

HEAR THE WIND SING

by Haruki Murakami

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(typed by "a fan" on Haruki Murakami Forum)

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1.

"There's no such thing as perfect writing. Just like there's no such thing as perfect despair."

A writer I chanced to meet when I was in university told me this once. It was only much later that I caught on to the real meaning of those words, but at least I was able to find some consolation in them. That there is no such thing as perfect writing.

All the same, when it came to getting something into writing, I was always overcome with despair. The range of my ability was just too limited. Even if I could write, say, about elephants, I probably couldn't have written a thing about elephant trainers. So it went.

For eight years I was caught in that dilemma--and eight years is a long time.

Of course, you keep telling yourself there's something to be learned from everything, and growing old shouldn't be that hard. That's the general drift.

Ever since I turned twenty, I've tried to stick to that philosophy of life. Thanks to which I've been dealt smarting blows, been cheated and misunderstood

countless times, or just as often got myself into the strangest situations. All sorts of people have come my way telling their tales, trudged over me as if I were a bridge, then never come back. All the while I kept my mouth shut right and said nothing. That's how I saw out my late twenties.

Now I think I'm ready to talk.

Granted I haven't come up with one single solution to anything. For that matter, by the time I get through talking, things might be no different than when I started. You get right down to it, writing is no means to self-help. It's scarcely a passing attempt at self-help.

Still, it's awfully hard to tell things honestly. The more honest I try to be, the more the right words recede into the distance.

I don't mean to rationalize, but at least this writing is my present best. There's nothing more to say. And yet I find myself thinking that if everything goes well, sometime way ahead, years, maybe decades, from now, I might discover at last that these efforts have been my salvation. Then lo, at that point, the elephants will return to the plains and I will set forth a vision in words more beautiful.

I've learned a lot about writing from Derek Heartfield. Perhaps almost everything. Unfortunately, Heartfield was in every sense of the word a wasted talent. Read him and you'll see. His style is difficult, the stories impossible, the themes infantile. Nonetheless, he was one of those few writers distinguished by an ability to put up a good fight with words. A contemporary of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and that crowd, Heartfield was in my estimation no less a "fighter" than they. It was just that right through to the end Heartfield never got a clear picture who he should have been fighting. Ultimately, that was the waste of his talent.

For eight years and two months he struggled on in vain, then died. One fine Sunday morning in June, 1938, a portrait of Hitler clutched in his right hand and an open umbrella in his left, he leaped from the top of the Empire State Building. He was as unnoticed in death as he had been in life.

It was during summer vacation in my third year of middle school--and I'd come down with a terrible rash in my crotch--when an out-of-print word by Heartfield first found its way into my possession. The uncle who'd given me the book developed intestinal cancer three years later and died in excruciating pain, his guts all hacked to pieces and plastic pipes shoved in and out of his body. The last time I saw him, he'd shriveled up dark and red like some crafty old monkey.

Altogether I had three uncles, one of whom died on the outskirts of Shanghai.

Two days after the cease-fire, he stepped on a mine he himself had laid. My only surviving uncle has since become a sleight-of-hand artist who tours hot spring resorts throughout Japan.

Heartfield has this to say about good writing: "The task of writing consists primarily in recognizing the distance between oneself and the things around one. It is not sensitivity one needs, but a yardstick." (What's So Bad About Feeling Good?, 1936).

With me, it had to have been the year President Kennedy died that I took my yardstick in hand and began checking things out ever so cautiously. That's already been fifteen years ago, and in those fifteen years I've tossed out quite an assortment of things. Just like when an airplane has engine trouble and they start tossing out the baggage to reduce the weight, then the seats, and finally they'll even toss out the flight attendants. Over these fifteen years I've tossed out all kinds of things, but taken on almost nothing in the process.

I'm not entirely sure it was the right thing to do. Certainly it's made my load easier to bear, but the prospects are awfully scary: in old age, when it comes time to die, what on earth's going to be left of me? After my cremation there won't be a bone remaining.

"To those of gloomy spirit come only gloomy dreams." That's what my grandmother always said.

The night my grandmother died, the very first thing I did was reach out to close her eyes. And as I drew her eyelids down, the dreams of her seventy-nine years quietly dispersed like a passing summer shower on a shopping street, leaving not a thing behind.

One more point about writing. And this will be the last.

