

HIROMI ITŌ

**THE THORN-PULLER: NEW TALES OF
THE JIZŌ STATUE AT SUGAMO**

TRANSLATED BY JEFFREY ANGLES

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Hiromi Itō is one of Japan's most prominent women writers—a fiercely independent poet and novelist who has consistently explored issues of motherhood, childbirth, the female body, sexuality, and mythology in dramatic and powerfully vivid language. Following a divorce, she left Japan and settled permanently in southern California in 1997, beginning a life shuttling back and forth across the Pacific. Since then, she has written a great deal about migration, national identity, and the pressure placed upon women to take care of their families.

In 2007, Itō published what is perhaps her most ambitious book, the strikingly original *Toge-nuki Jizō: Shin Sugamo Jizō engi* (*The Thorn-Puller: New Tales of the Jizō Statue at Sugamo*). The following excerpt is one chapter of the book, which she sometimes refers to as a “novel in verse.” The book takes its name from the famous statue of the Buddhist bodhisattva Jizō—a figure believed, especially among elderly adherents, to alleviate suffering. Weaving together autobiography with elements drawn from folklore and classical Japanese literature, this surreal and wildly imaginative book represents Itō's attempt to use a new mode of storytelling to explore some of the most important concerns facing contemporary Japan. In this regard, Itō's work has much in common with authors like Haruki Murakami and Yōko Tawada, who have also employed a mythological, surreal style to explore aspects of modern society.

This novel focuses on Itō's experiences rushing back and forth between her home in southern California and Kumamoto (the southern Japanese city where

she still maintains a second home even today) in order to take care of her ill and aging parents. In language that is often self-deprecating and funny, she describes difficulty of maintaining two households on opposite sides of the Pacific. The novel is set against the backdrop of a demographic crisis; in Japan, the nation with the world's longest life expectancy, the numbers of senior citizens are swelling to enormous proportions, leaving their already aging children to become caregivers, even despite the fact they have their own families and problems. As readers learn, these difficulties prompt the narrator to start considering her own position and personal legacy in the world.

The novel can be enjoyed on many levels—for the amusing plot, which sometimes veers into the surreal and imbues scenes of everyday life with mythological grandeur; for its clever use of literary devices, including its deployments of archetypes and literary references; as well as for its innovative language, which weaves together both profane and elevated registers of speech. In several places in each chapter, Itō borrows famous turns of phrase from prominent writers, poets, lyricists, manga authors, popular singers and even punk-rock performers in narrating her own story. At the end of each chapter, she cites the names of the people whose language she has borrowed, but an astute, pop-culture savvy Japanese reader would likely recognize a number of the references through the text alone. Her re-deployments of these turns of phrase reveal how Itō, a creative and well-read author in her own right, is constantly drawing upon literature, society, and pop culture as she digests the language of others and turns it into her own. It was because these strikingly original features that the novel received the rare distinction of winning two of Japan's highest literary prizes--both the 2007 Hagiwara Sakutarō Prize and the 2008 Izumi Shikibu Prize.

CHAPTER 4
ITŌ THROWS A PEACH THAT ROTS,
AND SHE BECOMES A BEAST ONCE AGAIN

On February 24, I went back to Japan. I was alone this time. Just before I left, I bit my husband. Yes, you read that right. I *bit* him. A big bite too. I was so flustered I didn't know what I was doing, I'd lost the ability to act like a normal human being. He was freaked out when I came to Japan, and now I wasn't sure if I'd ever see him again.

I'd left Aiko, my youngest daughter, behind. If worse came to worse, I could go the bank and move money between accounts, my older daughter could send me the books I needed, and I could leave the rest behind—yes, I could leave everything behind, bringing only the flash drive for my computer. I could kidnap Aiko in front of her school, put her on a plane, and take her back. I repeated this over and over in my mind as I considered how to get her back.

