THE PENGUIN BOOK OF THE INTERNATIONAL SHORT STORY

FROM HARUKI MURAKAMI TO SAMANTA SCHWEBLIN

EDITED BY JOHN FREEMAN AND RABIH ALAMEDDINE

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The stars had only one task: they taught me how to read.
They taught me I had a language in heaven
and another language on earth.

—Mahmoud Darwish, from "Poetic Regulations,"
translated by Amira El-Zein

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INTRODUCTION

Rabih Alameddine and John Freeman

As Americans, we tend to think that how we see the world is how everybody else does. We believe the United States, like the pre-Copernican earth, is the center of the universe and everything revolves around us. Do writers from other countries have different concerns? What can stories from around the world tell us about who we are, about humanity, about the world in general? While researching stories for this book, we were astounded that there were many amazing stories that we had never heard of. We realized that for a long time it was the norm for 75 percent of the stories in international anthologies to be American or English. If the book needs to be more "internationalized," the editors add Irish stories. If the book needs to feel even more foreign, an Australian story. To make sure that the book is seen as completely international, perhaps a sprinkling of the ubiquitously anthologized Borges, Kafka, and García Márquez (three of our favorite writers, but come on!). Not too many, mind you, otherwise the anthology might turn out to be too salty.

In this volume, we are hoping to expand this restrictive paradigm just a tad.

We set conditions for the number of stories we looked at, as well as what we ended up selecting. From the beginning, we imagined this book being a selection of wonderful stories and not an exhaustive account or

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textbook of the international short story. Just as important, we wanted to look at contemporary stories, a glance at what is happening around this world of ours. We decided to look at writers who are still living. Of course, since neither of us likes rules, not even ours, we broke it once (for Pedro Lemebel's story). Sadly, Zoë Wicomb died in the final months of our preparing this book. Her story was the first we chose, and not for a second would we drop it on a technicality. And the last condition: Imitating Phileas Fogg, we decided to travel the globe in eighty days—thirty-four stories, in this case—and not necessarily stop in every port.

In order to travel the world well, one needs great guides. Ours were the amazing translators working today, who pointed us in so many directions. We are lucky to be living at a time when the art of translation has improved drastically and the stories appear seamless. Without the ear and craft of these immensely talented readers, none of us could hear this music from elsewhere.

It should be mentioned that we also wished to enlarge a sense of how the story delivers pleasure—that complex form of contentment which only a short story can provide. This readerly joy can derive from narrative, from page-turning energy; it can also come from setting, that sense of place, or familiarity, or unfamiliarity made real. A good story can do much to situate us in the world. Joy can also come from the orality of a story's language, or a rhythm to its prose, a sense of mischief, or a spike of absurdity, a well-made character portrait.

There are so many ways a story can be great. We wanted, in making this book, to reflect as many ways as we could.

Long before it was printed in magazines or literary journals, the short story was essentially a tale told briefly. In its earliest days, it came from fables and oral stories, and as we read around the world, we found that this very old form has begun to return to its original roots.

Fables, tall tales, strange happenings are all back at the center of the international short story; they seem to us to be where the most interesting writing is happening. Very few of the best stories we came across could be called realistic in the conventional sense. Perhaps this is because in the past few decades, an agreed-upon sense of what is real has

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broken down. Writers in the past fifty years have become better and better at structuring extraordinary loops within small spaces. Many of the stories in this book achieve these effects by straddling the genre boundary between flash fiction, prose poem, vignette, and feuilleton. We loved being free to enter and exit stories with a sense of arrival or departure, rather than beginning and end. We found we turned to definitions of what "real" is, what "society" is, that were unstable, often thrillingly so. That sense of engagement, the rapture it can produce, is best described by the word *love*—that feeling you have upon encountering a thing made so uniquely, only that writer could have produced it.

Both of us read in search of that feeling. We also read stories because we are restless, life is finite, and to read a tale is still the swiftest, cheapest, most extravagantly immersive form of travel. In a world of ever-stricter boundaries, this freedom of movement—of becoming or transforming or simply disappearing—that any great short story promises is second to none. These are radical freedoms, and they are under the greatest threat we have witnessed in our lifetimes. Perhaps here is the core of their subversiveness: Great stories are inherently anti-nationalist. They do not give us a glimpse of another national character; they give us the opportunity to leave our own behind. For their ability to do that, among many other things, we love them.

Of course, we chose these stories because we loved them. We would die on their hills. Yet we also liked quite a few others, which we ended up not selecting because they did not fit the collection, be it in length or the fact that they did not fit with the collection as a whole, with the anthology as a book. Just as an example, we could have picked two or three stories each from Samanta Schweblin and Mariana Enriquez, or from Zoë Wicomb or from Can Xue. Their stories are that good. But doing so would have been a mistake, because we were also interested in what we call the tuning-fork theory. An anthology has to work as a book, where reading one story will hopefully make another shine. It has to layer discrete, exquisite stories into a whole that resonates and sings.

We hope you can sing with us.

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Super-Frog Saves Tokyo

Haruki Murakami

Translated from Japanese by Jay Rubin

Katagiri found a giant frog waiting for him in his apartment. It was powerfully built, standing over six feet tall on its hind legs. A skinny little man no more than five-foot-three, Katagiri was overwhelmed by the frog's imposing bulk.

"Call me 'Frog,'" said the frog in a clear, strong voice.

Katagiri stood rooted in the doorway, unable to speak.

"Don't be afraid, I'm not here to hurt you. Just come in and close the door. Please."

Briefcase in his right hand, grocery bag with fresh vegetables and canned salmon cradled in his left arm, Katagiri didn't dare move.

"Please, Mr. Katagiri, hurry and close the door, and take off your shoes."

The sound of his own name helped Katagiri snap out of it. He closed the door as ordered, set the grocery bag on the raised wooden floor, pinned the briefcase under one arm, and unlaced his shoes. Frog gestured for him to take a seat at the kitchen table, which he did.

"I must apologize, Mr. Katagiri, for having barged in while you were out," Frog said. "I knew it would be a shock for you to find me here. But I had no choice. How about a cup of tea? I thought you would be coming home soon, so I boiled some water."

Katagiri still had his briefcase jammed under his arm. Somebody's

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playing a joke on me, he thought. Somebody's rigged himself up in this huge frog costume just to have fun with me. But he knew, as he watched Frog pour boiling water into the teapot, humming all the while, that these had to be the limbs and movements of a real frog. Frog set a cup of green tea in front of Katagiri, and poured another one for himself.

