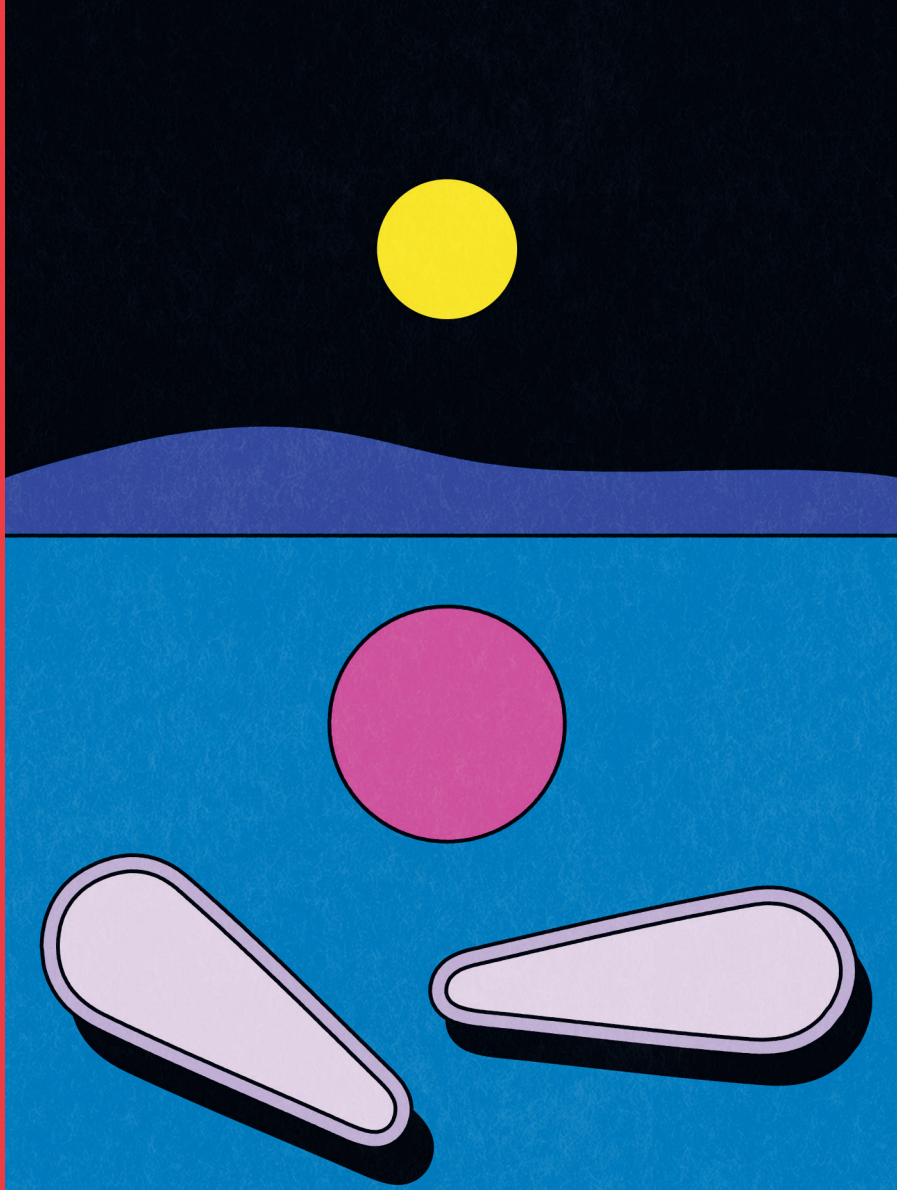
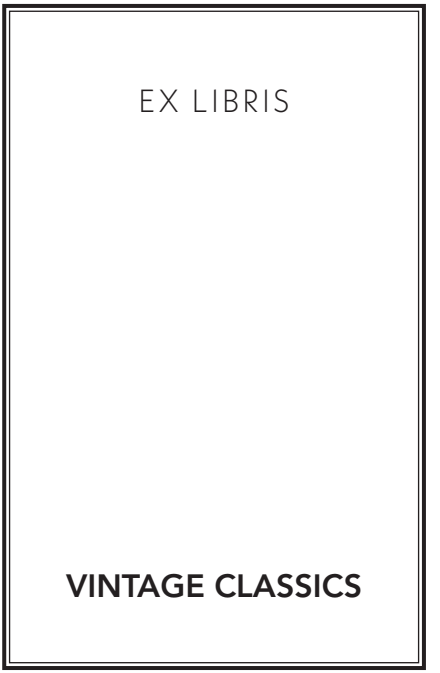
VINTAGE CLASSICS



