

THE OUTSIDER

0

CHASE ME

•

COORDINATE 0 / BEFORE KABESHIN

English Edition

TOJI

The day Jane Wayne died, I took five in the head.

She was the one who died first. I was the one who got up after.

That year I was twenty-two.

Police work never suited me.

You had to trust people.

You had to trust the times written on forms.

You had to wait for a killer to admit he'd killed, and even a dead man wasn't finished being dead until somebody stamped it.

I did it anyway.

Ever since I was fourteen and called the police and then ran, I've hated the uniform and the badge and never once managed to leave the inside of it.

Most of the names of the children who disappeared from that orphanage were wiped out of the records.

The people who wiped them were alive.

I didn't like that.



Jane knew where my desk was from the first day I transferred into homicide.

There was a lukewarm paper cup of coffee on it and a report that had been kicked back the day before. I opened the window before I sat down.

When I lit a cigarette, a clear plastic cup came sliding across from the other side.

An iced americano with the ice half melted out of it.

"Ashtray's on the right."

The woman said it.

Long black hair.

Small face.

Naturally red eyes.

Her white shirt had a vertical stripe and the collar was open loose, and a loosened tie hung long over the black underlayer. No blazer. She looked like someone who'd never owned one.

She looked tired.

Even the tiredness was tidy.

"Window's on the right too."

I said it.

Jane looked at my cigarette, looked at the open window, and lowered her eyes back to her paperwork.

"Then the left is my side."

That was the first conversation.



Calvin came in ten minutes later.

He was our superior.

Clean shirt.

Thin tie.

Trimmed nails.

His left eye was a shade paler than his right.

I thought it was the lighting.

Calvin threw a brown case file onto my desk.

"Six months. Four dead."

The first victim was an insurance assessor.

The second, an employee of an art transport company.

The third, a restorer.

The fourth, an auction broker with no name on file.

They hadn't known each other. They died in different places.

Hotel room.

Underground parking.

Restoration workshop.

His own bathroom.

There was one thing in common.

All four had touched the same painting before they died.

Inside the file was a photograph of an old portrait.

Black ground.

A cracked gilt frame.

The man in the painting was too white and too beautiful. His left arm covered the upper part of his face, so the eyes were almost invisible. There were no wings, but the darkness behind his back was split like a place wings had been torn out of.

Under the photograph was a classification number.

UMO.

And at the end of a blacked-out ownership line, three letters left standing.

C.A.S.

"Serial killings over an artwork?"

I asked.

"It's a homicide," Calvin said.

"The artwork is evidence."

Jane pulled out one of the photos.

"All four died after seeing the painting."

"Which is why you're the one seeing it now."

"If I die it'll be five cases."

Calvin didn't smile.

"Finish it before that."

He shut the door and left.



Jane looked at the photograph for a long time.

"He's good-looking."

"Better than the four dead ones?"

"The dead ones' photos are blurry."

I got that it was a joke half a beat late.

Jane didn't laugh.

Neither did I.

From that day we worked together.



The case started as an ordinary murder and ended in extraordinary paperwork.

The bodies had no injuries in common.

One had a broken neck.

One's heart had stopped.

One drowned in a bathtub.

The last one lost every drop of blood in a room where not one drop was on the floor.

What they did have in common was what came out of all four of them.

A white thread, finer than a hair.

Between the fingers.

Under the tongue.

Inside the pericardium.

The examiner wrote *fiber*.

The composition was never confirmed.

The samples vanished from the evidence room two days later.

Jane looked less at the sample that had gone missing than at the stamp that hadn't.

A small seal pressed into the corner of a shipping document.

Three lines inside a circle, all avoiding each other.

"You ever seen this before?"

She asked.

"No."

That was a lie.

There'd been a mark like it on the back of the orphanage ledger. At the time I thought it was a coffee stain.

Jane knew I was lying.

She didn't push.

That was Jane's way.

She didn't corner people.

She blocked off the direction they'd run and waited.



The first scene we walked into together was a shut-down print shop.

The last number the dead auction broker called had gone dead there. The steel door at the back of the building looked locked.

Jane stood in front of it.

"Move."

"Why."

"I'm opening it."

She took a step back.

The toe of her shoe hit the middle of the door.

Bang.