Sipping his tea, Frog asked, "Calming down?"

But still Katagiri could not speak.

"I know I should have made an appointment to visit you, Mr. Katagiri. I am fully aware of the proprieties. Anyone would be shocked to find a big frog waiting for him at home. But an urgent matter brings me here. Please forgive me."

"Urgent matter?" Katagiri managed to produce words at last.

"Yes, indeed," Frog said. "Why else would I take the liberty of barging into a person's home? Such discourtesy is not my customary style."

"Does this 'matter' have something to do with me?"

"Yes and no," said Frog with a tilt of the head. "No and yes."

I've got to get a grip on myself, thought Katagiri. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Not at all, not at all," Frog said with a smile. "It's your home. You don't have to ask my permission. Smoke and drink as much as you like. I myself am not a smoker, but I can hardly impose my distaste for tobacco on others in their own homes."

Katagiri pulled a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and struck a match. He saw his hand trembling as he lit up. Seated opposite him, Frog seemed to be studying his every movement.

"You don't happen to be connected with some kind of *gang* by any chance?" Katagiri found the courage to ask.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha! What a wonderful sense of humor you have, Mr. Katagiri!" he said, slapping his webbed hand against his thigh. "There may be a shortage of skilled labor, but what gang is going to hire a frog to do their dirty work? They'd be made a laughingstock."

"Well, if you're here to negotiate a repayment, you're wasting your time. I have no authority to make such decisions. Only my superiors can do that. I just follow orders. I can't do a thing for you."

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"Please, Mr. Katagiri," Frog said, raising one webbed finger. "I have not come here on such petty business. I am fully aware that you are assistant chief of the Lending Division of the Shinjuku branch of the Tokyo Security Trust Bank. But my visit has nothing to do with the repayment of loans. I have come here to save Tokyo from destruction."

Katagiri scanned the room for a hidden TV camera in case he was being made the butt of some huge, terrible joke. But there was no camera. It was a small apartment. There was no place for anyone to hide.

"No," Frog said, "we are the only ones here. I know you are thinking that I must be mad, or that you are having some kind of dream, but I am not crazy and you are not dreaming. This is absolutely, positively serious."

"To tell you the truth, Mr. Frog—"

"Please," Frog said, raising one finger again. "Call me 'Frog.'"

"To tell you the truth, Frog," Katagiri said, "I can't quite understand what is going on here. It's not that I don't trust you, but I don't seem to be able to grasp the situation exactly. Do you mind if I ask you a question or two?"

"Not at all, not at all," Frog said. "Mutual understanding is of critical importance. There are those who say that 'understanding' is merely the sum total of our misunderstandings, and while I do find this view interesting in its own way, I am afraid that we have no time to spare on pleasant digressions. The best thing would be for us to achieve mutual understanding via the shortest possible route. Therefore, by all means, ask as many questions as you wish."

"Now, you *are* a real frog, am I right?"

"Yes, of course, as you can see. A real frog is exactly what I am. A product neither of metaphor nor allusion nor deconstruction nor sampling nor any other such complex process, I am a genuine frog. Shall I croak for you?"

Frog tilted back his head and flexed the muscles of his huge throat. *Ribit! Ri-i-i-bit! Ribit-ribit-ribit! Ribit! Ribit! Ri-i-i-bit!* His gigantic croaks rattled the pictures hanging on the walls.

"Fine, I see, I see!" Katagiri said, worried about the thin walls of the

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cheap apartment house in which he lived. "That's great. You are, without question, a real frog."

"One might also say that I am the sum total of all frogs. Nonetheless, this does nothing to change the fact that I am a frog. Anyone claiming that I am not a frog would be a dirty liar. I would smash such a person to bits!"

Katagiri nodded. Hoping to calm himself, he picked up his cup and swallowed a mouthful of tea. "You said before that you have come here to save Tokyo from destruction?"

"That is what I said."

"What kind of destruction?"

"Earthquake," Frog said with the utmost gravity.

Mouth dropping open, Katagiri looked at Frog. And Frog, saying nothing, looked at Katagiri. They went on staring at each other like this for some time. Next it was Frog's turn to open his mouth.

"A very, very big earthquake. It is set to strike Tokyo at eight-thirty a.m. on February 18. Three days from now. A much bigger earthquake than the one that struck Kobe last month. The number of dead from such a quake would probably exceed a hundred and fifty thousand—mostly from accidents involving the commuter system: derailments, falling vehicles, crashes, the collapse of elevated expressways and rail lines, the crushing of subways, the explosion of tanker trucks. Buildings will be transformed into piles of rubble, their inhabitants crushed to death. Fires everywhere, the road system in a state of collapse, ambulances and fire trucks useless, people just lying there, dying. A hundred and fifty thousand of them! Pure hell. People will be made to realize what a fragile condition the intensive collectivity known as 'city' really is." Frog said this with a gentle shake of the head. "The epicenter will be close to the Shinjuku ward office."

"Close to the Shinjuku ward office?"

"To be precise, it will hit directly beneath the Shinjuku branch of the Tokyo Security Trust Bank."

A heavy silence followed.

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"And you," Katagiri said, "are planning to stop this earthquake?"

"Exactly," Frog said, nodding. "That is exactly what I propose to do. You and I will go underground beneath the Shinjuku branch of the Tokyo Security Trust Bank to do mortal combat with Worm."

As a member of the Trust Bank Lending Division, Katagiri had fought his way through many a battle. He had weathered sixteen years of daily combat since the day he graduated from the university and joined the bank's staff. He was, in a word, a collection officer—a post that carried little popularity. Everyone in his division preferred to make loans, especially at the time of the bubble. They had so much money in those days that almost any likely piece of collateral—be it land or stock—was enough to convince loan officers to give away whatever they were asked for, the bigger the loan the better their reputations in the company. Some loans, though, never made it back to the bank: they got "stuck to the bottom of the pan." It was Katagiri's job to take care of those. And when the bubble burst, the work piled on. First stock prices fell, and then land values, and collateral lost all significance. "Get out there," his boss commanded him, "and squeeze whatever you can out of them."

