



## The Kurodahan Press Translation Prize

It gives us great pleasure to announce the Kurodahan Press Translation Prize, awarded for excellence in translation of a selected Japanese short story into English. We hope that it will be possible to continue this prize as an annual event.

Kurodahan Press was established to preserve and circulate contemporary and historical observations of Asia, and to produce informative and entertaining translations. The Japanese literary world needs no help from us in producing outstanding works, but they cannot be introduced to a broader, global audience without skilled translators capable of rendering delicate nuances and atmospheres into another language.

The Kurodahan Press Translation Prize is held to help locate and encourage these translators.

The short story to be translated is メルクの黄金畑 by 高樹のぶ子, and is about 15,000 characters in length.

Submissions will be accepted through October 15, 2009, Japan time.

Three judges will select the winning entry (alphabetical order by surname):

- Juliet Winters Carpenter, Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts
- Meredith McKinney, Visiting Fellow, Japan Centre, Australian National University
- 酒井昭伸, translator of numerous English SF bestsellers into Japanese

The winning entry will receive a cash prize, and an additional payment for first English publication rights in our upcoming SF&F anthology. Submissions will not be returned, but translators will retain all applicable rights to their work.

For additional information and the contest package download, please see our website:

<http://www.kurodahan.com/mt/e/khpprize/>

or write us at:

Kurodahan Press  
3-9-10-403 Tenjin  
Chuo-ku, Fukuoka  
810-0001 JAPAN



## The 2009 Kurodahan Press Translation Prize

Kurodahan Press is pleased to announce the 2009 Kurodahan Press Translation Prize, awarded for translation excellence of a selected Japanese short story into English. In the event that the prize is awarded, the winning translation will be published in an upcoming Kurodahan Press anthology.

### 1. Eligibility

There are no restrictions whatsoever on translator participation. All translators are encouraged to apply, regardless of whether or not you have worked with us before.

### 2. Submission

Send your translation to the below address, by regular postal mail or (preferably) E-mail.

Please be sure to read the submission instructions, which cover formatting requirements (for both printouts and electronic files) and provide information on Kurodahan Press standards and other points. Submission instructions are given in the style sheet included in the contest package at:

<http://www.kurodahan.com/mt/e/khpprize/2009prize.pdf>

Submitted translations will not be returned, but the translator will retain all rights to the translation. Kurodahan Press will receive first publication rights to the winning translation, to be arranged under a separate and specific agreement.

No information about any submissions, including the names or contact information for people submitting translations, will be made available to any third party, including the judges, with the exception of the name of the winner (or a pseudonym, if the winner prefers). Translators are of course welcome to tell anyone they wish that they have made submission.

### 3. Source material

The story to be translated is

高樹のぶ子      メルクの黄金畑      Roughly 15,000 字

The submission package, including provisional table of contents for the anthology, style sheet and instructions, is available as a downloadable PDF. Note that because the story is in print, translators are requested to purchase the book (ファンタジア), which is available at most bookstores, including Amazon Japan <http://www.amazon.co.jp/dp/4167373173/>

If you are unable to purchase the book please contact us directly.

### 4. Application Deadline

Translations must be received no later than October 15, 2009. A notice confirming receipt will be issued. The results should be announced by the end of the year.



#### 5. Submission address and contact

Grand Prize / one winner

30,000 yen prize money, and contract for publication in an upcoming Kurodahan Press anthology for an additional payment of 30,000 yen (first English publication rights; translator keeps all other rights to translation).

Note: Prize payments will be subject to source-tax deductions as required by Japanese law.

Submissions should be sent to:

Kurodahan Press

3-9-10-403 Tenjin

Chuo-ku, Fukuoka

810-0001 Japan

Electronic submissions preferred via our website.

#### 6. Notification

All contest entrants will be informed of the contest results. The winner's name will be posted on the Kurodahan Press website.

#### 7. Judging

All decisions will be final and except in extremely unusual circumstances the reasons for the decision and the specific votes of the judges will not be revealed. The goal of the contest, simply stated, is to produce an English translation faithful to the original, which can be read and enjoyed by someone with no specialized knowledge of Japan or Japanese.

The winner will be selected by the following three judges:

Meredith McKinney, Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University

Juliet Winters Carpenter, Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts

酒井昭伸, translator of numerous English SF bestsellers into Japanese



## Style Guide for Kurodahan Translation Contest Submissions

v1.1 of May 31, 2008

This document is in two parts. The first part refers to the technical specifications we expect to see in documents submitted to us. The second part covers conventions of usage we prefer to see. As one might expect, the first part is less open to modification than the second part.

### Part One: Technical Specifications

#### Word processing:

Please submit documents in Microsoft Word DOC format if possible. RTF or TXT files are also acceptable, but DOC files are preferred. If you would like to use a different file format please contact us in advance.

#### Document formatting:

Use a common font (such as Times) at 10 or 12 point size.

As much as possible, use only one font at one size throughout your document. See part two for a discussion of special accented characters.

Use italics for emphasis.

Do not start paragraphs with tabs, and do not insert an extra return between paragraphs.

If there is a blank line in the source text, use "\*\*\*blank line" in the document.

You can use headers and footers if you wish, but do not put important information in headers or footers if it does not also appear somewhere else. If possible (depending on your software), put page numbers and your name in either the header or footer on every page.

#### Document layout:

On the first page of your document, include the following information in the following order. Please put

(1) Your name. (This line can also include the translator's assertion of copyright.) You may of course specify a pseudonym for public release if you prefer, but please make it very clear which is which.

(2) Your contact information (current mailing address, telephone number and email). This information will be kept confidential from everyone except KHP administrative personnel and Japanese tax authorities. Specifically, it will not be released to other contestants, judges or the general public. It is required for Japanese tax purposes, however.

#### File name conventions:

Please give the file your own name, without spaces and using only letters and numerals. If your name is Fred Smith, for example, name your file something like FredSmith.doc. Please add the correct extension for the file type if you are using a Macintosh, UNIX or other non-Windows system.

#### In general:

Avoid fancy formatting of all types. The contest judges your translation and writing abilities, not your artistic skills.

Make your document plain and simple. It may not be as attractive as you might like, but it will keep problems and file sizes to a minimum.



## Part Two: Style Conventions

For the sake of convenience and to aid in mutual understanding, Kurodahan Press turns to the Chicago Manual of Style to answer questions as they arise. We will not always follow the Chicago Manual's advice, but we will start there to explain what we prefer to see in print.

For information on handling uniquely Japanese situations, we refer to the style guide of Monumenta Nipponica, which is available as a downloadable PDF from

[http://monumenta.cc.sophia.ac.jp/MN\\_Style.html](http://monumenta.cc.sophia.ac.jp/MN_Style.html)

Kurodahan Press uses American English as the basis of its own documents and most of its publications. If a translator prefers to use a different set of spelling and usage conventions, we will not object, but we will insist on internal consistency. Punctuation will follow American usage as outlined in the Chicago Manual.

We also use the following general reference works as authorities: Encyclopaedia Britannica, and for U.S. spelling, and Webster's Third New International Dictionary (the big heavy one that was in your school library).

We view matters of style and usage as conventions, not laws, and so we are open to reasoned argument if a translator wishes to do something other than what we initially require. Please be aware that "this is right" and "this is wrong" are not in themselves convincing arguments.

Representing the source language in the translation:

While Kurodahan Press normally romanizes extended vowels with macrons, people submitting translations may have difficulty with these special characters. For that reason, while we welcome the use of macrons or circumflexes over extended vowels, they are not required and will not be considered when judging a submission.

Chinese, Japanese, and Korean names are given in Asian order (for example: Murakami Haruki). Western names are given in Western order (for example: Tom Hanks). The general principle we follow is this: we wish to represent names as they would be represented in the source language culture. We recognize that this gets tricky sometimes, so discussion is possible in special cases. The name of a character in a Japanese novel is not, in our view, a special case.

Recasting passages:

Recasting is often necessary to make an original text read smoothly in English. Our goal is to produce texts that will appeal to general readers: translations should read smoothly, and should not attract attention to themselves in places where their original authors did not intend to attract attention.

Allusions in the source text:

A source text will often refer to a work of art or literature, to a cultural practice, proverb, famous place, or other aspect of common culture that readers of the original can be expected to understand. In cases where English readers could be expected to follow the allusion, the translation should attempt to reproduce it as closely as possible. If the source text refers to something which would be unfamiliar to English readers, the translation should recast the passage to retain the flavor of the original as much as possible. This may involve brief, discreet definitions (something like: "Amaterasu, the sun goddess") or more substantial recasting.



Quoted titles of works in the source language:

If a work makes reference to a publication in the source language, the translator should (a) romanize the reference if the work is not available in English translation, or (b) replace it with a reference to the most recent published English translation. If the atmosphere conveyed by a title, rather than the specific text being referred to, is most important to the meaning of a passage, the translator might choose to translate the title. This applies to works of fiction intended for general readers – specialist texts, nonfiction, and bibliographies require different treatment.

Unusual dialects

This is a constant problem, and many attempts at dialect can be way off course. You should try to suggest regional accents or bumpkin-ness through a few well-chosen words and phrases, and leave most of the sentences as standard speech.

Many translators have suggested or used many different ways of doing this, but (in our considered opinion) none of them is really successful. For example, "Them people up there" as opposed to "those people" is preferable to "Them people uppa yonder." We want to suggest something of the flavor of the original, but we can't slow readers down, or make them laugh when the scene isn't funny, or (the worst) make them stop and think "that's odd." Using prohibition-era gangster slang for a yakuza speaking Osaka dialect just doesn't work.



## Contents of Speculative Japan Volume 2

AWA Naoko 安房直子

海からの贈り物 (about 4600 字)

ENJOE Toh 円城塔

Freud (about 8400 字)

HORI Akira 堀晃

開封 (about 2800 字)

KAJIO Shinji 梶尾真治

おもいでエマノン (about 10,300 字)

KITAKUNI Kōji 北國浩二

靄の中 (about 13,200 字)

KOBAYASHI Yasumi 小林泰三

海を見る人 (about 22,800 字)

NAKAI Norio 中井紀夫

山の上の交響楽 (about 21,000 字)

OGAWA Issui 小川一水

老ヴォールの惑星 (about 23,000 字)

ŌHARA Mariko 大原まり子

銀河ネットワークで歌を歌ったクジラ (about 18,200 字)

ONDA Riku 恩田陸

大きな引き出し (about 12,400 字)

TAKAGI Nobuko 高樹のぶ子

メルクの黄金畑 (about 15,000 字)

TANI Kōshū 谷甲州

仮装巡洋艦バシリスク (about 49,000 字)

YAMAO Yūko 山尾悠子

遠近法 (about 14,400 字)

## Scoring scheme for Kurodahan Press Translation Prize submissions

The goals of the contest are given in the announcement as “to produce an English translation faithful to the original, which can be read and enjoyed by someone with no specialized knowledge of Japan or Japanese.”

Scoring is broken down into three sections, all of which are left up to your individual subjective judgments. You do not have to give any reason for your decisions; that’s why you’re jurors. This is merely a suggestion as to one possible way of judging the entries. Be sure to read the paragraph at the very bottom, too!

### 1. Translation accuracy

This part is fairly straightforward, and can be handled fairly simply by merely rating the translation as

Unsatisfactory: 0 points

Significant translation errors or Japanese-specific issues that are not explained sufficiently for the English-only reader.

Acceptable: 5 points

No major problems, but a lot of nuances and peripheral meanings that would add depth to the work in English have been lost in translation.

Good: 10 points

Pretty obvious.

### 2. Representation of the original

Probably the most subjective part of all, this is your judgment of how well the translator captured the style, atmosphere, thrust, etc of the author. Naturally no translation will provide the same reading experience as the original, but how close did the translator come? Do you feel that the translator has inserted too many of his own interpretations? Or failed to reasonably convey the intent of the author?

Just go ahead and assign a point total from 0 (terrible) to 10 (superb). Again, 5 would be “acceptable,” representing the average translator.

### 3. English flow

Regardless of how the translator has actually translated the work, how was the English itself? Vocabulary, structure, readability, flavor, etc. Does it still have that “醤油臭さ” with the source Japanese visible between the lines? Does it feel like it was written in English? Perhaps all traces of Japan have been obliterated and it could work equally well in Poughkeepsie?

Just go ahead and assign a point total from 0 (terrible) to 10 (superb). Again, 5 would be “acceptable,” representing the average translator.

If everything works properly, this should give each work a total point count of from zero to 90 (three jurors), which should be enough to eliminate ties.

### Note on Romanization:

There are many ways to Romanize Japanese, and I don’t think we should penalize translators for using uncommon ones. Translating 太郎 as Tarō, Tarou, Taroh or Taro is acceptable (although I personally prefer the first one). If the translator chooses to write Jiro instead, that’s just flat wrong.

### Special note for judges who really don’t have time for all this nonsense:

The point is to try to make sure different submissions end up with different point totals. As long as that can be accomplished, you can forget about the scoring methods describes above and just assign a single total score of zero to ten, with ten being best. The goal is to figure out which translation is best, not eat up all your spare time!



## 考課基準

まちがえやすい箇所、訳しにくい箇所を書きだした。以下はごく一部で、これ以外にも気になる点はチェックしている。

	頁	対象	基準
01	75	メルクの黄金畑	<p>ワイン用の葡萄は樹高を低く育てるものが多く、「畑」の範疇に収まるものと認識している。だが、この短篇に出てくるブドウ園は鬱蒼として、周囲から掩いかぶさってくるような神秘的・黄金の迷宮的雰囲気を持っている。それをfieldと訳していいものかどうか。</p> <p>また、「黄金畑」というのはちょっと不思議なことばで、日本の読者には中身を読まない具体的なイメージは連想しにくいものに対して（だからファンタジーとして成立する）、golden fields等としてしまうと、英語圏の読者は小麦畑のようなものを連想してしまうのではないか。それは原題が持つ不思議な雰囲気を著しくそこねることにならないか。</p> <p>そのため、ここは大きな判定基準になると思ったのだが、悩んだ末に、このへんは英語ネイティブでないと判断できないものと結論した。fieldでもvineyardでもacresでも、みなOKとする。</p>
02	75	また来る、と月に言った。	<p>大過去になっているか。ここも英語ネイティブでないとわかりにくい面があるが、いつの時点での叙述であるか、混乱している人もいる。明らかにおかしいものは減点した。</p>
03	75	はばかりれ、	<p>ここは主人公の性格を表わす部分でもあるので、「気が進まない」だけでは弱い。「遠慮した」ニュアンスまで訳してほしい。</p>
04	75	何よりドイツ語圏の人の英語は解りやすい。	<p>「何より」をmore thanなど比較の意味にとっていないか（何人かいた）。「解りやすい」理由をまちがえていないか（こちらはひとり）。</p>
05	75	老婦人と友達になったが～犬までが甲高く吠えた。	<p>老婦人を老夫婦としている人が何人もいた。それは論外としても、この犬は小型犬をイメージできるように訳すことが重要ではないか。老婦人は小型犬を抱きかかえて運んでいるらしく、乗り継ぎ待ちのホームでいっしょになったか、列車に乗りあわせたかして、話がはずんだらしい。原文からはそこまでイメージできる。</p>
06	76	岩や深い緑を雲のように従えて、	<p>修道院を雲に見たてた翻訳がちらほらあったが、原文では「岩や深い緑」が「雲のよう」に広がっていて、そのうえに修道院のドーム等が頭をつきだしている。修道院を「地上の楽園」とする暗示もすこしある気がするので、ここの風景描写は的確にお願いしたい。</p>
07	76	あまりにも華美だ。	<p>たんに美しいと絶賛しているだけではない。修道院にしては美しすぎるという含みを持たせている。</p>
08	76	緑青	<p>色合いを適切に訳しているか。このお話は色が非常に重要な意味を持つ。色の再現性には気をつけてほしい。緑青の色にも幅はあるが、vivid greenなどという表現はどんなものか。</p>
09	77	言われるだけのことはある。	<p>さすがだ、というニュアンスを訳せているか。</p>
10	77	金色に取り囲まれると人間は、	<p>この「人間」を"I"として、自分の経験のように訳していないか。「自己の思いや体験」と「それを基に推定される人間の普遍的な反応や考え」とは峻別してほしい。</p>
11	77	日本の浄土思想	<p>金色堂や来迎図に代表される、荘厳で金ピカのイメージに接すると、人は強い畏怖の念をいだく、というほどの意味だろう。西方浄土に限定すると意味がちがってくる。念仏もこの文脈では無関係。綴りは幅があってもいいが、ジョードーという表記はどんなものか。</p>
12	77	マルク	<p>辺境区をちゃんと訳せているか。メルクという辺境区があったわけではない。綴りはいろいろ見られたが、評者には判定できない。</p>
13	77	バーベンベルグ家	<p>家をFamilyとするのは、もちろんまちがいでないが、当時のオーストリアの支配家として、作者はThe House of Babenbergとしてほしいところだと思う。</p>
14	78	むしろ改革を	<p>「むしろ」をちゃんと訳しているか。これを訳さないと文脈が繋がらない。つながっていない人が大半。</p>