The door didn't open.

The heel came off her black shoe and flew the length of the corridor.

Jane stood there with one foot lower than the other.

I took the handle.

Turned it.

The door opened.

Jane looked back and forth between the open door and the heel down the hall.

"It wasn't locked."

"Guess not."

"The door lied."

I laughed out loud, right there.

It was short, but I actually laughed.

While I was laughing Jane walked all the way down the corridor and picked up the heel. She took an evidence bag out of her pocket and put it inside.

"What are you doing."

"Preserving the scene."

The laughing ended on the other side of the door.

There was a man sitting in the middle of the office.

He wasn't tied to the chair. He was sitting up straight at the desk with only his head tipped back.

His mouth was open.

Several white threads came out from under his tongue and ran up to the ceiling vent.

I looked up at the vent.

The threads went in through the gap in the cover. They were taut. It was like something had passed through once, from in there to out here, and only the mark of the passing was left.

Jane set the evidence bag with the broken heel down on the floor.

She didn't joke for a while after that.

A few days later I left a pair of black flats under her desk.

Cheap, low-heeled.

Jane opened the shoebox the moment she got in.

"Is this your taste, Detective?"

"They're door-opening shoes."

"They're ugly."

She wore them from that day.

She didn't throw the others away.



We put the case records back together every night.

Jane held the iced americano in her left hand and drew the victims' routes with her right. Even when the ice was all gone she didn't throw it out.

She looked less like someone drinking a coffee than someone carrying one.

"Why do you keep holding that."

"Because it's cold."

"It's all melted."

"Then it's less cold."

She answered and then sat there a while before she put the cup down.

That was how it went.

The talking was short and the meaning came later.

Once we sat on a transport contractor outside a station.

Three in the morning.

Jane had her eyes closed in the passenger seat.

I took out a cigarette. No lighter.

"Left pocket."

Jane said it with her eyes shut.

"Whose pocket."

"Mine."

My lighter was in her shirt pocket.

"Why do you have it."

"Because you lose it every time."

"That's stealing."

"That's safekeeping."

"Since when."

"Since the third case."

"Which one are we on now."

"I've never counted."

Jane went to sleep like that.

She didn't wake up when the man came out of the convenience store either.

I went down alone and took him.

She only opened her eyes after I'd cuffed his wrists and pushed him into the back seat.

She turned around and her eyes met the suspect's.

"Who's this?"

Jane asked.

The suspect answered first.

"I've been apprehended."

Jane looked at me.

"Why didn't you wake me, Detective?"

"You were asleep."

"That's dereliction of duty."

"Yours."

The suspect laughed in the back seat.

Jane laughed too.

I didn't laugh.

The next morning there was a new lighter on my desk.

Same model as the one I'd been using.

Price tag still on it.



That transport contractor died three days later.

Found under an overpass. Broken neck, personal effects untouched.

It wasn't our case. It went down as accidental.

Around then I saw other bodies too.

A woman asleep sitting up in a bathtub.

A driver who came out of a harbor freezer along with the ice.

All of them classified as deaths with nothing to do with the painting.

Death cuts into a case without asking whose it is.

That could have been all it was.

I laid the times of death of those three next to our own logbook.

The contractor was after we took him.

The woman in the bathtub was the day after Jane found her name in a document.

The freezer driver was the night we pulled the warehouse access records.

All three: we went first, and then they died.

That isn't an order coincidence makes.

Somebody knew where we were looking, and was a little faster than us.

There weren't many chairs that could sit in.

I put the logbook in a drawer and locked it.

I didn't tell Jane either.

I thought if I told her she'd move first.

Looking back, that was the first stupid thing I did.



Jane went often to the isolation museum where the portrait was kept.

It was called a museum but the public couldn't get in. A grey building run by a harbor finance foundation.

First floor, offices.

Second floor, restoration.

Third floor, an isolation gallery with no windows.

The cargo corridor at the back ran down to the docks.

The painting hung in the far room on the third floor.

Jane sat in the chair in front of it and drank her coffee. She put a small sketchbook on her knees and copied the portrait.

"Hobby time, in the middle of an investigation."

I asked.

"It's a copy."

"We have photographs."

"Photographs can't catch which way the painting is looking."

"What is it looking at."