The Kabukicho neighborhood of Shinjuku was a labyrinth of violence: old-time gangsters, Korean mobsters, Chinese mafia, guns and drugs, money flowing beneath the surface from one murky den to another, people vanishing every now and then like a puff of smoke. Plunging into Kabukicho to collect a bad debt, Katagiri had been surrounded more than once by mobsters threatening to kill him, but he had never been frightened. What good would it have done them to kill one man running around for the bank? They could stab him if they wanted to. They could beat him up. He was perfect for the job: no wife, no kids, both parents dead, brother and sister he had put through college married off. So what if they killed him? It wouldn't change anything for anybody—least of all for Katagiri himself.

It was not Katagiri but the thugs surrounding him who got nervous

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when they saw him so calm and cool. He soon earned a kind of reputation in their world as a tough guy. Now, though, the tough Katagiri was at a total loss. What the hell was this frog talking about? Worm?

"Who is Worm?" he asked with some hesitation.

"Worm lives underground. He is a gigantic worm. When he gets angry, he causes earthquakes," Frog said. "And right now he is very, very angry."

"What is he angry *about*?" Katagiri asked.

"I have no idea," Frog said. "Nobody knows what Worm is thinking inside that murky head of his. Few have ever seen him. He is usually asleep. That's what he really likes to do: take long, long naps. He goes on sleeping for years—decades—in the warmth and darkness underground. His eyes, as you might imagine, have atrophied, his brain has turned to jelly as he sleeps. If you ask me, I'd guess he probably isn't thinking anything at all, just lying there and feeling every little rumble and reverberation that comes his way, absorbing them into his body, and storing them up. And then, through some kind of chemical process, he replaces most of them with rage. Why this happens I have no idea. I could never explain it."

Frog fell silent, watching Katagiri and waiting until his words had sunk in. Then he went on:

"Please don't misunderstand me, though. I feel no personal animosity toward Worm. I don't see him as the embodiment of evil. Not that I would want to be his friend, either: I just think that, as far as the world is concerned, it is in a sense *all right* for a being like him to exist. The world is like a great big overcoat, and it needs pockets of various shapes and sizes. But right at the moment Worm has reached the point where he is too dangerous to ignore. With all the different kinds of hatred he has absorbed and stored inside himself over the years, his heart and body have swollen to gargantuan proportions—bigger than ever before. And to make matters worse, last month's Kobe earthquake shook him out of the deep sleep he was enjoying. He experienced a revelation inspired by his profound rage: it was time now for him, too, to cause a massive earthquake, and he'd do it here, in Tokyo. I know what I'm

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talking about, Mr. Katagiri: I have received reliable information on the timing and scale of the earthquake from some of my best bug friends."

Frog snapped his mouth shut and closed his round eyes in apparent fatigue.

"So what you're saying is," Katagiri said, "that you and I have to go underground together and fight Worm to stop the earthquake."

"Exactly."

Katagiri reached for his cup of tea, picked it up, and put it back. "I still don't get it," he said. "Why did you choose me to go with you?"

Frog looked straight into Katagiri's eyes and said, "I have always had the profoundest respect for you, Mr. Katagiri. For sixteen long years, you have silently accepted the most dangerous, least glamorous assignments—the jobs that others have avoided—and you have carried them off beautifully. I know full well how difficult this has been for you, and I believe that neither your superiors nor your colleagues properly appreciate your accomplishments. They are blind, the whole lot of them. But you, unappreciated and unpromoted, have never once complained.

"Nor is it simply a matter of your work. After your parents died, you raised your teenage brother and sister single-handedly, put them through college, and even arranged for them to marry, all at great sacrifice of your time and income, and at the expense of your own marriage prospects. In spite of this, your brother and sister have never once expressed gratitude for your efforts on their behalf. Far from it: they have shown you no respect and acted with the most callous disregard for your loving-kindness. In my opinion, their behavior is unconscionable. I almost wish I could beat them to a pulp on your behalf. But you, meanwhile, show no trace of anger.

"To be quite honest, Mr. Katagiri, you are nothing much to look at, and you are far from eloquent, so you tend to be looked down upon by those around you. *I*, however, can see what a sensible and courageous man you are. In all of Tokyo, with its teeming millions, there is no one else I could trust as much as you to fight by my side."

"Tell me, Mr. Frog—" Katagiri said.

"Please," Frog said, raising one finger again. "Call me 'Frog.'"

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"Tell me, Frog," Katagiri said, "how do you know so much about me?"

"Well, Mr. Katagiri, I have not been frogging all these years for nothing. I keep my eye on the important things in life."

"But still, Frog," Katagiri said, "I'm not particularly strong, and I don't know anything about what's happening underground. I don't have the kind of muscle it will take to fight Worm in the darkness. I'm sure you can find somebody a lot stronger than me—a man who does karate, say, or a Self-Defense Force commando."

Frog rolled his large eyes. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Katagiri," he said, "*I'm* the one who will do all the fighting. But I can't do it alone. This is the key thing: I need your courage and your passion for justice. I need you to stand behind me and say, 'Way to go, Frog! You're doing great! I know you can win! You're fighting the good fight!'"

Frog opened his arms wide, then slapped his webbed hands down on his knees again.

"In all honesty, Mr. Katagiri, the thought of fighting Worm in the dark frightens me, too. For many years I lived as a pacifist, loving art, living with nature. Fighting is not something I like to do. I do it because I have to. And this particular fight will be a fierce one, that is certain. I may not return from it alive. I may lose a limb or two in the process. But I cannot—I *will* not—run away. As Nietzsche said, the highest wisdom is to have no fear. What I want from you, Mr. Katagiri, is for you to share your simple courage with me, to support me with your whole heart as a true friend. Do you understand what I am trying to tell you?"

None of this made any sense to Katagiri, but still he felt that—unreal as it sounded—he could believe whatever Frog said to him. Something about Frog—the look on his face, the way he spoke—had a simple honesty to it that appealed directly to the heart. After years of work in the toughest division of the Security Trust Bank, Katagiri possessed the ability to sense such things. It was all but second nature to him.

"I know this must be difficult for you, Mr. Katagiri. A huge frog comes barging into your place and asks you to believe all these outlandish things. Your reaction is perfectly natural. And so I intend to provide you with proof that I exist. Tell me, Mr. Katagiri, you have been having

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a great deal of trouble recovering a loan the bank made to Big Bear Trading, have you not?"

"That's true," Katagiri said.