## 考課基準

	頁	対象	基準
15	78	“知性”が集まっていたことになる。	「知性」を「知性ある人々」として訳せているか。
16	78	当時からこの修道院には	<p>「当時から」を「当時すでに」の意味で訳せているか。これができていた人は数えるほど。ここは「当時すでに文芸執筆室があり、そこで製作された作品の大半がこのときの大火で燃えてしまった」の意味。「その当時から現在にかけて、文芸執筆室で作られた作品の大半が（たび重なる出火で）燃えてしまった」としている例が多いが、この段落の内容は、すべて一回めの大火に関する記述。13世紀よりもあとのことには触れていない。</p> <p>なお、文芸執筆室はscriptorium としている人が多いが、これでいいんだろうか？ ちとちがう気がするが。わからないので、これについては減点も加点もしていない。</p>
17	79	春に来たときは	自分の経験として訳せているか（第10項に同じ）。
18	79	石畳	cobbleなどとしていないか。石畳は板石で石が比較的大きいイメージがあるのに対して、cobbleでは小さな玉石サイズも含むので、イメージがずれる恐れがあることを危惧したのだが……結局、cobble もアリとした。stone-pavedが無難だとは思いますが。
19	79	地元のお年寄り	単数形もまちがいはいいきれないが……。この場合、日本人は二、三人をイメージするのではないか。店も一軒ではなく、数軒のような印象を受ける。
20	80	夏場の、一年の、一生の、	三つとも訳すことが重要。こういう言いまわしを訳さずしてなんの文芸翻訳ぞ。
21	80	大声をあげずとも	「ふつうに会話する大きさの声」という意味。小声で、などと訳していないか。
22	81	と目を細めた。	「ほほえむ」の意味に訳せているか。引っかかっている人が多い。
23	82	身動きしない信者の姿もいくつかあるが、	「いくつか」を「多数」としている例が散見せられる。
24	82	最初はざわめいていたがすぐに静かに沈みこんだ。	これは難しい。が、主人公の心がざわめいたのではないと思う。彼女を迎えて、黄金像たちが一瞬ざわめいたような錯覚をおぼえたが、すぐに鎮まった……ということではないだろうか。じっさいに音がしたわけではない。
25	82	ペテロとパウロは～深紅のマントの女性	ペーターが修道院でなにをやらかしたのかはわからない。が、ここでの Peter と Paul、woman in red cloakの描写は、なにかを暗示している可能性がある。ペーターの相手がかならずしも女性であったとはかぎらないということだ。ペーター夫婦のあいだに子供がいらないらしいことも、その暗示かもしれない。この認識いかんで、ラスト近くの訳し方が変わってくるように思う。
26	85	言葉にすればどうということもない。	言葉にすればたいした内容には聞こえない、けれども、あえて言葉にするなら、次行の「人間で、何と凄いをやってくれるのだろう」ということ。たしかに、「ことばではうまく表現できない」という含みがあるが、とにかくにも「言葉にして」おり、「この程度の表現では不足」という意味なので、そのように訳してほしい。
27	85	アヴァ女史の「イエスの生涯」	実在とわかるように訳してあればペター。Leben JesuとしてLife of Jesusと補足するとか、作者をAva of MelkやFrau Avaとするとか。Lady Avalは貴婦人みたいでは？
28	85	つい最近、といっても一九九九年に	ここの時間の流れでは「つい最近」だが、じっさいにはもう何年もたっている。要するに、「比較的最近である一九九九年」ということ。「つい最近、具体的には一九九九年」のように訳している人が多い。

## 考課基準

	頁	対象	基準
29	87	顎から首にかけての皮膚も垂れているが、	「顎の皮膚が首に垂れている」と読めるものがあるが、「顎の皮膚も首の皮膚も垂れている」の意味。
30	89	ヨハン・ベルグル	Johann Berglと綴るべきでは。Bergerと綴っている例がちらほら見られるが、英語表記ではこれもアリ？
31	96	青い実の房	<p>原文を見たとき、評者は文字どおりブルー（明るい青から濃紺、紫まで）の品種だと思った。「青い」には「未熟」や「緑」の意味があるが、「未熟ではなさそう」とあるから前者ではないだろうし、この状況で「緑色のブドウ」を指すときは、「青い」ではなく、「緑の」と表現するのが自然に思えたからだ。</p> <p>しかし、「青い実の房」から「緑色のブドウ」を連想する人もいる。何人かにたずねてみたところ、半数は「緑のブドウ」と答えた。また、黄色と緑の葉のあいだにまぎれて見わけにくいのなら、緑色である可能性もある。作者が自覚していない方言の可能性もあるだろう。</p> <p>結局のところ、これは作者に訊かないとわからない。</p> <p>したがって、green, purple, blue, みんなOKとする。</p>
32	92	レストラン「エリマキカラス」	<p>こういうカラス名は存在しないようだが、現地での呼び名を訳すところなるのかもしれない。あるいは、ベネディクト派修道士の象徴として、あえてこの名を造語してあてたのか（カラスの姿が文中の修道士の描写と重なることに注意。エリマキは修道士の襟を暗示している可能性がある。すくなくともショールやバンダナの意味ではないと思う。エリマキトカゲを検索すれば、エリマキの意味の幅の広さがわかるはず）。</p> <p>ただ、実在のありふれたカラスでないと話が成立しにくいので、ここは修道士の服装を連想させる姿をしたHooded Crowとするのが順当ではないだろうか。Hooded という名前も修道士に通じるものがあるし。</p> <p>Collared Crowは原文そのままだが、この名前の種はヨーロッパに棲息していないのが難。</p> <p>もちろん、架空の名をあてるのも一案ではある。Ringed Crow はアリか。gray necked raven はイメージがつかみやすい造語だが、店の名前としてはどうだろう。</p>
33	94	少し苦みのあるオイルだそうだ。	少し苦みがあるとわかったのは、いまペーターから説明を受けたから。「前にそう聞いたことがあるので」「知識として知っているので」「苦そうだから」オイルを断わった、としている人が多い。
34	96	赤い葡萄の葉には紅い色が混じる	赤い実をつけるブドウは、不思議に葉にも赤い色が表われるということ。逆にいうと、何色の実がつくかわからないブドウでも、葉に赤い色が混じれば、ああ、これは赤い実が成るとわかる。微妙にずれている人が多い。
35	97	美しすぎることは怖い。	「このブドウ園が美しすぎて怖い」としている人が多いが、「このブドウ園にかぎらず、美しすぎるものすべてが怖い」という意味。これをちゃんと訳さないと、うしろの文章と微妙につながらない。
36	103	なまめいて	<p>ここはセクシュアルなイメージが必要だと考える。「性的な禁断の実を食べてしまった」という含みがあると思われるからだ。この直前で、「修道士の服装に似た柄のカラス」が「ココの服の色をしたブドウの実を食べる」描写は、ペーターがかつて修道院でとった行動の暗示と思われるため、alluringやseductiveでは弱い気がする。eroticは適切、amorousはエクセレントに思えるが、このへんは英語ネイティブでないといけない。</p> <p>いっぽう、「生きもの」を animal や small animal とするのはどんなものか。小動物の吐息にそそられはしないでしょう。性的イメージをほのめかすように訳すべきだと思うのだが。</p>

Sakai-san also made this comment in a separate email, which is certainly worth considering.

このリストにはあがってこない性質のものですが、改行も重視しています。

日本とは改行の考えかたがちがうので、原文より改行を減らしたほうが、英文は読みやすくなると思っています。が、それも程度問題。あまり改行の少ないものは大幅に減点します。改行も文体の一部ですからねえ。ここんところは、原文を愛してくれているか、作者を尊重してくれているかの判断規準でもあります。

もうすこしいうと、改行のなかには、「ここだけは絶対に改行が必要」という作者のこだわりどころがあって、そのこだわりどころを識別できているかどうかポイント。ただ、そこまで要求するのは酷かもしれないので、評価には反映させないかもしれません。

## The Golden Fields of Melk

By Takagi Nobuko

A long time ago I visited Melk by car. Back then spring was still young, and the misty moon hung over the forests standing guard like fortresses along the banks of the Danube. As if it did not want to be overtaken by darkness, the sky still held on to a deep indigo hue as the low moon glided just over the top of the mountains, following my car.

I remember saying to the moon: *I will come again.*

In order to fulfill my promise, I took a train from Vienna's West Station. It was October, a different season entirely, and the weather was clearer.

I had gotten used to traveling through Austria on my own. Last time a student attending the University of Vienna had driven me, but I had hesitated to ask her again. After all, I could speak to the station attendants and train staff in English, for it was easy enough to understand the Germans when they spoke in their sister tongue. This happened to be the case in the restaurants, hotels, and taxis I frequented too.

I arrived at Sankt Pölten within forty minutes. While changing to the local train there, I befriended an older woman with her dog, who boasted that the abbey in Melk was the most beautiful in the world. Even the dog barked loudly, as if in agreement.

The train reached Melk station in a little less than half an hour.

Melk's abbey was at the top of a high hill, the wide brown roof of which complemented the surrounding boulders and greenery. The long walls under this roof were painted in alternating yellow and white stripes, and looked as sturdy as fortress walls. The green dome erected in the center and the two towers overlooking the Melk River were purely decorative and rather too gaudy. The two towers were vivid with their white and yellow walls and their green patina roofs, which flowed and curved from the tip down toward the round clock dials on each tower, shining with golden color here and there.

Just looking at this section gave the impression of a palace rather than a church or abbey.

The interior itself was done up in gold and multicolored marble. Moreover, all of the molding was done in soft, detailed curves; it was said to be the pride of Austrian Baroque architecture.

The architects who, during the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, re-modeled this abbey into its current form with vast amounts of gold and piety, unmistakably wanted to create a temporal Heaven atop this hill in Melk. I could tell that it was not passionate love and longing that inspired them, but a certain tenacious, implacably divine energy.

Last time I stood within it, a mere person overwhelmed by the golden splendor around me, I felt drained of my sense of reality; I even remember feeling weightless at one point. I wanted to re-experience that bodily sensation – the kind I believe the Pure Land sect in Japan obtains through their *nembutsu* chanting rituals – from the magical power of the gold.

The history of this abbey begins around the 10<sup>th</sup> century, well before becoming resplendent with Baroque beauty. This site had been used as a fortress and the soldiers got together and built a sanctuary right in the center of it. All the fortresses guarding what was then a frontier district known as the Ostmark took the names of tributaries of the Danube: Weins, Ybbs, Melk, and Krems. The most important one, by far, was Melk.

At that time the House of Babenberg ruled this country. They offered protection to the meditating monks who established this abbey, which became a base for the Benedictine order.

The abbey's stewards have changed hands over time, yet it has not only continued to be a religious center but has continued its existence as a lofty peak of theological scholarship and art.

Of course, over the years a number of trials and tribulations assaulted Melk. One of these was political and economic unrest due to the Reformation. Melk, hand in hand with Vienna University, took the initiative for launching a body of monastic reforms known as the Melk Reforms.

It was interesting that the abbey chose to side with the Council of Vienna University instead of the Pope in Rome. As a result, relations with the Vatican deteriorated, but this also meant that academic theory and scholarship were prioritized.

Nowadays science explains the truth of things to us, but at that time the quest for Truth lay in understanding God's plan. Based on that context, the new policies put forth by the abbey combined rigorous "scholarship" and an almost modern "intelligence".

Fires struck the abbey many times.

In a cold region, the only way you can keep yourself warm in winter is through tending a fire. In a high-altitude place such as the abbey, there is not enough water readily accessible. An accidental blaze, then, would pose a serious problem.

The abbey's scriptorium was destroyed by fire at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The monks sacrificed themselves in order to keep the precious hymnals and Passion plays dating from Melk's earlier days from being lost in the fire. Ever since that time, the abbey has had a room devoted to preserving works of art and literature, exquisite paintings as well as chronological records that the monks produced with great vigor, but many of these have been lost over time.

Even more tragic was the great fire of 1736 in which the abbey built by master architect Jakob Prandtauer – also showing off his skills as an interior decorator, mason, and sculptor – was destroyed, the roof and all the elaborate rooms being lost to the flames just as his great work was one step away from completion. The abbot, Berthold Dietmayr, ordered the abbey to be rebuilt, but unfortunately he passed away before he could see his successors' efforts bringing forth the Baroque masterpiece that we have today.

The two great fires caused a lot of damage but more importantly, everyone at the abbey came to fear fire to a bizarre extent, even small, trifling ones. For instance, as they would not use fire in their daily lives, the priests and monks always wore long sleeved garments in order to shield themselves from the cold.

As it is located in the middle of Europe, this region tends to be cold; ice remained in the Melk River even when I came in the springtime. Now it was autumn, and the sky still glittered beautifully with the last remnants of the summer sun, but the temperature had fallen to around 10 °C, casting images of a long winter into my head.

On the stone paved road in front of the town hall there was an open restaurant with chairs and tables adorned with tablecloths set up, but there were no customers to be seen. One of the elderly locals was nonchalantly drinking tea. He had the air of someone taking a breather after having finished a long summer's work, a year's work, a lifetime's work. The main street was so narrow that people in the café and gift shop on opposite sides of the road could hold conversations with each other without raising their voices.

And looking down upon the road were the abbey's two towers and green dome, as if the whole town were under the protection of their watchful gaze.

Ascending a gentle slope, I was greeted by a beautiful gate with a circular arch supporting a triangular roof. Ahead of me I can see another gate of the same type. The abbey was surely within that gate, a sanctuary of learning that could not be intruded upon, but one was allowed to enter the interior halls and apartments. Although, there was nobody there but myself.

When I passed through the first gate, from all sides of the interior garden came the sound of a large flock of birds fluttering away. I wanted to turn back, having disturbed them, but I realized it wasn't the sound of birds but rather children; dozens of children,

running all at once along the stone-paved path, down the hill and past the gate. And then I was alone again.

After watching the children go off, a priest in a black frock and a white collar appeared before me. He seemed to be their teacher.

He approached me and greeted me with a smile. *You seem astonished*, his expression seemed to say. "I am called the Wind," he said, his eyes narrowing.

"Of course." I smiled back at him.

"Those are the underclassmen. When they wear the white ceremonial garments we call them the Rabbit Winds."

*Where were these "rabbits" going in their plainclothes?* I wondered.

Without answering my question, the teacher said, "When they become upperclassmen they become unable to run." Behind the glasses he wore, there was a twinkle in his eyes.

I figured certain students chosen from among that group would soon begin their rather strict training as Benedictine monks, eventually becoming priests.

The wind died down, and in the silence that remained I began walking toward the next gate.

It was quiet. Within the vast building were students on their way to becoming monks. I'd heard that most of them lived in the dormitories but the atmosphere around here seemed clear, grave, and unsullied by human breath.

Quiet solemnity is important for a religious site, Christian or Buddhist alike. My favorite thing about this place was this very atmosphere; like finely chilled, gold-tinged white wine, it would soak into my lungs all the way into my mind, heart, and soul. The abbey's chapel added to this sensation, bringing me to the point of intoxication.

There were a number of worshippers standing around but they were outnumbered many times over by statues of human figures coated in gold leaf, looking down nonchalantly upon us as if they were denizens of Heaven itself. Whereas things had been astir when I first entered, everything was now settling down into silence.



The high altar was particularly overwhelmed with gold and marble. Right above it statues of the apostles Peter and Paul clasped hands tightly as if mourning being driven apart; I could imagine them spurring each other on to prepare for their deaths and martyrdom. Their entire bodies were golden. Surrounding them were figures of the Old Testament prophets: Daniel, Jeremiah, David, and Isaiah, all of whom were also golden. The saints and angels hanging off the walls above the high altar, almost all the way up to the ceiling, also shined with golden color. It was enough to cause hallucinations. I wondered to myself if the builders of this place didn't have that as an ulterior motive.

Peter and Paul were executed on the same day. Peter was crucified upside-down while Paul, a Roman citizen, was beheaded. The fresco above the high altar depicted a woman shrouded in a blood-red mantle, wearing a crown of thorns, with instruments of torture scattered at her feet. What a thing it was, I thought, for her to suffer such torture yet rise to such heights. I could envision her blood flowing in copious amounts onto the gold figures below.

Although it was an extravagant and showy place, I attempted to imagine the bodily sufferings of those who died in the name of Christ until visions of people screaming in the throes of agony arose in my mind.

In Christianity martyrs are canonized into saints, and famous churches in Europe have preserved the bodies of certain saints as objects of worship and reverence. St. Coloman of Stockerau, originally a pilgrim from Ireland, came here to Melk and was hanged from an elder tree. His corpse was brought here before it could rot away, and now his body is kept in a glass case fringed by gold, his skeleton adorned to the maximum.