"Right now, me."

I looked at the portrait.

The man's gaze came down under his arm. It wasn't one of those cheap paintings whose eyes meet yours from any angle.

If anything it was a face that looked at no one.

But when Jane stood up out of the chair, the eye under the arm seemed to move, very slightly.

A drop fell off Jane's coffee and spread on the sketchbook.

She added a pencil line on top of the stain.

"You ruined it."

"That eye was already there."

"It appeared just now."

"Paintings can do that too."

Jane closed the sketchbook.

In the elevator that day she took hold of my wrist.

Her hand was cold.

In the elevator mirror my shadow raised its head half a beat late.

Jane looked at the mirror.

"You're quieter going out than you were coming in."

"Is that a compliment."

"A warning."

Her hand came off right away.



Jane wrote the transport contractor into the fifth line the next week.

He'd never touched the painting.

He had, however, carried the people who touched it.

"They won't accept it."

"Not being accepted is a record too."

That day the order came down from upstairs to close the case.

Individual causes of death confirmed.

Insufficient evidence.

No connection between incidents.

UMO photograph to be returned.

Calvin came to collect the file.

"This is as far as it goes."

Jane asked.

"As far as what goes."

"The investigation."

"Five people are dead."

"Four."

Calvin said it looking into Jane's eyes.

"If you don't want to be the fifth, start by fixing how you count."

The room went quiet.

I put out my cigarette.

How you count.

Calvin was the one who said four. Jane was the one who said five.

The one who could count seven was in my drawer.

I didn't open that drawer.

Calvin's left eye went white under the fluorescent light and came back.

"Give me the file."

Jane took the brown folder out of her drawer.

She handed it over without an argument.

It was only after Calvin left that I noticed the file had gotten lighter.

The portrait photograph and two transport records were gone from inside it.

"Where'd they go."

"Returned them."

"To who."

Jane drank a mouthful of the melted coffee.

"Where they came from."

"Don't go alone."

"Is that a request?"

I didn't answer.

She looked at me.

Her eyes, always tired, were strangely clear that day.

They were like the eyes Rin had on the last night.

The eyes of someone who's already decided how far they're going.

I knew those eyes.

That made it worse.

"Jane."

"I know."

"Know what."

"The expression you hate."

Jane threw the empty cup at the wastebasket.

It hit the rim, bounced back up, and returned to her hand.

That time I laughed right away.

Jane looked down at the cup.

"It says it doesn't want to go in."

"Respect that."

She put the cup back on the desk.

"Pretend you didn't see it."

"See what."

"All of it."

Jane left the office.

I started to follow her and stopped.

On the desk was the pair of black flats she'd been wearing.

That day she had the heeled shoes back on.

That was the last time I saw the ordinary Jane.



One seventeen in the morning.

The phone rang once.

Sender: Jane.

Two words.

chase me.

I didn't move right away.

I opened the sketchbook she'd left.

There was no portrait on the last page.

On a map of the harbor, one rectangle drawn in the shape of a gilt frame.

Bottom right, a coffee stain.

A cargo elevator number.

03.

The isolation museum.

It was raining.

The front shutter was half down. The guard station was empty and the access log screen had been frozen since one a.m.

There was no blood on the first floor.

None on the second.

On the stairs up to the third I stepped on the lid of an iced americano.

The black straw mark was still on it.

Jane hadn't finished her coffee.

She hadn't thrown the lid away separately either.

It was a mark she left on purpose.

Every light on the third floor was off.

Only the door at the end of the hall was open.

I drew my gun and went in.



The first thing I saw was Calvin's back.

He had one knee on the floor.

His right arm crossed over Jane's face. The forearm covered her forehead and eyes and his hand cradled the back of her head.

His left hand held her jaw.

He was lifting her slack face and pressing it to the portrait.

Jane's lips and the lips of the man in the painting were pushed together.

From a distance it looked like a kiss.

Up close it was the work of fitting a dead body into a device.

Jane's neck bent limply wherever Calvin's hand took it.

There were three black holes in the chest of the white shirt.

One.

Two.

Three.

The blood from the three of them joined under the shirt and ran down onto the black skirt and the floor.

Her chest didn't move.

Her stomach didn't move.

Her right hand rested on the floor.