HARUKI MURAKAMI

WIND/PINBALL

'A fresh, heart-warming dose of the Japanese master'
The Economist



HARUKI MURAKAMI

In 1978, Haruki Murakami was twenty-nine and running a jazz bar in downtown Tokyo. One April day, the impulse to write a novel came to him suddenly while watching a baseball game. That first novel, *Hear the Wind Sing*, won a new writers' award and was published the following year. More followed, including *A Wild Sheep Chase* and *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, but it was *Norwegian Wood*, published in 1987, that turned Murakami from a writer into a phenomenon.

In works such as *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *1Q84*, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* and *Men Without Women*, Murakami's distinctive blend of the mysterious and the everyday, of melancholy and humour, continues to enchant readers, ensuring his place as one of the world's most acclaimed and well-loved writers.

TED GOOSSEN

Theodore (Ted) Goossen has translated the work of many Japanese writers, most notably Naoya Shiga, Haruki Murakami, and Hiromi Kawakami. He is the editor of *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories* (1997) and the co-editor and founder, with Motoyuki Shibata, of the annual literary journal *Monkey: new writing from Japan*, which, since 2011, has introduced a new generation of Japanese writers to English-speaking readers. Essays and stories by, as well as interviews with, Murakami are a staple of every issue.

ALSO BY HARUKI MURAKAMI

FICTION

1Q84
After Dark
After the Quake
Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman
The City and Its Uncertain Walls
Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage
Dance Dance Dance
The Elephant Vanishes
First Person Singular
Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World
Kafka on the Shore
Killing Commendatore
Men Without Women
Norwegian Wood
South of the Border, West of the Sun
Sputnik Sweetheart
The Strange Library
A Wild Sheep Chase
The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle

NON-FICTION

Absolutely on Music: Conversations with Seiji Ozawa
Novelist as a Vocation
Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche
What I Talk About When I Talk About Running: A Memoir
Murakami T: The T-Shirts I Love

HARUKI MURAKAMI

HEAR THE WIND SING

AND

PINBALL, 1973

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY
Ted Goossen

VINTAGE CLASSICS

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Vintage Classics is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies

Vintage, Penguin Random House UK, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk/vintage-classics
global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin
Random House
UK

This combined edition first published in Vintage Classics in 2025

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781529957747

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

The Birth of My Kitchen-Table Fiction

An Introduction to Two Short Novels

Most people—by which I mean most of us who are part of Japanese society—graduate from school, then find work, then, after some time has passed, get married. Even I originally intended to follow that pattern. Or at least that was how I imagined things would turn out. Yet in reality I married, then started working, then (somehow) finally managed to graduate. In other words, the order I chose was the exact opposite to what was considered normal.

Since I hated the idea of working for a company, I decided to open my own establishment, a place where people could go to listen to jazz records, have a coffee, eat snacks, and drink. It was a simple, rather happy-go-lucky kind of idea: running a business like that, I figured, would let me relax listening to my favorite music from morning till night. The problem was, since my wife and I had married while still in university, we had no money. Therefore, for the first three years, we worked like slaves, often taking on several jobs at once to save as much as we could. After that, I made the rounds, borrowing whatever money friends and family

could spare. Then we took all the funds we had managed to scrape together and opened a small coffee shop/bar in Kokubunji, a student hangout, in the western suburbs of Tokyo. It was 1974.