When I passed by in front of this display, I felt a bit uneasy at the thought of being hung from an elderbush and then having my bones displayed like this, bleaching under peoples' stares for a thousand years.

Leaving the chapel, I walked down a long hallway illuminated by iron lanterns suspended from its white ceilings. That these lanterns were used to light up the place must have been a recent development in the history of the Melk abbey. They made me think of candlelit silhouettes cast on the walls.

Ascending a stone staircase, I entered a hallway called the Emperor's Gallery. In a room called the Marble Hall I watched sightseers who had come in to look around before me. A woman, carrying a backpack and holding what looked like a guidebook, was scrutinizing the paintings on the walls.

We smiled as we passed each other. I felt relieved. Standing in the Marble Hall and the Emperor's Gallery, I could see that Melk held an important place in the hearts of Austria's rulers, such as the House of Babenburg and the House of Hapsburg. It was simultaneously a palace, a fortress, and a place for pilgrimage and spiritual devotion.

In the Marble Hall the Emperor would meet with the high priests; to receive messages from God I suppose. When I moved forward a little further, I could see windows on three sides of the room.

I emerged onto a large front semi-circular terrace.

Surrounding the town of Melk and the Melk River was a forest that, as if covered by a flowing white veil, appeared greenish grey in the light from the sun shining overhead. When I looked closely I could see the ebb and flow of the river as it flowed incessantly downstream.

Then there was the abbey's library, which outsiders were permitted to enter. It was a change of pace from the chamber meant for the Emperor's use. This library was even more fascinating than the golden chapel. The reason I had wanted to return to Melk was because I had wanted to see it again.

When I opened the thick door and entered I came into a severe and grave room, the atmosphere of which was totally different than the chapel lined with gold.

It was a four-cornered room that stretched further towards the interior, with narrow windows on sides and stacks of leather-bound books reaching toward the ceiling – leaving space for the windows. The leather bindings displayed patterns and letters in gold paint, but these were dull and subdued, having taken on centuries of age; it was like a mountain of lifeless books.

People had taken an incredible amount of energy to copy these books all by hand. I could imagine this room, now filled with lifeless books, flowing with that energy and the voices, sighs and sweat belying the scribes' efforts. Last time I stood in the center of this room I was met with a certain sensation, a sensation that I wanted to feel again.

Just what kind of amazing things has Man attempted? It is not the kind of thing that can be expressed in words.

Here were kept handwritten books such as the *Book of Admonishments*, dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and a copied manuscript of the *Vergilius*, from the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Copies were also made here of the commentaries of St. Jerome. There were also books on Benedictine precepts, Scripture, legal texts, theology and, oh! Even *The Life of Jesus*, by Ava of Melk, the oldest known German female poet. Two thirds of all the copied manuscripts here appeared to date from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but one was not allowed to open them. Not too long ago, in 1997, Dr. Christine Glassner caused a great commotion when she went through these latter-era medieval manuscripts and discovered a partial copy of the epic *Nibelungenlied* dating from about the year 1300.

Aside from hand-copied manuscripts there are also examples of printed books: 1,700 dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, 4,500 from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and more than 18,000 from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when printing had increased dramatically. If you added them all up there would be about 100,000 books kept in this library.

I could tell just by looking that the vast majority of the books were written in German and Latin which I could not read, and I could only guess, based on my own mental notes, that they comprised books on theology, jurisprudence, natural sciences, and even astronomy.

And yet, the beautiful volume sitting on a display table held a force that took my breath away. Letter by letter, each pen stroke was a splendid labor of love. I could not understand what the passages meant. Yet like the individual letters, they too could boast of a noble birth. Perhaps the script itself was meant to be an object of supplication?

Which reminds me, Buddhism has its own share of hand-copied manuscripts. Regardless of their meaning or content, I suppose copying the Sutras must have been a religious act too.

The monks who produced these manuscripts must have pursued this extraordinary work in order to get closer to God. The 100,000 volumes housed here were the condensed form of the monks' prayers and devotion over hundreds of years.

Something here was sinking into my skin and filling my breaths. My own existence held no more weight than a feather within such a history-rich atmosphere.

When I walked by the window I felt the presence of someone behind me.

As I slipped into the creative atmosphere that produced all these books, I felt the person's presence pressing on the nape of my neck. It was a presence mixed up into that of the surrounding letters, words, and prayers piled up over the centuries, but more than that, it was also the presence of living flesh.

I turned my head to see whoever was behind me had passed and was now making his way back. It was an elderly gentleman clad in a brown sweater. He seemed unaware not only of the existential gravitas of all the works piled up here, but also of a nearby woman and a monk clad in long-hemmed garments fastened around his waist.

The man walked slowly beside the window where I was standing, his eyes raised toward the upper part of the window. He had a round face creased by wrinkles, the skin slouching from his chin to his neck, but I was taken aback by his eyes, which were sharp, red and gave off an aura of sadness.

He noticed my presence and let out a reserved smile.

This was an old building so there were only a few tall windows that let in a scant amount of light. I must have appeared to this person as only a silhouette. From my own vantage point, standing in the light, I could make out the individual eyelashes framing his narrow eyes.

While once again gazing at the top part of the window, the elderly man muttered something. I could not understand him. When I started to turn and go away from the window he tried speaking to me again, this time in English.

“My wife is over there...”

The man was pointing to the upper part of the window as he said this.

“Your wife?”

I figured he was just a weird old man.

The monk came up to the man and shook hands with him, then withdrew into one of the inner rooms. It seemed that the monk must have felt some affection for the man, as if the two were friends or...

I moved away from the window and took a look at the area the man had been looking at. There was a picture faintly painted there, patterned after a vase. Not only had it deteriorated terribly over the centuries, the intrusive backlighting made it harder to see.

“Is that a vase?” I asked.

“Does it look like a vase?”

“It is a vase.”

“Can’t you see the woman clothed in red inside it?”

I squinted until I could make out a human-like figure. “Hmm, it does look like a person.”

“It’s my wife.”

I felt I ought to get away from this man.

“...Everyone in this abbey says that the person depicted here is a religious scholar, painted by Rosenschta. But if you look closely you’ll see that it is a woman. I knew at first glance that it was a woman and I fell in love. My, that was a long time ago...”

“But it’s a vase.”

“Well, the vase is something that Johann Burger painted *a secco*; he painted it over the figure of the woman, but my wife wouldn’t stand for being snuffed out like that which is why you can still see her figure appearing in the middle of the vase.”

“...Secco? What is that?”

“Rosenschta painted the fresco on a wet plaster wall. The term *a secco*, on the other hand, refers to a wall painting done on a dry surface. But a fresco is more durable; you can still make out the original painting of the woman underneath that of the vase. In a hundred years it will be the other way around, because the vase painting will flake away from the fresco’s surface and look dull whereas now it crowds out the woman. It’ll be such a happy moment when that happens. They tried to imprison her within that vase but it’s no use; she’ll outlive the thing.”

“So that is your wife?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“She’s like your own personal Madonna, then?”

“I married her. She got right down from that wall and stood here looking out the window, just like you are now. Only the vase painting was left on the wall then. She lived with me until she died four years ago. Then she returned *there*.”

As I listened to the man tell me this, the figure of the human became clearer to me. It definitely was not a religious scholar but a woman clad in red.

“I’m the owner of this place here.”

He took out a business card from his pocket, which held the name and location of a restaurant.

“You’re Japanese?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You came from Vienna?”

“I took a train from West Station.”

“Then you didn’t pass through Krems. If you’d come here by car and passed through Krems, you would’ve seen my restaurant. We have Jamek, a famous Austrian wine. The restaurant is distinguished by a sign featuring a hooded crow.”

The business card had a picture of this “crow”. He didn’t seem like a suspicious old man; he seemed like he was for real. I told him that I had previously come to Melk by car via that road.

“This window here is very special. If you aren’t in any hurry, come have lunch at my restaurant. It’s twenty minutes away by car.”

“But I’m not a lady who jumps out of walls...”

We both laughed. I decided to trust the old man. That he walked with a cane also played a part in putting me at ease.

We walked to the parking lot. His name was Peter, and every day he drove to Melk to see his “wife”.

The parking lot had been built on a plaza at the top of some steps. As he struggled up the steps with his cane, he explained that since she came back to Melk this was just something he had to go through.

His car was a high-end German model that had been remodeled to be handicapped-accessible.

He had looked to be about seventy in the dark library, but in the brightness of the parking lot I could see that he was clearly older than that.

“Why are we going to the restaurant today?”

“I work there whenever I feel like it. I transferred daily management of the place to my son. I used to be the head sommelier until my leg went bad, so I passed the baton to him.”

My feeling of ease toward Peter grew again.

The Melk River flows into the Danube and continues flowing east. I remembered the road that ran alongside the Danube, as well as the wall of trees lining the roadside. Now all these trees were in the midst of shedding all their leaves, which scattered and danced along the road’s surface. The branches of the trees that had become bare were reflected in the river’s surface. I was struck by the impermanence of the tranquil autumn scenery.

The restaurant itself was a cozy place. The front yard had been made into a parking lot and sure enough, the crow sign was there, standing out like a sore thumb. It looked more like a black pigeon than a crow, and it sported a grey sash wrapped about its shoulders at an oblique angle. When I told Peter I’d never seen such a bird in Japan, he explained that around here you could find them no matter where you were.

The mountains behind the restaurant were resplendent in golden color. It was the leaves of the grapevines. Apparently Peter’s restaurant made its own house wine from them. Peter noted in a low voice, “It’s more beautiful than Jamek. My son says so himself, so there’s no doubt about that.”

I suddenly remembered my empty stomach. I had eaten a bread roll with ham on the train, but that was it.

There were a few customers in the restaurant, who were driving on their way to Melk. It was a small family restaurant with just five tables decorated with flowers and white tablecloths. Lying underneath the vases, like a place mat, were the golden grape leaves. The scent of cheese and the aroma of bread put me in a happy mood.

Peter introduced me to a young man wearing an apron. He was a big man with thin eyes.

“This is my son.”

A strange emotion appeared written on the young chef’s face as he was being introduced thus, narrowing his eyes in the sunlight as if looking through a distant haze.

“...Did you meet the woman in the wall?”

“Yes, and he also told me how the woman is more resilient than that vase. He said it's his wife...”

I wanted to see some kind of reaction from the chef. However he just put out a smile as if he was used to this, and did not answer my question.

The young chef's eyes were as black as an Arab's and his hair was glossy. He did not resemble Peter; he looked like someone from a foreign land. I noticed Peter stiffen a little bit at my side. But it was all right. There seemed to be a close relationship marked by mutual understanding between the chef and Peter.

And it was definitely true that Peter was the owner of the place.

The main course for lunch was an aromatic *meunière*. White wine, herbs, and a kind of sour apple found only in Krems imparted a thick flavor into the clean white flesh of the fish.

Peter drizzled some grapeseed oil over his fish. He offered some to me but I declined. It was made by pressing grape seeds so I figured it would have a bitter taste. The bread was also homemade, and its surface was crisp while the interior retained its moistness. The flavor made my mouth water. All of this was the young chef's creation.

“He's a superb chef. But he doesn't resemble you, Peter...if anything, he resembles the woman painted on the wall in the abbey.”

“Koko.”

The old man's eyes relaxed.

“That's your wife's name?”

“Koko, the woman dressed in red.”

“You mean the painting of the woman in the church? Or is Koko your wife?”



Having overheard us, the chef paused his work to bring over a small-framed picture of a woman, which he set on top of the tablecloth. Then he said, "This is his wife."

In her traditional red Tyrol garb, she looked like a common, rustic woman. This was Peter's wife, the chef had said. So apparently he was not Peter's biological son. He didn't act like he was showing a picture of his own mother.

When Peter went up to go to the bathroom, I called the chef over and asked, "Are you really his son?"

He just shrugged.

"Peter will probably bring you to see the grape fields. To thank him for the lunch, please get to know him a little bit and listen to his story. For a long time Peter was the chef in this restaurant, although I took over his duties when he lost his wife. She was a wonderful woman who was his wife for a long time; she ended up taking care of this place. Supposedly it was she who came up with the name "Hooded Crow".

"What about that story of her coming out of a wall painting and then going back in again?"

"That was a big scandal for the monastery." As he said this, the chef's eyes held a mixture of mischief and mourning.

He left the table as Peter returned from the bathroom.

Peter and I left the restaurant and strolled to the back of the house where the grape fields were.

Viewed from afar it looked like a uniformly golden colored slope, but the different types of grape had subtly different shades of light and dark, so each section of the field displayed a different color tone.

Some of the vines still showed bits of green mixed in between their golden leaves; these were slightly taller than the other varieties and if you looked closely, I could see bunches of green grapes. While they did not seem unripe, their skins were hard and firm. On my left hand side was a lower vine that had already been harvested. Its leaves were shriveled and just about to fall. The color of the remaining leaves was changing from yellow to red.

Peter walked slowly with his cane, and I kept pace with him.

He noted that the red grape vines' leaves seemed to be mixed with red. He told me all about the different kinds, and also about the flavors of the wine produced from them.

“This is where we got the grapes for the house wine we drank at lunch. This plant is very robust so out of all the vines here it requires the least amount of attention from us. If only the cooler winds from beyond that hill were scattering the leaves, you would see how strong yet supple its branches are.”

“When will all the leaves have fallen?”

“In about a month, maybe. In the snow the black branches are entwined and can tolerate cold winds. If only my wife had been so resilient...”

The path had narrowed as we started going up an incline. Going up this snaking path gave me visions of getting lost within a golden forest.

During harvest time this path would surely be bustling with harvesters and such, but now it was quiet. At the crossroads was a small shrine with a triangular roof and a statue of Christ on the cross. It did not seem fitting for this golden forest. The color had faded due to the elements, but the blood that was smeared on Christ's face under his crown of thorns still appeared fresh on account of the roof shielding him.

Although the path twisted and turned many times the grape vines themselves grew in straight lines. And between them bands of verdant grass continued into the distance, providing a path that the harvesting machines would proceed over.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Underneath the bright afternoon light, the harvested grape vines and the vines yet to be harvested both looked like they were together in a golden dream.

But it was too beautiful. Things that were too beautiful were intimidating. The golden chapel in Melk was intimidating as were the gold-painted bindings on the centuries-old books stuffing the library.

And then there was the old man strolling leisurely through these golden grape fields...

My footfalls became slower. Were the old man's legs really all that bad? Was his cane just a cane? I got a sensation as if the fish I had just eaten for lunch was swimming around in my stomach. Where were we walking? I did not speak for several minutes. I just kept walking toward our destination.

The grape trees I had seen up to that point held golden leaves but the trees we were passing now were covered in red leaves. Peter stepped off the paved path into the field. The grassy soil at his feet was soft, though not soft enough to be flattened out by his shoes.

“Where are we going?”

My voice was clearly tense, but he just kept walking.

The wall of red and golden yellow continued on both sides of me. There was a stone wall at the dead end. There was no point in going down any further. The fish rumbled inside my stomach. It was nice to have been treated for the meal but maybe I got more than I bargained for? At this point was there a reason to turn back and retrace my steps? I desperately searched for such a reason. The back of Peter’s head was shiny with sweat.

He stopped in his tracks.

The trees in this area had been cleared away, and a bench had been put in their place. He took a seat placing the cane between his knees, and breathed a deep, tired sigh.

I took a seat, putting a little distance between us. Having been treated for lunch, I figured here was where I would have to repay the favor.

I could see blackened fruit underneath the red and yellow leaves on the surrounding grape trees. The rotting fruit gave off a sickly-sweet aroma. I hadn’t noticed it while walking, but now it was enough to make me choke. In this thick atmosphere I could not distinguish between the smell of ripe fruit and the smell of rotten fruit, and the smell of grass and the smell of earth mixed together until my body and head felt like they were becoming intertwined.

“The grapes seem to be rotting, no?”

“The whole field is rotting and drying up. Look, there’s white stuff growing on them. Wait a little longer and the red colored fruits will turn grey. That’s when they’re at their sweetest. When they get to that point we’ll harvest them.”

*Ah I see. It’ll become a late harvest wine.*

“If they don’t get the rot then they won’t be as sweet.” As if he saw through my nervousness, he started fiddling with his cane in both hands.

“So...do you always invite someone in the library, and bring them here?”

“Just women. It’s just that I saw you standing by that window ...just the way Koko would...and...”

“The one who slipped out of the fresco?”

“Nobody believed me. On the contrary, they’d say that the figure painted within the vase was a man. Everyone in the abbey said that. Then they’d look at me like a heretic being interrogated by the Inquisition.”

He pounded on the ground with the cane in his hands, and it made a dent in the earth. His cheeks were red, and his eyes began to redden. It was that same intensity of spirit he had flourished when we met in the library. His glance flew from the golden field and pierced some empty space way up high.