For me, writing is extremely hard work. There are times when it takes me a whole month just to write one line. Other times I'll write three days and nights straight through, only to have it come out all wrong.

Nonetheless, writing can also be fun. Compared to the sheer difficulty of living, the process of attaching meanings to life is altogether clear sailing.

Back in my teens, was it? I was so startled upon awakening to this truth, that for one week I didn't say a word. If I so much as paid the slightest attention to things, the world would start to conform to my will--that's what it seemed like. All values would shift, the very passage of time would change.

The catch became apparent, unfortunately, only much later. I'd rule a line down the middle of a notebook page, put down all the things I'd recently gained on the left, and on the right everything gone by the wayside--things I'd lost,

things I'd crushed, things I was glad to have lost track of, things I'd sacrificed, things I'd betrayed--the list was endless.

A gaping chasm separates what we try to be aware of and what we actually are aware of. And I don't care how long your yardstick is, there's no measuring that drop. What I can set down here in writing only amounts to a catalog. Not a novel, not literature, not even art. Just a notebook with a line ruled down the center. And maybe a lesson or two in it somewhere.

If it's art or literature you're looking for, you'd do well to read what the Greeks wrote. In order for there to be true art, there necessarily has to be slavery. That's how it was with the ancient Greeks: while the slaves worked the fields, prepared the meals, and rowed the ships, the citizens would bask beneath the Mediterranean sun, rapt in poetical composition or engaged in their mathematics. That's how it is with art.

More humans who root through their refrigerators at three o'clock in the morning are incapable of such writing.

And that includes me.

2.

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

3.

"The rich can all eat shit!"

The Rat turned to me and bellowed gloomily, both hands pressed on the counter. Or maybe he was shouting at the coffee mill behind me. The Rat was seated next to me at the counter, so there really wasn't any need for him to turn in my direction. But whatever, once he'd let off steam, he went back to savoring his beer with his usual satisfied expression.

To be sure, not a soul paid his outburst any attention. The tiny bar was packed, and who wasn't shouting just as loudly at someone else? The whole place seemed like a passenger ship about to go under.

"Lice, that's what they are!" The Rat shook his head vehemently, "Nothing but deadbeats the lot of them! Gives me the creeps just looking at their money-bag faces!"

I put my mouth to the lip of my beer glass and quietly nodded. The Rat had said

his piece and he fell silent and stared intently at his hand on the counter, turning his long fingers over and back, again and again, as if roasting them over a fire. I resigned myself to looking at the ceiling. There'd be no starting a new line of conversation until he'd finished examining his ten fingers in order. It was always like that.

We used to drink as if we were possessed. Over the course of one summer we managed to down a twenty-five-meter pool's worth of beer and eat enough peanuts to cover the floor of J's Bar two inches deep with shells. If we hadn't kept it up, we'd never have survived that boring summer.

A nicotine-yellowed print hung behind the counter of J's Bar, and when things got unbearably slow we'd stare at that picture for hours on end. The image was a pattern, something like a Rorschach test, in which I saw what seemed to be a face-off between two green monkeys tossing two tennis balls through the air at each other.

When I told J, the bartender, this, he paused a while to take a look, then came back with a noncommittal, "Well, now that you mention it . . ."

"What do you suppose it symbolizes?" I asked him.

"The left monkey is you and the right one's me. I'm tossing you a bottle of beer and you're tossing me the money for it."

I drank my beer, most impressed.

"They give me the creeps!"

The Rat was done with his finger check and had started in again. These tirades against the rich weren't anything new in the Rat, and in fact he really did hate them. The Rat's own family was fairly well off, yet whenever I pointed this out to him, his stock reply would be, "It's not my fault." On occasion (typically when I'd had too much beer), I'd tell him, "Nah, it's your fault all right." Once I'd gone and said that, I'd always feel awful. Because, in a way, the Rat had a point.

"Why do you think I can't stand rich people?"

That night, the Rat didn't stop. It was the first time he'd carried on this long.

I shook my head.

"Well, let me tell you." The Rat was forever "letting-me-tell-you" something. "It's 'cause the rich don't bother to figure out anything. They've got to have a flashlight and a yardstick even to scratch their own assholes."

"Do tell."

"Yeah, the whole lot of them don't have a worthwhile thought in their heads. They only pretend to think . . . And do you know why?"

"You got me."