It cost a lot less to open your own place back then than it does now. Young people like us who were determined to avoid "company life" at all costs were launching small shops left and right. Cafés and restaurants, variety stores, bookstores—you name it. Several places near us were owned and run by people of our generation. Kokubunji retained a strong counterculture vibe, and many of those who hung around the area were dropouts from the shrinking student movement. It was an era when, all over the world, one could still find gaps in the system.

I brought my old upright piano from my parents' house and began offering live music on weekends. There were many young jazz musicians living in the Kokubunji area who happily (I think) played for the small amount we could pay them. Many went on to become well-known musicians; even now I sometimes run across them in jazz clubs around Tokyo.

Although we were doing what we liked, paying back our debts was a constant struggle. We owed the bank, and we owed the people who had supported us. On one occasion, stuck for our monthly payment to the bank, my wife and I were trudging along with our heads down late at night when we stumbled across some money lying in the street. Whether it was synchronicity or some sort of divine intervention I don't know, but the amount was exactly what we needed. Since the payment was due the next day, it was truly a last-minute reprieve. (Strange events like this have

happened at various junctures in my life.) Most Japanese would have probably done the proper thing, and turned the money in to the police, but stretched to the limit as we were, we couldn't live by such fine sentiments.

Still, it was fun. No question about that. I was young and in my prime, could listen to my favorite music all day long, and was the lord of my own little domain. I didn't have to squeeze onto packed commuter trains, or attend mind-numbing meetings, or suck up to a boss I disliked. Instead, I had the chance to meet all kinds of interesting people.

My twenties were thus spent paying off loans and doing hard physical labor (making sandwiches and cocktails, hustling foul-mouthed patrons out the door) from morning till night. After a few years, our landlord decided to renovate the Kokubunji building, so we moved to more up-to-date and spacious digs near the center of Tokyo, in Sendagaya. Our new location provided enough room for a grand piano, but our debt increased as a result. So things still weren't any easier.

Looking back, all I can remember is how hard we worked. I imagine most people are relatively laid back in their twenties, but we had virtually no time to enjoy the "carefree days of youth." We barely got by. What free time I did have, though, I spent reading. Along with music, books were my great joy. No matter how busy, or how broke, or how exhausted I was, no one could take those pleasures away from me.

As the end of my twenties approached, our Sendagaya jazz bar was, at last, beginning to show signs of stability. True, we couldn't sit back and relax—we still owed money,

and our business had its ups and downs—but at least things seemed headed in a good direction.

One bright April afternoon in 1978, I attended a baseball game at Jingu Stadium, not far from where I lived and worked. It was the Central League season opener, first pitch at one o'clock, the Yakult Swallows against the Hiroshima Carp. I was already a Swallows fan in those days, so I sometimes popped in to catch a game—a substitute, as it were, for taking a walk.

Back then, the Swallows were a perennially weak team (you might guess as much from their name) with little money and no flashy big-name players. Naturally, they weren't very popular. Season opener it may have been, but only a few fans were sitting beyond the outfield fence. I stretched out with a beer to watch the game. At the time there were no bleacher seats there, just a grassy slope. The sky was a sparkling blue, the draft beer as cold as could be, and the ball strikingly white against the green field, the first green I had seen in a long while. The Swallows' first batter was Dave Hilton, a skinny newcomer from the States, and a complete unknown. He batted in the lead-off position. The cleanup hitter was Charlie Manuel, who later became famous as the manager of the Cleveland Indians and the Philadelphia Phillies. Then, though, he was a real stud, a slugger the Japanese fans had dubbed "the Red Demon."