“Perhaps...” he said to me in a low voice, “I was a monk. And that window showed me a new world. That window...over hundreds of years it provided the monks with a sneak peek into the outside world. Can you imagine all those monks who may have been seduced by the woman that Rosenschalt painted? You can’t use fire in the library, and there’s no heating apparatus either, so people would read their books by the windows to soak up whatever heat and sunlight they could. They’d have to copy out passages if they wanted to read them later, right by that window, since they couldn’t take books out of the library. They would often die young from consumption due to the cold. I too was close to death at one point. But then the woman descended from the wall and stood by the window. It was Koko; she was wearing red. She saved me, oh...she came to save me...”

I could feel the heavy, cool air of the library as I visualized the scene. Before my eyes was a thin, pale-faced young man, standing by Koko at the window. He looked tired from his ascetic training, in urgent need of some warmth, barely clinging to life, love in his eyes. The youth’s long black cloak was fastened at the waist, with a white hard clerical collar and a crucifix on his chest. The sight of this Benedictine monk moved me completely, and my own insides quaked with terror as if from some looming disaster...

“What happened then?”

As his throat was dry, he opened his mouth slowly, deliberately.

“It doesn't matter. I was together with Koko.”

“She passed away and hid herself behind the vase in that fresco?”

“But her body is sleeping here.”

“Where?”

“Here.” He pointed to the ground underneath the bench.

It felt like the wind was blowing from the bottoms of the earth. The overripe grapes, with their sweet, moist, pungent smell, sent my body reeling.

Was I was being deceived? No, it was definitely a true story. The grape trees adjacent to this bench were especially beautiful with their red leaves. I thought of the fruit that would be made into late harvest wine once these leaves had just started falling...

“That was an interesting story.”

My voice was chipped. Koko's body underground could probably hear the sound of my heartbeat.

A black shadow passed overhead. The shadow cast itself on the grape trees a little ways off from us, and a bunch of leaves trembled.

As the elderly man cleared his throat, a black, long-beaked bird about the size of a pigeon appeared from within the leaves and deftly fluttered onto the grass. It cautiously began approaching us. Around its neck was a grey sash.

The old man quickly took a grape off one of the nearby trees and tossed it to the bird. The hooded crow ambled over, took it in its beak and ran off.

“This tree's fruit is especially sweet. Do you want to try some too?”

He plucked off another one. It was a mysterious specimen; a shriveled, greyish-purple thing with half of its juice gone.

“...Here, see how it smells.”

He brought it close to my nose.

Compared to fruit, it was like a living thing with a muted will. The smell of it made me want to vomit. The offensiveness of it must have appeared written all over my face.

Peter's white face was suddenly closer. The grey-purple thing dangled between Peter's face and mine.

I tried sniffing it, then tried tasting a tiny bit of it that wasn't covered in decaying fungus. Just this bit wasn't enough so I tried eating the whole thing. Rather than a sweet flavor it left a sharp numbness at the tip of my tongue, making me wonder if it was fermenting.

"That's the color," I ventured to say. "...The color of the clothing worn by the woman in that painting, it was surely the same color as this..." I remembered it as being a deep color of red mixed with black.

Tears began to appear in the old man's eyes.

"Thank you very much for the meal. It was nice to meet you. You and your wife were a lovely pair, I think."

And that was it. I stood up and began to walk away.

He stayed on the bench and did not move.

Back at the crossroads I had come from, I once again came across the figure of Jesus on the cross. It was as if he had been housed on the crucifix as the guardian spirit of the fields.

What would Christ say, I wondered, to this former monk who had chosen to break off his meditations and training to be with that woman, every time he passed by the shrine? The young chef had said that the incident that occurred at the abbey was a big scandal, but would not have been fitting to describe the photograph of Koko as scandalous. She was a rural-bred woman who had the appearance of a woman who had taken on age and become elderly.

When I returned to the restaurant, the chef had come out to see off some customers he was friendly with.

“Peter is with Koko in the grape field,” I said, and he nodded knowingly. He was kind enough to ask the middle-aged couple getting into their car, if they could take me to Sankt Pölten.

As I got into the car, the sharp sensation from the grape still lingered on the tip of my tongue.

#### Translator's Notes

[page 79 of the text] The fire was in 1738, not 1736 as given in the text:  
<http://members.virtualtourist.com/m/tt/427ee/>  
[http://austria-travel.suite101.com/article.cfm/visit\\_melk\\_abbey\\_from\\_vienna](http://austria-travel.suite101.com/article.cfm/visit_melk_abbey_from_vienna)

[page 89 of the text] As for the vase above the window in the library, the name of the person who painted it is given as ローゼンシュタール; I could not find this name anywhere in my research so I Anglicized it as “Rosenschta”.

[page 90 of the text] Peter's restaurant in Krems is called “エリマキカラス”, for which I could not find an appropriate Anglicized/German equivalent. “えりまき” meaning “scarf” in Japanese, and “カラス” meaning “crow”, I settled on “The Hooded Crow” as the restaurant's name, as this bird is found in Austria and its name is similar to the Japanese:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hooded\\_Crow](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hooded_Crow)

## Melk's Golden Fields

I had visited Melk before, some time ago, by car. It was early spring then, and a milky moon hung over the woods that loom like the walls of a fortress along the banks of the Danube. The sky was still a pale shade of indigo, as if the dusk were hesitating to fall, and, low on the horizon, peeking out between the mountains from time to time, the moon seemed to slide along in pursuit of the car.

I'll be back, I said to the moon.

It was to fulfil that promise that I was boarding a train at Vienna's *Westbahnhof*. In contrast with the last time, it was October and the air was clear.

I had grown used to travelling around Austria alone.

The last time, I had been given a lift by a Japanese girl who was studying at Vienna University, but as I did not want to trouble her again, I decided to take the train. The staff at the station and in the train spoke English, and I find English as spoken by German speakers easy to understand. In restaurants and taxis too, I can get by in English.

It took 40 minutes to reach Sankt Polten. There, while I was waiting to board the local train, I struck up a friendship with an old lady travelling with a dog. She told me proudly that Melk Abbey was the most beautiful place in the world. Even the dog joined in with a high-pitched yelp.

In just under 30 minutes, the local train drew into Melk station.

Perched high on a hill, Melk Abbey spreads its brown roofs against the sky, sitting like a cloud atop the rocky outcrop with its deep green skirts.

Under the roofs, the long walls, painted with yellow and white stripes, appear as stout as those of a fortified castle, but the green dome soaring in their centre and the two towers facing the river Melk are superbly ornate.

The flowing lines that seemed to cascade like a cursive script down from the tips of the two towers, gaily decked with white and yellow and topped with the dull greenish sheen of verdigris, towards the faces of the twin clocks, glittered here and there with flashes of gold.

The façade conveys the impression of something closer to an imperial residence than a church or a monastery, but the interior of the church, too, is decorated with a profusion of polychrome marble and gold.

The entire structure down to the finest detail is made up of soft lines, and it is not for nothing that Melk is described as the jewel of the Austrian baroque.

The architects who converted this church into its present form in the first half of the 18th century truly strove to create heaven on earth on the hill of Melk with the help of a generous amount of gold and faith. It is easy to grasp that they were fired not by the passion we call love or sentiment but by an obsessive, driving energy.

When I first stood inside the nave, I thought that when a human being is overwhelmed by gold, surrounded by gold, his sense of reality is drained away and even his own weight



becomes impossible to grasp. It was the same magic power of gold that I had felt once when passing through the Japanese Pure Land belief and longed to experience again.

Before it began to sparkle as baroque jewel, the monastery began life in the age of fortified castles around the tenth century. Churches tended to be built where troops were stationed. The castles that guarded the county known as the Mark were named after the tributaries of the Danube, Enns, Ybbs, Melk, Krems, etc. , and the most imposing of them all was Melk.

In those days, the house of Babenberg that ruled over those lands, protecting the monks and founding monasteries, particularly favoured the Benedictine order.

Thereafter, though rulers changed and eras came and went, the monastery continued to be protected thanks to its status as a centre of religion and to flourish as a citadel of scholarship and the arts.

Of course, over the years, the abbey suffered many trials. One of these was the political and economic upheaval wrought by the Reformation. Melk became the centre of a monastic reform movement known as the Melk Reform.

Interestingly, Melk Abbey chose the humanism of the University of Vienna over the Pope in Rome. Melk's relationship with Rome deteriorated because it gave priority to intellectual enquiry and the pursuit of knowledge.

Today, science sets out to explain the truth, but at that time, the pursuit of truth was to know the teaching of God. In the midst of all that, Melk, which was able to do theoretical research and hammer out new ideas, became a pinnacle of scholarship and stored up "intelligence" close to that of the present day.

On a number of occasions, fires were visited upon it.

In those cold parts, they could only light fires for warmth in the winter. The wind whipped up from the river and kindled the flames in the monastery atop the hill. Because it was a high spot, there was not enough water. A fire started accidentally quickly became a raging inferno.

In the great fire in the thirteenth century, the library was consumed by flames. At that time, thanks to the monks' self-sacrifice, some of Melk's precious early chants and mystery plays were rescued from destruction. From that time onwards, the monks expended much energy on the creation of illuminated manuscripts, miniature paintings and books of hours, but many of them ended up being lost in this way.

Still more tragically, in the great fire of 1736, a place described as one step short of perfection, the fruit of the labour of a host of decorators, plasterers and carvers gathered around Jakob Prandtauer, the greatest architect of his time, was engulfed by flames when the work was almost complete, and nearly all the roofs and the decorated rooms were lost. The abbot, Berthold Dietmayr, ordered it to be rebuilt, but died a broken-hearted man. It is to the efforts of the Vice Abbot that we owe the flower of the Baroque we know today.

Those two great fires caused the greatest destruction, but there were frequent smaller-scale blazes and all the monks were strangely afraid of fire.

Perhaps priests and monks wear long-skirted robes because they needed to keep out the cold without resorting to the use of fire.

In those chilly parts of central Europe, there had still been ice on the river Melk in early spring. Now, it was autumn and the sky was sparkling clear like a remnant of summer, but the temperature had already fallen as low as 10°, and you could imagine what it must be like in the depths of winter.

In the cobbled street in front of the *Rathaus*, the restaurants with their cloth-covered tables and chairs were still open but there were no longer any customers, and elderly people from those parts were quietly drinking tea.

It was as if the summer sun were taking a breather, having finished its year's work.

The streets of Melk were so narrow that the people at the cafes at either side of the road could converse with one another without raising their voices.

In that town, everyone's comings and goings were watched over by the monastery, with its twin towers and green dome, that gazed down on the streets from on high.

As I climbed the hill, I was welcomed by a splendid gate with a round arch mounted by a triangular portico. Another, similar gate came into view further on. No one is allowed to enter the monks' quarters, which lie right at the heart of the abbey, but visitors may enter the church and a designated area that is open to the public. There were no other visitors besides myself.

As I made to enter the first gate, there was a commotion like flocks of birds taking off from left and right, and I flinched involuntarily. But they were children, not birds. All at once, a dozen or so youngsters came rushing out through the gate and went clattering down the steep, cobbled street. A priest-like figure in a black robe with a white collar, who seemed to be a teacher, came into view after seeing the children off. He came up and greeted me, smiling. He must have been surprised, but he said with an affable expression,

"We call them the wind!", and narrowed his eyes.

"Indeed". I replied with a smile.

"They are the lowest class of the high school. When they wear their white uniforms, we call them the 'rabbit wind'."

Where had the "rabbits" in their uniforms gone?

"If they were the top class, they wouldn't be running", the teacher said, without answering my question, and again his eyes smiled behind his spectacles.

I wondered whether there were some chosen ones among them who, after undergoing a discipline more strict than that of a Benedictine monk, might one day make the grade as priests.

In the quiet that set in once the "wind" had passed, I walked up to the next gate.

It was peaceful now. The great complex held many people, from the high school students to the monks, and I had heard that many of them actually lived there in dormitories, but the air seemed beautifully clear as if it had never been polluted by human breath.

In all religious buildings, be they Christian or Buddhist, great store is set by silence. I love that air. Like cool white wine, it flows out of the lungs into the spirit.

Inside the church, the white wine air and the cool feel of the gold combined to make me drunk.

There were a few worshippers, motionless figures dotted here and there, but they were greatly outnumbered by the gold-leaf covered statues, gazing down on me benignly from their heavenly dwelling place.

Above the tabernacle of the marble- and gold-encrusted altar, Peter and Paul were stretching out their hands to one another in a poignant farewell, as if they were striving to prepare one another for death, but their entire bodies were covered in gold. Gathered around them, the Old Testament prophets, Daniel, Elisha, David, Isaiah and their fellows, were all golden too. Above the altar, stretching almost up to the ceiling, saints and angels all shone with the same golden glow, so that I finally braced myself, wondering whether it was all a deliberate scheme to dazzle the worshipper with light.

Peter and Paul were executed on the same day. Peter was crucified upside down, but, as a Roman citizen, Paul was beheaded. In the fresco above the altar, a woman in a dark red cloak wears a crown of thorns on her head, and instruments of torture are scattered about her feet. It seems that it is through enduring such torture that she has soared to such heights. Underneath the gold, there has been much flowing of blood.

For all the gorgeous splendour, in Christianity the spirit is tested by mortification of the flesh, and human screams and pain linger wherever you turn.

Throughout Europe, saints and martyrs were worshipped and their corpses and body parts were preserved as relics. The corpse of Saint Coloman, an Irish pilgrim who was hanged from an elder tree, was brought to Melk in an uncorrupted state in the 11th century and still lies there in a gold-rimmed glass case. The saint's skeleton is venerated to this day.

As I passed in front of it, I felt a twinge of pity. On top of being hanged from an elder tree, he had had to suffer the indignity of having his bones exposed to view for nearly a thousand years.

I walked out of the church into a long corridor lit by iron lamps suspended from the white ceiling.

Electric bulbs had been inserted into the lamps only quite recently in the abbey's history. I could imagine shadowy figures faintly silhouetted against the light of kerosene lamps and candles.

I walked up a broad staircase and entered once more the corridor leading to the exhibition area where the imperial apartments are displayed. Inside the Marble Hall, I saw a tourist for the first time since I had entered the building. It was a young woman carrying a rucksack. She was comparing the paintings on the walls with what appeared to be some information she was holding in her hand.

As I walked past, we exchanged a smile, and I felt breathed more easily. The sight of the imperial apartments and the Marble Hall made me realize that Melk, as a spiritual centre, had been of great importance to Austria's ruling dynasties, the Babenbergs and Habsburgs. It was a place of worship and religious discipline but at the same time it had once been an imperial residence and a fortress.

Perhaps when the emperor met a high-ranking priest in the Marble Hall, he was given a message from God.

When I moved on again, I suddenly felt the river breeze.

I had emerged into the far end of a huge A-shaped building.

The grey-green trees that encircle the town of Melk and its river down below swayed constantly, breaking through the white veil of sunlight that poured down from just above their heads. Looking closely, I could see the surface of the river moving incessantly in one direction.

There, almost like another monastery, separate from the part built as an appendage to the imperial apartments, was the library, which people from the outside were allowed to enter. Even more than the church with its sparkling gold, this library is an enchanting place. One of the reasons I had returned to Melk was that I longed to see that library again.

As I entered through the heavy doors, I was embraced by a harsh air, heavy with damp, in striking contrast to the sparkling gold of the church.

The long, rectangular room, pierced with narrow windows to left and right, was lined with leather-bound books right up to the ceiling. All the leather spines were inscribed with gold letters and designs but the gold was dull and dark with the weight of several hundred years. It was a mountain of dead books.

They had all been copied by hand, and cost enormous amounts of energy. If you thought about it that way, far from being dead, they had stored up strength, and appeared as a mass distilled from human voices, breath and sweat.

What was that sensation that had flooded through me when I stood in the centre of this room the last time? I wanted to savour it again.

It was impossible to put into words.

Perhaps it was a sense of the awesome things human beings can do.

Here, there were hand-copied lesson books dating from the ninth century and copies of Virgil's works from the tenth and eleventh centuries. In the twelfth century, the commentaries of Jerome were copied here. There are commentaries on the Benedictine rule, Bibles, books of law, works of theology, and even the oldest book written by a woman in the German language, the Life of Jesus by Lady Ava. Two thirds of all the books are said to be from the fifteenth century, but not all their pages have ever been opened. Recently, in 1997, a great stir was caused when Dr Christine Glasner opened a book from the late Middle Ages and discovered that it contained a fragment of a copy of the Song of the Nibelungs dating from around 1300.

In addition to the hand-copied manuscripts, the library also houses early printed works, and there are 1,700 works from the 16th century, 4,500 from the 17th and as many as 18,000 from the 18th. In all, the library houses some 100,000 books and manuscripts.

I was only partially able to ascertain this with my own eyes. As I could read neither Latin nor German, I was unable to distinguish theology from jurisprudence, geography or astronomy, and had to rely on the explanations posted in front of the exhibits.

Nevertheless, in one of the beautiful books laid out in a display case, there dwelt a power that took my breath away.

