

Monkey Business

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An extract

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The Union of Body and Spirit

When we shall be no more – when the union of body and spirit that engenders us has been disrupted – to us, who shall then be nothing, nothing by any hazard will have power to stir our senses, not though earth be fused with sea and sea with sky.

Lucretius, *The Nature of the Universe*

It won't take long now. This afternoon they shifted me to the sixth floor. My calves haven't been shaved and I've not been given a drip. So I know enough – no operation, no scan. They give you an injection with a clear liquid and you fall into a dreamless sleep.

Shin has seen it happen three times, he told me. Three times a jar came back with a dirty-coloured cauliflower in formaldehyde. That's your brain, Shin maintained. They leave that cauliflower in the fridge for a long time. And then, one day, they cut your prefrontal cortex into wafer-thin slices. They glue the slices very carefully between glass plates and years later they bring them out from time to time. They study the slides that you have become.

I haven't smelt any human for quite a while now. It must be past midnight. They will probably finish me off early tomorrow morning – the first job of the day. I've got about another seven or eight hours.

The worst criminals of their own species get whatever they want in a case like this: plenty to eat and drink, cigarettes. Me, though, they leave in the dark, without any form of consolation. Even worse – just listen to the lamentations of pigs and goats and mangy mutts here on the sixth floor.

I knew it would all come to this. They're all over the place and they're so many of them. The Planet of the Apes is and remains science fiction. You can snivel about it, but that's not my nature. Not just before the final injection, either. I have played my role, that's all. Haruki, the lab monkey. And now

the moment has come to act out the final scene in the life of Haruki. With pride and hermetically sealed lips.

I'll never bring off that about the lips. Rorensu realised that very quickly. Rorensu may not be the brightest of all the lab people, but he took most notice of what I did, normally understood a couple of days before the others what was troubling me. He was the one to give me the name 'Big Noise'. Because I used to make my discontent known in shrill high cries. He repeatedly interpreted it as meaningless noise, and thought a sympathetic smile would serve well enough as a reply. This would make any right-thinking monkey start shouting even more. So that was what I did, and that led to such offending comments as: 'Haruki can't keep his darling little trap shut for a moment.'

Talking about traps, Rorensu's is well and properly shut now. I wouldn't be surprised if they blame me for that, too. Me, Haruki, 'the troublesome monkey with B+' – but tell me, just for starters, how is it that my blood is B+ while that of the other monkeys in the basement isn't? Have they forgotten who it was that put me in the wrong cage back then? It's their own fault, those lab people, that Rorensu ended up a goner. Is that a reason to go straight ahead and give me that injection? No. I thought not.

To wait seven or eight hours for my execution. That's all that's left to me. Or am I to feel chuffed at the realisation that my life has been in the service of science? Pull the other one.

I mustn't think like that about it, the lab people would say. I mustn't see things from my own tiny personal perspectives, not give a distorted picture of things. 'Reality takes place at a more general level,' I once heard Rorensu say.

What an unanswerable remark. The sort of statement that allows you to wash your murderous hands in the gentle lather of innocence. Or is reality simply something else than the truth? The truth is that I have to endure seven or eight hours of highly concrete terror (to the accompaniment of squealing pigs, goats and mangy mutts).

This is the first time I can enjoy such a concert of screams to the full. Enjoy the exciting musical contrasts between the deep bass of certain dogs, the middle register of hardly intelligent grunting from the pigs and the shrill bleating of what is probably the only goat in the orchestra. If I concentrate hard enough on it, I will probably forget that soon my head will be chopped off. Woof, woof, bleat, grunt, grunt, WOOF.

Do people outside the lab have any idea of what kind of farmyard has been accommodated here? On the top floor of the respected, highly venerated university hospital whose purpose is to save human lives? My bet is no. Outside the lab, people don't wear white coats and don't listen for two minutes to a concert of screams.

Alright, though. I mustn't get upset, see things from my own tiny personal perspectives. People without white coats don't have to know what goes on here, let alone be interested in the details.