I think Hiroshima's starting pitcher that day was Yoshiro Sotokoba. Yakult countered with Takeshi Yasuda. In the bottom of the first inning, Hilton slammed Sotokoba's first pitch into left field for a clean double. The satisfying crack when the bat met the ball resounded throughout

Jingu Stadium. Scattered applause rose around me. In that instant, for no reason and based on no grounds whatsoever, it suddenly struck me: *I think I can write a novel.*

I can still recall the exact sensation. It felt as if something had come fluttering down from the sky, and I had caught it cleanly in my hands. I had no idea why it had *chanced* to fall into my grasp. I didn't know then, and I don't know now. Whatever the reason, *it* had taken place. It was like a revelation. Or maybe "epiphany" is a better word. All I can say is that my life was drastically and permanently altered in that instant—when Dave Hilton belted that beautiful, ringing double at Jingu Stadium.

After the game (Yakult won, as I recall), I took the train to Shinjuku and bought a sheaf of writing paper and a fountain pen. Word processors and computers weren't around back then, which meant we had to write everything by hand, one character at a time. The sensation of writing felt very fresh. I remember how thrilled I was. It had been such a long time since I had put fountain pen to paper.

Each night after that, when I got home late from work, I sat at my kitchen table and wrote. Those few hours before dawn were practically the only time I had free. Over the six or so months that followed, I wrote *Hear the Wind Sing*. I wrapped up the first draft right around the time the baseball season ended. Incidentally, that year the Yakult Swallows bucked the odds and almost everyone's predictions to win the Central League pennant, then went on to defeat the Pacific League champions, the pitching-rich Hankyu Braves, in the Japan Series. It was truly a miraculous season that sent the hearts of all Yakult fans soaring.

Hear the Wind Sing is a short work, closer to a novella than a novel. Yet it took many months and much effort to complete. Part of the reason, of course, was the limited amount of time I had to work on it, but the greater problem was that I hadn't a clue about how to write a novel. To tell the truth, although I was reading all kinds of stuff—my favorites being nineteenth-century Russian novels and American hard-boiled detective stories—I had never taken a serious look at contemporary Japanese fiction. Thus I had no idea what kind of Japanese novels were being read at the time, or how I should write fiction in the Japanese language.

For several months, I operated on pure guesswork, adopting what seemed to be a likely style and running with it. When I read through the result, though, I was far from impressed. While my book seemed to fulfill the formal requirements of a novel, it was somewhat boring and, as a whole, left me cold. *If that's the way the author feels,* I thought dejectedly, *a reader's reaction will probably be even more negative. Looks like I just don't have what it takes.* Under normal circumstances, it would have ended there—I would have walked away. But the epiphany I had received on Jingu Stadium's grassy slope was still clearly etched in my mind.

In retrospect, it was only natural that I was unable to produce a good novel. It was a big mistake to assume that a guy like me who had never written anything in his life could spin off something brilliant right off the bat. I was trying to accomplish the impossible. *Give up trying to write something sophisticated,* I told myself. *Forget all those prescriptive ideas about "the novel" and "literature" and set down your feelings and thoughts as they come to you, freely, in a way that you like.*

While it was easy to talk about setting down one's impressions freely, actually doing it wasn't all that simple. For a sheer beginner like myself, it was especially hard. To make a fresh start, the first thing I had to do was get rid of my stack of manuscript paper and my fountain pen. As long as they were sitting in front of me, what I was doing felt like "literature." In their place, I pulled out my old Olivetti typewriter from the closet. Then, as an experiment, I decided to write the opening of my novel in English. Since I was willing to try anything, I figured, why not give that a shot?

Needless to say, my ability in English composition didn't amount to much. My vocabulary was severely limited, as was my command of English syntax. I could only write in simple, short sentences. Which meant that, however complex and numerous the thoughts running around my head, I couldn't even attempt to set them down as they came to me. The language had to be simple, my ideas expressed in an easy-to-understand way, the descriptions stripped of all extraneous fat, the form made compact, everything arranged to fit a container of limited size. The result was a rough, uncultivated kind of prose. As I struggled to express myself in that fashion, however, step by step, a distinctive rhythm began to take shape.