There was no strength in the fingers.

The red eyes were half exposed but had no focus.

Jane was dead.

That fact reached me before the painting did.

The portrait had been taken down off the wall and stood on a black cloth. The man in it covered the upper part of his face with his arm.

Calvin's left eye was completely white.

White threads were rising out of Jane's chest.

The threads weren't closing the wounds.

They weren't stopping the blood.

They were holding on to something trying to get out of the body.

Between Calvin's wrist and Jane's gunshot wounds the thread was pulled taut.

I squeezed the trigger.

The round went for Calvin's shoulder.

A single white thread struck the side of the bullet.

It twisted off, broke the corner of the frame, and buried itself in the wall.

Calvin didn't turn around.



The black ground of the portrait moved.

It didn't rise like smoke.

Like wet paint scraped out of an old oil painting, the black surface stretched thickly.

Where the light reached inside it, a dirty deep green showed through.

Like oil pooled a long time in rusted metal.

Like a thin film surfacing from the bottom of a deep sea.

The color went out of the lips of the man in the painting.

The white outline of his jaw and throat blurred.

The depth of the black ground got shallow.

What came out — the color, the shape — passed between the pressed-together lips and went into Jane's mouth.

Some of it soaked into her nose and throat.

Some of it forced through between the white threads and went into the gunshot wounds.

Black lines formed under Jane's skin.

Under the black, a clouded green moved, rotting.

The painting was going into Jane.

The direction was clear.

The portrait was losing its color.

Jane's body was taking it in.

And yet the one being eaten looked like Jane.

The depth inside the frame got bigger than her body.

The edges of Jane's silhouette wavered like they were folding toward the painting.

I couldn't tell whether her mouth was the passage the painting was being drawn through, or whether the painting was a mouth eating her.

Jane was swallowing something.

And from inside the thing she'd swallowed, something was swallowing Jane back.

The white threads and the deep green and black nature pulled in opposite directions.

Some threads burned black.

Some lost their color.

The rest held on to Jane's body to the end.

I ran.

Calvin pulled Jane's face off the portrait.

Her limp neck bent back and dropped to the floor.

Her hair spread out over the blood.

The man in the portrait was gone.

The black ground had lost its depth.

Inside the gilt frame there was only a clouded canvas and a faint stain.

Jane stayed where she was on the floor.

She didn't open her eyes.

She didn't breathe.

She didn't look at me.

The painting went into a dead body, and the dead body stayed dead.



My left hand began to split.

The fingers got longer.

Black lines opened under the palm.

My shadow went forward ahead of my breath.
A cold thread came up from inside my gums.
Calvin looked at my hand.
The white left eye narrowed once.
He let out a long breath.
It was before my arm had finished moving.
The first three were almost a single sound.
The first turned my head sideways.
The second broke the fluorescent light.
The third cut off the smell of Jane's coffee.
Two more came before my body reached the floor.
On the fourth the floor came up into my face.
The fifth confirmed a place that had already gone numb.
All of it was faster than one swing of my arm.
Going down, I looked at Jane.
The strengthless fingertips.
Three holes on the white shirt.
Black hair stuck in blood.
The melted ice.
The black flats.

The lighter that had fallen between us.

The portrait with its contents gone.

My blood ran toward Jane's blood.

The two colors didn't separate.

Jane died.

So did I.

Calvin's shoes stopped between us.

He didn't look down at the two of us.

He checked the order he'd process them in.

My vision closed.



When I opened my eyes it was inside metal.

Not all the way open.

There was no light.

My head felt like it was open, and there was blood and cement dust mixed in my mouth. Everything below my waist was pressed under a hardening weight.

An oil drum.

Outside there was the sound of waves.

Diesel.

Oil.

Rust.

Seawater.

An engine turned under the metal floor.

The ship was already moving.

Jane hadn't disappeared.

The last I'd seen of her, she was still on that floor.

Three rounds in the chest.

Not breathing.

With the painting inside her body.

What Calvin did with her after that, I didn't know.

I heard Calvin's voice.

"Do I have to do even this part myself."

A lighter went.

A little cigarette smoke came in through the gap in the drum lid.

I thought about Jane's name.

No sound came out.

Instead something else answered from inside.

—*She's dead.*

It was The Man.

