

# Something Inside Us Bowed Low

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**An extract (Chapters 1-8)**

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## GIVEN TANGENT A

**The long night**

**Doubt arises**

## [1] *Ima wa mukashi*

*Ima wa mukashi*, ‘now long ago’. This is how every story in the *Konjaku Monogatari* begins, the ‘Anthology of Tales from the Past’, itself over 800 years old. Time moves mercilessly on. Every ‘now’ is immediately set on the path to long ago.

Or is there more to it? Can things return to us? Every ‘there’ is here today too.

There once was, and perhaps there still is.

There once was, or perhaps there wasn’t. A microscope, a small field, a conflict, waves made by a clew of worms.

When does doubt arise? When do we find ourselves in the twofold state of possibility, the zone of indecision: true or untrue, this or that, here or there, one way or the other, being or nothingness? Human beings are fond of saying ‘or’, but can we turn to animals for an answer? Let’s just say that until the line has been drawn, no boundary has been crossed.

‘But the line does not exist in nature!’

The return remains a possibility, the alternative is still an option. In spite of everything and contrary to his habits, Kohara put on a white coat and resolved to spend the entire day with his eyes glued to the microscope. He was first to arrive at the lab and selected a spot by the window. Whose microscope was this? He did not even know: some student or other, Matsusaki perhaps.

Everything in the lab was Kohara’s, so too this microscope. Matsusaki would not dare say a word when he saw that his spot had been taken.

When does doubt arise? The question is one of movement, the beauty of movement, the pointless, superfluous, trivial splendour of the body engaged in the dance.

Doubt is the opposite of movement. To understand the workings of doubt, one has to examine movement. Kohara took pleasure in watching, was calmed by observation, the intensive contemplation of the ballet, his worms in the conflict paradigm, squirming under the influence of opposites, attraction and repulsion, the tempting smell of butter, there, at the other side of the Petri dish, and the repellent copper barrier, here, right in front of their noses.

Yuji Kohara, aged 43, professor of molecular biology, a man without attributes, saw the possibilities swim into focus and then recede into a blur, exactly like the minuscule roundworms beneath his lenses.

Doubt is a form of silence, of postponement, a preoccupation with the decision-making process, but how can we tell whether the doubter is really thinking, genuinely engaged in figuring out what to do or what not to do, instead of being fully present while absent, a zombie, a living corpse, engaged in nothing more than a daydream?

No peeking inside! Relying on external observation only, how does thoughtful doubt differ from the unthinking twists and turns of this worm, which will either turn away or brave the copper en route to the largest concentration of buttery substance?

‘I dream of a humanity in which human beings are thoroughly conscious of the pure formalism that underlies all thinking.’ The German expressionist, poet and doctor Gottfried Benn wrote something of the sort. He gave these words to his alter ego, the character of Olf in *Home Front*. The play was written during World War I, a time when Benn was preoccupied with the whores of Brussels. A purely professional concern, well within the strictures of his calling, Benn was not the sentimental type.

The human race of his dreams would think only in shapes, clean contours, emptied of their haphazard contents; the determinants and restrictions of words would be filtered out. Flying in the face of circumstance, in defiance of context.

That would be the dance. Bliss.

That is the dance.

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## [2] *The roundworms squirmed*

The roundworms squirmed, Kohara grew calm. Roundworms: nematodes, threadlike creatures, a multifarious breed. Kohara concentrated on *C. elegans*, the favourite roundworm of the scientific world, approximately one millimetre in length, just big enough to see with the naked eye, to lift on the tip of a toothpick.

Not parasitical but ‘free-living’, a worm that is found in the soil. It devours bacteria to feed itself, to maintain its place in the world: an unsegmented, bilaterally symmetrical, multicellular eukaryote equipped with a complete digestive system. Kohara could watch them endlessly and take pleasure in watching.

A day like today, a day of peering uninterrupted through the microscope, had seemed unthinkable. No meetings to attend, no lectures to give, no time lost to emails, applications, recommendations; this was a pleasure Kohara should make a point of permitting himself. Not just today but from now on, every once in a while. Unthinkable? No, simply matter of organization and willpower.