Shin told me that he had once seen the hospital from the outside. People without white coats walked past the grey square fortress without looking round, also walked past the van on which

there was a picture of an innocent little giraffe used as a logo for the firm that specialised in 'Animal Transport'. The graphic designer of the van probably meant 'Transportation of Animals'.

The animal transport indeed appeared to be something for animals, to stay within the boundaries of human language – apparently unavoidable for me. 'Something for animals', 'bestial', is what it is called, when they're talking of irrational cruelty (do I hear myself thinking, how typically human?). In any case, according to Shin's story, half a dozen fellow-sufferers had been given a knock-out injection and, with scant ceremony, been thrown into a heap in minute temporary cages.

There was even – although this may be poetic licence on Shin's part – a wrenched-off finger on the floor of the stowage space of the van. Shin pretended to be fast asleep. In that way he went unnoticed and could gain a glimpse of the outside world. It must have been a sun-drenched, bitter-cold day in January, with a steel-blue sky of the kind most often seen in winter in Tokyo.

Shin was only too willing to tell me all the details of what he had seen. The hospital of the University of Pure Reason seemed to house a building that looked more prosaic than the name might suggest. From listening to the descriptions, my guess is that Shin has only seen the back of the hospital. I am pretty sure that a mountain of blue refuse bags would not be dumped in front of the visitors' entrance.

The 'Animal Transport' van stood parked next to the portal of a dark-red tower, opposite an entrance. The entrance is probably for small loads of human suffering. My guess is that in the dark-red building there are mainly offices, and a library and, in the basement, the cafeteria that Rorensu used to deliver endless sermons about.

Oh, Rorensu. He often complained about the food. He was from another race of humans, came from a capricious place immensely far away from the University of Pure Reason (sometimes he called it 'Belgium', at other times 'Flanders'). The Land of Waffles, Paedophiles and Drugged Cyclists. Waffles far more delicious, and paedophiles far more dangerous, than you can find anywhere in Tokyo, Rorensu would invariably add. The country of famous cathedrals, he also claimed, but didn't clarify any connection with the waffles or paedophiles.

If monkeys could fly as fast as pigeons and wanted to avoid the ice-cold wastes of Siberia, they would have to spend more than three weeks, flying non-stop, to reach that famous country of Rorensu's. Or just twelve hours, sedated in the cargo compartment of a plane. (Rather not, then.)

Rorensu claimed that in his country there were stalls with waffles on practically each corner of every street. Just the concept I find pretty hard to imagine.

Shin, at least, knows how the smell of grilled sweet potatoes makes you irresistibly reach for your purse – if you happen to have such a thing as a purse – in search of coins you don't mind missing for them. The smell of grilled sweet potato was what Shin could remember most from that remarkable day in January.

'It's the sort of smell that gives meaning to your existence,' he said, his mouth watering, 'it's wonderful to know that such a remarkable thing exists, so freely available, something they give you with a smile and for a mere trifle. It inspires hope for the future of the human race.' Shin – that much may be clear – had nought point nought insight into the mechanisms of human economics.

However that may be, I would have loved to have tasted that grilled sweet potato. I try to imagine the stall as clearly as possible, with a dense blue smoke that must have come from the charcoal grill, along the street, up into the air, swirling away over the high roofs of the University of Pure Reason. And then, lying on the blackened rods of the grill, the large, sweet potatoes sweltering and puffing away there in their purple jackets, the purple peel hardening while the yellow flesh inside grows more and more tender.

I bring my teeth together, make my lips as wide as possible, curving slightly upwards, and give the vendor a hundred yen coin. The vendor accepts it, mumbling that it's actually not enough, but just this once, because I've got such a charming smile. (A generous vendor? I'm just imagining.) He takes a sheet of paper, rolls a grilled potato up in it – the potato is too hot to hold – and gives me the package, with on his face a smile every bit as broad and as stupid as mine. I warm my frozen hands on what is glowing inside the paper and stand there for a while in drooling anticipation.