When my husband and I weren't face to face but were talking on the phone, we'd sometimes settle down, but it wouldn't be long before we'd start arguing about what had caused our troubles. I hated, absolutely hated the way he'd fire off his arguments, one after another. It was like he was he trying to win some debate, and I couldn't stand it. When I asked him why he was speaking to me so aggressively, he repeated the word *aggressive*. Even though I couldn't see him on the other end of the line, I could tell he was rolling his eyes and letting out an impatient sigh. *You're* the aggressive one, if you don't think that what you did to me the other day was aggressive, then I don't know what is, I'm still having

trouble walking.

He said, my thigh's black and blue, it's so swollen it's like it's got a peach stuck in it, and the peach has started to rot.

That's too bad, I said. I didn't have any ulterior motive when I said that. To be honest, that was the only way I knew to express what I was thinking in English, but I must have sounded nonchalant, even non-repentant. When I suggested he go to the doctor, he responded in a very, very low voice—so low it was hard to hear.

Just what am I going to tell him? That my wife did this? Just try telling that to the authorities in this country. You ought to thank your lucky stars I'm keeping my mouth shut.

If you'd ask why we were fighting, I wouldn't have known how to answer. I'd already forgotten. That's how it is when couples fight. That's how it begins, and when they split up, there's never any resolution. That's how it was when I split up with my first husband, that's how it was when I split up with my second husband, and that's how it was with my third and fourth too. Fights always start over something stupid, but they still end relationships. When a Japanese couple reaches some sort of compromise, even if it is only a lukewarm one—like a teakettle that has been left for too long after it boils—the couple will clam up and stick it out. But my current husband was entirely different. He was British, he was Jewish, and he had been raised in an intellectual environment, so for him, debates were the stuff of everyday life. He'd made his way through the world, passing through the unsheathed blades of language for at least twice as long as I've been alive. My English, by contrast, is faltering at best. When we fought, he'd pick me apart word

by word. It was like he was picking up each word with chopsticks and dropping them into a sizzling hot vat of tempura oil.

He'd deep fry and sizzle me.

I'd curl up like a shrimp.

In reality, our footing probably wasn't that uneven. I'd made up my mind to master his style of aggressiveness, and even though my English reading and writing abilities are still practically nonexistent, I'd made such progress in my ability to fight in English over the last ten years that even I was impressed with myself. Still, I come from a culture in which one either slashes at the opponent without saying anything or just commits hara-kiri. *Slash at the opponent, or commit hara-kiri, how jolly.* That's probably what my husband would say if he'd heard me say that. *Jolly.* The word usually means "pleasant," but it had taken on a new meaning in my husband's vocabulary. He used it sarcastically to mean "shameless" or "incorrigible." When he said it, I felt like he was looking down on everyone. I couldn't hold my own with him through words alone.

Deep fried and sizzling. Scooped up by my feet. Knocked down hard. Driven into a corner. Caught in a hail of bullets, I take my last breath.

I say this all metaphorically, of course. The peach is a metaphor, my husband and mother and father are metaphors, the summer heat and winter cold are metaphors, everything is a metaphor, the only thing that isn't a metaphor is me living as myself, and that's all I have to hold onto.

So I fired back.

He's a big man, twice as tall as me and probably three times heavier, but fortunately for me, he was getting old and his movements slow. I'm also lucky he's

not the kind of guy who'd inflict bodily harm. Actually, I'm the one that lashed out at him. My ability to catch rats barehanded served me well. He didn't think to grab my hand and stop me, or even try to hurt me. I took advantage of that and started throwing hard, unripe peaches without even taking the time to aim, but I had trouble hitting him even though he was right in front of me. (All of this is a metaphor, of course.) The peaches rolled about on the floor, running into each other as if they had electric motors. Most missed, but one hit squarely and lodged in his leg.

I was being unfair. I should have gotten back at him without restoring to projectiles.

But did I regret it? Not really. I *did* want to hurt him. People shouldn't hit other people, that's only common sense. So I bit him instead. It didn't matter how, but I couldn't resist the urge to attack and hurt him. When the marks my teeth had left began to welt, I knew I'd made my ill will felt. At the same time, I recognized I'd left myself in a terrible position.