*Caenorhabditis elegans*. *Caeno* meaning 'recent', *rhabditis* meaning 'rod-like'. A name is but a name, the C alone a more interesting proposition than the Greek amalgam of 'rod-like' and 'recent'. It is *C. elegans* for short, the elegant C, the worm in its own image, the creature that can suddenly take the form of its own initial and then continue its graceful advance across the slippery surface of the Petri dish, propelled by the pleasingly regular waves that course through its tiny body.

Does Wallace Stevens spring to mind? His lengthy poem about Crispin, 'The Comedian as the Letter C'. Or are we prompted to consider Luciano Pavarotti's high C, the note that can reduce some specimens of *Homo sapiens* to tears?

The tiny creatures were placed in a conflict situation and Kohara peered at their behaviour. He was comparing wild-type worms with mutants devoid of a particular peptide, the lack of which impaired the function of certain neurons.

He was studying the phenomenon of sensory integration in his worms. The sum of all smells, the perception of what was tempting. Reductionists argued that simpler mechanisms were at work, a basic push and pull, direct from sensory cells to motor cells: perception triggers action with no thought, no intervening stage of gathering or processing information.

But Kohara believed in the consciousness of the worms.

If the worms were lacking, then he was lacking. Or conversely, he was not lacking and so neither were the worms.

Kohara allowed his mind to wander, to swim, to rock on the rhythm of the nematode waves, to swim as they swam. Especially the worms that had already passed the copper barrier, advancing at quite a pace, in the throes of chemotaxis on their way to the sweet smell of diacetyl, so intense that it stank. When his focus turned to the squirmers, the wriggling and writhing doubters, his thoughts drifted back to yesterday, the disruption that had torn open the fabric of his daily routines.

Better to stick with the steady swimmers, the self-assured.

*C. elegans*, an ideal laboratory animal for molecular biology, for genetic experiments. For playing a game called evolution. Organ development and apoptosis, the programmed death of the cells. Predetermined cessation. Hard-wired suicide. This tiny worm had plenty to teach us.

Ms Miyata entered the lab and greeted her boss, her agitated eyes seeking an explanation for which she was not about to ask. Kohara elected to remain silent and exude an air of deep concentration on the spectacle in the Petri dish. What was there to say? That he had suddenly experienced an inexplicable urge to put in a personal appearance and carry out the work of one of his underlings?

Ms Miyata would soon forget this anomaly. The best policy was to reinforce existing expectations. Kohara could simply go back to being the reliable, impatient professor, a superior everyone could count on to keep the lowest of profiles under any circumstances.

Yesterday had never happened. There was no yesterday, no past, no history. It was only the future that mattered, the things he was going to do, later, from now on, the responsibility that he would bear, as a father, as the head of a laboratory, as a scientist, a citizen, a person.

The bourgeois! The hypocrite! Camus over Sartre.

And yet here it was, his love of the abstract, the purity of shapes, the relentless wrestling match with circumstance, a bid to free oneself from the stranglehold of context.

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### [3] *What would Ms Miyata make of it?*

What would Ms Miyata make of it? Nothing or anything she liked. Things happened, the absurd reared its head as Kohara's gaze remained fixed on the battle around the copper barrier. A roundworm tapped its nose against the copper, shrank away and stretched out, from C to rod, made as if to undulate in the opposite direction, yet turned back towards the copper. Yesterday could not be denied. Yesterday had happened.

Where was the flaw in the germ cell? The source of the unravelling? Kohara heard the tones resonate; the doors of the underground train were about to close. It was yesterday evening, Tuesday evening, homeward bound after a long day, a departmental meeting that had dragged on and on. Kohara was tired, had drifted into a light doze, an issue of *Science* in his hands, thoughts muddled, calves verging on cramp.

He woke with a start and stormed off the train, only just made it through the closing doors. He leapt across the gap between carriage and platform, and during that leap, his brief horizontal flight above the abyss, time expanded, perpendicularly, vertically, into the infinite deep. There was no ground, only blackness, the dark void being crossed by Kohara. He realised. The realisation overcame him. This was not his stop.

Can we speak of an epiphany? We most certainly can. Kohara realised immediately that this was not his stop. The here-and-now was still underground. Muromi, one stop before Meinohama, the last station before the train emerged into the open air. Ordinarily, Kohara noticed the transition, the space, the view, the apartment blocks, the hills, the clouds, the sunlight slanting in or the bright patches of artificial light against an inky background. Another light, a deeper field. Ordinarily, the sound would also conspire to wake him: the pressurised rush of air displaced by the speeding train in the narrow tunnel, there then gone, from one moment to the next.