Each individual letter had been written like an emblem, each quill-stroke gloriously filled with love. I could not understand the meaning of the texts. Nevertheless, those letters were treasures. Perhaps they were also objects of prayer.

The monks who created the manuscripts engaged in this extraordinary work in order to be closer to God. The 100,000 or so works in that library must have held the concentrated prayers of the monks of many centuries.

Something seemed to be seeping powerfully into my skin and my breath. In that concentrated air, my life seemed insignificant as a feather.

I moved close to a window, and felt the presence of someone behind me.

Mingled with the oppressive feeling caused by the books, the presence of a person exerted a pressure on the nape of my neck. Although mingled with the prayers and the works and the letters that had piled up over the centuries, it was distinguishable as the scent of a living body.

I turned round and saw someone pass slowly behind me and turned back towards me. It was an old man in a brown sweater. I had been so intensely absorbed by the sensation of dwelling in the book-lined room that I had failed to notice, but there was also another woman in the room and a monk dressed in a long-skirted robe.

The old man came slowly towards the window where I stood and looked up at the top of the window.

His round face was lined and his skin sagged from his chin to his neck, but his bloodshot eyes were sharp and the sadness that flowed gently from them took me by surprise.

When he noticed me, he smiled shyly.

It was an old building with few windows. They were long and narrow in shape. Only a little light was able to enter through them, and the man could probably see me only as a silhouette. When he turned to face me, I could see every lash of his dazzled eyes.

Staring again at the top of the window, the old man muttered something I did not understand. I made to move away from the window and this time he spoke to me in English.

“...there is a woman there”.

The old man definitely said those words, pointing at the wall above the window as he spoke.

I thought perhaps he was strange in the head.

The monk approached him and shook his hand before going out into the inner rooms. It was apparent from the gesture that he was fond of the old man. The two of them seemed to be friends or acquaintances.

I too moved away from the window and, following his gaze, lifted my eyes to the upper part of the wall.

There was an image painted there but I could not see it distinctly. It looked like a flower vase or a pattern. Not only had it been severely ravaged by the passage of centuries, but my sight was affected by the incoming light.

“Is that a vase...?” I said.

“Does it look like a vase?”

“It is a vase”.

“Can’t you see a woman in a red dress, behind it?”

“Yes, it does look like a person, doesn’t it?”

“It’s my wife”.

I suddenly felt the need to get away from the old man.

“... All the people in the monastery say that it is a scholar of the church community, painted by Rosenstahl. But if you look closely, you will see that it is a woman. I immediately recognized that it was a woman, and fell in love with her. It is very old, you know.”

“But it is a vase.”

“There is a vase, but Johann Berger painted it *secco* over the top of a woman. He painted the woman out but my wife couldn’t bear to be treated in that way so she appeared from behind the vase.”

“What do you mean by ‘*secco*’?”

“Rosenstahl painted his fresco on a damp wall. *Secco* means a wall painting painted on to a dry wall. But the fresco was more intense. From beneath the vase painted on dry, the fresco began to re-emerge over time, and now it has finally pushed out the vase that was on the surface. In a few more hundred years, it will be perfectly visible again. That would probably make her happy. The person will have finally re-emerged from the object. Even though they tried to push her into the wall, it didn’t work.

“And that is your wife?”

“Yes, that’s right”.

“Do you see her as a sort of Madonna?”

“I married her. She came down from the wall and I saw her from outside the window, standing there like you are now. At that time, only the vase remained on the wall. She lived with me, and four years ago she died. Now she has returned to her place up there.”

When I looked closely, the figure of a woman emerged clearly. Indeed, it was not a male scholar or anything like that, but a woman in a red dress.

“I am famous around here”, the man said, and took a calling card out of his pocket.

On the card was the name of a restaurant and a map.

“Are you Japanese?”

“Yes.”

“Have you come from Vienna?”

“I came by train from the *Westbahnhof*.”

“So you didn’t go through Krems. If you had come by car and passed through Krems, you would have been bound to see my restaurant. You’ll find a wine there called Jameck. It’s famous in Austria. It is the restaurant right next to the winery, with a sign hanging outside that says “The Hooded Crow”. On the card, there was a picture of a crow. He seemed to be a strange old man.

“This window is special. If you aren’t in a hurry, please come and have lunch in my restaurant. It’s twenty minutes away by car.”

“But I didn’t come down from that wall, you know.”

We smiled at one another. I decided to trust the old man. The fact that he was carrying a cane was somehow reassuring.

We walked to the car park. He said that his name was Peter and that he drove to Melk every day to see his wife.

The car park was built on a square at the top of some steps. It was terrible to climb up with a stick, he said, but because his wife had returned to Melk, there was no help for it.

In the dim library, he had looked over seventy, but in the brightly lit car park, he was obviously older still.

“What do you do in the restaurant these days?”

“I work when I feel like it. I have handed over to my son now. He was head sommelier for Jameck, but when my leg got bad, I passed on the baton.”

I felt increasingly comfortable with Peter.

The river Melk flows eastward into the Danube. I recognized the trees that line the road that follows the Danube. The trees were losing their leaves and the scattered leaves were dancing on the surface of the road. Bathed in the light reflected from the surface of the river, visible between the gaps, the trees with their naked branches hinted at an ever unchanging, mellow autumn landscape.

The “Hooded Crow” restaurant was a snug little place with a car park in the front garden, but the crow on the sign was very striking. It looked more like a black dove than a crow, with grey bands running at an angle along its back. I said that I had never seen one like it in Japan, but Peter said that it was a very common bird in those parts.

Behind the restaurant, the entire mountainside was yellow. It was the yellow of vines. In Peter’s restaurant, they served the wine they made themselves, he told me, adding in a low voice,

“It is more delicious than the Jameck. That is what my son says, so it must be true.”

I suddenly remembered that I was hungry. All I had eaten was a ham roll in the train.

There were a few customers in the restaurant, and all of them seemed to have stopped off on their way to Melk by car. The restaurant had a family touch. There were just five tables,

covered with white cloths and decorated with flowers. The vases were placed on yellow vine leaves. The place was cheerily redolent of fresh bread and cheese.

Peter introduced me to the young chef. He was a thin man with big eyes.

“This is my son.”

At this introduction, the chef’s eyes narrowed in his pleasant face, and a strange emotion seemed to linger there as if he were seeing a distant haze.

“...Did you meet the woman on the wall?”

“Yes. I also heard that the woman was stronger than the flower vase. Is it true that she is Peter’s wife?”

I was curious to see what sort of a response he would give. But he gave me a practised smile and left my question unanswered.

The young chef’s eyes were black like an Arab’s and his hair was very shiny. He looked as though he might be of foreign descent and did not resemble Peter at all.

I wondered a little about Peter. But after all what did it matter? There were signs that Peter and the chef were close as if they somehow relied on one another.

It did look as though Peter might be the owner of the place.

The main course of the lunch was *truite meunière* with trout from the river and a fragrant white wine sauce. The sauce, a subtle blend of white wine and herbs and a very tart type of apple found only around Krems, complemented the pure white flesh of the river trout with a deliciously rich flavour.

Peter put grape oil on his trout. He encouraged me to do likewise but I declined. He told me that it was made with pressed grape seeds and had a slightly bitter taste. The bread too was home made. On the outside it was hard and crusty but the inside was kept soft and moist, so that the flavour only emerged when you bit into it. The young chef had made everything himself.

“He is a brilliant chef. But he doesn’t look like you, does he? Does he by any chance take after the woman on the wall?”

“Coco”.

The only man’s eyes softened.

“Is that your wife’s name?”

“Coco in the red dress.”

“The woman in the painting? So your wife’s name is Coco?”

Perhaps the chef overheard our conversation. When he had a moment’s respite from his work, he brought over a small, framed photograph of a woman and placed it on the table.

“This is his wife.”



She was an ordinary woman with country looks, wearing not a red dress but Tyrolean costume. The chef called him Peter's wife. So he almost certainly was not Peter's son. He had not shown her to me as he might his own mother.

When Peter stood up to go to the bathroom, I called the chef over.

"Are you really his son?" I asked.

The chef just dipped his head.

"Peter will probably take you to the vineyards. Please keep him company for a while and listen to his stories, as a way of thanking him for the lunch. Peter was chef in this restaurant for a long time. When he lost his wife, I took over. His wife was a wonderful woman and they kept this restaurant as a couple for years. She was the one that named it the 'Hooded Crow'."

"So she came down from the wall and then went back into it?"

"It was a big scandal at that monastery."

As he spoke, the chef's eyes filled with mischief and sadness.

When Peter returned he moved away from the table.

Peter and I left the restaurant and set off towards the vineyards that stretched out behind.

From a distance, they were a uniform shade of yellow, but depending on the type of vine, the intensity of the colour varied subtly, and each section presented a different hue.

Some green leaves were still mixed in with the yellow, and some of the vines were taller than others. If you looked closely, you could make out bunches of blue grapes. They did not look unripe but the skins were hard and tight. To the right of them was a lower row where the harvest was already complete and the faded leaves, still clinging to the plants, were on the verge of falling. Some of the remaining yellow leaves were turning to red.

Peter walked slowly, leaning on a stick, and I adjusted my pace to his.

He told me that there was some red pigment in the leaves of red grapes. He also explained to me the different types of vine and how the taste of the wine depended on the type of grape.

"This type of grape is made into the wine we drank at lunch. It is a robust vine and doesn't need much looking after. When a cold wind blows from that hill over there and scatters the leaves, you can tell how strong and supple the branches are."

"When do the rest of the leaves fall?"

"In about a month's time. They can withstand the cold winds when the black branches are tangled with snow. If only my wife had been as strong as that."

The narrow way wound upwards, splitting off here and there, and the snaking paths seemed to have lost their way in a yellow wood.

The agricultural tracks for special machinery to pass through at harvest time were quiet too. At a fork in the way, there stood a small shrine with a triangular roof and, inside, a statue of Christ crucified. It was somehow out of tune with the yellow woods. Wind and rain

had stripped away the colours but, under the shelter of the roof, the blood flowing down from the crown of thorns on the head of Christ had remained fresh and bright.

The path wound hither and thither but the vines were planted in straight lines. Between them, strips of green grass stretched away into the distance. They were probably used by the machines to harvest the grapes.

It was a beautiful afternoon. In the overgenerous afternoon light, both the vines that still bore grapes and those already harvested spread out like a golden dream.

But it was too beautiful. Too much beauty makes us afraid. The gold of the church nave at Melk had struck fear into me. So too had the golden spines of the books that filled the library, burdened with its hundreds of years of history.

And now the old man who walked slowly through that golden vineyard, leaning on his cane....

I began to lag behind.

Did the old man really have a bad leg, I wondered. And was the stick really only a stick?

I felt as if the river trout I had just eaten were swimming around in the pit of my stomach.

How much further were we going to walk? For several moments, he was silent. He just kept on walking towards his destination.

The vines we were walking through now, with their reddish leaves, were clearly different from those we had seen so far.

Peter left the track and walked into the middle of the field.

“Where are we going?” I asked. My voice was bright and hard.

But he just went on walking.

To right and left and straight ahead, red and yellow rows ran on and on. In the distance, they ran up against a stone wall. It seemed awfully far away. The trout in my stomach wriggled harder. It had tasted good, but it might not have been very wholesome after all. There seemed to be some reason why we could not turn back. I searched for it desperately. The sweat shone on the back of Peter’s head.

Then he stood still.

A long bench stood in a spot where the vines had been cleared away.

He sat down with his stick between his knees and exhaled deeply as if he were a little tired.

I sat down in turn. This had been our destination. This must have been the reason he had asked me back for lunch.

Black grapes were visible under the red and yellow leaves of the vines around us. They gave off a sweet, rotten smell. I had not noticed it while we walked, but it was quite stifling. The air was heavy with the smell of ripeness or rottenness, I could not tell which, and, mingled with the smell of grass and earth, it had seeped into my body and my complexion.

“The grapes have rotted, haven’t they?”

“Bacteria get into them, and while they rot, they dry out. Do you see that whiteness? In a little while, the red colour will have turned completely to grey. That is when they are at their sweetest. We harvest them just at that moment.”

Aha, I thought to myself, this must be the wine they call “noble rot”.

“If they didn’t rot, they wouldn’t get sweet enough, you see.”

Maybe he noticed my tenseness, but he just played with his stick between his hands.

“Do you often invite people here when you meet them in that library?”

“Only women. When they are standing by that window... That’s how it was with Coco.”

“She came out of the picture?”

“No one believed it. They said that the person painted behind the vase was a man. All the people inside the monastery said that. They all gave me disapproving looks like inquisitors examining a heretic .”

He thrust the point of his stick into the ground. The stick sank into the earth. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes suffused with blood. I felt the same power as I had when I had met him in the library, as if something far off was stirring my heart. His gaze moved upwards from the golden field and penetrated the empty sky.

“Perhaps one day...”

I said in a low voice.

“I was a monk. That window showed me a whole new world. For hundreds of years, that window secretly led the monks into the outside world. Can you imagine how many monks must have been tempted by the woman Rosenstahl painted? They weren’t allowed to use fire in the library. There was neither heating nor candles. So to read the books they had to rely on the faint light from the windows. They weren’t allowed to handle the books so they made copies by the window. Many of them died young from cold and tuberculosis. I nearly died too. Then the woman came down from the wall and stood beside me by the window. It was Coco. At that time, Coco was wearing a red dress. She saved me. She had come to save me. “

I felt again the cool, heavy air of the monks’ library. I was Coco, standing by the window, and before me stood a thin, pale-faced young man. My eyes filled with love as they beheld him, barely alive, exhausted by discipline and desperately seeking human warmth. The boy’s long black robe was tied round his waist with a cord. He wore a hard white collar and a crucifix on his chest. That Benedictine monk moved my whole being, and I trembled with fear at the commotion that arose inside me...

“So what happened then?”

I opened my mouth slowly as if trying to protect my dry throat.

“That’s all. I am always with Coco.”

“She died and went back to hiding behind the vase on the wall.”

“But her body is sleeping here.”

“Where?”

“Here.”

He pointed to the ground under the bench.

A breeze rose from the earth. My body was deeply stirred by the luscious smell of the sweetly rotting ripened grapes.

I felt cheated. Could the story really be true? The vine beside the bench was an especially beautiful shade of crimson, and the noble rot was working on the fruit, now drooping and about to fall.

“It’s an interesting story.”

My voice was hoarse. My heart was beating so hard that I thought perhaps even Coco there in the ground could hear it.

A black shadow passed over my head. It fell upon a vine a little way off and set the leaves aflutter.

The old man whistled and a long-beaked bird as large as a dove flew out from among the leaves and settled on the grass. It walked towards us cautiously. On its back were the grey hood-like stripes.

The old man immediately plucked a grape from a nearby vine and threw it down. The hooded crow hopped towards it, picked it up and flew off.

“The fruit of that tree is especially sweet. Would you like to taste it too?”

He plucked another grape. It had lost half its juice and had shrunk to a strange greyish purple thing.

“...smell it!” he said, holding it close to my nose.

It resembled not so much a fruit as a living thing with a quiet will concealed within. It smelled like the breath of a living creature.

It was a lump of bewitchingly aggressive air, but it touched my face softly.

Peter’s white face was suddenly close to mine. That creature dangled between my face and his.

I sniffed at it, then plucked another grape, this time one that was not grey with the rot bacillus, and put it in my mouth. Not satisfied, I tried one that was rotten. The taste was not so much sweet as sharp and left a tingling sensation on the tongue as if the fermentation had been taking place on the vine.

“That was the colour, wasn’t it?”

I said.

“....the dress the woman in the picture was wearing really was that colour...”

I remembered it as a deep colour, a blend of red and black. Tears welled up in the old man’s eyes.

“Thank you so much for the delicious lunch. It was nice to meet you. You were a splendid couple.”

It was all over. I stood up and walked away.

He remained seated on the bench, motionless.

At the fork, I again came upon the statue of Jesus on the cross. What would Christ have said when the monk passed by that spot having broken his vows and chosen a woman? The young chef had said that there had been a big scandal at the monastery, but on the photograph Coco didn't look like the kind of person you might call scandalous. She looked like a simple country girl who had grown into an old woman.

When I returned to the restaurant, the young chef was just coming back after seeing off some regular customers.

“Peter is with Coco in the vineyards”, I said.

He understood perfectly and nodded. Then I went up to an elderly couple who were just getting into their car and asked them if they could give me a lift to Sankt Polten.

Still rolling the sharp sensation around on the tip of my tongue, I climbed into the car.

Notes:

- 1) This is a work in progress and not intended as a finished product.
- 2) I have used footnotes for points that I would like to discuss with the author, editor and/or a native speaker of Japanese.
- 3) I have used italics for the unspoken thoughts of the narrator, mostly from present tense sentences in the text.
- 4) Lines have been left as in the original without restructuring into paragraphs; a task for later.

メルクの黄金畑

高木のぶ子

Golden Acres<sup>i</sup>

I had visited Melk by car many years before. That time, it had been<sup>ii</sup> early spring, and above the forests that bordered the Danube like a fortress had hung a pale vernal moon.