American culture abhors bodily violence above all else. You can't even lay a finger on a person—actually, that's a huge lie. In America, you can take a gun and kill as many people as you want. People think it's okay to shoot, but you mustn't inflict violence—never, ever. It's all or nothing here. You should never kill, but if you do, then do it completely.

No one dared to remove the peach lodged in his flesh, so it remained there as a visible reminder of his injury.

I supported you, I supported your children, I supported your work, I supported you

while you took care of your parents, but what am I to you? Just a monster you want to leave, or someone who supported you, cared for you and loved you?

My husband sent that to me in an e-mail. (Trying to talk on the phone was so unproductive we had given up on it altogether.)

I supported you, I supported your children, I supported your work, I supported you while you took care of your parents, but you still don't believe in me, do you? That's what he wrote. Thinking it over calmly, I realized he was right. I didn't believe in him. These ten years, I hadn't believed in anything.

You're right, I replied. Like you said, I don't believe in you, in a certain sense, I haven't believed in you this whole time.

I was trying to answer honestly, but when he opened the e-mail, I could hear him groan all the way through the internet, and the rotting peach sank even further into his flesh.

Our family's happiness had shattered to smithereens.

My wife is ferocious, faithless, shameless, unfeeling, she doesn't believe in me—her own husband. She doesn't love me, she's a beast.

He was beating on the keyboard. He beat on it and beat on it. And as he did, he spelled out his abuse.

When he's mad, he uses words as lofty as Jane Austen and speaks with that special form of circuitous sarcasm unique to Britain. Sometimes, those things slip out even when he's speaking normally. People often get ticked off at him, and he turns away sighing that Americans just don't get British humor. Honestly, we Japanese don't either. Everything he writes just comes at me as a great big, aggressive jumble of words—after all, I live in an English-speaking country but

am practically illiterate. It took me hours just to digest his e-mail.

He wrote, I supported you, I supported your children, I supported your work, I supported you while you took care of your parents, let me repeat, I supported you, I supported your children, I supported your work, I supported you while you took care of your parents—my freedom came second, and it's caused me all sorts of emotional stress and loneliness. The peach is still buried in my thigh, and it still hurts.

I wrote back, I understand. But you're so aggressive, so negative, you make everything impossible, you're always 100% right, I'm 100% wrong. There's a Japanese proverb: the cornered mouse bites the cat. That's what happened. And let me tell you something, you shouldn't bring up money in a domestic dispute.

He responded, Read this, and read this carefully, I'm NOT talking about money.

I could tell. The injury in my husband's leg was as sore as when I first inflicted it.

I supported you, I supported your children, I supported your work, I supported you while you took care of your parents, let me say it again! I supported you, I... He kept beating angrily on the keyboard.

You talk about compromises, but a compromise involves both parties giving something up. What're you giving up? Do you intend to give anything up?

You say I'm being negative. Negative? In my work, I've accomplished things no one has ever done before, do you think that's negative? How can you say that?

You feel small and insignificant when you leave the house.

You feel small and insignificant when it comes to your work.

You feel small and insignificant when you leave me for so long.

EVERYTHING MAKES YOU FEEL SMALL AND INSIGNIFICANT, YOU

FEEL SMALL AND INSIGNIFICANT ABOUT SO MANY GODDAMN THINGS.

The last part was all in capital letters. He was screaming at me through the Internet.

He'd blown his lid, but I did think about what he'd said.

His view of me was way off the mark. How did he see me? Do I seem small and insignificant when I leave the house? Do I seem small and insignificant when it comes to my work? Heavens no. Not me.

That's when I remembered why we'd started fighting. The reason behind it all.

