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YUKIO MISHIMA

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THIRST FOR LOVE

'A sensuous, absorbing study of overriding obsession'
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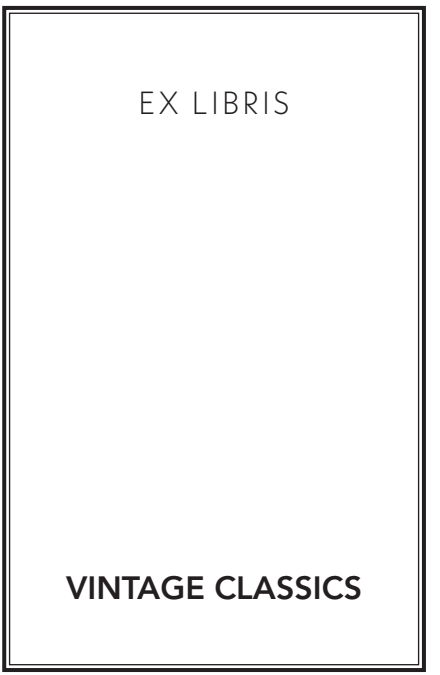

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YUKIO MISHIMA

Yukio Mishima was born into a samurai family and imbued with the code of complete control over mind and body, and loyalty to the Emperor – the same code that produced the austerity and self-sacrifice of Zen. He wrote countless short stories and thirty-three plays, in some of which he acted. Several films have been made from his novels, including *The Sound of Waves; Enjo*, which was based on *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*; and *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*. Among his other works are the novels *Confessions of a Mask* and *Thirst for Love* and the short-story collections *Death in Midsummer* and *Acts of Worship*.

After Mishima conceived the idea of The Sea of Fertility tetralogy in 1964, he frequently said he would die when it was completed. On November 25, 1970, the day he completed *The Decay of the Angel*, the last novel of the cycle, Mishima committed *seppuku* (ritual suicide) at the age of forty-five.

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ALSO BY YUKIO MISHIMA

The Sea of Fertility tetralogy

Spring Snow

Runaway Horses

The Temple of Dawn

The Decay of the Angel

Confessions of a Mask

Forbidden Colours

After the Banquet

The Temple of the Golden Pavilion

The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea

Five Modern Nō Plays

The Sound of Waves

Death in Midsummer

Acts of Worship

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THIRST FOR LOVE

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY
Alfred H. Marks

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Thirst for Love

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1

THAT DAY Etsuko went to the Hankyu department store and bought two pairs of wool socks. One pair was blue, the other brown. They were plain socks, of solid color.

She had come all the way into Osaka and completed her shopping at the Hankyu store at the last station, and now all she was going to do was turn around, board her train, and go home. She wasn't going to a movie. She wasn't even going to have tea, much less a meal. Etsuko hated nothing so much as crowded streets.

If she wanted to go anywhere, all she had to do was go downstairs into the Umeda terminal and take the subway to Shinsaibashi or Dotonbori. Yet if she stepped outside the store and crossed the intersection, where the shoeshine boys were lined up and calling, "Shine! Shine!", she would find herself on the beach of the metropolis, where the rich tides ran.

For Etsuko—born and brought up in Tokyo—Osaka

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held inexplicable terrors. City of merchant princes, hoboes, industrialists, stockbrokers, whores, opium pushers, white-collar workers, punks, bankers, provincial officials, aldermen, Gidayu reciters, kept women, penny-pinching wives, newspaper reporters, music hall entertainers, bar girls, shoeshine boys—it was not really this that Etsuko feared. Might it have been nothing but life itself? Life—this limitless, complex sea, filled with assorted flotsam, brimming with capricious, violent, and yet eternally transparent blues and greens.

Etsuko opened her cloth shopping bag and thrust the socks deep within it. A flash of lightning brightened the open windows. It was followed by solemn thunder that made the glass shelves in the store shudder faintly.

The wind bowled in and knocked over a little sign that said "Specials." Clerks ran to close the windows. The store grew dark. The lights, which were kept on even in the daytime, suddenly seemed to glow brighter. There still wasn't any rain.

Etsuko passed her hand through the handle of her shopping bag. The curving bamboo scraped down across her forearm as she lifted her hands to her face. Her cheeks were very warm. That was a common occurrence with her. There wasn't any reason for it; of course, it wasn't a symptom of any illness—it was just that suddenly her cheeks would start to burn. Her hands, delicate though they were, were callused and tanned, and because of that very delicacy seemed rougher. They scratched her cheeks and intensified the burning.

