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RECORD
of a
NIGHT
TOO BRIEF

translated from the Japanese by
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PUSHKIN PRESS

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Pushkin Press
Somerset House, Strand
London WC2R 1LA

HEBI O FUMU © Hiromi Kawakami, 1996

English language translation © Lucy North, 2017

Record of a Night Too Brief was first published as *Hebi o Fumu* in 1996

First published by Pushkin Press in 2017

This edition first published in 2024

Parts of "Record of a Night Too Brief" appeared, in slightly
different form, in *Words without Borders*, July 2012

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the British
Centre for Literary Translation and the Nippon Foundation

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

ISBN 13: 978-1-80533-140-7

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Designed and typeset by Tetragon, London
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

www.pushkinpress.com

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RECORD OF A NIGHT TOO BRIEF

1 HORSE

What was that itch on my back? I wondered. And then I realized that it was the night—the night was nibbling into me.

It wasn't that late, still only twilight, but the darkness seemed to have collected just above my shoulders. A black clump of it had fastened onto me, eating away at my back.

I wriggled, trying to shake it off, but the night clung fast. When I tried to rip it off with my hands, it floated away, as vapour, and I couldn't grasp it. I grabbed at a patch, where it was most intensely black, but immediately it dispersed, and another black patch swirled up somewhere else.

The itchiness became unbearable. I scratched frantically. The more I scratched, the more the darkness ate into my back, and the more the darkness ate into my back, the more I itched.

Unable to stand still, I broke into a run.

Immediately, I was running as fast as a horse. I thought, as I ran: you get faster when the night starts eating into you. Roads, pedestrians, signs, all fly by, retreating into the distance, like scenes through a train window.

After a minute or two I grew sick of running, so I stopped. My body was giving off steam like a horse. I was breathing loudly through my nose. Some of the darkness merged with the steam, producing swirling, hazy eddies.

People, standing at a distance, stared.

The darkness mixed with the breaths I was taking in, reappearing when I breathed out, floating in long trails. When I inhaled, the dark trails near my nostrils were sucked back in. When I exhaled again, they were longer than before. The darkness grew, stretching out like endless ribbons, issuing forth from my nostrils.

“That’s a sight you don’t see every day,” an onlooker exclaimed, and then clapped, purposefully, as if summoning koi to the surface of a pond. The other onlookers clapped too, in just the same way.

I grew irritated. “Hey, clear off!” I tried to shout.

But no words emerged from my mouth. I couldn’t get the first consonant out. Straining, blowing through my nostrils, bearing down, I tried for that first sound: “G— G— G—” But all I could manage was to snort and blow out air.

The onlookers were delighted, and clapped some more.

This infuriated me. I leapt into the air, trying to yell at them, but all that came out was a whinny—like I was a horse. I kept leaping. Landing on a roof, I whinnied again—and

then again. The onlookers below were all clapping. I wasn’t going to be outdone by them, and I kept whinnying. By now I had acquired a horse’s body, and was covered with a thick black coat of hair.

“Night’s coming. The Night Horse has arrived,” an onlooker said—the first in the crowd to have clapped. At that moment the steam started to rise in clouds off my body. More darkness: spreading, covering everything.

Elated now, I whinnied over and over again. With every whinny, the darkness became blacker and more intense.

2 CHAOS

While I was walking, the number of people increased. We were all going in the same direction. I walked, swept along in the flow.

It was after dusk, an hour closer to night. I could see the outlines of people walking just ahead of me, but couldn’t tell the colour of their clothes. A lamplighter approached, holding a long pole, pushing his way against the stream of people. Raising the pole up to a lamp, he let it rest there a few seconds, and the lamp started to glow. Looking around, I realized that there were several lamplighters: everywhere about me, one street lamp after another started to give out a steady light.

Now there were even more people walking, and it was difficult keeping up the pace.

"Are you going too?"

I glanced over my shoulder, and saw a slender girl with short hair walking behind me.

"I was thinking about it..." I answered, without quite committing myself.