We were having *o-nabe* for dinner. For those of you who aren't familiar with Japanese cooking, *o-nabe* is a pot full of vegetables and meat cooked in broth. Usually people make it over a portable burner on the table so everyone can sit around, cook, and eat together. I'd recently bought a brand-new electrical burner, and we were having *o-nabe* every night. That meant that we were eating *hakusai* every night, since it is one of the most common ingredients. Now, *hakusai* is for sale everywhere—they call it “nappa cabbage” or “nappa” and there are piles in every grocery store. I realize *nappa* isn't a proper name like you'd see on a wine label or something, but whenever I bought it, that name just didn't feel right to me. One evening as I was putting some in the *o-nabe*, I used the word *hakusai* instead of the English word. My husband didn't understand, so I had to explain. That evening, I'd already said “enoki mushroom” instead of just *enoki*, “shitake mushroom” instead of just *shiitake*, and “bean noodle” instead of *harusame*. I had to use the absurdly general word “sauce” to mean something specific like citrus-

flavored *ponzu*. I always had to rephrase myself for him. So by the time we got to the *hakusai*, I was already full of despair. We'd been living together for ten years, but for what? In a decade, he couldn't learn a simple Japanese word like *hakusai*? He was always saying, "I love Japanese food" and "I love *o-nabe*," but did it show? To make matters worse, he was trying out the Atkins diet. That meant he was eating lots of high-fat, high-protein, low-carb food so he wouldn't touch rice with a ten-foot pole. How could he possibly claim to understand his wife's culture if he didn't eat rice?

I shouted at him, and he shouted back.

I wondered what would happen if somewhere down the line Aiko asked us why we got divorced. *Because of nappa cabbage*. How could I possibly say that with a straight face?

Several days later, I saw our parakeets kiss.

Originally, we had a cockatiel. One day, I tossed some of its old food into the yard, and that attracted a green parakeet. I caught it, and the two birds started to live together. When the cockatiel was perched on my hand and the parakeet was near, it got excited. When the cockatiel was free in the house, it spent the whole day flying back and forth over the parakeet's cage, showing off. It talked non-stop. "You're a bird. Look! I'm a bird too! You're a bird. Look! I'm a bird too! You're a bird. Look! I'm a bird too! You're a bird. Look! I'm a bird too!" The cockatiel stopped roosting on our shoulders or coming to the dinner table. It was just a plain, old bird whose only interaction with us was to sit on our hands. My older daughter decided to move it to her apartment, but that made the parakeet lonely. Far away in Japan, my father was home alone with my mother in the hospital. I

hated to think about bringing more tedium and loneliness into this world so I went to buy another bird. Aiko went with me. She pointed at a white bird and said, let's get that one. It was a pure white parakeet, with none of the usual yellow, blue, or green on its back. We tried putting it in the same cage as the other parakeet, but the cage was too small, so we bought a new one—a cage for newlyweds. We also bought a birdhouse so they could raise babies. As the bird flapped around wildly, trying to get away, their feathers puffed out and dancing, I managed to catch the wriggling green parakeet and held it in my hand. (It bit me hard.) The white one was no problem. I let them go in their new home. The white parakeet was still and sat on a branch while the green one approached it as if to say, "How handsome you are!" After that, they couldn't stop kissing. It turns out they had chemistry. Their kisses got deeper, and although I knew they were birds, I imagined them tonguing one another, their sweaty palms clenched tightly as they stared at each other, wondering what was next. They kissed shamelessly in front of my husband and me.

When my husband saw this, he snarled, those birds are the only ones in the damn house on good terms. (I could tell from his tone and expression just how foul his mood was.)

And it was true. We weren't close anymore. If I'd had just shown him that sort of affection, there was a one-in-three chance it would lead to sex, and a two-in-three chance it wouldn't, but we'd agree that was fine and everything would be okay. But his heart had grown old, leaving him feeling small, insignificant, and unable to compromise. I wanted to avoid him. I didn't just want it, I probably said it outright.

Oh, damn it. You've done it now.

I shouldn't have brought projectiles, but now I'd gone and used them.

We began to argue, and that was when I threw the peaches at my husband.

One buried itself in his skin, grew inflamed and started to swell. It looked exactly like a bite mark.

I'm getting old.

I don't have time.

My body won't move.