She suddenly felt she could do anything. She could cross that intersection as if walking out on a springboard, and

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plunge into the middle of those streets. As she reflected and her gaze was caught by the masses of people moving there on the selling floor among multitudes of things, she momentarily slid into a reverie. Her dreams knew only happy things; misfortune frightened her.

What had given her this courage? The thunder? The two pairs of socks she had just purchased? Etsuko cut through the crowd and hurried to the stairway. She moved with the traffic down to the second floor. Then she approached the Hankyu ticket offices on the first floor.

She looked outside. In the minute or two since it began, the rain had turned to a downpour. The sidewalks were already soaked as if it had been pouring for hours. The rain bounced as it struck.

Etsuko approached one of the exits. Her calm returned. She relaxed as she moved, tired, slightly dizzy. She had no umbrella. She couldn't go out. No, not that. It was no longer necessary that she do so.

She stood by the door and squinted at the row of shops on the other side, beyond the trolley tracks, the traffic signals, and the streetcars so quickly swallowed up by the rain. The rain dashed in even to where she was, dampening her skirt. The doorway area was quite noisy. A man ran up shielding his head under a small valise. A woman dressed in Western clothing hurried in with a scarf covering her hair. It was almost as if they had come to be with Etsuko, who was the only one not soaked.

All around her were men and women who looked as if they could be office workers, all drenched by the rain. They griped, they joked, they looked back rather triumphantly at the rain they had just dashed through. For a time

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they all turned silent faces toward the rain-filled sky, Etsuko's dry face among all these wet ones.

From some preposterously high place, the rain fell full tilt toward these faces. It seemed to be under tight control. The thunder was receding in the distance, but the sound of the rain numbed the ears, numbed the heart. Even the occasional rending sound of the horns of the passing cars and the gravelly screams of the station loudspeaker could not compete with the tumult of the rain.

Etsuko left the group waiting for the rain to stop and joined one of the long, silent lines at the ticket windows.

The Okamachi station on the Hankyu-Takarazuka line was thirty or forty minutes away from the central Umeda terminal. Expresses did not stop there. Maidemmura, where Etsuko lived, was a suburb of the city of Toyonaka, which had doubled its population after the war. It had become a refuge for many made homeless by the Osaka fire bombings. Other settlers were attracted to the city by the government housing built there. Maidemmura was in Osaka prefecture. In a strict sense it was not rural at all.

Nevertheless, if one wanted to purchase something special, or cheap, he had to take an hour or so and go into Osaka. Etsuko had come shopping on this day before the Autumnal Equinox in order to buy a pomelo to offer before the tablet of her deceased husband, who had loved that fruit. Unfortunately the department store was sold out of pomelos. She didn't want to go outside the store, but driven by conscience or some other obscure impulse, she was about to venture out on the street when the rain stopped her. That was all. Nothing more was necessary.

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Etsuko boarded the local train to Takarazuka and sat down. The rain outside the windows seemed as if it would never stop. The smell of printer's ink on the evening newspaper spread out in front of her by a standing passenger woke her out of her reverie. She looked furtively around her. There was nothing to see.

The trainman's whistle shrilled. The train shook with a deep sound like that of heavy chains gnashing against each other and started rolling. It would repeat the same monotonous maneuver many times over as it advanced hesitantly from station to station.

The rain stopped. Etsuko turned and looked at the way the sunlight was streaming through a rift in the clouds. It came to rest on the residential streets of suburban Osaka like an extended, powerless, white hand.

Etsuko walked as if she were pregnant. It was an ostentatiously indolent walk. She didn't realize it; she had no one who might see it and set her right; but like the slip of paper that a mischievous boy has surreptitiously affixed to a friend's back, that walk was her involuntary sign and seal.

She left the Okamachi station, passed through the *torii* of the Hachiman shrine and the assorted bustlings of small-town streets, and finally came to where the houses were not so frequent. So leisurely was her pace that night had overtaken her.

Lights were burning in the rows of government housing. There were hundreds of units—of the same style, the same life, the same smallness, the same poverty. The road through this squalid community afforded a shortcut that she never took.

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These rooms into which one could see so plainly, each with its cheap tea cabinet, its low table, its radio, its muslin floor pillows, its slim fare, of which one could see at times every scrap, and all that steam! Every one of them made Etsuko angry. Her heart had not developed to the point where she could look at poverty, or imagine anything but happiness.

The road darkened. The insects began to sing. The puddles here and there reflected the light of the dying evening. On either side lay ricefields, their surfaces alternately light and dark in the mild damp breeze.