"Because they don't need to. Sure, they have to use their heads a bit to get rich, but not in order to stay rich. Not any more than a satellite needs gasoline to keep going round and round in the same place. But that's not how it is with me or you. We've got to keep our wits about us just to live. We have to consider everything from tomorrow's weather to the size of the bathtub plug. Am I right or am I right?"

"Uh-huh."

"You see, that's how it is."

When the Rat had talked himself out, he pulled a tissue out of his pocket and blew his nose loudly. Just how serious he was about all this, I couldn't quite gauge.

"Still, everybody dies in the end," I ventured.

"So what else is new? Everybody's gotta die sometime. But up until that time there's a good fifty years of living to do, and let me tell you, living fifty years thinking about different things takes a hell of a lot more out of you than living five thousand years not thinking at all. Am I right?" I had to admit he had something there.

4.

I first met the Rat three years before in the spring. We'd both entered university that year, and the two of us had gotten pretty bombed. So I have absolutely no recollection what could possibly have thrown us together for that ride after four in the morning in the Rat's shiny black Fiat 600. I guess we had a friend in common.

In any case, we were rip-roaring drunk, on top of which the speedometer was hitting fifty. What better reason for us to plow through a park hedge, bulldoze over a patch of azaleas, and ram head on into a stone post? It was nothing short of sheer good fortune that neither of us was hurt.

When my head cleared from the shock, I kicked open the broken door and got out, only to find that the hood had been knocked clear off and landed thirty feet away in front of a monkey cage. The front of the car was indented neatly in the shape of the stone post, and the monkeys in the cage were most put out at having been so rudely awakened.

The Rat sat crumpled over, both hands on the wheel. Not hurt, just depositing the remains of the pizza he'd had an hour before onto the dashboard, I crawled up on top of the car and peered in through the sunroof over the driver's seat.

"You all right?"

"Uh-huh, a little bit too much to drink, though. Made me vomit."

"Can you get out?"

"You'll have to pull me up."

The Rat turned off the engine, took his pack of cigarettes from the dashboard, stuffed them in his pocket, then unhurriedly grabbed my hand to inch up onto the car roof. There we sat, side by side on the Fiat roof, gazing up at a sky just beginning to grow light, smoking cigarettes in silence. I don't know why, but a war movie starring Richard Burton came to mind. I have no idea what the Rat was thinking about.

"Man, Lady Luck's sure with us," said the Rat all of five minutes later. "I mean, look at us. Not a scratch. Can you believe it?"

I nodded. "The car's a wreck, though."

"Hey, don't worry about it. You can buy another car, but you can't buy Lady Luck."

This put me off a little, and I gave the Rat a look. "You that rich?"

"Seems so."

"Good for you."

The Rat didn't answer; he just kept shaking his head, dissatisfied. "Anyway, we're riding with Lady Luck."

"I guess so."

The Rat ground out his cigarette on the sole of his sneaker, then flicked the butt in the direction of the monkey cage.

"Hey, wouldn't we two make a team? Bet we could do great things."

"Like what for starters?"

"How about some beer?"

We bought a half-dozen beers from a nearby vending machine, walked to the beach, stretched out on the sand, and polished them off. Then we gazed at the sea. A marvelously clear day it was going to be.

"You can call me 'Rat'," he said.

"How'd you get a name like that?"

"I forget. Goes a long way back. At first I really hated being called that, but now I don't even think about it. You get used to anything."

We chucked all our empty cans into the sea, then lay down on the jetty and slept for an hour with a duffle coat pulled over our heads. When I woke up, my body was overflowing with some strange energy. It felt really odd.

"I bet I can hit seventy running," I told the Rat.

"Me too," said the Rat.

Actually, what we ended up having to do, though, was pay city hall for the damage to the park over a three-year period with interest.

5.

The Rat was horribly unread. In fact, I never saw him read anything except maybe a sports paper or a direct-mail flier. On occasion, when I'd be reading to kill

time, he'd peer at the book as puzzled as a fly looking at a fly swatter.

"Why do you read books?"

"Why do you drink beer?"

I answered the Rat between alternating bites of pickled mackerel and salad, not even looking at him. This plunged the Rat deep in thought. It was five minutes before he opened his mouth again.

"The great thing about beer is you can piss it all out. One out, one base, double play. All over and done with."

The Rat watched me continue eating as he said this.

"Why do you only read books?"