My imagination can take me this far. The only thing is that I don't know what a grilled sweet potato tastes like. I do know what the product tastes like when it hasn't been warmed. Nothing to write home about, though better than the dry pieces of compressed garbage fodder we normally got to eat.

If I am to believe Rorensu, a grilled potato, when it comes to it, is not all that terrifically memorable either.

Still another seven, eight hours or so. If only I could taste a piece of apple, preferably a piece of one of those fat, unutterably beautifully gleaming red apples from Aomori that Kawaguchi sometimes brought along. What wouldn't I do for a last bite...

If that means waiting for Kawaguchi to take pity, I'm in for a long wait. That frigid frog. If he brought an apple along with him, it was in connection with my diet. He will never become my friend, even less than Rorensu would have been able to.

Kawaguchi has seen far too many creatures of his own species die, creatures that he himself – surgically – had ripped open. Which meant that he couldn't summon a grain of sympathy for something as inane as the feelings of a lab monkey. The whole concept of 'emotion' was alien to him. Neurosurgery is a severe test of the nerves of the neurosurgeon it would appear. To change yourself into a polar bear would seem the only way you can get through the daily routine of wiping blood and drilling holes in skulls.

Kawaguchi's a polar bear for sure. There's no doubt that he will be the one to open up my chest with a sharp little knife and place an injection in the left chamber of my heart. After a certain amount of sloshing around in the mush under my ribs, he will find the descending aorta and clamp it. Then he will pump formaldehyde into my heart which, because of the clamp, will flow upwards into my brain. At some point or other during this process I will be pronounced clinically dead, before my head – to put it solemnly – is separated from my rear.

Enough of this. Back to Shin's story. There was a vendor with grilled sweet potatoes next to the 'Animal Transport' van.

That vendor had chosen the time and place well. Shin reported that there was quite a run. It must have been around the lunch break. Then people have rumbling stomachs that have to be filled fast, a state where they are susceptible to the temptation of grilled sweet potato. I assume that the vendor would pull his cart to the stairs in front of the cafeteria at half past eleven precisely, heat the charcoal quickly, place three or four potatoes on the grill, and then just count on the processes that are set in motion in humans by the sweet smell of grilled sweet potato.

The stairs to the cafeteria did not exactly possess any powers of attraction – thick pipes that, fully visible, twisted along the ceiling and disappeared into a dark passage where you were hardly likely to find delicious food. According to Shin, the stairs were a bit like something in an engine room of a gigantic freighter.

I wonder just how many of the memories of that sunny day in January were improved on or inserted later. Unintentionally, perhaps. But how could Shin, motionless, have been able to look from the van into the passage leading to the cafeteria? That he saw a steel-blue sky I am prepared to believe. And that it was cold enough to assume that it was winter is also fine by me. And the smell of grilled potato can conceivably have wafted into Shin's nostrils. Perhaps a person or two really did pass close enough to the van for Shin to have noticed them. That he glimpsed parts of the two large buildings of the University of Pure Reason I would not dispute either.

The cages were fetched one by one out of the 'Animal Transport' van and disappeared in various directions. Most of them went to the tower building, probably to the thirteenth floor, the only discordant note in the otherwise spotless administrative building. There were the incinerator and the large waiting room where I saw my youth pass by me. Shin then went in the other direction, straight to the basement.

Even the moving of the cage to the basement had been engraved on Shin's memory. On a melancholy day he could spend hours going on about those two swinging minutes, about how the transit cage was too small even to be able to sit up straight in. The cage had been of plastic that was soft to the touch, and Shin had lain inside it on unforgettable straw. I know that Shin will be thinking of nothing else than that straw when it is his turn to witness the concert of screams.