She traversed a meaningless, tedious road of the kind country areas are given to, from which she struck off onto a path that wound near a little stream. She was now in Maidemmura.

Between the stream and the path ran a bamboo thicket, a break in which led to a bridge across the stream. Etsuko crossed the bridge, which was of wood, passed in front of the former tenant farmer's home and through a grove of *kaede* and assorted fruit trees, mounted a curving stone stairway bordered by tea plants, and opened the side door of the Sugimoto home. It was at first glance sumptuous, although the builder had contrived to use cheap lumber in places where it did not show. From the back room issued the laughter of Asako's children. Asako was Etsuko's sister-in-law.

Those children are always laughing. What in the world do they find to laugh at? If there's anything I can't stand it's arrogant laughter like that! Etsuko's thoughts had no particular purpose. She placed her shopping bag on the doorstep.

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* * * *

Yakichi Sugimoto had bought this property, of about ten acres, in 1934, five years before he retired from the Kansai Merchant Ships Corporation.

He was originally from the Tokyo area, the son of a tenant farmer, and had worked his way through college. After graduation he was hired by Kansai Ships and assigned to their Osaka home office, in Dojima. He married a girl from Tokyo, and although he lived in Osaka he had his three sons educated in Tokyo. In 1934 he became general manager; in 1938, president. The next year he retired.

When he and his wife happened to visit the grave of an old friend in the Hattori Garden of Souls, a new government cemetery, he was taken with the rolling beauty of the surrounding area. When he inquired about the place, he heard for the first time the name Maidemmura. He selected a sloping site covered with chestnuts and bamboo and graced with orchards, and in 1935 built a simple villa there. At the same time he turned over the cultivation of the fruit trees to a gardener.

This was not at all, however, what his wife and sons had been thinking of as a likely base for leisurely villa life; in fact, it became nothing more than the spot to which Yakichi could drive with his family from Osaka and spend the weekend enjoying the sun and indulging a penchant for farming. Yakichi's languid dilettante of an eldest son, Kensuke, opposed his energetic father's whim with all the force he could muster; but although he loathed it all from the very depths of his heart, he finally found himself—reluctantly, as usual—being coerced into joining his brothers as a farmer.

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Among the Osaka men of affairs at this time there were many who loved the soil, and out of the inborn miserliness and sunny pessimism that went with their Kyoto–Osaka area vitality, they looked askance at the villas in the sought-after shore and hot springs areas, and built cottages in the mountains, where land and socializing cost little.

After Yakichi Sugimoto retired, Maidemmura became the hub of his life. The name may well be derived from *mai*, meaning rice, and *den*, meaning field, with the *mura*, of course, meaning village. The area was evidently under the sea in prehistoric times, and as a result the soil was extremely rich. On this ten acres of land Yakichi was able to grow various fruits and vegetables. The tenant farmer and his family, along with three gardeners, were of much help to this tiller of the soil, and after a few years the Sugimoto peaches became greatly prized in the urban markets.

During the war Yakichi lived a life disdainful of the hostilities. It was, however, a unique form of disdain. The city folk, as he saw it, had to buy the bad rations and high-priced black-market rice because they lacked foresight. He, however, had foresight and was able to live a life of composed self-sufficiency. He traced everything back to the doctrine of foresight. Even his retirement at the mandatory age seemed somehow planned. The malaise and boredom other retired executives suffered, so much like the malaise and boredom of imprisonment, he seemed somehow to have missed.

He mocked the military with the half-jesting jibes of a man who holds no grudge. Those jibes hit their highest point when his wife died after coming down with pneumonia, for which she had received a drug newly developed by

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the medical corps. Yakichi had secured the drug from a friend in the Osaka army headquarters. The drug had no beneficial effect, said Yakichi, save the death of her.

He weeded; he tilled. The peasant blood revived in him; his love of the soil became a fever. Now that neither his wife nor society was watching him, he even went so far as to blow his nose between his fingers. From the very depths of his aging physique, beaten down by suspenders and vests graced with gold chains, emerged intimations of the sturdy frame of a farmer. Beneath his once overly groomed features, the farmer's face came to light. If his subordinates could see him now they would know that the furious brows and glaring eyes that had once terrorized them were features usually associated with old farmers.