As if unwilling to sink into night, a pale indigo sky had persisted, while in its lower reaches the moon had seemed to skate along, barely clearing the tops of the mountains, in pursuit of the car.

“I’ll be back,” I’d told the moon.

It was to fulfill that promise that I took the train from the Westbahnhof<sup>iii</sup> in Vienna. Unlike my previous visit, it was October and the air was clear.

I was well used to travelling<sup>iv</sup> alone in Austria.

Last time, I had been driven by a Japanese student attending Vienna University, but to avoid imposing on her again I took the train this time. All the railway staff speak English and, further, I find German-speakers’ English easy to understand. In restaurants, hotels and taxis I<sup>v</sup> get by with only English.

\*\*p76

It took 40 minutes to St Pölten. While waiting there for my connection to the local train I made the acquaintance of an elderly lady with a dog, and she proudly told me how the monastery was the most beautiful in the world. Even the dog yapped its agreement.

The local train reached Melk in under 30 minutes.

“Stift Melk”, the Abbey, stands on a hill surrounded by cliffs and cloud-like forest, its brown roofs spreading high into the sky.

The long walls below the roof are painted in stripes of yellow and white making it look as sturdy as a fortress, but with the green central dome and the two decorative towers toward the river, it is simply gorgeous.

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<sup>i</sup> Alternative titles: Since 畑 as “field” doesn’t match the vineyards of the story, “Golden Vineyards” . But “Golden Acres” or “Acres of Gold” would wrap in the interior of Melk Abbey with the final scene. My preference is not to add “Melk’s” or “of Melk”.

<sup>ii</sup> agreement of tense..

<sup>iii</sup> I feel that using the German name gives atmosphere. How about “Stift Melk” with an explanatory phrase for “Melk Abbey” ? I’m not sure.

<sup>iv</sup> British spelling because I’m British. Easier for internal consistency. That’s all

<sup>v</sup>Text is the general “you” but this is a personal experience not a travel guide.

The white, yellow and dark verdigris of the two towers was vivid, while the elegant outline that ran down from the spire to curve around the clock face sparkled with gold.

Though to see this part alone might give the impression less of a church or monastery than of a palace, the inside of the church too consists of masses of gold and coloured marble.

What's more, every detail of the structure is composed of such elaborate curves that it is often referred to as the "Jewel<sup>vi</sup> of Austrian Baroque<sup>vii</sup>".

\*\*p77

The architects who rebuilt the church in the early 18th century here on the hill above Melk undoubtedly poured huge amounts of money and faith into this attempt to create heaven on earth. It is also very apparent that their energy sprang, not from the ardour of love or adoration but from an obsession.

When I'd stood here before, I'd been overwhelmed by the gold, and had felt that, when surrounded by gold, you<sup>viii</sup> can lose your sense of reality, forgetting even the weight of your own body. I'd noticed that there was a parallel here with the Buddhist "Pure Land" philosophy, and had hoped to experience again one day the enchantment of gold.

The Abbey's history reached back, before it began to shine as a star of Baroque art, to the era of 10<sup>th</sup> century forts, when, while soldiers were stationed there, a shrine was built. The castles, built to defend these remote areas known as "Marks", were named after the tributaries of the Danube; Enns, Ybbs, Melk, Krems and so on, the most important of which was Melk.

The House of Babelberg, which ruled the lands, was patron to a group of contemplative monks and founded for them a monastery that became a centre for the Benedictine order.

Though the rulers changed over the ages, the monastery not only maintained but improved its standing as the peak of art and religious learning.

\*\*p78

Of course, the monastery at Melk was afflicted with its share of misfortunes. One of these was the political and economic disturbance of the religious reformation. Melk joined hands<sup>ix</sup> with the University of Vienna, pioneering monastic reforms that came to be known as the Melk Reform.

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<sup>vi</sup> Jewel rather than Treasure.

<sup>vii</sup> ->Rococo?

<sup>viii</sup> You/one/a person /people?

<sup>ix</sup> Need to contact the author to find out what historical event is referred to here and in the next sentence's "Council of Vienna" ->Constance? Or policies of VU?



A fascinating point here is that the monastery at Melk chose the Council of Vienna<sup>x</sup> University over the Pope in Rome. Relations with the Pope cooled but Melk valued theory and knowledge more.

Nowadays, science provides a way to truth but in those days the search for truth depended on a thorough knowledge of the Word of God. In that situation, pioneering a new approach based on theory put the monastery at Melk at the cutting edge of learning in the modern sense.

The monastery suffered a number of fires.

In this cold region there is no way to keep things warm in winter but to light a fire. The wind, blowing up from the river, would fan the flames of the monastery on the hill. Being high up, there was little water. A spark could lead to an inferno.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century the library was destroyed. Some of the monks gave their lives to save valuable early works such as hymns and Passion plays dating from the founding of the monastery. At the time there was a scriptorium where illustrated manuscripts and chronicles were tirelessly reproduced, but most of these were apparently lost.

\*\*p79

Even more catastrophic was the great fire of 1736 when, led by Jakob Prandtauer, the greatest architect of the time, decorators, plasterers and sculptors had showed off their skills and all but finished the building. One step before completion, flames destroyed most of the roof and decorated rooms. Berthold Dietmeyer, the Abbot at the time, started the rebuilding but died of despair leaving his deputy to slave over the birth of the flower of the baroque that we know today.

These two great fires caused enormous damage, but there were also numerous smaller fires, and the whole community had an inordinate fear of fire. The long habits worn by the priests and monks, with their baggy sleeves, may well have been a way of keeping warm in a world without fire.

This is a particularly cold part of Europe; when I came in the spring there was still ice on the River Melk. Now it was autumn, and, though some summer light still sparkled beautifully in the sky, the temperature had already dropped to around 10<sup>xi</sup> degrees giving one a taste of the long winter ahead.

In the stone-paved street in front of the Town Hall stood a restaurant with lines of chairs and cloth-covered tables but no customers, only a few elderly locals enjoying a cup of tea.

\*\*p80

Just taking a breather after the work of a summer, a year, a lifetime.

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<sup>x</sup> Ditto preceding item

<sup>xi</sup> I'm reluctant to change this to Fahrenheit.. Perhaps "a mere 10 degrees above freezing"

Even in this, the main thoroughfare, the road is so narrow the shopkeepers in the cafes and souvenir shops can chat across the street without raising their voices. The two towers and the dome of the abbey overlook the street; every detail of the life of the whole town watched over, and monitored, by the monastery.

As I climbed the gentle slope I was met by a delightful gateway comprised of a round arch under a triangular roof. I could see a similar one farther ahead. The monastery is literally the inner sanctum and the monks' quarters are closed to the public, but the church and certain areas are accessible. Not that there was anyone there but me!

As I was about to pass through the first gate, a sound, as of a huge flock of birds taking flight, burst from the courtyard to left and right, instinctively stalling me, but it wasn't birds; it was a flock of children. Dozens of them dashed out of the gate and down the stone-paved hill. And then I was alone again.

After I'd watched them go, a teacher-like monk in a white-collared black habit appeared. He came closer and greeted me with a smile. With an expression that seemed to say, "That surprised you, didn't it,<sup>xii</sup>" he spoke.

"We call them The Breeze."

\*\*p81

His eyes wrinkled in a smile

"Very appropriate!"

I returned his smile.

"They are the juniors from the Abbey School<sup>xiii</sup>. When they are in their white vestments they are the Breeze of Bunnies.<sup>xiv</sup>"

*Where had the bunnies in their civvies gone*, I wondered, but this pedagogue<sup>xv</sup> left my question unanswered.

"When they become seniors they stop running."

Behind his glasses, his eyes twinkled again<sup>xvi</sup>.

*Do the chosen ones among them in due course undergo the strict training of monks of the Benedictine order and rise to become priests*, I wondered.

In the silence after the passing of the breeze, I walked on to the next gate.

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<sup>xii</sup> Not sure if this needs a question mark.(more below. Search for "wonder")

<sup>xiii</sup> I'd like to use the German "Gymnasium" (i.e. "High School"). I don't think "seminary" is appropriate here as the children are not (yet) training to become monks.

<sup>xiv</sup> This will have to go. I'd felt the author was referring to younger children but have since confirmed that this "Stiftsgymnasium" is a secondary school (13 and older). Or is this acceptable artistic license?

<sup>xv</sup> Pejorative word needed for □□□□

<sup>xvi</sup> Does the author wish to express smugness?

It was so quiet there. This wide expanse of buildings must be full of people, from the Abbey School students to the monks, many of whom, I hear, live in dormitories here, but the air is clear, as if it has never been sullied with a human breath.

At religious sites, whether they be<sup>xvii</sup> Christian or Buddhist, silence is carefully preserved. It's this atmosphere that I like. Like chilled white wine, it soaks from the lungs into the very soul.

As I entered the church itself, the chill of the gold was added to the white wine, and I was completely intoxicated.

\*\*p82

While I could make out the figures of a number of unmoving worshippers, there were several times that number of gilt statues, and, as befit the denizens of heaven above, they regarded me below, magnanimous and at ease. *There was a stir at first but it soon died down.*

The main altar in particular was quite buried in marble and gold while above the tabernacle St Peter and St Paul clasped each other's hands as they lamented their separation. I suppose they both knew they were going to die and were trying to keep each other's spirits up, but they were gilded from head to toe, while arranged around them the prophets Daniel, Jeremiah, David, Isaiah and other characters from the Old Testament were all smothered in gold. The saints and angels who were plastered on the walls from the altar almost to the ceiling all shone with the same hue, the dazzle of which seemed intended to bewitch, a surreptitious intent that put me on my guard.

Peter and Paul were executed on the same day: Peter, crucified with his head downwards and Paul, a Roman citizen, beheaded. The fresco above the main altar depicted a woman in a crimson cloak, with a crown of thorns on her head and instruments of torture cluttered around her feet. *Had she survived the torture and managed to drag herself up there? Under all that gold there must have been blood all over the place.*

However gorgeous or magnificent it may be, there is something odd about Christianity in how it tries to test the soul by tormenting the flesh, leaving the agonies and anguish of human beings hanging in every corner.

\*\*p83

The martyr becomes a saint, and the saint's body, or part of it, is venerated as the patron saint of a church: It's a pattern that has been repeated in history all over Europe. Here in Melk, the story is of Coloman, an 11<sup>th</sup> century Irish pilgrim who was hanged from an elder bush. His body was brought to the abbey before it had disintegrated and, even now, lies there, a decorated skeleton in a glass case edged with gold<sup>xviii</sup>.

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<sup>xvii</sup> Are? Is my use of "be" a feature of my dialect?

<sup>xviii</sup> I believe the decorated skeleton(s) (which have names such as "Fred") are not the one reputed to be Coloman's, which is in a sarcophagus. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Melk71.jpg>

As I passed, I felt sorry for him. First he was hanged from a mere bush, and then suffered the indignity of having his bones were exposed to public view for the next thousand years.

Leaving the church, I walked down a long white corridor with iron lamps hanging from the ceiling. The appearance of electric light bulbs in these lamps must have been a very recent event in the long history of Melk Abbey. You<sup>xix</sup> can imagine how candles or oil lamps must have made people's shadows loom eerily.

Climbing some wide stone stairs, I continued on into the depths along a corridor labelled "Emperors' Gallery". In the "Marble Chamber", I came upon the first visitor I had seen since entering the building. A young woman with a backpack was comparing the paintings with some kind of pamphlet in her hand.

As I passed her we exchanged smiles. *Phew! Nothing to worry about.*

What with the "Emperors' Gallery" and the "Marble Chamber", you could see how the Babenbergs and Hapsburgs, the rulers of Austria, had valued Melk as a haven. As well as a place of worship and monastic training, it was a fortress and a palace.

**\*\*p84**

The Marble Chamber was probably where the Emperor met the higher clergy and received the Word of God.

Proceeding a little further, I suddenly felt a wind from the river.

I had reached the very tip of that immense A-shaped building.

The town and river of Melk that rose into view and the surrounding grey-green forests shimmered under a white veil cast by the sun almost overhead. Looking carefully I saw the whole surface of the river shimmering off into the distance.<sup>xx</sup>

Ahead, on the other side of the building from the Emperor's chambers, lay a more monastic sector, where outsiders were permitted access only to the Library. This library held even more attraction for me than the glittering church. This was what had brought me back to Melk.

Opening the heavy door, I found myself in an atmosphere quite different from the glittering gold of the church; heavy, musty<sup>xxi</sup> and oppressive.

Apart from the narrow windows, the walls of the long, rectangular room were crammed to the ceiling with leather bound tomes. Every one of them was decorated with gilt lettering and motifs but the gold was dull and dark under the weight of centuries; a pile of dead books<sup>xxii</sup>..

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<sup>xix</sup> I could ....?

<sup>xx</sup> "Looking carefully..." Not understood. Must check author's intent.

<sup>xxi</sup> □□□ but I find it hard to believe a library could be damp or dank?

<sup>xxii</sup> mountain of corpses? Adding "of books" makes it ungainly.

\*\*p85

Almost all were copied by hand; a huge concentration of human energy. The thought of all that effort made me see them not as inanimate cadavers but bursting with power, an amalgam of voices, sighs and sweat.

*What was that feeling that had come over me last time I stood in the middle of this room? I wanted to experience it again.*

Put into words it doesn't sound much<sup>xxiii</sup>.

It's amazing what people will do.

Handwritten "homiliaria"<sup>xxiv</sup> from the 9th century, and 10th and 11th century manuscript copies of Virgil lie here. Jerome's "Commentaries" were copied here in the 12th century. The Holy Rule of St. Benedict, bibles, legal texts, theology; there is even the "Life of Jesus" by Ava, the earliest female German author. Two thirds of the transcriptions are from the 15th century, but there are pages that remain unopened. Quite recently, in 1997, when Dr. Christine Glassner<sup>xxv</sup> opened a book from the Middle Ages, she discovered a scrap from the "Nibelungenlied" carefully hidden inside, which caused quite an uproar at the time.

As well as manuscripts there are also early printed works known as "incunabula", 1700 books from the 16th century, 4500 from the 17th, and from the 18th century a surge of 18,000 volumes. In all, the library contains 100,000 books.

\*\*p86

Only a small portion of them were visible, and, being unable to read either German or Latin, I just had to guess from the brief descriptions which sections were devoted to Theology, Law, Geography or Astronomy.

But on a display stand there was one impressive manuscript that simply took my breath away. Each letter was an illuminated emblem, each splendid pen stroke a devotion of love. I couldn't understand a single line, of course. But I realized how highly writing had been valued. Words themselves were the object of devotion, I suppose.

Which reminds me; Buddhists copy out the sutras. Not to contemplate their meaning, mind you; the act of simply writing each character is a form of worship.

The monastic scribes, too, tackled this daunting task as a way of coming nearer to God. Which means the 100,000 volumes here constitute the condensed prayers<sup>xxvi</sup> of the

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<sup>xxiii</sup> Strange sequence. Have I understood this?

<sup>xxiv</sup> Need to check with author what is intended here: 訓戒書 Homilies? Or something else? Sermons? Exhortations (of Enoch?)? Reprimands? Notes of censure? Penances? Catechisms? Parables? Luther's "Exhortations" were 16<sup>th</sup> C.

<sup>xxv</sup> Dr. ? Prof.? correct title needed. Was she a Dr. at the time?

<sup>xxvi</sup> worship?

monks of several centuries.

*Something was trying to force its way into my skin, into my very breath. In this concentrated atmosphere my life-force was as vulnerable<sup>xxvii</sup> as a feather.*

**\*\*p87**

As I walked toward the window I sensed someone behind me.

A presence, hidden in the pressure from the books, lay heavy on the back of my neck. It was obscured by those centuries of accumulated letters, words and prayers, but it was unmistakably a living, human presence.

As I turned, he was passing slowly behind me and about to turn back the way he'd come. It was an elderly man in a brown sweater. Perhaps it was the dense atmosphere of the books filling the room that had made me fail to notice earlier, but I realized that there was also a woman there and, with his long sleeves tied behind him, a monk.

The old man came slowly toward the window where I stood, and looked up above it.

His round face was deeply creased and the skin of his neck hung in wattles while his eyes were bloodshot and poignant, flowing with such grief that I was taken aback.

He noticed my reaction and smiled politely.

It being an old building there were few windows, and what there were were tall and narrow. There was little light, so he could only have been able to see me in silhouette. From my position, having turned toward him, I could see every eyelash as he squinted against the light.

Gazing again above the window, he uttered something, but I couldn't catch it. I went to step past him, away from the window, when he spoke again, this time in English.

**\*\*p88**

"There is my wife..."<sup>xxviii</sup>

*Yes, that's what he said, pointing at the wall above the window.*

"Your wife?"

*He may be a bit funny in the head.*

The monk came forward and shook hands with him before disappearing into a room beyond. That reassured me of the monk's familiarity with the man. They were friends or at least acquaintances.