The way to the basement, Shin said, was impossible to reconstruct, passing through passages that hummed, trembled, shook, rattled, as if the passages were living creatures, or intestines of a hospital with acute diarrhoea. All Shin was able to remember was that the daylight disappeared at the second staircase, and that the third staircase ended close to his final destination – the Laboratory of Neurophysiology.

Of all the labs you can end up in, the neurophysiology lab is perhaps the most subtle, sometimes even a bit misleading to begin with. They don't immediately plant a fake kidney or something similar in you. Whole months passed for Ichitaro with them doing little more than occasionally placing him in the chair and giving him orange juice when he pressed a button. He must have thought they were training him to become a circus monkey.

In my case it was different. Just a couple of weeks after I had landed up in the basement, they had already carried out operation 1. A thin wire round my eye, skin of my forehead removed, bare skull, screws inserted, and the whole caboodle filled in with that intoxicating dental cement.

The neurophysiologist gentlemen needed the thin wire since they had devised a trick for me where I had to make 'goal-oriented eye movements'. I had to look precisely at the target. My

epitaph can be: 'Haruki, 1994 – 2001, maker of more than half a million goal-oriented eye movements'.

Should I be glad that of all the laboratories I had to land up in the neurophysiology lab? However repugnant their method may be, neurophysiologists are working on a great question.

How does the mind work? Who would not want to know how his or her mind works? How is it that we are able to think, that we are able to find some things beautiful or nasty, that we have an inner light that can allow us to see things that are no longer there? To be able to have dreams, memories – isn't that terrific? Don't you want to know, then, how it is possible, how the thing works?

I do, I have to admit. And there is also no doubt that this entails looking into the brain. Even the ancient Egyptians knew that. But does looking at the functioning of nerves in the brain have to take place in such a literal fashion, with the sticking of wafer-thin but considerably long needles into brains of monkeys like me? What can still be learned from this that cannot be gathered in another, more monkey-friendly approach?

Shin and I have more than once had a snappy discussion about this – and not only about the question of whether anything sensible can be learned from what needles are able to measure. Even if you give neurophysiology the benefit of the doubt, even if you good-naturedly concede that in principle something can be learned from sticking in needles, there are still objections to the usefulness of the needles in every individual case, in the case of monkey number soandso in the lab of Universitywhatever in, say, Italy.

And in the case of the monkey Haruki.

Shin felt I shouldn't think like that. The world didn't have enough time to weigh the pros and cons of every particular case. The world was much too complex to start weeping every time at every monkey that had come to grief.

Shin is a fatalist. He has suffered too many needles. Even before his accident his powers of thought had been compromised (in my opinion). He had become too indifferent. He was no longer able to grasp how pain can really be painful.

In essence his thoughts and memories ticked or tocked not quite like mine. Perhaps they derived from a different neural network. A less accomplished simulation? Sometimes I have a sneaking suspicion that my brain doesn't really exist, or that it was modified or retouched in some way or other. It's a strange thought, I can't explain it well. I'd better keep shut about it. (As if I am Haruki no longer, but some sort of ghost stuck in an infinite loop.)

Generally speaking, Shin is too willing to please the lab people. It seems as if all of it hardly matters to him.

Why, throughout the world, do so many monkeys have to be subjected to precisely the same forms of torture at the same time? In Japan alone there are at least thirty such laboratories that, one by one, account for three to five fatal victims every year, to give a conservative estimate.

‘There you go again,’ Shin would reply. ‘Why do you say *forms of torture*?’

If a monkey is held against his will and with nothing but negative personal consequences and has to go through a whole series of more or less painful forms of treatment, what word is more applicable? The word ‘torture’ is not all that far off the mark, I maintained.

Doesn’t it speak volumes that they use monkeys and not members of their own species? There are more than seven billion people on this earth. That means 7,000,000,000 potential subjects. Among that lot it must surely be possible to find a handful of volunteers to promote the cause of science? Apparently, lab people have just enough brain behind their eyes to realise that they would be lynched if, for ‘the sake of the experiment’ they were to lift the skull of a living human being.