"Well, they have a number of extortionists working behind the scenes, and those individuals are mixed up with the mobsters. They're scheming to make the company go bankrupt and get out of its debts. Your bank's loan officer shoved a pile of cash at them without a decent background check, and, as usual, the one who's left to clean up after him is you, Mr. Katagiri. But you're having a hard time sinking your teeth into these fellows: they're no pushovers. And there may be a powerful politician backing them up. They're into you for seven hundred million yen. That is the situation you are dealing with, am I right?"

"You certainly are."

Frog stretched his arms out wide, his big green webs opening like pale wings. "Don't worry, Mr. Katagiri. Leave everything to me. By tomorrow morning, old Frog will have your problems solved. Relax and have a good night's sleep."

With a big smile on his face, Frog stood up. Then, flattening himself like a dried squid, he slipped out through the gap at the side of the closed door, leaving Katagiri all alone. The two teacups on the kitchen table were the only indication that Frog had ever been in Katagiri's apartment.

The moment Katagiri arrived at work the next morning at nine, the phone on his desk rang.

"Mr. Katagiri," said a man's voice. It was cold and businesslike. "My name is Shiraoka. I am an attorney with the Big Bear case. I received a call from my client this morning with regard to the pending loan matter. He wants you to know that he will take full responsibility for returning the entire amount requested by the due date. He will also give you a signed memorandum to that effect. His only request is that you do not send Frog to his home again. I repeat: he wants you to ask Frog never to visit his home again. I myself am not entirely sure what this is

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supposed to mean, but I believe it should be clear to you, Mr. Katagiri. Am I correct?"

"You are indeed," Katagiri said.

"You will be kind enough to convey my message to Frog, I trust."

"That I will do. Your client will never see Frog again."

"Thank you very much. I will prepare the memorandum for you by tomorrow."

"I appreciate it," Katagiri said.

The connection was cut.

Frog visited Katagiri in his Trust Bank office at lunchtime. "That Big Bear case is working out well for you, I presume?"

Katagiri glanced around uneasily.

"Don't worry," Frog said. "You are the only one who can see me. But now I am sure you realize that I actually exist. I am not a product of your imagination. I can take action and produce results. I am a real, living being."

"Tell me, Mr. Frog—"

"Please," Frog said, raising one finger. "Call me 'Frog.'"

"Tell me, Frog," Katagiri said, "what did you do to them?"

"Oh, nothing much," Frog said. "Nothing much more complicated than boiling Brussels sprouts. I just gave them a little scare. A touch of psychological terror. As Joseph Conrad once wrote, true terror is the kind that men feel toward their imagination. But never mind that, Mr. Katagiri. Tell me about the Big Bear case. It's going well?"

Katagiri nodded and lit a cigarette. "Seems to be."

"So, then, have I succeeded in gaining your trust with regard to the matter I broached to you last night? Will you join me to fight against Worm?"

Sighing, Katagiri removed his glasses and wiped them. "To tell you the truth, I'm not too crazy about the idea, but I don't suppose that's enough to get me out of it."

"No," Frog said. "It is a matter of responsibility and honor. You may not be too 'crazy' about the idea, but we have no choice: you and I must go underground and face Worm. If we should happen to lose our lives in

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the process, we will gain no one's sympathy. And even if we manage to defeat Worm, no one will praise us. No one will ever know that such a battle even raged far beneath their feet. Only you and I will know, Mr. Katagiri. However it turns out, ours will be a lonely battle."

Katagiri looked at his own hand for a while, then watched the smoke rising from his cigarette. Finally, he spoke. "You know, Mr. Frog, I'm just an ordinary person."

"Make that 'Frog,' please," Frog said, but Katagiri let it go.

"I'm an absolutely ordinary guy. Less than ordinary. I'm going bald, I'm getting a potbelly, I turned forty last month. My feet are flat. The doctor told me recently that I have diabetic tendencies. It's been three months or more since I last slept with a woman—and I had to pay for it. I do get some recognition within the division for my ability to collect on loans, but no real respect. I don't have a single person who likes me, either at work or in my private life. I don't know how to talk to people, and I'm bad with strangers, so I never make friends. I have no athletic ability, I'm tone-deaf, short, phimotic, nearsighted—*and* astigmatic. I live a horrible life. All I do is eat, sleep, and shit. I don't know why I'm even living. Why should a person like me have to be the one to save Tokyo?"

"Because, Mr. Katagiri, Tokyo can *only* be saved by a person like you. And it's *for* people like you that I am trying to save Tokyo."

Katagiri sighed again, more deeply this time. "All right then, what do you want me to do?"

Frog told Katagiri his plan. They would go underground on the night of February 17 (one day before the earthquake was scheduled to happen). Their way in would be through the basement boiler room of the Shinjuku branch of the Tokyo Security Trust Bank. They would meet there late at night (Katagiri would stay in the building on the pretext of working overtime). Behind a section of wall was a vertical shaft, and they would find Worm at the bottom by climbing down a 150-foot rope ladder.

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"Do you have a battle plan in mind?" Katagiri asked.

"Of course I do. We would have no hope of defeating an enemy like Worm without a battle plan. He is a slimy creature: you can't tell his mouth from his anus. And he's as big as a commuter train."

"What *is* your battle plan?"

After a thoughtful pause, Frog answered, "Hmm, what is it they say—'Silence is golden'?"

"You mean I shouldn't ask?"

"That's one way of putting it."

"What if I get scared at the last minute and run away? What would you do then, Mr. Frog?"

"'Frog.'"

"Frog. What would you do then?"

Frog thought about this a while and answered, "I would fight on alone. My chances of beating him by myself are perhaps just slightly better than Anna Karenina's chances of beating that speeding locomotive. Have you read *Anna Karenina*, Mr. Katagiri?"

When he heard that Katagiri had not read the novel, Frog gave him a look as if to say, What a shame. Apparently Frog was very fond of *Anna Karenina*.

"Still, Mr. Katagiri, I do not believe that you will leave me to fight alone. I can tell. It's a question of balls—which, unfortunately, I do not happen to possess. Ha ha ha ha!" Frog laughed with his mouth wide open. Balls were not all that Frog lacked. He had no teeth, either.

Unexpected things do happen, however.