The thing that hadn't spoken properly once since I was fourteen raised its head inside me.

—Both of you are.

Save her.

—Which one.

I didn't answer.

Jane was dead.

She wasn't something to be saved.

What was left was Calvin.

Me.

I felt The Man laugh.

A laugh without a mouth.

—Three minutes.

What.

—I borrow your body for three minutes. Once. I choose when.

I didn't answer.

—Today I put you back together. Taking is for later.

Jane's empty cup.

The broken heel.

The black flats.

My lighter.

And the last sentence.

chase me.

Take it.

—Contracted.



Metal rang inside the drum.

One black spine punched through the side.

A second.

A third.

Seven spines burst out in seven different directions.

The cement split.

The steel plate folded.

The drum lid flew up onto the deck.

One of them went through Calvin's left shoulder.

His cigarette dropped to the floor.

Nobody could have dodged it.

It was a drum with a corpse in it.

He was the one who put the corpse in.

Calvin didn't scream.

He took hold of the spine with his right hand and pulled it out of his body.

White liquid came out of the wound instead of blood.

"Michael."

Calvin called.

It wasn't his own name.

The left eye went white again.



What rose first were the rounds.

White things came up one by one from Calvin's shoulder and behind his back and stopped in the air.

About the size of a finger joint, rounded at the tip and cut flat at the back.

Like a slug pulled out of a pistol and painted white.

Ten.

Twenty.

I stopped counting.

Every one of them pointed at me like a muzzle.

"Needles."

Calvin said.

I couldn't tell if it was an order or a name.

It seemed to be both.

He was a man who called something shaped like a bullet a needle.



The first one came.

I turned my body left.

It went past my ear.

It didn't hit me and my neck went hot.

There was a white line left where it had passed.

Finer than a hair, glowing very faintly.

The skin of my neck had grazed that line.

The line hung in the air about as long as two breaths and then vanished.

Until it vanished it was the same thing as a bullet.

That's when I understood how the ability was built.

There was a reason he called them needles.

Hitting wasn't the point.

Passing through was the point.
Where a needle goes, thread follows.
Every place I dodged, a blade got left behind.
The white threads that came out of four bodies.
Under the tongue.
Between the fingers.
Inside the pericardium.
All of it was the mark of something having passed through
once.
That was also where I learned that a line left inside flesh
doesn't vanish.
And I learned something else at the same time.
He hadn't taken them out of the bodies.
He could have if he'd wanted to.
He left them four months and then cleaned them out of the
evidence room only after we'd taken samples.
He was a man who cleaned up after being caught, not before.
That's how strong people live sloppy.



Calvin opened his fingers.

Twenty came at once.



One strand came out of my right arm.

The flesh on the outside of the forearm split lengthwise and the black thing pushed up through it.

It knocked three of them away in one motion.

Four got pushed aside. The rest went past.

Every place they passed, a white line stayed.

It was only after seeing that far that I understood.

I had never told it to do that.

A quarter of a beat.

In that gap it had already knocked three away.

I didn't think about what that meant at the time.



The air over the deck started getting thinly ruled.

I didn't run backward.

Going backward means the lines stack up.

I took one step forward.

On the next step I gave up the right arm.

Specifically, I pushed the front of it into the lines.

The flesh tore. The sound was closer to paper tearing.

Almost at the same time, three more came out.

Two from the back. The skin under the shoulder blades split from the inside.

One from the left forearm.

The torn right arm closed right after.

Four in all.

They were longer than a man is tall. As thick as a forearm at the root, thinning toward the end until the last handspan was pressed flat.

That was the blade.

There were no joints.

They didn't bend at an angle, they curved. Not the way a whip curves — the way an arm moves through water.

Torn, they closed.

Something passed through the closed place again.

It closed again.

Six steps of distance.

I did it in three.

The first step folded the deck plate.

On the second a container corner caught my shoulder.

On the third I was in front of Calvin.



That was where it got long.

Calvin didn't back off.

He couldn't.

The air behind him was three layers deep in lines he'd laid himself.

Same for me.

We were about an arm and a half apart.

Inside that, twenty of them circled.

They didn't come from the front. They came from the side, from behind, from above. They went past and came back.

Four of mine took all of it.