It was as if Yakichi were owning land for the first time. Before this he had been able to own building sites. This farm, in fact, had seemed to him only another such piece of property. But now it had come to be *land*. The instinct which held that the concept of ownership has no meaning unless the object owned is land came to live again in him. It seemed as if for the first time the achievements of his life were firm and palpable to hand and heart. It now seemed that the disdain in which he as a rising young man held his father and his grandfather was entirely attributable to their failure to possess so much as one acre of land. Out of a love that was more like a thirst for revenge, Yakichi erected a ridiculously expensive monument to his ancestors at the family temple. He did not dream that Ryosuke would be the first one buried there. For that purpose he might as well have taken a plot at the Hattori Garden of Souls.

On their infrequent visits to the Osaka area, his sons were

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puzzled by the changes taking place in their father. The image of him held by Kensuke, the eldest; Ryosuke, the second son; and Yusuke, the youngest, was more or less the image produced by their dead mother's careful nurture. She, brought up in the abominable ways of the Tokyo middle class, permitted her husband to act only as an upper-class executive should. Until she died her husband could not blow his nose with his hand, pick his nose in company, slurp his soup, or hawk and spit into the charcoal fire in the *hibachi*—bad habits that society, in all its magnanimity, tolerates in great men.

The transformation of Yakichi was in his sons' eyes somehow pitiable, foolish, makeshift. It was as if the high spirit of his days as general manager of Kansai Merchant Ships had returned, though now with the businesslike flexibility gone, leaving only the self-made man at his worst. His voice was like that of a farmer running after garden thieves.

Yakichi's bronze bust graced a drawing room that must have been twenty mats in size. His portrait in oil, by one of the shining lights of the Kansai art world, hung there. This bust, this portrait were of the same tradition as the pictures of successive presidents one sees lined up in the voluminous handouts printed for the fiftieth anniversaries of Imperial Japanese So-and-so Corporations. What his sons saw as pitiable was the gratuitous obduracy, the ostentatious pride of the bust enduring unchanged within this old peasant. The remarks he made about the military had behind them the grimy arrogance of the country demagogue. The innocent villagers took his words as evidence of his patriotism, and accorded him even greater respect.

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It was ironic that the eldest son, Kensuke, who consid-

ered Yakichi impossible, should have been the first to move in with the father. He knew that although his chronic asthma permitted him to live in idleness and escape the draft, it did not exempt him from voluntary service—a duty he took the initiative of choosing by having his father secure him a post with the Maidemmura post office. He moved in with his wife in tow, and it seemed certain that some kind of friction would develop, but Kensuke slid out from under his proud father's absolute power with ease. In this feat his talent for cynicism served him well.

As the war got worse all three of the gardeners were called up, but one of them, a youth from Hiroshima prefecture, managed to have his younger brother, just out of grade school, take his place. That boy, named Saburo, was being brought up in the Tenri sect; for the big festivals in April and October he would leave to meet his mother and, dressed in a white happy coat with the word *Tenri* on the back, would go to worship at the Mother Temple.

* * * *

Etsuko placed her shopping bag on the doorstep as if she were listening to determine what sound it made; then she peered into the dark room. The child's laughter went on and on. Now that Etsuko could hear more clearly she realized the child was not laughing, but crying, rocking himself in the darkness of the deserted room. Asako seemed to have put him down while she cooked. She was the wife of Yusuke, who had not yet returned from Siberia. She had come here with her two children in the spring of 1948, exactly a year before Yakichi asked the widowed Etsuko to join them.

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Etsuko started toward her six-mat room, but as she ap-

proached it she was surprised to see a light gleaming from above the partition. She did not recall that she had left a light burning.

She opened the sliding door. Yakichi was sitting at the desk engrossed in reading something. He seemed flustered when he looked up and saw his daughter-in-law. Etsuko realized that the red, leather-backed book he had been reading was her diary.

"I'm home," she said, in a clear, cheerful voice. Her look and her reaction to what she had come upon were quite different from what one might have expected. Her voice, her movements were lithe as a maiden's. This husbandless woman was a human being to be reckoned with.

"Welcome home; you're late, aren't you," said Yakichi, who might with more honesty have said: "You're early."

"I'm starved—while I was waiting I borrowed your book." The book he held up was a novel he had substituted for the diary; it was a translated work Kensuke had lent Etsuko. "It was too tough for me; I didn't understand a word."

Yakichi was wearing the old knickerbockers he wore in the fields, a military-style shirt, and an old vest from one of his business suits. His dress was what it had been for a long time, but the almost servile humility with which he comported himself was a tremendous alteration from what he had been during the war, before Etsuko knew him. There was also the decline in his physique, the loss of power in his glance. The once proudly closed lips seemed to have lost the power of coming together; when he spoke, flecks of spittle appeared at the corners of his mouth.

"They were all out of pomelos. I looked all over for them, too, but couldn't find any."

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