This time Kohara had woken too soon, alarmed by the irritating signal, a string of synthesised notes, the spasmodic whistling that announced the closing of the doors.

We suspect a convergence of sensory conditions, both external and internal. Externally, there was the sonic vibration of the signal in relation to the other sounds in the carriage. By coincidence, the signal sounded slightly clearer than it normally did, rising a touch more than usual above the general din. Internally, there was the scientist's mood, a few degrees less stable than usual, fatigue, a hormonal imbalance, a state that manifested itself as restlessness, agitation, resistance to drowsiness, to the wobbling of his left leg.

Kohara stiffened for a fraction of a second on hearing the signal and dashed unthinkingly for the door, a reflex. The rest of the evening, the night, subsequent events: they all followed from an unconscious, unintended movement.

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## [4] *There once were a great many tadpoles*

There once were a great many tadpoles in a pond. They swam around in their watery world, ruminating every now and then upon the mystery of the glowing object that climbed slowly above them, moved across the span of their domain and then disappeared. Its glow was warm, bright and pleasant.

Then came a day when, as is the way with tadpoles, one of their number turned into a frog. Revelling in his newfound freedom, he leapt onto a lotus leaf and observed the dry world around the pond. When he dived back underwater, the tadpoles asked him to explain the mysterious glow, the object of their intense longing.

‘It forms a perfect circle,’ said the frog.

‘Circle?’ asked the tadpoles.

‘It’s so bright that it brings tears to your eyes,’ said the frog, having given it some thought.

‘Tears?’ asked the tadpoles.

It didn’t matter what the flustered frog said, the tadpoles possessed none of the concepts they needed to grasp what he was saying. Eventually it dawned on him that there was only one way for the tadpoles to understand the sun: they would have to turn into frogs themselves.

Insight, *satori*, overcomes us, according to the Rinzai school. It arrives in an instant. The Obaku school allows for two versions: *satori* that strikes all at once or *satori* achieved gradually through meditation.

The archetypal case is that of the *bosatsu* Battabara. *Bosatsu* or, in Sanskrit, *bodhisattva*: a heroic soul on the brink of attaining everlasting enlightenment who postpones that transition in order to help others in their pursuit of the same goal. Battabara experienced his sudden insight when bathing, more precisely at the moment when he stepped into the thermal bath, one foot in and one foot out of the water, a state between pure and impure.

But Kohara’s epiphany, one foot in and one foot out of the train carriage, was not an instance of blissful *satori*. If this was a matter of enlightenment, then it came first in the form of a lightning bolt, followed by a fierce gust of wind and a drastic change of mood, neither darker nor lighter, but higher or wider than normal, than had been the case mere seconds earlier, when things had still been what they were.

Kohara stood on the platform in disbelief, trembling. Had he been shaken from his sleep? Had something startled him? He had lost his way on the journey home. Not Battabara, but Dante, at the

beginning of the *Inferno*: 'Midway on our life's journey / I found myself in dark woods, / the right road lost.'

'Our life', shared experience, as opposed to 'I found myself', a problem reserved entirely for the first-person narrator and him alone. At the age of 43, Kohara stood there like Dante in his woods, inadvertently, absurdly, for a reason as yet unexplained, having strayed from the road he knew so well.

Dante as an example of the human phenotype before the Age of Reason.

If this was indeed a lightning bolt, it was not the kind that had struck the *bosatsu* as he stepped into his bath. Nor did it resemble Hildegard's migraine-induced hallucinations. Mysticism had nothing to do with it. Kohara's fleeting vision of eternity, the glimpse of the deep that had caught his wayward eye, the primeval darkness from beyond the end of the ages, was purely a matter of formalism. Of merciless geometry.

His sudden intuition, his brilliant or disastrous aberration, owed everything to doubt: bizarre, paradoxical, paralysing doubt. Kohara's involuntary act betrayed the nature of the creature that he was, the scientist addicted to the power of the error, the rejection of theories, learning through negation. Playing with fire.