His insecurities had mounted, but now he had the perfect opportunity—his own wife had bitten him. He exploded with rage. I was the one in the wrong, it didn't matter how much I tried to explain. I'd hurt someone. Moreover, my own spouse. In a violent manner. He couldn't put up with that. He was on the side of justice. His rage exploded.

I'm getting old. I don't have time.

My work isn't getting the attention it deserves. But I don't have time. I don't have time to wait. Shadows are falling over my health. My body won't move like I want it to. Surgery isn't helping. I don't have time to wait. I'm getting old. I'm a sexual failure. I've failed over and over. Over and over. I don't have time for this. I'm getting old, I've never been in this situation before, and I don't know how to handle it. I don't have time to wait. I don't have time to come up with new ideas. I'm not satisfied. Things aren't getting better. I don't have time.

His anger was unrelenting. He didn't have time. He directed his anger at me. At himself. At me. But more of it at himself. At his penis. At his eyes. At his ears. At his heart. At his knees. At his shoulders. At his lower back. At his elderly

body that wasn't good for much anymore. At his old, decrepit self. Yes, himself.

As the days went by, the weather cooled down and warmed up again.

I was on the way to mother's hospital, when I noticed a grassy spot in the sun. There were clumps of a particular plant in it. I was thinking how lavish it looked when I realized it must be what we call *hotokenoza*—literally “Buddha's seat” in Japanese, or in English, henbit. Little reddish-purple flowers shaped like tongues were sticking out from it, and right before my eyes, I watched them fluff out as the individual stalks began to grow. As they grew, I noticed another flower, something like a white shepherd's purse, scattered among them. It seemed too low for shepherd's purse, however, so I was thinking that it had to something related, when it too began to grow. As it grew, it made a quiet rustling sound. There was mugwort too—impudent clumps of it had died completely and were being reborn as a new generation of plants—and vetch, which had produced vines that reminded me of a baby sticking out its hand. I saw something twinkling in the grass. The more I looked, the more of it I saw. They were speedwell flowers twinkling, warmed by the spring sun. They twinkled so brightly I thought they'd hurt my eyes. Next to them, some soft stitchwort plants were quietly blooming, revealing their neatly arranged white petals. Scattered around this were clumps of withered up weeds. They laid there dead and dry, without budging an inch.

Mother was lying in bed.

She couldn't move, but she was conscious.

Could she answer questions? No, she couldn't. Was she out of her mind?

No, she wasn't. As the waves of her dementia came and retreated, the numbness in her body had spread. Her right hand was gnarled. It couldn't move—or rather, it had died. It was a hand that was not a hand. A hand that had neither the shape nor the color of a hand. It was like the chicken feet that you get in dim sum. Like it had been cooked. She had lost the movement in her legs too. She couldn't move her legs, so they had grown thin and frail. They wouldn't have supported her even if she could stand. She couldn't urinate so the hospital catheterized her. Before when they'd given her a catheter, she'd raised a fuss, but this had time, she didn't say a word. She was still taking a diuretic for patients with high-blood pressure, but she didn't seem to be having any more problems with that. Still, she was so weak that it was all she could do just to press the call button for the nurse with the pinky on her left hand. She couldn't turn the pages of a book or use a TV remote. She had already spent long, long periods of time like this, unable to do anything, even move—a replay of the same tedium and loneliness my father and the parakeet gone through.

When I sat by her bedside, she asked me, will you scratch me a little? I'm so itchy I can't stand it.

I rolled up my sleeves, pushed her hospital gown aside, and scratched her all over—on her back, her arms, her thighs, her belly.

Higher, harder, use your nails.

Her arms were slack and wrinkled. The skin on her belly was dry and worn. There was nothing left of her on the backs of her thighs. She was as thin as a bat. As a dried-up fish.

She moaned, oh, right there, right there, more, more. Don't be namby-

pamby, do it harder, use your nails, more.