The first from the back knocked away the one that came from the upper right.

One from an arm blocked the lower left.

The second from the back swept the two that had come back around, in one motion.

Two things happened every time I knocked one away.

The severed place closed where it was.

And one more came out.

Four became eight.

Eight became a dozen and more.

I stopped counting somewhere past twenty.

My back kept splitting. My arms, my sides, the back of my neck.

The flesh opened and it didn't hurt. That was the stranger part.

Calvin raised his count too.

Twenty became forty, and forty I couldn't count.

Inside an arm and a half of space, black things and white things crossed by the hundred.

The sound wasn't metal hitting metal.

It was closer to a fingernail dragged across wet paper.

They stopped being separate sounds and ran together into one.

The sound didn't break.

Every time I knocked one away a white line stayed.

The line that stayed had another laid over it before it faded.

Calvin's right hand kept moving. Every time one finger folded, a trajectory changed.

Cut off the hand and it would end.

He knew that too.

Five crossed each other in front of my right wrist.

Five layers of line, overlapping.

Put a hand in there and the hand is gone.

I didn't put my hand in.

I drove one blade into the deck plate at my feet and turned my whole body on that axis.

I went past just under the crossing.

The skin of my back opened.

It closed.



The tendrils didn't get thinner.

The first one that came out and the hundredth were both as thick as a forearm.

That wasn't the side that was losing.

The layered lines didn't vanish.

The air was hardening into strata.

The room I had to stand in kept getting smaller.

I lowered a shoulder.

I bent a knee.

After that there was nothing left to bend.

I was winning and getting smaller.

It couldn't run long.



Calvin's face still had no expression on it.

It wasn't the human side of his face.

It was the face of a man processing a task.

I wanted to hit that face once.

And while I wanted it, I watched.

The white liquid out of the shoulder wound went up into the air and every time came back to his chest.

The ones that missed did too. They took a wide arc and ended up on the same side.

The left eye.

The wrist.

The shoulder.

All of it connected to one place.

Behind the heart.



One came straight in.

I hit it from the side with the first one on my back.

Not squarely — I pushed the flank of it at an angle.

The round turned and shoved the tip of the blade back.

That shove came up as far as my shoulder.

I didn't stop it.

I put myself on it.

The blade sprang up along the direction it had been pushed and went through Calvin's neck.

It touched.

It wasn't deep.

There was a line about a handspan long on the side of his neck, and white liquid ran from it down into his collar.

Calvin gave half a step back for the first time.

An expression happened.

A surprised face.

The face of a man who's only now confirming that the person he killed is standing in front of him.



Every needle in the air stopped.

They changed direction and began gathering to a single point.

In front of Calvin's right hand.

Until now he'd been scattering them.

Now he was collecting.

If that finished, a dozen containers were going through with me.

"The dead should stay dead."

The voice had two layers in it.

The Man spoke inside me.

—That's the handle.

I didn't wait.

I couldn't count how many layers of line were laid between us.

The neck would go first if anything went wrong.

Before the gathering thing could find its direction again, I pushed my left hand up under the ribs.

I was going for the heart.

My thumb touched the heart.

But the tip of my ring finger caught on something else.

It was behind that.

It wasn't shaped like a human bone.

A small, flat wing.

That's where I changed it.

The heart is where you kill a man.

This wasn't a man.

Leaving the thumb resting on the heart, I pushed the hand in another knuckle.

The ring finger hooked under the wing.

I drove the little finger into the gap.

Calvin's left eye opened wide.

"Wait—"

I stirred.

It wasn't the sound of a bone breaking.

It was the sound of something wet bursting inside.

I hooked what was left of it on my ring finger and tore it out.



Every needle in the air dropped at once.

They left no lines as they fell.

Calvin went back two steps.

He looked at me with a hand pressed to his chest.

What was left was the human side of his face.

"What did you—"

Once would have ended it.

I didn't end it in one.

One blade went through his shoulder, through his neck, and into the deck.

A second came from the other side.

From the third I didn't count.

Calvin's body changed shape several times before it lay down on the deck.

At the end I put a knee on it.

There was a sound of a chest folding.

I pressed a little more after that.

Not because it was necessary.



The tendrils went back into my body one at a time.

The places they went in closed in order. The back, the arms, the sides, the back of the neck.