Katagiri was shot on the evening of February 17. He had finished his rounds for the day and was walking down the street in Shinjuku on his way back to the Trust Bank when a young man in a leather jacket leaped in front of him. The man's face was a blank, and he gripped a small black gun in one hand. The gun was *so* small and *so* black it hardly looked real. Katagiri stared at the object in the man's hand, not register-

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ing the fact that it was aimed at him and that the man was pulling the trigger. It all happened too quickly: it didn't make sense to him. But the gun in fact went off.

Katagiri saw the barrel jerk in the air and, at the same moment, felt an impact as though someone had struck his right shoulder with a sledgehammer. He felt no pain, but the blow sent him sprawling on the sidewalk. The leather briefcase in his right hand went flying in the other direction. The man aimed the gun at him again. A second shot rang out. A small eatery's sidewalk signboard exploded before his eyes. He heard people screaming. His eyeglasses had flown off, and everything was a blur. He was vaguely aware that the man was approaching with the pistol pointed at him. I'm going to die, he thought. Frog had said that true terror is the kind that men feel toward their imagination. Katagiri cut the switch of his imagination and sank into a weightless silence.

When he woke up, he was in bed. He opened one eye, took a moment to survey his surroundings, and then opened the other eye. The first thing that entered his field of vision was a metal stand by the head of the bed and an intravenous feeding tube that stretched from the stand to where he lay. Next he saw a nurse dressed in white. He realized that he was lying on his back on a hard bed and wearing some strange piece of clothing, under which he seemed to be naked.

Oh yeah, he thought, I was walking along the sidewalk when some guy shot me. Probably in the shoulder. The right one. He relived the scene in his mind. When he remembered the small black gun in the young man's hand, his heart made a disturbing thump. The sons of bitches were trying to kill me! he thought. But it looks as if I made it through OK. My memory is fine. I don't have any pain. And not just pain: I don't have any feeling at all. I can't lift my arm . . .

The hospital room had no windows. He could not tell whether it was day or night. He had been shot just before five in the evening. How

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much time had passed since then? Had the hour of his nighttime rendezvous with Frog gone by? Katagiri searched the room for a clock, but without his glasses he could see nothing at a distance.

"Excuse me," he called to the nurse.

"Oh, good, you're finally awake," the nurse said.

"What time is it?"

She looked at her watch.

"Nine-fifteen."

"P.M.?"

"Don't be silly, it's morning!"

"Nine-fifteen a.m.?" Katagiri groaned, barely managing to lift his head from the pillow. The ragged noise that emerged from his throat sounded like someone else's voice. "Nine-fifteen a.m. on February 18?"

"Right," the nurse said, lifting her arm once more to check the date on her digital watch. "Today is February 18, 1995."

"Wasn't there a big earthquake in Tokyo this morning?"

"In Tokyo?"

"In Tokyo."

The nurse shook her head. "Not as far as I know."

He breathed a sigh of relief. Whatever had happened, the earthquake at least had been averted.

"How's my wound doing?"

"Your wound?" she asked. "What wound?"

"Where I was shot."

"Shot?"

"Yeah, near the entrance to the Trust Bank. Some young guy shot me. In the right shoulder, I think."

The nurse flashed a nervous smile in his direction. "I'm sorry, Mr. Katagiri, but you haven't been shot."

"I haven't? Are you sure?"

"As sure as I am that there was no earthquake this morning."

Katagiri was stunned. "Then what the hell am I doing in a hospital?"

"Somebody found you lying in the street, unconscious. In the Kabukicho neighborhood of Shinjuku. You didn't have any external wounds.

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You were just out cold. And we still haven't found out why. The doctor's going to be here soon. You'd better talk to him."

Lying in the street unconscious? Katagiri was sure he had seen the pistol go off aimed at him. He took a deep breath and tried to get his head straight. He would start by putting all the facts in order.

"What you're telling me is, I've been lying in this hospital bed, unconscious, since early evening yesterday, is that right?"

"Right," the nurse said. "And you had a really bad night, Mr. Katagiri. You must have had some awful nightmares. I heard you yelling, 'Frog! Hey, Frog!' You did it a lot. You have a friend nicknamed 'Frog'?"

Katagiri closed his eyes and listened to the slow, rhythmic beating of his heart as it ticked off the minutes of his life. How much of what he remembered had actually happened, and how much was hallucination? Did Frog really exist, and had Frog fought with Worm to put a stop to the earthquake? Or had that just been part of a long dream? Katagiri had no idea what was true anymore.

Frog came to his hospital room that night. Katagiri awoke to find him in the dim light, sitting on a steel folding chair, his back against the wall. Frog's big, bulging green eyelids were closed in a straight slit.

"Frog!" Katagiri called out to him.

Frog slowly opened his eyes. His big white stomach swelled and shrank with his breathing.

"I meant to meet you in the boiler room at night the way I promised," Katagiri said, "but I had an accident in the evening—something totally unexpected—and they brought me here."

Frog gave his head a slight shake. "I know. It's OK. Don't worry. You were a great help to me in my fight, Mr. Katagiri."

"I was?"

"Yes, you were. You did a great job in your dreams. That's what made it possible for me to fight Worm to the finish. I have you to thank for my victory."

"I don't get it," Katagiri said. "I was unconscious the whole time.

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They were feeding me intravenously. I don't remember doing anything in my dreams."

"That's fine, Mr. Katagiri. It's better that you don't remember. The whole terrible fight occurred in the area of imagination. That is the precise location of our battlefield. It is there that we experience our victories and our defeats. Each and every one of us is a being of limited duration: all of us eventually go down to defeat. But as Ernest Hemingway saw so clearly, the ultimate value of our lives is decided not by how we win but by how we lose. You and I together, Mr. Katagiri, were able to prevent the annihilation of Tokyo. We saved a hundred and fifty thousand people from the jaws of death. No one realizes it, but that is what we accomplished."

"How did you manage to defeat Worm? And what did *I* do?"

"We gave everything we had in a fight to the bitter end. We—" Frog snapped his mouth shut and took one great breath, "—we used every weapon we could get our hands on, Mr. Katagiri. We used all the courage we could muster. Darkness was our enemy's ally. You brought in a foot-powered generator and used every ounce of your strength to fill the place with light. Worm tried to frighten you away with phantoms of the darkness, but you stood your ground. Darkness vied with light in a horrific battle, and in the light I grappled with the monstrous Worm. He coiled himself around me, and bathed me in his horrid slime. I tore him to shreds, but still he refused to die. All he did was divide into smaller pieces. And then—"

Frog fell silent, but soon, as if dredging up his last ounce of strength, he began to speak again. "Fyodor Dostoevsky, with unparalleled tenderness, depicted those who have been forsaken by God. He discovered the precious quality of human existence in the ghastly paradox whereby men who had invented God were forsaken by that very God. Fighting with Worm in the darkness, I found myself thinking of Dostoevsky's 'White Nights.' I . . ." Frog's words seemed to founder. "Mr. Katagiri, do you mind if I take a brief nap? I am utterly exhausted."