As I was scratching her, I felt a teeny tiny bump. Just a tiny bump. A rough, dry spot. Rather than hurt her by trying to scratch it off, I used the tip of my fingernail to press into it. Mother moaned, *right there, right there, there, there.*

I know how terrible it is to feel itchy. Her suffering was contagious—as I scratched her, I felt myself grow itchy all over. Moving the ring finger and pinky of her left hand, she kept trying in vain to scratch herself, but all she ended up doing was stroking her skin. *I'm itchy but I can't scratch myself, but I'm itchy...* She was not tormented with anxiety and depression, but she lived through one day at a time, never really fully present.

A long time ago, I saw a TV program in which a lion on the savanna ate a gazelle. The lion grasped it at the base of the neck, and the gazelle shook and twitched, but then it went limp, and its eyes opened wide. I thought it was dead, but no, it was still alive. The lion sat down and began to eat. Was it dead yet? No, still alive. It was being eaten, and its eyes were open wide in a catatonic state. The voice-over explained that a chemical substance was being secreted inside the gazelle's brain. The gazelle didn't feel any suffering or fear, even though it was being consumed. I wondered if my mother's brain was secreting some chemical substance like the gazelle. Was that why she laid there all day in a distracted state? Was that why she wasn't afraid of death or worried anymore about not being able to move?

Across the room, there was a female Alzheimer's patient about my mother's age. She did all sorts of things—she shouted in a loud voice, walked out of the room, came back in, and on and on. In the bed next to mother was another woman

who also close to mother's age, but she slept quietly without moving. She didn't eat. Once when I was moving a metal chair, I accidentally knocked it hard against her bed, letting out a loud clang and shaking her bed. She opened her eyes wide, but even so, she didn't move a muscle.

Mother said, when people get like that, it's probably easier on them. (She didn't look at the TV, she didn't read, she just stared at a single spot before continuing.) The lady on my left sometimes talks to me, but I don't have a clue what she's saying. It's a lot less trouble for me to get to sleep if I'm alone.

As night fell, Mother and the other old folks changed personalities and began to remember things, the wanderers began to wander, the emotional patients laid their emotions bare, and some of the patients started to rant and weep. A visitor coming in from outside would pass the receptionist of the dark hospital and go up to the patient rooms on the fourth floor, where they would find a world without night. The nightlights would be shining as bright as day, and at the nurses' station, the nurses would be jotting things down as if nothing were the matter. On their desks stood artificial anemones and artificial lilies.

A world without night.

A world without night.

I heard a wild groan. A deep, male voice. *Ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh*. The man's voice reverberated, filling the entire floor.

The lights groaned out their light.

As sleek as a clump of growing grass, the nurse jotted down her notes. It was as if nothing was the matter.

Ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh.

Ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh.

Someone was angry.

At old age. At their aging self. At the world. At night. At their aging wife.

I was walking home from the hospital at night when I smelled it—a violently fragrant aroma that seemed to clutch my head and spin me around. That scent—that memory of desire—penetrated my brain, but for a second I couldn't remember its name. I hadn't smelled it for the longest time, but I thought, I know you, I definitely know you, I've missed you, I've missed you, I've been wanting, wanting, wanting to see you again—and that's when I remembered. *Ahhh.*

It was a daphne.

It was hiding in the shade beneath a wall about two meters away.

A gecko darted right in front of me, and with lightning speed, I reached out and grabbed it. Catching a gecko in the early springtime isn't anything compared to catching a rat. I put the gecko in my pocket and held it for a while. The way it squirmed inside my palm struck me as incredibly cute, and I wished I could keep it. I wanted to live with it, to be its family, but I realized that was absurd. A gecko is a gecko. I let it scamper away into the darkness of night.

Even at times like this, you're daydreaming about making a family? As this thought crossed my mind, I couldn't help but let out a hollow chuckle.

Author's note: Throughout this chapter, I have borrowed voices from several pieces of literature and made them my own. I borrowed passages from Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Kenji Miyazawa's short story "The Acorn and the Mountain Cat," and Osamu Dazai's stories "Osan" and "The Happiness of the Family." [The English translation borrows passages from David Wyllie's translation of Kafka.]