Since I was born and raised in Japan, the vocabulary and patterns of the Japanese language had filled the system that was *me* to bursting, like a barn crammed with livestock. When I sought to put my thoughts and feelings into words, those animals began to mill about, and the system crashed. Writing in a foreign language, with all the limitations that entailed, removed this obstacle. It also led me to discover that I could express my thoughts and feelings with a limited

set of words and grammatical structures, as long as I combined them effectively and linked them together in a skillful manner. Ultimately, I learned that there was no need for a lot of difficult words—I didn't have to try to impress people with beautiful turns of phrase.

Much later, I found out that the writer Agota Kristof had written a number of wonderful novels in a style that had a very similar effect. Kristof was a Hungarian citizen who escaped to Neuchâtel, Switzerland, in 1956 during the upheaval in her native country. There she had learned—or been forced to learn, really—French. Yet it was through writing in that foreign language that she succeeded in developing a style that was new and uniquely hers. It featured a strong rhythm based on short sentences, diction that was never roundabout but always straightforward, and description that was to the point and free of emotional baggage. Her novels were cloaked in an air of mystery that suggested important matters hidden beneath the surface. I remember feeling somehow or other nostalgic when I first encountered her work. Quite incidentally, her first novel, *The Notebook,* came out in 1986, just seven years after *Hear the Wind Sing.*

Having discovered the curious effect of composing in a foreign language, thereby acquiring a creative rhythm distinctly my own, I returned my Olivetti to the closet and once more pulled out my sheaf of manuscript paper and my fountain pen. Then I sat down and "translated" the chapter or so that I had written in English into Japanese. Well, "transplanted" might be more accurate, since it wasn't a direct verbatim translation. In the process, inevitably, a new style of Japanese emerged. The style that would be mine.

A style I myself had *discovered*. *Now I get it,* I thought. *This is how I should be doing it*. It was a moment of true clarity, when the scales fell from my eyes.

Some people have said, "Your work has the feel of translation." The precise meaning of that statement escapes me, but I think it hits the mark in one way, and entirely misses it in another. Since the opening passages of my first novella were, quite literally, "translated," the comment is not entirely wrong; yet it applies merely to my process of writing. What I was seeking by writing first in English and then "translating" into Japanese was no less than the creation of an unadorned "neutral" style that would allow me freer movement. My interest was not in creating a watered-down form of Japanese. I wanted to deploy a type of Japanese as far removed as possible from so-called literary language in order to write in my own natural voice. That required desperate measures. I would go so far as to say that, at that time, I may have regarded Japanese as no more than a functional tool.

Some of my critics saw this as a threatening affront to our national language. Language is very tough, though, a tenacity that is backed up by a long history. However it is treated, its autonomy cannot be lost or seriously damaged, even if that treatment is rather rough. It is the inherent right of all writers to experiment with the possibilities of language in every way they can imagine—without that adventurous spirit, nothing new can ever be born. My style in Japanese differs from Tanizaki's, as it does from Kawabata's. That is only natural. After all, I'm another guy, an independent writer named Haruki Murakami.

It was a sunny Sunday morning in spring when I got the call from an editor at the literary journal *Gunzo* telling me that *Hear the Wind Sing* had been shortlisted for their new writers' prize. Almost a year had passed since the season opener at Jingu Stadium, and I had turned thirty. It was around 11 a.m., but I was still fast asleep, having worked very late the night before. I groggily picked up the receiver, but I had no idea at first who was on the other end or what he was trying to tell me. To tell the truth, by that time, I had quite forgotten that I had sent off *Hear the Wind Sing* to *Gunzo*. Once I had finished the manuscript and put it in someone else's hands, my desire to write had altogether subsided. Composing it had been, so to speak, an act of defiance—I had written it very easily, just as it came to me—so the idea that it might make the shortlist had never occurred to me. In fact, I had sent them my only copy. If they hadn't selected it, it probably would have vanished forever. (*Gunzo* didn't return rejected manuscripts.) Most likely too, I would have never written another novel. Life is strange.