Kohara's lightning bolt, his enlightenment, was that of Diderot, of Hobbes. Surpassed! Gone, never to return! Hume, La Mettrie, Gibbon: a systematic and determined concern with the meaning of life, the utility of knowledge, the argument of the working method. Yet such questions now seemed impossibly grand. Unacceptable, inappropriate, obscene even, in the context of the platform in Muromi.

What was he to do? He was in shock. He remained standing on the platform, trembling.

The next train came less than twelve minutes later.

Mechanically, still in shock, Kohara stepped through the doors, and let himself be carried up to the overground, the world of apartment buildings, teeming traffic, neon lights.

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## [5] 'I KNOW. I KNOW

'I KNOW. I KNOW' he read on the bag of the girl standing next to him. 'I'M FUCKING', the F-word screamed in red, 'FABULOUS'. The other words whispered black against the beige cotton background. The brash, vulgar message on the bag contrasted sharply with the persona of the timid, well-behaved young lady, a 20-year-old student who, in ticks of the biological clock, might have been his daughter. Her dress was a long grey jumper, her stockings black but not entirely opaque, her shoes nondescript. A curtain of long, dyed-brown hair screened her face.

'I KNOW. I KNOW. I'M FUCKING FABULOUS.' The 'I' was not the girl. Nor was the bag speaking for itself. It was language, pure nonsensical language that, fucking all the way, succeeded in reproducing itself, disseminated unwittingly by this poor hybrid beast of burden, a carrier of cynical English.

The train arrived in Meinohama, unmistakably the right stop. The girl alighted. Kohara followed her.

*Radiant underground train. The wall that brightens, endlessly. A thundering prayer of steel to tether days, trailing a brushstroke cloud, oh, beginning, there it is, your nest.*

What he saw in her was not so much pack mule as nightmare. He had to admit that he was feeling out of sorts. The aberration had given him a swift kick, knocked him off balance, sent his mental faculties reeling. He may well be back on his feet, still walking, but it was not on neutral ground, not among things as they were.

Kohara followed the student down the stairs, heading for the north exit. Not as a stalker might. He simply happened to be walking behind her, sharing the same direction.

He did his best to suppress the grand, obscene, indecent questions. Language most meaningful! Knowledge most useful! A life worth the living.

Are we to surmise that the red F-word had galvanised something within him? A subliminal response perhaps?

*'I KNOW. I KNOW. YOU'RE FUCKING FABULOUS.'* An autonomous utterance, incomprehensible and unreal. Had Kohara noticed the hips, the motion of the rump, the dynamics of those marching buttocks, their curves revealed through the grey jumper?

A poem by Emily Dickinson: a worm on a string that by the following stanza had become a snake.

Who was the worm? Who was the snake?

The buttocks did not make Kohara smile, pant or step in time. He squirmed. The sight of those curves confirmed the nightmare, knotted his thoughts all the more tightly. The crucial word was not *'FUCKING'* but *'FABULOUS'*. Wonderful, awesome, phenomenal, stunning, splendid, super, stupendous, fairytale, legendary, fabled, fantastic.

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## *[6] It was the beginning*

It was the beginning of autumn, the first time this season that Kohara found himself heading home in the dark. It should have been a Tuesday like any other, a banal 30th of October, yet the black and red characters on the illuminated signs jarred against the ominous white. As always after sunset, these lights flickered everywhere, but to Kohara's ears the accompanying hum sounded suddenly suspect.

For home was not where he was heading. Not yet. He was feeling out of sorts. Not ill but unsettled in some way, troubled by his episode underground. The initial conditions could, given the requisite sensitivity, result in significant divergence. Something had been set in motion, and Kohara turned out to be too inquisitive by nature to simply wend his way home.



He flicked open his silver-coloured mobile phone and pressed the left key in the circle to see his incoming messages. Dozens, all from the same source. 'Mother', who was in fact his mother-in-law. She did not grasp his meaning but was already thinking about the practical implications. Kohara would not be home for dinner. She should go ahead and dish up the evening meal for Natsumi. No questions asked, no need for his daughter to come to the phone.

Kohara entered Higedaruma, 'the bearded Bodhidharma'. The Brahman pictured on the illuminated sign looked more like a bearded grouch or a stunted pirate. No matter, as long as a bowl of noodle soup appeared on the table, more specifically a bowl of *piri-kara-negi-ramen*, spicy, with onion and an extra egg, a couple of fried dumplings on the side and a serving of fried rice.