It only started hurting after they closed.

I couldn't move for a while.

The blood off my face wet the toes of my shoes.

A line had gone across my face.

Starting above the left eyebrow, past the cheek, scraping under the mouth, down to under the right jaw.

An inch deeper and the left eye and the throat would have gone together.

I don't remember when it grazed me.

I couldn't tell which one it was out of more than a hundred lines.

Wounds that don't hurt during a fight all arrive together afterward.

The Man said:

—Haven't used it yet.

Three minutes.

That right was still there, untouched.

That was the last thing The Man said to me that day.

For six years after, it never once spoke first.



There was a broken piece of the wing bone in my hand.

Thin white lines were still moving at the snapped end.

I threw it over the rail.

I didn't watch it fall.

White rounds were scattered across the deck.

There was nobody left to call them needles.

All of them were losing their light.

Except one.

One buried under Calvin's chest was still white.

I looked at it for a long time.

I didn't pull it out.

Leaving it there was easier than deciding where to put it.

That was the second stupid thing I did.



I put my fingers to Calvin's neck.

No pulse.

I took hold of his waistband with one hand.

Lifted the body onto my left shoulder.

He was lighter than I expected.

"Fuck..."

In the middle of the deck the drum I'd been inside stood upright.

There was still half a load of broken cement in it.

I put Calvin in headfirst.

The head went into the cement.

The shoulders caught at the mouth of it.

I pressed once.

There was a sound of bone folding.

The legs and shoes shook outside for a second.

I pushed once more.

Calvin disappeared into the drum.



I took two steps to the stern rail.

The ship was clearing the harbor.

The sand across the water pulled away.

The rain-wet sand reflected the city's lights in a thin sheet.

Behind it, low buildings and warehouses and the lights of roads that hadn't gone out yet.

I couldn't pick out which building the isolation museum was anymore.

The sea was somewhere between grey and deep blue.

Calvin's cigarettes had fallen on the deck.

I took one out and put it in my mouth.

The lighter took three tries.

The smoke got pushed sideways along the wind.

Jane's broken heel came back to me.

The cheap flats I bought her.

The half-melted coffee left in my car.

The lighter that wasn't in my pocket.

The tie she straightened once.

The empty cup that came back to her hand out of the wastebasket.

Dead lips pressed against a portrait's lips.

Three gunshot wounds on a white shirt.

A floor soaked in blood.

chase me.

Jane died.

I saw it.

The painting went into her.

And to the very end, the one being eaten looked like Jane.

What Calvin did with that body after, I didn't know.

There was no way to find out now either.



I remembered when the cigarette was half burned down.

The logbook I'd put in a drawer and locked.

The transport contractor. The woman in the bathtub. The freezer driver.

The three who died after we went first.

It wasn't four. It was seven.

I looked over at the drum.

"Never asked you if the seven were yours either."

There was no answer.

I didn't ask when I could have.

That was the third.

I finished the cigarette.

I didn't turn my body.

The drum stood behind me on the right.

I folded my left foot back and to the right.

With the heel I tapped the side of the drum lightly.

Thunk.

The drum didn't roll along the deck.

It sprang up where it stood.

It went over the stern rail and out over the black water.

A moment later it hit.

It wasn't loud.

The sound of a person going away is always lighter than you'd think.

I didn't watch the drum sink.

My eyes stayed on the receding city and the horizon behind it.



I went down to the cabin and found Calvin's phone and the case file.

There was a disposition report with my name on it.

Deceased.

Identification complete.

Body lost.

The time of writing was before I was shot.

Paperwork always died before the person did.

Jane's name wasn't there.

Not on the list of the dead.

Not on the list of the missing.

Not in the personnel records.

Blank, like someone who had never worked at that station at all.

Lists of people whose names had been erased were familiar to me.

When I was fourteen there was a list I couldn't find my own name on.

There was one last message on my phone.

chase me.

I didn't delete it.

I opened the route table.

The next port was Kabeshin City.

Around first light, the sea was grey.

The coastline was already far off.

Jane was dead.

So was I.

The only difference was that she stayed on land and I was still moving.

Kabeshin City didn't ask a dead man his name.

If it had, I'd have given hers.

Nobody asked, so I gave it first.