The editor told me that there were five finalists, including me. I was surprised, but I was also very sleepy, so the reality of what had happened didn't really sink in. I got out of bed, washed up, got dressed, and went for a walk with my wife. Just when we were passing the local elementary school, I noticed a passenger pigeon hiding in the shrubbery. When I picked it up I saw that it seemed to have a broken wing. A metal tag was affixed to its leg. I gathered it gently in my hands and carried it to the closest police station, at Aoyama-Omotesando. As I walked there along the side streets of Harajuku, the warmth of the wounded pigeon sank into my hands. I felt it quivering. That Sunday was bright and clear,

and the trees, the buildings, and the shop windows sparkled beautifully in the spring sunlight.

That's when it hit me. I was going to win the prize. And I was going to go on to become a novelist who would enjoy some degree of success. It was an audacious presumption, but I was sure at that moment that it would happen. Completely sure. Not in a theoretical way, but directly and intuitively.

I wrote *Pinball, 1973* the following year as a sequel to *Hear the Wind Sing*. I was still running the jazz bar, which meant that *Pinball* was also written late at night at my kitchen table. It is with love mingled with a bit of embarrassment that I call these two works my kitchen-table novels. It was shortly after completing *Pinball, 1973* that I made up my mind to become a full-time writer and we sold the business. I immediately set to work on my first full-length novel, *A Wild Sheep Chase,* which I consider to be the true beginning of my career as a novelist.

Nevertheless, these two short works played an important role in what I have accomplished. They are totally irreplaceable, much like friends from long ago. It seems unlikely that we will ever get together again, but I will never forget their friendship. They were a crucial, precious presence in my life back then. They warmed my heart, and encouraged me on my way.

I can still remember, with complete clarity, the way I felt when whatever it was came fluttering down into my hands that day thirty years ago on the grass behind the outfield fence at Jingu Stadium; and I recall just as clearly the warmth of the wounded pigeon I picked up in those same hands that

spring afternoon a year later, near Sendagaya Elementary School. I always call up those sensations when I think about what it means to write a novel. Such tactile memories teach me to believe in that *something* I carry within me, and to dream of the possibilities it offers. How wonderful it is that those sensations still reside within me today.

JUNE 2014

Hear the Wind Sing

1

"There's no such thing as a perfect piece of writing. Just as there's no such thing as perfect despair." So said a writer I bumped into back when I was a university student. It wasn't until much later that I could grasp his full meaning, but I still found consolation in his words—that there's no such thing as perfect writing.

All the same, I despaired whenever I sat down to write. The scope of what I could handle was just too limited. I could write something about an elephant, let's say, but when it came to the elephant's trainer, I might draw a blank. That kind of thing.

I was caught in this bind for eight years—eight years. A long time.

If one operates on the principle that everything can be a learning experience, then of course aging needn't be so painful. That's what they tell us, anyway.

From the age of twenty on, I did my best to live according to that philosophy. As a result, I was cheated and misunderstood, used and abused, time and again. Yet it

also brought me many strange experiences. All sorts of people told me their stories. Then they left, never to return, as if I were no more than a bridge they were clattering across. I, however, kept my lips zipped tight. And so the stories stayed with me until I entered this, the final year of my twenties.

Now I think it's time to tell my story.

Which doesn't mean, of course, that I have resolved even one of my problems, or that I will be somehow different when I finish. I may not have changed at all. In the end, writing is not a full step toward self-healing, just a tiny, very tentative move in that direction.