"Please," Katagiri said. "Take a good, deep sleep."

"I was finally unable to defeat Worm," Frog said, closing his eyes. "I

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did manage to stop the earthquake, but I was only able to carry our battle to a draw. I inflicted injury on him, and he on me. But to tell you the truth, Mr. Katagiri . . ."

"What is it, Frog?"

"I am, indeed, pure Frog, but at the same time I am a thing that stands for a world of un-Frog."

"Hmm, I don't get that at all."

"Neither do I," Frog said, his eyes still closed. "It's just a feeling I have. What you see with your eyes is not necessarily real. My enemy is, among other things, the me inside me. Inside me is the un-me. My brain is growing muddy. The locomotive is coming. But I really want you to understand what I'm saying, Mr. Katagiri."

"You're tired, Frog. Go to sleep. You'll get better."

"I am slowly, slowly returning to the mud, Mr. Katagiri. And yet . . . I . . ."

Frog lost his grasp on words and slipped into a coma. His arms hung down almost to the floor, and his big wide mouth drooped open. Straining to focus his eyes, Katagiri was able to make out deep cuts covering Frog's entire body. Discolored streaks ran through his skin, and there was a sunken spot on his head where the flesh had been torn away.

Katagiri stared long and hard at Frog, who sat there now wrapped in the thick cloak of sleep. As soon as I get out of this hospital, he thought, I'll buy *Anna Karenina* and "White Nights" and read them both. Then I'll have a nice long literary discussion about them with Frog.

Before long, Frog began to twitch all over. Katagiri assumed at first that these were just normal involuntary movements in sleep, but he soon realized his mistake. There was something unnatural about the way Frog's body went on jerking, like a big doll being shaken by someone from behind. Katagiri held his breath and watched. He wanted to run over to Frog, but his own body remained paralyzed.

After a while, a big lump formed over Frog's right eye. The same kind of huge, ugly boil broke out on Frog's shoulder and side, and then over his whole body. Katagiri could not imagine what was happening to Frog. He stared at the spectacle, barely breathing.

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Then, all of a sudden, one of the boils burst with a loud pop. The skin flew off, and a sticky liquid oozed out, sending a horrible smell across the room. The rest of the boils started popping, one after another, twenty or thirty in all, flinging skin and fluid onto the walls. The sickening, unbearable smell filled the hospital room. Big black holes were left on Frog's body where the boils had burst, and wriggling, maggotlike worms of all shapes and sizes came crawling out. Puffy white maggots. After them emerged some kind of small centipedelike creatures, whose hundreds of legs made a creepy rustling sound. An endless stream of these things came crawling out of the holes. Frog's body—or the thing that must once have been Frog's body—was totally covered with these creatures of the night. His two big eyeballs fell from their sockets onto the floor, where they were devoured by black bugs with strong jaws. Crowds of slimy worms raced each other up the walls to the ceiling, where they covered the fluorescent lights and burrowed into the smoke alarm.

The floor, too, was covered with worms and bugs. They climbed up the lamp and blocked the light and, of course, they crept onto Katagiri's bed. Hundreds of them came burrowing under the covers. They crawled up his legs, under his bedgown, between his thighs. The smallest worms and maggots crawled inside his anus and ears and nostrils. Centipedes pried his mouth open and crawled inside one after another. Filled with an intense despair, Katagiri screamed.

Someone snapped a switch and light filled the room.

"Mr. Katagiri!" called the nurse. Katagiri opened his eyes to the light. His body was soaked in sweat. The bugs were gone. All they had left behind in him was a horrible slimy sensation.

"Another bad dream, eh? Poor dear." With quick, efficient movements the nurse readied an injection and stabbed the needle into his arm.

He took a long, deep breath and let it out. His heart was expanding and contracting violently.

"What were you dreaming about?"

Katagiri was having trouble differentiating dream from reality. "What you see with your eyes is not necessarily real," he told himself aloud.

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"That's so true," said the nurse with a smile. "Especially where dreams are concerned."

"Frog," he murmured.

"Did something happen to Frog?" she asked.

"He saved Tokyo from being destroyed by an earthquake. All by himself."

"That's nice," the nurse said, replacing his near-empty intravenous feeding bottle with a new one. "We don't need any more awful things happening in Tokyo. We have plenty already."

"But it cost him his life. He's gone. I think he went back to the mud. He'll never come here again."

Smiling, the nurse toweled the sweat from his forehead. "You were very fond of Frog, weren't you, Mr. Katagiri?"

"Locomotive," Katagiri mumbled. "More than anybody." Then he closed his eyes and sank into a restful, dreamless sleep.

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The Illumination of Santiago

Nona Fernández

Translated from Spanish by Idra Novey

It was a German company, she said. One that had arrived to install the light. There were many workers and technicians who disembarked with cables, light bulbs, and pliers in the Plaza de Armas, the first in all of Santiago to be illuminated. She said the work went on throughout the city for some years. She didn't specify how many, but I guess it was long enough for one of those German electricians to meet a woman and have four Chilean children with her. Two dark-skinned kids with blue eyes, a girl with straight blond hair, and, finally, a redhead.

One night, the mother of the children told them that they were going to the city center. The father had completed a section of his city-wide project and they were going to celebrate with a special ceremony in the plaza. The two dark-skinned children, the blond girl, and the redhead set out, walking along the half-dark streets lined with gas lamps, which were lit each day at dusk. The blond girl was holding her mother's hand, she told me. Their shadows lengthened up the walls and across the ground, extending their backs without disconnecting from their feet. Her mother's shadow was small and thin. Her redheaded brother's shadow was in constant motion, darting in front of the others. Hers, tiny with skinny legs, was a shadow so dark that she got scared just looking at it, she told me. It didn't matter how much they hurried or how fast they turned the corners, the shadows were always there behind

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them, following the same route they followed, stepping on their steps, swallowing each moment as it ended.

