook with a thump and a well-stuffed wallet leaped out of the pocket. As much as a thousand yen in ten-yen notes. Odd, very odd, I had to think hard. He said he’d used up his savings from his hitch in the army, the money he got on his release was only a hundred-some yen, where on earth did he get hold of all this money? If my imagination can be trusted, my brother must have sold everything he was given on his release in Tokyo and turned it into money. That’s all I could come up with.

But I didn’t say anything to Mother. Today as well my brother brought back something from a trip outside, and went off to the barn where the farm equipment is kept. I went out to the barn myself, wondering if the water for the pickled plums was still good, and without thinking about it moved aside a stretch of grub sheet. Three bottles of sake and a bag of rice were revealed. For

a while I just stared, uncomprehending, and then I realized it was my brother's work. Black market. What has the army turned my brother into? That thousand yen must be his capital sum so far, made in Tokyo the wrong way.

People would have sold my returning brother the remains of their sake ration cheap. They must have sold him rice for a song, figuring we couldn't have enough. Oh God.

26 August

The American forces were supposed to come in-country today, but it was put off two days on account of a sudden typhoon. Funny for the God-winds [1] to blow after the war is over, I said, and my nephew replied that we were supposed to surrender, so when we did God must have appreciated it. So these two days are a kind of heaven-sent grace period. I expect the government and the army are hiding things and burning things for all they're worth.

My brother keeps on smoking up Mother's cigarettes, asking her where the houses with rice left are while she brushes her hair.

I put a word in to ask him what he was going to do with the rice once he'd bought it, and he acquired an unusually severe expression and told me to keep my nose out of what didn't concern me, in this kind of situation who could insist on being totally honest all the time. I lost my temper and told him a few things in reply. My brother finally shut up and stayed in. He lay down, looking sullen, and at last drifted off to sleep. Thin, his eyes sunken, tired-looking, you could frame his sleeping face and title it "A Young Man of Modern-Day Japan." For me, having fixed my eyes on the fires blazing in the future since the war ended, this is like tripping on an enormous stone. The way is very dark. Dark. There's brightness far away. Suppressing my heart, which like any moth wants to fly to where the light is, I picked the bugs out of the cabbages. A wind in the rice field, the little peach-colored flowers of the sesame trembling at my feet. At their roots I crushed one caterpillar after another, attending at their last moments.

Note

1）or *kamikaze*.

（コリア国際学園教諭）