He opened his copy of *Science* at 'The Mood of a Worm', an article which addressed the growing body of evidence that, even at the highest levels of coordination involved in fundamental and complex behaviours, worms and humans have recourse to the same neural mechanisms.

Reading was a boon.

It provided perspective, rhythm; the words drew his eyes along in a comfortingly systematic flow. The text provided linearity, an orderly progression that made an instrument of time, a way of approaching things step by step. He would let reading dispel his nightmare. Oxytocin regulates sexual behaviour. Vasopressin is involved in the homeostatic regulation of the amount of water in the body.

The chef, a bearded grouch with a glistening pate, emerged from the kitchen and personally placed the bowl of *piri-kara-negi-ramen* on Kohara's table, a rare gesture of respect. A young assistant cast a fleeting glance in the direction of his unusually servile boss, quickly realised the error of his ways and lowered his eyes before anything came of it.

Oblivious to this social interaction, Kohara slid the journal to one side, snapped his chopsticks apart and took the spoon in his left hand. He slurped, sank his teeth greedily into the noodles and read on. Male worms require nematocin, a peptide that resembles oxytocin and vasopressin, to display normal sexual behaviour. Mutants lacking nematocin spend too little time exploring their surroundings to track down potential partners, and when they do find one, it takes them too long to initiate copulation. Not only that, but they botch the job.

Ayaka walked in. Kohara recognised her immediately. He had neither seen nor heard anyone else enter, but he soaked up Ayaka's every movement, how she took off her dark-brown leather jacket, how she sat down opposite another young woman her age, clearly a friend. He caught himself staring.

He swallowed, took a deep breath. Luckily she was sitting with her back to him. He remained safe, out of reach, beyond her field of vision. Kohara made a conscious effort to pick up his spoon, drink his soup, slurp, not too loudly but loudly enough, inconspicuously nonchalant, an inane ordinary presence that would attract no attention.

He forced himself to read. Reading would surely help. Ayaka was in full bloom, an exquisite *Prunus serrulata* on April the 7th or thereabouts.

Without nematocin, worms do not adapt sufficiently, fail to learn from experience as regards exposure to salt. Given its association with food, salt functions as an attractant but worms



repeatedly exposed to it in the absence of food alter their response. The wild-type *C. elegans* soon learns to avoid salt. Mutants, however, continue to crawl towards it.

Nematocin aids memory, contributes to learning through experience. In mammals, oxytocin and vasopressin play a part in social relationships: the bond between lioness and cub, the coupling of stallion and mare.

Ayaka and her friend ate quickly, paid for their meal and were gone. Kohara followed them, as a stalker might. Could this be noticed in the dark? As forecast, warm clouds swept across the cold sky, at a speed that seemed unnecessary. The dimming light implied the vanishing of stars.

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## *[7] Times converged*

Times converged, intermingled. Mechanisms from the past determine the course of the present.

*The sound of bursting flesh spreads between your ears. The fringes of the spray beckon to those who are without sorrow.*

The complete is irreversible, the arrow flies in one direction, but time occurs in different places: now, both here and there. And various times pop up at the same Cartesian coordinates in the game: here, both now and then.

What once was old is old no longer. The complete can always be absorbed into something new, something fresh and newly incomplete.

Our scientist's legs carried him down a path he had not chosen, a route that reflected the attention aroused within him. It was automatic, unconscious, a socially oriented path that spoke of a preference for certain stimuli in the present, a preference informed by an experience from the past. The preference was Ayaka. The experience, the dance they had shared three years before.

Ayaka had grown. She was no longer a girl, no longer a teenager but a woman, so womanly it bordered on wanton. Breathtaking contours which, even if resolutely concealed, would speak to Kohara, to his manhood, to his urge for movement. Yet her contours were not concealed.

Ayaka's jacket with its near-black collar of fake fur, her thin jacket of supple dark-brown leather, was tailored perfectly to her waist and ended there, short enough to accentuate her hips and the almost flagrant curves of her buttocks moving beneath flimsy material. Not lumps of meat, but sculpted Greek marble, a Platonic ideal, under a skimpy leopard-print skirt that could be stirred by the slightest breeze, a garment which, in combination with her jacket, filled every fixture of his longing.