I washed down the last piece of mackerel with a swig of beer, pushed away my plate, and began to thumb through the copy of *Sentimental Education* I'd put aside.

"Because Flaubert's dead and gone, that's why."

"You don't read books by living authors?"

"Nothing of value in living authors."

"How's that?"

"When people are dead, you can forgive them 'most anything." I carried on my end of the conversation staring across at a rerun of "Route 66" on the television behind the counter. Again the Rat fell silent, absorbed in thought.

"Then how about people in the flesh? You can't forgive them 'most anything?"

"I wonder. Never gave it serious thought. But if push came to shove, that's probably how it'd turn out. I just might not have it in me to forgive them."

I came over and set down two more beers in front of us.

"And if you couldn't forgive, what then?"

"I'd cuddle my pillow just to get to sleep."

The Rat shook his head, looking positively bewildered.

"Strange about that. I don't know what to think, myself," said the Rat.

I refilled his glass, but even that didn't break his train of thought.

"When was it, the last time I read a book? It must have been last summer," the Rat said. "I forget the title and the author. I even forget why I read it. But anyway it was a novel, written by a woman. The main character was a woman, a famous fashion designer, thirty years old or so, and she's got it into her head that she has this incurable disease."

"What sort of disease?"

"I forget. Cancer or something. Any other incurable diseases around? . . . Well, so she goes to this beach-side resort, and start to finish she's fingering herself. In the bath, in the woods, on her bed, in the ocean, all kinds of places."

"In the ocean?"

"Uh-huh . . . Can you believe it? Now why would anyone write a novel like that? There's got to be any number of better things to write about."

"You'd think so."

"Novels like that, no thanks. Not for me. They make me want to puke."

I nodded.

"Me, I'd write a completely different kind of novel."

"Like for instance?"

The Rat ran his finger around the rim of his glass as he gave the matter some thought.

"How's this? I'm on a ship that goes down in the middle of the Pacific. There I am, clinging to my life preserver, gazing at the stars, floating all alone on the night sea. A beautiful, tranquil night. When what should happen? A young woman, also clinging to a life preserver, comes swimming out of nowhere."

"A hot number?"

"What do you expect?"

I took a sip of beer and shook my head.

"It sounds kind of dumb."

"Hear me out, will you? So the two of us are floating shoulder to shoulder there on the ocean, just shooting the breeze. Where we came from, where we were going, interests and pastimes, the sleeping partners we'd had, favorite television shows, dreams from the previous night, things like that. Then we have ourselves some beer."

"Hey, wait a second. Where on earth did the beer come from?"

The Rat thought a second.

"It'd been floating around. Cans of beer from the ship's galley. Along with some cans of sardines, OK?"

"Gotcha."

"Eventually dawn begins to break. 'What should we do?' she asks me. 'I think I'll start swimming toward an island,' she says. 'But what if there's no island?' I say. 'I think I'd rather stay put, floating and drinking beer. There's bound to be a rescue plane.' But she decides to swim off" anyway."

The Rat sighed and took a drink.

"The woman swims for two days and nights and finally reaches an island. Me, I've got my usual hangover when a plane shows up to rescue me. Then, a few years later, the two of us run into each other at a small bar in Yamate,"

"And I suppose you two have some beer for old times' sake."

"Doesn't it kind of get you?"

"I'm all broken up," I said.

6.

The Rat's novel had two points to recommend it: first, there was no sex scene; and second, nobody died. Left to his own devices, a guy will sleep with women and die anyway. That's the nature of the animal.

*

"So you think I was wrong?" she asked.

The Rat took a sip of beer and slowly shook his head. "Well, let me tell you, everybody's wrong."

"What makes you think that?"

"Urn," the Rat cleared his throat, then licked his lip, but no answer came.

"I swam my arms off trying to reach that island. I hurt so much I thought I was going to die. And that's not all. I kept thinking over and over again, what if maybe you were right and I was wrong? Here I was killing myself, so why were you just floating there doing nothing?"

At that she forced a little laugh, then pressed her temples disheartenedly. The Rat bought himself some time searching aimlessly through his pockets. For the first time in three years he wanted to smoke in spite of himself.

"Did you wish I would die?"

"A little."

"Honestly, just a little?"

"...I forget."

They both fell silent a while. The Rat felt as if he had to say something.

"Hey, all men are not created equal, you know."

"Says who?"

"John F. Kennedy."