After a long walk, the girl arrived with her mother and siblings at the Plaza de Armas, where they met up with other women, men, and children waiting to see the spectacle of electric lights. The place was packed. Grandparents sat on the benches and used the cathedral stairs for extra seats. Perched on their fathers' shoulders, kids peered out, straining to see. There were animals, too. Dogs, chickens, and a few mules, she told me. Nobody wanted to be left out. Hundreds of heads and bodies with their respective shadows stood together, expectant, waiting in the public square for illumination.

I don't know how things started. I don't remember if she told me. Maybe there was a ceremony, like her mother said there would be. Somebody gave a speech, standing on a dais made for the occasion or on top of the existing cathedral stands. Maybe they talked about progress, a new era, the future about to arrive and present itself that very night, in the penumbra at the center of the city, the belly button of the country. Or maybe there was nothing ceremonial at all and a white-haired German man just counted out loud to three:

eins, zwei, drei.

Maybe he hit the switch then, and swiftly, to prevent anyone from seeing how it happened, each of the streetlights installed in the plaza clicking on at once, an act of magic unlike any trick the public had ever witnessed.

The people went silent.

We stood with our mouths open, she told me.

Not even a fly moved, everything was quiet while we stared up at the lit bulbs.

The light was much brighter than the flames in the gas lamps. It was all-encompassing and didn't leave anyone out. Intrusive and surprising,

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it made people's faces appear in the darkness. People in Santiago had never seen each other this way. Under the electric lights, the redheaded brother looked even more redheaded. His hair glowed like an ember in the wood-fed heater they lighted in the winter. The light moved between people's bodies, intensifying colors, shapes, and designs. It grasped onto people's waists, tangled their hair, narrowed their hands, shoulders, torsos, backs. It brought out a new dimension of each one. People drew closer to the lights and smiled under the bulbs, looking at their own illuminated bodies, turning around to show others, like a person showing off a new suit.

The blond girl was very small, and she told me she took it all in without letting go of her mother's hand because she didn't understand what was going on. The brightness of the light bulbs was so potent it caused all the shadows in the plaza to disappear. Wherever they looked, not a single shadow remained, she told me, the light had swallowed them all. The blond child, in her childishness, thought that the night had abruptly ended and that sunrise had arrived. She thought the hours that were normally dark for sleeping had been dissipated under the lights, that those hours were gone, and at any moment she would have to head to school again. The light resuscitated the day, making it appear from complete darkness with the flick of the switch. She told me she got scared. She told me the first thing she thought was that the electric light must be dangerous, given how fast it got rid of the shadows. She told me the electric light played tricks with time and that no one, not even someone with an illuminated mind, could do that.

After a few minutes somebody applauded, and the applause caught on. Others joined in, and then everyone began to clap their palms, stunned and incredulous at what they were seeing. What happened after that she never told me, but I can guess that there was a party, a drunken spree with guitars and dancing, and the festivities lasted all night in the plaza, where time no longer passed, where the new lights halted it to allow the parties to continue.

The German company continued spreading light through the city. In the following years, they put thick cement poles along the rest of the

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streets, poles that carried the new streetlights and cables. A whole block would switch on in some central neighborhood. The next month another one, and then another, and another. The city began appearing gradually, its darkest corners, once shadowed even in daylight, exposed, revealing the design that still emerges now, each day and night.

Through windows, the light entered houses, rooms, lit first the pillows of the most fortunate, who from then on began to imagine in their twisted dreams a city that had become limitless. With its neon lights—little brightly colored ones, and security spotlights. An alert city, always switched on, an insomniac city. The streetlight poles, the first ones, bore the name of the German company that had erected them. It was a circular logo with an acronym inside. Three or four indecipherable letters JTR, or GSBM, or CETA. I think it was CETA. These poles lasted in Santiago for many years. On a walk for a kilo of bread, or a quart of oil, holding hands with the blond girl, who with time had transformed into my grandmother, I saw this acronym imprinted on the poles of the street where I was born. That's the company where my father used to work, she told me, and she showed me the logo with her wrinkled, pale hand, like a testimony of the night when, according to her, we began cheating with time.

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Apples

Gunnhild Øyehaug

Translated from Norwegian by Kari Dickson

1

The dog came pelting towards me. Mouth half-closed around a stick, coat rippling. *Freeze time*, I thought, so we stay like this forever, me here on the field, open and white, and the dog with the snow glittering and swirling around it in midflight.

It was afternoon by the time we turned home. The dog ran in front of me, behind me, beside me. Completely untroubled. When we got to the cabin, dusk was falling. I brushed the snow from us, gave the dog some food, water, lit the fire.

Later in the evening there was a knock at the door. It was Sonja, who owned the dog. The dog leapt to its feet, ran to its owner and jumped up, Sonja laughed and said doggy things to the dog, Sonja looked at me with a questioning and slightly dumbfounded smile, as though she was saying to me, without saying, you could just have rung and told me. *Freeze time*, I thought, as I stood watching the dog jumping up at Sonja and Sonja looking at me with her gently quizzical smile, as though she wondered who I was, who could just take the dog like that and not say anything, again. You like the dog, Sonja said, and I nodded. You can come and visit, you know, Sonja said. I nodded again, would you like something to eat, I asked, I've just baked some rolls. Sonja looked at me,

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as though taken aback, either because I'd baked the rolls or because she wasn't sure what to do, OK, she said.

I put the rolls and a pot of tea on the table. Sonja looked around the cabin; the dog was lying on a blanket on the sofa, asleep. I hoped that I wasn't dreaming, that I wouldn't wake up and it would all be a romantic dream, that a person and a dog had come to visit me, that I'd made them food, that I'd put cheese on the table, that I saw a person standing there looking at my family pictures hanging on the wall, as though she was genuinely interested, and the dog lay sleeping on the sofa, and felt cared for and safe. And I liked the way I had written this, intimate and honest, and I liked the fact that Sonja was named after a variety of apple.