Perhaps people simply haven’t paused long enough to consider the subject. Perhaps one day someone will stand up and give serious, incorrigible criminals the choice between execution or taking part in neurophysiological experiments. After all, white men did something of the sort, didn’t they, when they invaded Australia?

At times I was jealous of Shin, of the way in which, without a qualm, he was able to accept his fate. The other monkeys, Ichitaro, Gauss, Zola, were either too mad or too stupid to have a conversation with, but Shin – in the days before Kawaguchi’s blunder – always had a moment to spare for me whenever I was suffering from attacks of angst. Shin was able to calm me. He told me about his youth in the Valley of Hell in Nagano, or about what he had seen in the basement while I was sitting in the waiting room on the thirteenth floor.

At certain moments the artistic itch would seize him. He dreamed of nothing else, he said, and couldn’t stop talking about some highly successful brushstroke by such and such, or about the importance of strawberries in the work of so and so.

What a load of rubbish all of that was! I think that I will miss it. Shin I will certainly miss. Or perhaps not: can you miss anything when you’re dead?

Early tomorrow, just for once, I can conduct a small neuroscientific experiment myself in order to provide an answer. If the mind resides in the workings of the brain and nowhere else, it should go up in smoke as soon as the brain stops working.

If I miss Shin tomorrow, after my decapitation, I must still have a soul. Then it cannot have resided in the workings of the brain.

My formula rings a small bell. ‘If you miss something, then you have a soul.’

Descartes had something like that... ‘If you thought, then you existed’?

If you don’t think, you may be asleep, or clicking among the sports pages on the Internet. Or perhaps you no longer have a soul because it has died in the meantime, while your neck was being sawn through?

Didn’t Descartes say that the soul was immortal? Will I still be thinking tomorrow evening?

I don't know my philosophical human inside out, but Descartes was, I believe, one of the most well-loved authors, who stuck to his guns in maintaining that body and soul belong to different worlds. Via the concert of screams I am beginning to understand why you might well feel affection for an author like Descartes.

The body belonged to a world with which God did not concern himself, while the soul wandered around somewhere in the same higher immaterial sphere as God.

Perhaps we've simply misunderstood Descartes. I wonder whether he wasn't poking fun at some seventeenth century inquisition or other. Can anyone explain to me what the difference is between immateriality and something that does not exist? Perhaps Descartes was joking the whole time. All that fuss about the Cartesian division between body and soul arose because some priest or other happened to switch the words *cogitans* and *extensa* when transcribing or reprinting. The *res cogitans* or 'what thought' was actually the body, and in particular that part of the body behind the eyes. And the *res extensa* or 'what was attached to it' was the kind of soul that appears in tongues of fire above the heads of apostles.

My soul resides solidly in this world, in the same world as the one in which I eat and drink and let the waste products fall or flow from my body.

Every thought that I have is nothing than a collection of electrical processes that occur between nerve cells.

Unless, maybe, occasionally I have my doubts: do those electrical processes actually need nerve cells? (Would it work with artificial circuits?) (*Too far fetched!*) (*But no, it must be possible.*) (*Shhht! Let Haruki speak.*)

Every memory, every twist that happens in my mind, is a collection of electrical processes by and with nerve cells. Billions of processes, admittedly. And what I experience as a thought is perhaps nothing more than a state of affairs, a news bulletin that has to be disseminated, so that all my nerve cells know what the main points of the brain newscast are.

All of this, though, is not going to last much longer.

Was it worth the trouble? Will my death have contributed anything to science? I think not. Or, at least, the answer to the second question has to be 'no'. They have stopped my experiment prematurely because Rorensu has died. No one at the University of Pure Reason could carry on with me. So they said: 'Sacrifice that Haruki'. *Sacrifice* – just the word itself.

But was it worth the trouble for me? That this Haruki ever existed? I want to be able to answer 'yes' to that. I want to summon everything that is still within me to answer 'yes'.