All the same, writing honestly is very difficult. The more I try to be honest, the farther my words sink into darkness.

Don't take this as an excuse. I promise you—I've told my story as best I can right now. There's nothing to add. Yet I can't help thinking: if all goes well, a time may come, years or even decades from now, when I will discover that my self has been salvaged and redeemed. Then the elephant will return to the veldt, and I will tell the story of the world in words far more beautiful than these.

☆

I learned a lot of what I know about writing from Derek Hartfield. Almost everything, in fact. Unfortunately, as a writer, Hartfield was sterile in the full sense of the word. One has only to read some of his stuff to see that. His prose is mangled, his stories slapdash, his themes juvenile. Yet he was a fighter as few are, a man who used words as weapons. In my opinion, when it comes to sheer combativeness he

should be ranked right up there with the giants of his day, Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Sadly, however, he could never fully grasp exactly what it was he was fighting against. In the final reckoning, I suppose, that's what being sterile is all about.

Hartfield waged his fruitless battle for eight years and two months, and then he died. In June 1938, on a sunny Sunday morning, he jumped off the Empire State Building clutching a portrait of Adolph Hitler in his right hand and an open umbrella in his left. Few people noticed, though—he was as ignored in death as he had been in life.

I came across a copy of Hartfield's long-out-of-print first book during my last summer vacation of junior high, a time marked in my memory by a terrible case of crotch rot. The uncle who gave me the book died in agony three years later of intestinal cancer. The last time I saw him, the doctors had hacked him up so badly that he bristled with plastic tubes ferrying fluids in and out of both ends of his body. He was shrunken and his skin had turned reddish brown, so that he resembled a crafty old monkey.

I had three uncles in total. One died just outside Shanghai two days after the end of the Pacific War when he stepped on a land mine he himself had laid. My sole surviving uncle works as a magician on the Japanese hot springs circuit.

Hartfield says this about good writing: "Writing is, in effect, the act of verifying the distance between us and the things surrounding us. What we need is not sensitivity

but a measuring stick" (from *What's So Bad About Feeling Good?*, 1936).

I began fearfully scanning the world around me with a measuring stick in hand the year Kennedy was shot, which was fifteen years ago now—fifteen years spent jettisoning one thing after another. Like an airplane with engine trouble, I started by pitching out the cargo, then the seats, then, finally, the poor flight attendants, getting rid of everything while taking on nothing new at all.

Was this the right way? How the hell should I know! Sure, life is easier like this, but I get scared when I imagine what it will be like to be old and facing death. I mean, what will be left after they incinerate my corpse? Not even a shard of bone.

My late grandmother used to say, "People with dark hearts have dark dreams. Those whose hearts are even darker can't dream at all."

The night she died, the first thing I did was reach out and gently close her eyes. And in that moment, all the dreams she'd seen in her seventy-nine years vanished without a sound (poof!), like a summer shower on hot pavement. Nothing left.

☆

One last thing about writing.

I find the act of writing very painful. I can go a whole month without managing a single line, or write three days and nights straight, only to find the whole thing has missed the mark.

At the same time, though, I love writing. Ascribing meaning to life is a piece of cake compared to actually living it.

I was in my teens, I think, when I discovered this, and it so completely blew my mind that I couldn't talk for a week. If I could just keep my wits about me, I felt, I could force the world to conform to my will, overturning whole systems of values, and altering the flow of time.

Sadly for me, it took ages to see that this was a trap. When at last I caught on, I took a blank notebook and drew a line down the middle; then I listed all that I had gained from this principle on the left-hand side and all that I had lost on the right. It turned out that I had lost so much—things long abandoned, trampled underfoot, sacrificed, betrayed—I couldn't even write them all down.

A gulf separates what we attempt to perceive from what we are actually able to perceive. It is so deep that it can never be calculated, however long our measuring stick. What I can set down here is no more than a list. It's not a novel or even literature, nor is it art. It's just a notebook with a line drawn down the middle. It may contain something of a moral, though.