2

The class clapped. The author showed a page from a fruit encyclopaedia on the digital blackboard, with an illustration of a round, red apple, and the text underneath said that Sonja was an autumn apple, resistant to apple scab, sweet in flavour, with a rich red colour and good keeping quality. Well, the author said, that was something I wrote yesterday to show you a way to turn everything upside down at the last moment, first: a realistic story without any meta levels, where "I" has a dog and is happy and looking for moments to freeze, and then at the very end destroys everything by saying "I liked the way I had written this," so everyone falls out of the story, and knows that what they have just read is fiction. Obviously, it's not a style I would use for anything I was going to publish, said the author who was the lecturer that day. The creative writing class at the creative studies college looked at the author. They didn't actually chorus "oh", but might well have done by the look on their faces. The author was tall, had dark hair and a long, pointed nose that gave him a distinctive profile, his slim hands holding a pen as he spoke. He looked at the class. His name was Aksel, after his farmer father's favourite potato. Aksel caught young Signe's look of scepticism—or was she irritated or annoyed? She had a slightly protruding upper lip,

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and a very sweet mouth, and when she didn't believe something, the pout became even more pronounced. Her eyes were big and serious, and it was clear she was thinking something. Her hair was light brown and cut in a bob that framed her face. Aksel waited, he waited for a critical comment, or at least a question, from Signe. Does anyone have any strong objections to the text? Aksel said. A hand went up, we don't know very much about his background, the student said, we aren't told much about why it's so important to him that someone comes to visit, what it is that he finds difficult with other people. Aksel nodded. True, he said. Perhaps there could be something in the room that gives a clue, he could have an aquarium or something like that, the aquarium could represent the confined, introverted space, keeping all the fish at a distance from him, another student said, which made Aksel smile, good idea, he said. An aquarium in a cabin? a third student said, that's not very realistic. No, that's true, the second student said. And what would the aquarium symbolise, would the aquarium symbolise him, that he was an aquarium with fish in it, with a glass wall to keep the world out, or would the fish represent the world he couldn't connect with because he was outside the aquarium? a fourth student wondered. Let's forget the aquarium! the second student said. Everyone laughed, and the corners of Signe's mouth turned up, but barely. Why does he want to freeze time? another student asked. Signe turned to the student, but *that*'s obvious, Signe said, who usually corrected everyone, he wants to freeze time because it's much easier to live in a happy moment than with all the difficult stuff before and after, and in any case, it's a device to illustrate writing, writing is an attempt to stop the constant flow of all that is difficult, to hold it still, to observe it. Signe glanced at Aksel, just long enough for him to realise that she wondered if he was impressed by what she'd said, before she looked at the floor. Her objection didn't come until the day was over and he was out on the street that ran like a long sentence past the creative studies college which lay more or less in the heart of Oslo, not far from the fjord. Signe came out with her bag through the glass doors, and stepped onto the pavement where Aksel was standing lighting a cigarette. She looked at him with the same scep-

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tical expression, pout and eyes. Let's continue in the present tense. It's easier, when it comes to dramatic experience: I know, Aksel says, I know I shouldn't. By this, he means smoking. There was something, Signe says, something I thought about that text you read out today. I could tell, Aksel says. Signe looks surprised. Oh, she says, because she doesn't really like the author's overconfidence. What I thought was this: I liked the story without the meta sentence at the end, which just ruined the whole thing. I liked it when he was out in the snow with the dog, and he was happy, and that then he went back to the cabin and baked rolls and had a visitor. End of. What you're saying is that you like a realistic narrative, Aksel says. What I'm saying is that I like stories that are genuine, Signe says. That are not clever and pretending to be something they're not. But it was only an example, the author says. I don't believe you, Signe says. I think you liked it when you were writing it. I think you were into it. I think you were in the landscape in your head, I think you pictured the snow, and the dog, and I think you liked that there was something about the dog that the protagonist longed for, and I think you thought that if you named a person after an apple, the meta device you used to leave your own story would somehow feel less obvious because of the symbolism of the person growing out of the soil, which we all do really, in a way. AND: I don't for a second believe that you actually wanted to deconstruct it at the end, I think it's exactly what you're looking for, but you're trying to camouflage it. Aksel: I don't mean that all stories should finish with "I liked the way I had written this." Signe: And I don't mean that that's what you meant. I think you have a longing, and that's alright. Aksel: I've never said that it's not alright to long for something. Signe: But that's precisely what you do when you undermine your own story about it. Aksel: I don't agree. Signe: What's your argument? Aksel: I'll have to think first before I can answer that. Signe: Have you read Inger Christensen's poem about dreams? Aksel looks at her. Every time she opens her mouth she makes him a little more like a snowy field inside—empty, he has nothing to say. It's something about her eyes, they're so incredibly big and see right through him, he can't hide anywhere, he feels nervous, or is it anxious? I can't remember, he says. It's in

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Alphabet, Signe says, and it, or rather she, compares an apricot tree in bloom with someone who's dreaming, when the tree is flowering, it's full of dreams, apricot blossom is the dream, you understand? And then she says she finally understood that "A dreamer / must dream like trees / be a dreamer / of fruit to the last." That's utterly wonderful, Aksel says. And it is wonderfully true. But you know, he says and looks at Signe, in the same collection of poems there's another apricot tree in a dream that someone dreams, and did you notice what that apricot tree does? Signe's eyes flicker with uncertainty. The apricot tree scrutinises the dreamer, the "I" that is, before turning around and leaving suddenly. What do you think about that? Aksel says and takes a drag on his cigarette before dropping it to the ground and stepping on it with the toe of his shoe. Signe looks at the stubbed-out cigarette. The stubbed-out cigarette grows into a symbol. She looks at him with a stubbed-out cigarette in her eyes. I think I need to think about it again, Signe says, because she's actually never thought about it, the fact that this collection of poems that she loves for its tangible content (apricot trees exist, etc.) and strong morals (take care of the planet), also uses meta devices. She, who normally catches everything, has failed to catch something so fundamental. What we are witnessing is an intellectual turning point for Signe. And Signe would no doubt wish that this entire conversation had a different outcome from the one it did, that she had not become the apricot that she naturally became for him, in fact, it took her several years to get over it, that she had gone home with him, this and that happened, in short, that in the course of a few months they went through the whole tiresome young woman/older man relationship that inevitably follows its necessary dramaturgy based on the young woman's need to be seen and her essentially mature mind that finds no resonance in her male peers, and the older man's attraction to youth and constant longing to be seen, a longing that for some men is voracious and never satisfied, so constantly seeks out new, fantastic girls, but time and again these girls' lack of life experience seems to ruin the relationship for the older man, whereas the man's lack of listening ears appears to ruin the relationship

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