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<sup>xxvii</sup> Feeble, unresisting,?

<sup>xxviii</sup> "That's my wife (up there)"?

I too stepped back from the window and cast my eyes where the old man was looking.

There was a vague picture of a vase or some kind of emblem that I couldn't make out. It had probably been deteriorating for hundreds of years, and it was against the light too.

"It's a vase, isn't it?"

"Does it look like a vase?"

"It is!"

"Can't you see the woman in red behind it?"

I screwed up my eyes and found I could see a humanlike form.

"Yes, it does look human."

"It's my wife."

\*\*p89

*I definitely need to get away from this geezer, I thought.*

"Everyone in the monastery says it's a picture of a Benedictine scholar by Rosenstahl<sup>xxix</sup>. But if you look carefully you can see it's a woman. I knew it at once and fell in love with her. A long time ago now."

"It's a vase."

"Yes, the vase. Johann Bergl painted that over her, in *secco*. He covered her up, but my wife wouldn't take that kind of treatment. She came out from behind the vase.

"What's *secco*?"

"Rosenstahl painted his fresco while the plaster was still wet. *Secco* means painting on dry plaster. But, the fresco was stronger. The picture beneath the *secco* vase is gradually showing through. It looks ready to push the vase on the surface out of the way. In another hundred years they'll have completely changed places. Amusing isn't it? Live people are greater than objects. Even if you try and hide them in the wall, it's no good."

"And, that's your wife?"

"That's right."

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<sup>xxix</sup> "Rosenstahl"? Suspect this is a mistake for "Rottmayr" (Johann Michael Rottmayr). Can't find real fresco artist of this name or similar spellings, Rosental etc. Other historical figures are all confirmed by internet research. Author's permission to "correct" this? Or is it intentionally fictitious (because picture doesn't exist)?

\*\*p90

“Your idol, is she?”

“I married her. She’d come down off the wall and was looking out of the window where you were standing just now. There was only the vase left on the wall then. We lived together until she died 4 years ago. Then she went back up there.”

*Come to think of it, the figure did seem clearer now. Not a male scholar but a woman in red.*

“I have this little place,” he said, taking a business card from his pocket.

It showed the name of a restaurant, with a map.

“Are you Japanese?”

“Yes.”

“Come from Vienna?”

“By train from the Westbahnhof.”

“Then you didn’t come through Krems.

“If you’d come by car you couldn’t have missed my restaurant. There’s a famous Austrian wine here called Jamek. And right by the winery there is a restaurant with a Hooded Crow<sup>xxx</sup> on the signboard. “

\*\*p91

*The picture of the Hooded Crow is on the business card too. Maybe he isn’t such a dubious old gentleman after all.*

I told him I had once traveled that road to Melk by car.

“This window is very special to me. If you’re not in a hurry, why not come and have lunch at my restaurant? It’s only 20 minutes by car.”

“But I’m not the lady who came down off that wall, you know.”

Together we laughed. I decided to trust him. The fact that he used a cane was reassuring too.

We walked to the car park. His name was Peter, and apparently he drove to Melk every day to see his wife.

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<sup>xxx</sup> Check with author, Is this the real Hooded Crow (Nebelkrähe, *Corvus cornix*) or a fictional creature? Descriptions on pp 92 & 102 match the real bird. Is there really such a restaurant? (Can’t find one.) Does this matter?



The car park had been constructed in a square at the top of a long<sup>xxxi</sup> stairway. When I asked if it wasn't hard going up and down all those steps with his cane every day, he said it couldn't be helped because his wife had returned to Melk.

His car was an expensive German model adapted for a disabled driver.

In the gloomy library he had appeared to be about 70 years old, but here in the bright car park he was clearly rather older.

"Who's running the restaurant today?"

\*\*p92

"I work when I feel like it. I've handed over to my son now. He used to be head sommelier at Jamek but my leg got bad so I passed on the baton to him."

I started to trust him even more.

The River Melk joined the Danube and flowed east. I seemed to remember the road beside the Danube and the trees lining the road. The trees were in the middle of shedding their leaves, which danced all over the road. The spaces between the branches of the bare trees were flooded with light from the river, a peaceful autumn scene that left me with an impression that it could last forever.

The Hooded Crow was an unobtrusive building with a parking area in front, but the signboard was certainly eye-catching. It looked more like a black pigeon than a crow, and had a diagonal grey band running across its shoulders. I told him I'd never seen one in Japan and he explained that you could see them all over the place around there.

Behind the restaurant the whole hill was solid yellow. Grape vine leaves, they were. At the restaurant they serve their own wine, he told me, adding in a whisper,

"And it's better than Jamek. My son says so, so there's no doubt about it.

Suddenly I felt hungry. I hadn't eaten anything since that single Semmel roll with ham in the train.

\*\*p93

There were several parties of customers in the restaurant who all seemed to be stopping in during a drive to Melk. Flowers and white tablecloths decorated the five tables, giving it a homely atmosphere. The mats under the vases were yellow grape leaves. The aroma of bread and the smell of cheese made me feel blissful.

Peter introduced the young chef in his apron, a thin man with large eyes.

"This is my son."

At this introduction, a strange emotion seemed to flood the chef's face, his eyes

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<sup>xxxi</sup> Not in text but it IS long. Not just a few steps.

narrowing in the sunshine as if peering into a far off mirage<sup>xxxii</sup>.

“Did you meet the lady on the wall?”

“Yes, and I heard about how she is stronger than the vase. Peter told me she’s his wife.”

I wanted to see his reaction, but he had already switched back to his business smile and wouldn’t be drawn.

The young chef’s eyes were dark and Arabic while his hair was glossy. He didn’t resemble Peter in the least; in fact he looked distinctly foreign.

I started to have slight reservations about Peter. Not that the chef’s looks were any of my business. There was an air of closeness between them, a sense of mutual trust and forgiveness. It seemed that Peter really was the owner.

\*\*p94

The main course for lunch was a savoury trout meunière with a white wine sauce<sup>xxxiii</sup>. The wine and herbs, carefully mixed with a sharp kind of apple available only in the Krems area, gave the immaculate white trout a rich flavour.

Peter sprinkled grapeseed oil on his trout. He offered me some too, but I declined. Apparently it’s squeezed from the grape seeds and is slightly bitter. The bread, with a crispy crust and moist inside, was home-baked and the more I chewed it the better it tasted. All made by the young chef, he told me.

“He’s a wonderful chef, isn’t he? But he doesn’t look like you, Peter. He must take after the lady on the wall.”

“Coco.”

The old man’s eyes went slack.

“Your wife’s name?”

“Crimson Coco.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

“The woman in the picture? Or do you mean Coco is your wife?”

Perhaps overhearing this exchange, the chef, whose work was almost done, came over with a small, framed photo of a woman, placed it on the tablecloth and spoke.

“This is his wife.”

\*\*p95

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<sup>xxxii</sup> Strictly, “heat haze”.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> I wonder what this refers to. Is there a “proper” term for it?

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Unsatisfactory. Needs more thought. “Coco in red.” ?

*Not a lady in red<sup>xxxv</sup>, but an ordinary country girl in a Tyrolean costume. The chef had said “his wife.” So he was obviously not really Peter’s son. This wasn’t how you’d show someone a picture of your mother.*

When Peter excused himself for a moment, I called the chef and asked him,

“Are you really his son?”

The chef just ducked his head.

“Peter will probably take you to the vineyards. If you don’t mind, keep him company and listen to his story. Think of it as in return for lunch. He was the chef of this restaurant for many years. I took over when he lost his wife. She was a wonderful woman and together they kept the “Hooded Crow” running for a long time. I believe it was his wife who chose the name.”

“She came down off the wall, and went back to it, is that right?”

“It was quite a scandal at the Abbey.”

As he said this, I saw in his eyes a mixture of mischief and mercy.

\*\*p96

Peter returned from the bathroom, so the chef left the table.

Peter and I left the restaurant and went for a walk in the vineyards that lay behind it.

From a distance, the hillside had appeared simply yellow, but each variety of vine had its own particular shade, so every sector of the vineyard was a different colour.

The vines that still showed green among the yellow leaves were slightly taller than the rest and a close look showed bunches of green grapes still hanging there. They didn’t look unripe but the skins were firm and tough.

The vines to the left were strung lower, but there the harvest was over and what leaves were left were ready to fall. These remaining leaves had turned red in parts.

Peter pottered along with his cane while I matched his pace.

According to him, the leaves with red parts were from the red grapes. He told me about all the varieties. And about the flavour of the wine from each.

“This vine here’s the one that the house wine we had at lunch comes from. It’s really tough so it doesn’t take much work. Soon there’ll be a cold wind blowing from beyond that hill over there, taking all the leaves off. Then you’ll see how tough and flexible they are.”

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<sup>xxxv</sup> “No scarlet woman, just an ordinary...”

“When do the last leaves drop?”

“Another month or so. The black branches huddle up together<sup>xxxvi</sup> under the snow and resist the cold wind. If only my wife had been as tough.”

\*\*p97

The narrow track divided repeatedly as it climbed the slope. The windings gave an illusion of being lost in a forest of yellow. These lanes, which during the harvest season must be busy with agricultural vehicles, were quiet now. At the junctions were small shrines with statues of the Crucifixion under a triangular roof. They seemed quite out of place in this yellow forest. Wind and weather had worn the colours off, but thanks to the protection of the roof the blood on Christ's head under its crown of thorns remained fresh and raw.

Even though the path wound in and out, the vines were planted in straight rows. And between the rows a fresh green belt of turf ran off into the distance. I guess that's where the harvesting machines run.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Under a surfeit of afternoon light, fruit laden vines and harvested ones alike shared a golden dream.

*But it's just too beautiful. An excess of beauty is disturbing. The gold of the church at Melk was macabre, and the gilded bindings that filled the centuries old library were sinister too. And, tottering with his cane through this golden vineyard, this old man too.....*

My feet slowed.

\*\*p98

*Does he really have a bad leg? Is that just a cane?*

My recently consumed trout seemed to be swimming around at the bottom of my stomach.

*How far are we going to walk? He hasn't said a word for the last few minutes. Just keeps on walking wherever it is he is heading.*

Here the vines were of a kind I hadn't seen before, with reddish leaves that were obviously different.

*Peter steps off the surfaced road into the rows. The ground is soft with grass but not deep enough to cover the shoes.*

“How far are we going?”

*My voice is bright and quavery.*

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<sup>xxxvi</sup> Need to check. Does this mean that people actively bundle the branches together or that it happens naturally?

*He keeps on walking.*

On left and right the walls of red and yellow stretched ahead.

*At the end there is a stone wall. It's so far away. Isn't it just a bit too far?* My trout flipped again. I'd been grateful for the free lunch, but now remembered that there is no such thing. But, to turn back now demanded a good reason. I frantically thought of excuses. Sweat shone on the back of Peter's head.

He stopped.

\*\*p99

The vines had been cut back here, leaving room for a long bench.

He sat down with the cane between his knees and heaved a deep breath of exhaustion.

I too sat down, leaving a space for one more between us. *So, this is where he wanted to bring me. This is where I have to pay for my lunch.*

Beneath the red and yellow leaves of the vines around us I could see the black fruit. A sweet smell suggested they had started to decay. I hadn't noticed while we were walking, but now it was stifling. Along with the smell of the grass and soil, the overwhelming odour, which I could no longer distinguish as being ripe or rotten, began to wrap itself around my face and body.

"These grapes are overripe, aren't they?"

"Mmmm,... The mould gets in and we let them decay as they dry. Look. Can you see this white stuff on them? Before long the red will change to grey. That's when they are at their sweetest. That's when we harvest them."

*Ah, I see; this is the famous "noble rot".*

"So they don't become sweet until they decompose, then?"

I was afraid he had detected my anxiety, but he just fiddled with his cane in his hands.

"Do you often invite people at the library and bring them up here?"

\*\*p100

"Only women..... if they are standing at that window..... like Coco was...."

"And she came out of the picture?"

"And nobody believed me. Even worse, they insisted that the figure behind the vase was male. Everyone in the Abbey said so. It was like being sent to the Spanish Inquisition."

He thumped the tip of his cane on the ground. It sank in. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes bloodshot. It was as formidable a sight as when I'd met him in the library. His gaze soared out of the golden vineyard, stabbing through the thin air into eternity.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

".....Er...may I ask ..."

"I was a monk. That window taught me about a new world. Over the centuries that window has secretly led monks to the outside world. Can you imagine how many monks that woman in red has tempted? No fire is allowed in the library. No heating, no candlesticks. That's why everyone had to read by the long narrow beams of light from those windows. Books can't be removed from the library so transcriptions were made right there by the windows, too. Many of them died young from the cold or from T.B. I was almost dead myself. That's when she came down from the wall and stood beside the window. It was Coco. She was wearing red that time. I was saved<sup>xxxviii</sup>. She came and saved my life."

\*\*p101

*The cold, heavy air of the monastery library comes back to me. I am Coco by the window, and before me stands a starved and pale-faced lad exhausted by the day's austerities, hoping against hope for some human warmth, on his last legs, and in love.*

*The youth's long black habit is tied around his waist with a cord, his collar white and stiff, and on his chest hangs a crucifix. This Benedictine monk seems thrilled<sup>xxxix</sup> by my body while the unaccustomed changes occurring within his own make him shiver with fear....*

"So, what ... happened .. next?"

I said each word deliberately, favouring my dry throat.

"Nothing. I've been with Coco ever since."

"And after she passed away, she went back to being hidden behind the vase on that wall."

"But her body is still resting here."

"Where?"

"Here," he said, pointing at the ground beneath the bench.

\*\*p102

A wind wafted up from the depths of the earth. The mellow fragrance of those

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<sup>xxxvii</sup> Don't honestly understand this:心をどこか遠くに振り回している ような迫力

<sup>xxxviii</sup>? ああ助かった God help me/Thank God!

<sup>xxxix</sup> "Moved" doesn't seem right. Japanese understatement?

grapes, over-ripe and sweetly decayed, made me reel.

*He's having me on. No, it's probably all true. The vines beside this bench are a particularly attractive red and the noble rot has gone so far that the fruit seem about to drop<sup>xl</sup>.*

"A fascinating story!"

My voice had become hoarse. My heart was beating loudly enough for Coco to hear it beneath the ground.

A dark shadow passed over my head. It dropped into the vines a short way off and a few leaves shook.

The old man clucked and from between the leaves appeared a bird the size of a pigeon, black, with a long beak, which nimbly alighted on the grass. Then it cautiously approached us. Around its shoulders it wore a grey hood. The old man immediately plucked a single grape from the closest vine and threw it. The hooded crow walked forward, picked it up and dashed off.

"The grapes on this vine are especially sweet. Try one."

He plucked a fresh bunch. With half the juice gone, withered and grey, they were weird.

\*\*p103

"This is the smell. Try it," he said, bringing them near my nose.

Rather than just fruit they seemed alive, with a quiet will of their own. I could smell the breath of something alive. An amorously aggressive<sup>xli</sup> puff of air alighted on my face.

Peter's pale face was up close. That creature was hanging between his face and mine.

Checking with my nose, I chose a grape without any mould on it and popped it in my mouth. Unsatisfied with that, I tried another one, which had started to go off. Instead of sweetness it left a sharp tingle on the tip of my tongue as if it had started to ferment while still on the tree.

"This is the colour, isn't it?" I confirmed. "The clothes she was wearing in the picture. They were this colour, I'm sure."

I recalled that it was a deep shade that could be taken either for red or for black. There were tears welling in the old man's eyes.

"Thank you for lunch. It was very nice to meet you. You make a wonderful

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<sup>xl</sup> My guess is that the author intends to imply that the smell is that of Coco's body.

<sup>xli</sup> Aggressively amorous?

couple.”

I could stand no more. I stood up and started walking.

\*\*p104

He stayed sitting on the bench, immobile.

Where I met the road we'd come on, I found another Crucifixion. Guardian spirits of the vineyards.

I wonder what Christ has to say, every time he passes, to that ex-monk who was broken by his ascetic training and chose a woman instead. The young chef said there was a furore at the monastery but the Coco in the photo didn't look the least bit scandalous. It was just the figure of an unremarkable country girl grown into an old woman.

When I got back to the restaurant, the chef was just seeing off some familiar customers.

“Peter's in the vineyard with Coco,” I called, and he nodded his complete understanding. Then he asked the middle-aged couple, who were just getting into their car, to take me as far as St Pölten.

Still rolling that sharp tang around with the tip of my tongue, I got into the car.



## The Golden Fields of Melk

*by Takagi Nobuko*

I once visited Melk Abbey in Vienna, Austria, by car. This was a very long time ago. The season of year was early spring, and a white, pale moon hung over the endless forests which stretched like a fortress along the banks of the Danube River.

The sky was still tinged a light mazarine blue, as if hesitating to plunge fully into dusk. Low in that sky, just above the tops of the mountains, the moon followed the car, sliding along after it.