If it's art or literature you're interested in, I suggest you read the Greeks. Pure art exists only in slave-owning societies. The Greeks had slaves to till their fields, prepare their meals, and row their galleys while they lay about on sun-splashed Mediterranean beaches, composing poems and grappling with mathematical equations. That's what art is.

If you're the sort of guy who raids the refrigerators of silent kitchens at three o'clock in the morning, you can only write accordingly.

That's who I am.

2

This story begins on August 8, 1970, and ends eighteen days later—in other words, on August 26 of the same year.

3

"Eat shit, you rich bastards!" the Rat shouted, glowering at me, with his hands resting on the bar.

Maybe it wasn't me he was bellowing at but the coffee grinder behind me. Since we were sitting side by side, he really didn't have to raise his voice like that. Whatever the cause, he seemed to have become his old self again. He took a satisfied swig of beer.

No one in the bar gave a damn about the Rat's shouting. Fact was, the place was so packed everyone and his cousin was yelling. It looked like the *Titanic* just before it sank.

"Leeches!" the Rat spat out, shaking his head. "The bastards can't do a damn thing for themselves. Looking at their faces makes me want to puke."

I nodded back without taking my lips from the rim of my glass. Rant ended, the Rat began contemplating his slender fingers, turning them back and forth on the bar, as if warming them over a fire. I studied the ceiling and waited. He would have to examine each finger before our conversation could resume. So what else was new?

The Rat and I had spent the whole summer as if possessed, drinking enough beer to fill a twenty-five-meter pool and scattering enough peanut shells to cover the entire floor of J's Bar to a depth of two inches. We were bored out of our skulls that summer, and surviving the only way we knew how.

When the boredom grew too much to bear, I contemplated the nicotine-stained print hanging behind the bar. It was the kind of picture you'd find on a Rorschach test: from where I sat, it resembled two green monkeys tossing deflated tennis balls back and forth. I spent hours looking at it.

When I told J the bartender what it reminded me of, he just shrugged. "Yeah, I guess I can see that," he said, after studying it for a moment.

"But what do you think it symbolizes?" I persisted.

"The monkey on the left is you," he replied. "And the one on the right is me. I'm throwing you a beer and you're tossing me back the money."

Far out, I thought, taking another swig of beer.

"Makes me want to puke," said the Rat, his finger inspection complete.

The Rat was always running down the rich—he out and out despised them. Yet his family was loaded. Whenever I pointed that out, his reply was always, "Ain't my fault." There were times (usually when we were smashed) when I said, "Sure it is," but to say that only bummed me out. I knew there was some truth in what he said.

"Know why I hate the rich so much?" the Rat continued. This was the first time he'd gotten past the puking part.

I shook my head no.

"To be blunt, 'cause they don't have a goddamn clue. They can't scratch their own asses without a flashlight and a measuring tape."

"To be blunt" was one of the Rat's signature phrases.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. They're totally in the dark, the whole lot of them. They only pretend to think about important stuff . . . Know why?"

"No, why?"

"'Cause they don't need to, that's why. Sure, they have to use their brains a little to get rich in the first place, but once they make it, it's a piece of cake—they don't need to think anymore. Like an orbiting satellite doesn't need gas. They just keep going round and round, always over the same damn place. But I'm not like that, and neither are you. We have to use our brains to survive. We think about everything, from tomorrow's weather to the size of the bathtub plug. Right?"

"Right," I said.

"That's where things stand."

The Rat looked bored. He pulled out a tissue and blew his nose. He'd said everything he wanted to say, but how seriously was I supposed to take him? I had no idea.

"In the end we all die anyway," I said, trying to feel him out.

"Yeah. We all die. But it'll take another fifty years. And, to be blunt, fifty years spent thinking is a helluva lot more exhausting than five thousand years of living without using your brain, right?"

No argument there.