Hearing this, the girl, who didn't stop walking, removed an envelope from her satchel, and opened it, all the while keeping pace with the stream of people.

In the envelope were some green tickets.

"I have an extra. You take it," she said, as she quickly slipped the green ticket into my pocket. I was going to thank her—but she waved me off and pointed at the people behind us. Some kind of hitch had stopped the flow of people, and there was a pile-up. Knots of people were starting to form, and as more people kept coming from behind them, soon some of the knots were getting pushed up into the air, on top of the knots of people below them.

Quickly I turned to face forward again, and started to walk. A long gap had opened up between us and the people in front of us. Thinking I ought to catch up with them, I broke into a run. But again the girl stopped me.

"Don't run, or we'll have chaos. It's too early. Too early."

I didn't understand what she was referring to, but in any case I resumed walking.

We seemed to be approaching a termination point. The stream of people was spreading out. Just ahead, something very tall was rising up to the sky.

Several dozen ticket collectors stood in a row, and once we passed through, showing our tickets, the tall object came into better view.

It was a singer, who stood as tall as a three-storey building. From where I was, I had a clear view of the beauty spot under her jaw, and the rise and fall of her breasts.

"The beauty spot is artificial," the girl informed me, gazing up at the singer, enraptured.

The singer was producing notes at different pitches, as if she were warming up. When she sang high notes, flocks of birds took flight from the branches of the ginkgo trees. When she sang low notes, the earth heaved, and small furry creatures emerged from underground and crawled about.

When the square was packed with people, suddenly, with no warning, the singer commenced singing. It was as if an immense musical instrument was filling the firmament with sound, or as if the melody of her song was swimming through the skies... In the next moment her voice had overwhelmed all else, and rather than listening, we seemed to be encompassed within it. No longer able to know the words, we were conscious only that her lilting voice was, slowly and powerfully, all around us.

The crowd of people, filled with her music, started to break up and form lines, which began to flow from the square in every direction, like innumerable streams flowing from a lake.

"The chaos has started," the girl said to me, joining a stream of people going by her. I watched as she was borne away.

I joined the same stream of people, and pretty soon caught up with her.

"Where are we going?" I enquired. The girl nodded several times, her eyes closed, looking unworried.

"Where?" I asked again.

"The night," she replied.

With that, her head tilted downwards, and she fell into a deep sleep. She was carried along as she slept.

Now a part of the chaos, alongside the girl, I entered the night.

3 GENTLEMEN

I ascended the stairs and found a door, which I opened to a banquet in full swing.

An array of gentlemen, each of them dressed in white, was seated at a table, eating and drinking. On the table were platters of raw seafood—sea urchin, halibut, scallops, clams, sea bream, flounder, silver trevally, tuna, squid, octopus, smelt—as well as an assortment of meat and vegetable dishes—broiled, boiled, fried. The gentlemen were savouring each dish.

I could hear them having little disagreements, in the soft-spoken manner befitting gentlemen.

"This part, just here. *So succulent! Such flavour!*"

"Oh, but it shouldn't be soft. When it's utterly fresh, it's springy and firm. That's the whole point."

"So the divers have to gather it up from the seabed in the early hours."

"That's what makes it such a luxury."

The food looked so mouth-wateringly delicious, I swallowed loudly, despite myself.

The gentlemen, unaware of my presence, turned and trained their gaze on me.

"Who do we have here? A traveller, perhaps, from a distant land?"

"A visitor."

"We don't often get visitors."

"We should mark the occasion!"

They all rose from the table. The gentleman at the head placed his napkin on his chair and approached me, his arms open.

"So good of you to come!" he said.

And the others, who'd followed his lead placing their napkins on their chairs and greeting me, added their chorus of welcomes.

I was shown to a seat midway along the table, a napkin was tucked in at my collar, and a gleaming knife and fork placed beside me.

"Please, eat."

"Please feel free, have whatever you like."

The gentlemen took their seats at the table. The gentlemen