Thin, hesitant streaks of rain began to fall. The young women opened their umbrellas. On the other side of the street, some thirty paces to the south, Kohara kept his furred for the time being.

*Things that rain and things that grow. They are all that fascinate me. Until the things that rain have grown, and the things that grow have poured down.*

Her legs were exposed to the air, to the damp: her thighs, knees, calves, ankles were unprotected, stockingless. Kohara's powers of observation were running away with him. He gritted his teeth, sought to quicken his pace, but was reined in; to speed up would be to diminish the distance between prey and predator.

*Things that grow and things that rain. They are all that I desire. Until the things that grow stop growing, and the things that rain no longer shed a drop.*

It was not the contours themselves that spoke to Kohara, it was the fact that they belonged to Ayaka; to Ayaka as he now saw her and not as he had once known her. This is easily demonstrated, as he took no interest whatsoever in the person walking beside her, a young woman whose contours were no less lovely and who made just as little effort to conceal them.

Skulking along in the wake of her physical presence, Kohara attempted to recall the Ayaka of three years ago, the Clara Stahlbaum to whom he as Herr Drosselmeyer had given a plastic rose, countless times in rehearsal and once in public, before the eyes of over 700 parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, teachers and assorted relations of the children who had performed at Meinohama Cultural Centre.

What does time do? What is its role, its function? Time stops everything from occurring in a single breath. There was then and there is now. But the fact that there was a then, influences the now. Then and now intersect, and everything becomes complicated. This is inevitable, even though it does not occur in a single breath. Some things happen while others do not. Some people die while others are cured, of the same cancer. Death is an irreversible occurrence. Those who die impact the future differently from those who respond to chemotherapy. Irreversibility lies in the past, but the arrow flies ahead, pointing at possibilities. Kohara had no choice but to investigate, to explore them.

There is an unquestionable asymmetry in time. Einstein could utter formulas with cool certainty, but the perfect, eternal equation is an ideal, a pipe dream in the natural world. There is a whiff of ideology about such finality. It smacks of a religious yearning for the predictability of all things.

In reality, clouds of data rain down upon us.

Any attempt to formulate a correlation between Kohara's energy and Ayaka's body would at best be an approximation, involving a kind of multiple of the lightning speed at which she had stupefied him. Would this off-the-cuff calculation imply an astronomic amount? The energy required to make a born doubter walk like a man obsessed. And walk he did, hot on her trail.

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## **[8] Ayaka and the young woman**

Ayaka and the young woman beside her twittered incessantly, their shrill, animated words punctuated by nods, grunts, purrs and giggles. Their voices carried but not enough to permit Kohara to eavesdrop. Unable to decipher their chatter, he nevertheless understood that the two were 'girlfriends'. Their entire repertoire was geared towards mutual confirmation, reinforcing their entanglement, their attachment, their knowledge of each other, their sense of each other as

equals, though they could easily be deadly rivals in love, and one may not trust the other in the slightest: complete reciprocity in sugar-coated heartlessness.

They walked to the end of the street and reached a junction, a T topped by the main road to Nishijin. Here they turned right. Kohara had to pick up his pace briefly to keep sight of his quarry.

Ayaka and x crossed the road, obediently at the zebra crossing. Time was on Kohara's side and he managed to cross before the lights changed. He and the young women formed an unstable dynamic system that remained in balance for the time being, a distance of 20 to 40 metres from end to end.

*Along the coastline with its department stores, you bathe in light. Almond-brown eyes you inherit from the street. Tidal strands link the island, your burning cheeks, soft legs which sometimes stumble.*

The friends walked westwards and then took a left at the following junction, heading north towards the sea, Atagohama, Wave Coast, Building No. 6, home to Kohara's apartment.

They crossed the road once again. Distracted for a moment, Kohara almost missed them, was just in time to see x slip inside; Ayaka had already been swallowed by the hole in the wall called JunJun, a 'snack bar' where rudimentary dishes were served to a mostly nocturnal clientele. Solitary, male.

He walked on until he reached the beach, and from the beach continued to the Nokonoshima ferry departure terminal. From there a circuitous route led him back to Meinohama station.

His walking slowed to a gentle plod. It had stopped raining.