“I’ll come back again someday,” I said to the moon.

It was in order to keep that promise that I boarded a train from Vienna West Railway Station. Although I had first visited Melk Abbey in the early spring, this time it was October, and the air was limpid and clear.

I was used to traveling alone in Austria.

My previous visit to Melk Abbey had been courtesy of a Japanese woman studying at the University of Vienna who had taken me to the monastery in her car. But I decided to take the train this time, hesitant to ask her to drive me all the way to Melk again. The station attendants and the staff on the train could all speak English—and the English spoken by native speakers of German is the easiest English to understand. One could get by in English not only on the train, but also at restaurants and hotels, and even in taxis.

Our train arrived in the city of Sankt Pölten in forty minutes. While I was waiting in Sankt Pölten to transfer to the local train, I made the acquaintance of an old woman with a dog who boasted that Melk Abbey was the most beautiful monastery in the entire world. Even the dog barked stridently.

The local train took just under thirty minutes to get to Melk Station.

Melk Abbey is perched on a tall bluff, from which it looks down like a cloud upon boulders and the deep green of the forest, its bistre roof spreading high into the sky.

This roof sits atop long walls striped vertically in yellow and white, which by themselves make the monastery look as solid as a mountain citadel. But the green dome which rises out of the center of the stronghold, and the two steeples which stand facing the Melk River, are decorations which citadels do not possess, and they lend the abbey an altogether ornate, even florid, air.

The two steeples are vibrant in white and yellow and antique verdigris; the architectural line which unfurls along the rotund bulges of the byzantine steeple domes down to the numbers of the clock faces which adorn the structures sparkles here and there with a golden hue.

If one were to look only at this section of the complex, one would be left with the impression of a palace, perhaps, rather than a church or a monastery; moving into the interior of the church, though, one finds even more sumptuous design, as the church itself is lavishly appointed in multi-colored marble and in gold.

Even the smallest details of the molding are wrought in gentle curves, such that Melk Abbey is known as the crown jewel of Austrian Baroque architecture.

Undoubtedly, the architects who carried out the redesign of this church in the first half of the seventeenth century, enduing it with the form we see today, were attempting to convert vast reserves of faith—and enormous sums of money—into a heaven on Earth right on top of the rocky crag in Melk. The buildings are suffused with an unmistakable energy, not of passion born of love and aspiration, but of implacable tenacity.

When I last stood in this spot at Melk Abbey, I had been overwhelmed by the color of gold. When human beings are drawn into spaces surrounded by gold, they lose their sense of reality; I remember, for the moment, no longer feeling even the weight of my own body. I thought that this feeling must have been the same which ran through the Japanese school of Pure Land Buddhism, which promised salvation to all who believed fervently enough. I wanted to experience this transporting power of the color of gold once again.

Melk Abbey has a history stretching back before it assumed the mantle of being one of the shining lights of Baroque aesthetics. This history begins around the tenth century, when what is now a monastery was used as a fortress, with troops garrisoned in the central building and a chapel built thereafter. The fortresses which guarded over the frontier region known then as Mark were named after tributaries of the Danube, such as Enns, Ybbs, Melk and Krems. Of these, the most important fortress was that at Melk.

It was the House of Babenberg, which controlled the region at the time, that acted as protective patron to contemplative monks, establishing a monastery here as a base for the Benedictine Order of monastic life.

Thereafter, the monastery not only preserved its status as a religious center despite changes in rulers across the ages, but also as a prominent locus of the arts and of scholarship, especially theology.

It goes without saying, though, that the years brought with them any number of ordeals and tribulations for Melk Abbey, among them the political and economic unrest surrounding the period of religious reformation. The monastery at Melk formed a partnership with the University of Vienna and placed itself at the forefront of these religious reforms, becoming the starting point of a monastic revolution which came to be known as the Melk Reform Movement.

It is interesting to note that, at the time of these reformations, the Melk monastery elected to follow the theory of ecumenical conciliarity, set forth by scholars at the University of Vienna, over the bulls and edicts of the popes in Rome. Because of this choice, although the monastery's relations with Rome worsened, it nevertheless began to place a premium upon theory, or, in other words, upon scholarship.

Today we look to science to explain the truth, but during the Middle Ages the pursuit of truth was a matter of divining the mind of God. Melk Abbey, which was able to give birth to new paths and policies in light of theory amidst this atmosphere of singular focus upon theology, was at the vanguard of “learning,” and became a gathering place for a “knowledge” which was closely akin to the way we conceive of “knowledge” in the modern world.

The monastery has been the scene of countless blazes throughout its long history.

In these frigid regions, the only way to warm a building is to light a fire inside of it. But the winds blowing over the bluff from the river below fan the flames, and there is little water to be drawn from the ground at such a high elevation. Even a wisp of carelessness can lead to a fiery disaster, and did, in fact, on many occasions.

The abbey library was destroyed in a fire at the end of the thirteenth century, but a self-sacrificing monk saved valuable artifacts such as early Melkian hymns and Easter plays from

the flames. Ever since then, the monastery has had an arts and literature room, where monks have tirelessly created miniature paintings, historical chronicles and other works. But we are told that most of these items have been lost.

Even more tragic was the inferno of 1736. The fruits of the labor of Jacob Prandtauer, the greatest architect of his day, along with the work of ornamentalists, plasterers, carvers and other artisans, had all been brought to the verge of triumphant completion, but just before the final stroke of the masters' tools the flames again swept through the complex, and nearly the entire roof and decoration room were consumed in the blaze. Berthold Dietmayr, the abbot at the time, vowed to rebuild in the wake of the disaster, but he died, broken-hearted at the loss, before work could be started again. It was through the efforts of the assistant abbot that the "Flower of the Baroque Age" that we see today finally came into existence.

While these two catastrophes inflicted an extraordinary amount of damage to the complex, an untold number of smaller fires has instilled in all at Melk Abbey what might even be termed a morbid fear of fire.

I wondered if the priests and monks wore long robes with full, flowing sleeves to keep out the cold in an abbey which had eschewed the use of flame.

The region in which Melk Abbey is situated is particularly cold even for Central Europe; when spring comes, it finds the Melk River still covered in a thick sheet of ice. My visit was in the fall, with the faint afterglow of summer still flickering beautifully in the sky, but the temperature had already dropped to around ten degrees Celsius, and a long, cold winter was expected to arrive soon.

There were restaurants open along the cobblestone street in front of the city hall, with chairs and tablecloth-covered tables lining the way, but there were no customers to be seen, except for some local elderly folk leisurely sipping tea. The entire scene had an air of people taking a break after finishing work—for the summer, for the year, or perhaps for their entire lives.

Even on the main avenue, the people in the cafés and souvenir shops on both sides of the street kept their voices low and their conversations private.

The two steeples and the green dome of the abbey looked down upon the goings-on of the avenue; in this town, it was the monastery that watched over everyone in their daily lives—protecting them and observing what they did.

Walking up a gentle slope, I was greeted by a beautiful gate consisting of a round arch on which was perched a triangular roof. I could see similar gates up ahead of me. The monastery itself was in the very center of the compound, and the area where the monks lived and worshiped was off-limits to visitors, who were permitted only into the church chapel and certain other designated sections. The grounds were completely empty—there wasn't another soul in sight.

Just as I was passing through the first gate, I heard what sounded like the fluttering of a flock of birds taking flight and shrunk back, startled. The sound was not that of birds, though, but of children. Dozens of children were running at full tilt through the gate and down the cobblestoned slope I had just climbed. When they had gone, I was alone again.

But after the children had disappeared out of sight, I caught sight of someone else, a man dressed in black and wearing a white collar who appeared to be a priest. He approached me and greeted me with a smile which seemed to ask playfully, 'All those children surprised you a bit, didn't they?'

"I call them 'the wind'," he said, narrowing his eyes.

“Indeed, that's just what they remind one of,” I replied, returning his smile.

“They're in the lower class of the Gymnasium,” the priest went on. “When they're in their formal white uniforms, I call them 'the rabbit wind'.”

I wondered aloud where the uniformed band of rabbits had scampered off to, but the priest did not answer my question, instead replying with, “They no longer run around when they get to be upper-classmen.” Behind his glasses, his eyes again lit up with laughter.

Perhaps, in the past, those chosen from among the other students went on to even stricter training as Benedictine monks, eventually working their way up to being ordained as priests.

I continued on to the next gate in the tangible silence that followed after the 'wind' had blown down the sloped street.

All was quiet. I had heard that the vast grounds were home to many people, from Gymnasium students to monks, who spent most of their lives indoors; the air around was placid, as though unsullied by the breath of mere mortals.

Silence is treasured in places of religious worship, whether Christian or Buddhist. It is this air of silence that I love. Like chilled white wine, the air passes through one's lungs and seeps directly into the spirit.

The church chapel left me reeling, intoxicated by the same white wine to which had been added another element of crisp, golden coolness.

Although there were a number of motionless believers, there were several times more gold-plated statues of human figures calmly and serenely watching over me as if from their respective abodes in Heaven. The chapel had been astir with noise at first, but had now settled back into silence.

The main altar, in particular, was covered over in marble and gold; above the tabernacle, Sts. Peter and Paul were shown joining hands, sorrowfully bidding one another farewell. They seemed to be offering encouragement to one another, as the scene depicted was that just prior to their execution, when both had accepted their fates and were prepared to die. St. Peter and St. Paul were completely done over in gold, as were the various prophets and Old Testament figures arrayed around them, such as Daniel, Jeremiah, David and Isaiah. The other saints and angels spread above the altar just below the ceiling were also made of sparkling gold, and I caught myself becoming wary of what seemed to be a secret plot on the part of the designers to dazzle visitors with coruscating light.

Sts. Peter and Paul were both executed on the same day—St. Peter was crucified upside-down, while St. Paul, as a Roman citizen, was beheaded. There was a woman in a deep red mantle drawn in fresco above the altar who wore on her head a crown of thorns, and about whose feet there lay scattered the cast-off instruments of torture. Perhaps it was through her endurance of torture that she had been able to attain such heights; under the gold leaf, there flowed a spectacular amount of blood.

However aureate and lavishly-appointed it may outwardly appear, there are elements of Christianity in which the fleshly body is abused in order to test the spirit. Screams and cries of human suffering can be heard in every corner of the created world.

The history of all Europe is filled with examples of martyrs being canonized as saints, and of these saints' bones and flesh being venerated as belonging to the patron saint of a particular church. The church at Melk is no exception—in the eleventh century, the partially-decomposed body of St. Coloman, an Irish pilgrim who was executed by having been strangled to death with a red-berried elder bush, was carried into the church. Even today, St.

Coloman's bleached-white bones, draped over in decorative garb, lie at rest in a glass case framed in gold.

As I passed before his coffin, I felt a bit sorry for him. Not only was the life choked out of him with a red-berried elder bush, but he also had to suffer the indignity of having his bones on public display for a thousand years.

Upon coming out of the chapel, I left the cover of a white plaster ceiling and walked down a long hallway from whose ceiling hung iron lighting fixtures. It seemed to have been only very recently in the history of Melk Abbey that these lights had been outfitted with electric bulbs. I reflected on how the light from candles or lamp oil must have cast hardly more than vague shadows on the walls of people passing by.

Climbing a wide stone staircase, I then proceeded further into the interior of an exhibition room hallway whose name was given as the "Emperor's Chamber." It was upon entering the marble room that I saw the first tourist at Melk Abbey other than myself, a young woman carrying a backpack and holding what appeared to be documents, comparing them with the pictures on the building walls.

We exchanged smiles as we passed one another, and I breathed a small sigh of relief. Whether one spoke of the Emperor's Chamber or of marble rooms, it was clear that the ruling families of Austria such as the House of Babenberg and the House of Hapsburg cherished Melk Abbey as their spiritual base and headquarters. While Melk Abbey was a place of worship and religious discipline, it was also a fortress, a royal palace.

Perhaps the Emperor's Chamber was the room wherein the emperor met with the highest-ranking members of the clergy, who conveyed to the sovereign messages from God Himself.

Walking further, I was suddenly aware of the breeze blowing off of the river.

I had come out at the very tip of an enormous building constructed in the shape of the letter "A". The town of Melk that had risen up, and the Melk River, and the greenish-gray trees which closed them both in, were swaying to and fro, covered in the white veil of the sun which shone almost directly overhead. Looking carefully, one could see the surface of the river moving on endlessly downstream.

Farther on, in the actual monastery-looking areas which stood separate from the areas interconnected with the rooms that had been built for the emperor, the library was the only building which was open to the public. This library was even more captivating than the chapel which glimmered in gold, and was also the reason why I had longed to visit Melk once more.

Opening the thick library door, I entered a room filled with heavy, damp and oppressive air, exactly the opposite of the shining, golden atmosphere of the chapel I had just come from.

The library was a square room which continued on deep into the distance; apart from the narrow windows which were arranged down the left and right of the room, the walls were covered, ceiling to floor, with leather bound books. Although all of the volumes were decorated in gold-leaf lettering and designs, the gold was dark and dull, smothered by the weight of hundreds and hundreds of years' worth of time. I was inside of a mountain of book corpses.

These books were actually stockpiles of human energy, as almost every single volume had been copied out by hand. When I thought about it this way, the books were anything but corpses—indeed, they were concentrated products of human labor, full of power, and alive with voices, sighs and sweat.

Whatever that feeling had been—what *had* it been?—that I had felt the last time I had stood in the middle of this room, I wanted to feel it again.

If I were to be asked to put that sensation into words, I wouldn't be able to do it.

Human beings are capable of truly remarkable things.

The library contains the handwritten “Books of Admonitions,” written during the ninth century and after, as well as hand-copied editions of Virgil's works from the tenth and eleventh centuries. And it was here that St. Jerome's Vulgate was copied. The Rule of St. Benedict, the Bible, legal documents of all kinds, works of theology, and, indeed, the “Life of Jesus” of Frau Ava, held to be the oldest work of literature written by a woman in the German language, are all here. Although it is supposed that two-thirds of all of the hand-copied volumes are from the fifteenth century, it is by no means the case that every page of every book has been opened and examined. It was only recently—as recently as 1997, in fact—that Dr. Christine Glassner opened a hand-copied book here from the late Middle Ages and discovered a fragment of *The Song of the Nibelungs* tucked neatly inside, a find which caused quite a stir among researchers and historians.

In addition to hand-copied tomes, there are also old editions, or books from first printing runs—there are 1,700 such books from the sixteenth century in the Melk Abbey library, 4,500 from the seventeenth century, and 18,000 from the eighteenth century, when the number of old edition books increased dramatically. In total, there are 100,000 volumes stored here.

Only a small fraction of these books are visible, though—and as I can't read either German or Latin, I couldn't even tell whether the books that I could see were on the subject of theology, or law, or perhaps geography or astronomy. All I could do was look at the modestly-written explanatory sheet and try to guess which book was on which topic.

But there was one hand-copied book laid open on a display table that was so beautiful and so stunningly overpowering that it took my breath away. Each letter of the text was like a miniature emblem in and of itself; the words had been drawn—for “drawn” is the right expression—with such loving care as to make even the pen strokes themselves beautiful in their own right. I had no idea what the text was about. But the beauty of the book spoke of how precious a thing writing and words were to the people who copied and cherished these books. Perhaps the words themselves were objects of devoted prayer.

I was reminded of the Buddhist sutras. Religion is to be found not in asking what the words mean, but in copying them out carefully, painstakingly, reverently.

The monks who copied out the books in the Melk Abbey library engaged in their prodigious labor in order to come closer to God. If we believe this to be true, then the 100,000 volumes in the library where I stood represented the condensed prayers of monks who had been engaged in this work for hundreds and hundreds of years.

There was something trying to force its way into my skin, into my breathing. My own life was a fleeting, transient feather amid the dense atmosphere of the place...

When I walked over to the window, I felt the presence of another person at my back.

The books were pressing down with an overwhelming weight, and I felt someone's presence with the nape of my neck. Although I was indeed wrapped up in the centuries' worth of accumulated letters, words and prayers, there was no mistaking that the presence I felt was that of a living, breathing human being.

When I turned to look behind me, the person I had sensed was just coming back in my direction after having passed me slowly by. It was an old man, wearing a brown sweater.

The books that filled up the room I was in had had too strong a presence, and I had been unable to notice the man up until then. And there was a woman, as well, and a monk in a long robe cinched round at the waist.

The old man walked slowly over to where I was standing beside the window, keeping his eyes fixed the whole time on the section of wall above the window pane.

He had a round face with deeply carved wrinkles, and the skin of his neck hung flaccid under his chin. His eyes were bloodshot, but sharp. He had a relaxed, mournful air about him, which put me at my ease.

When he finally took notice of me, he smiled at my obvious reserve.

Because it was such an old building, there were few windows, and all of them were long and narrow. These windows didn't allow much light in, and I guessed that all the old man could see of me was my silhouette against the glass. From where I stood, though, I could see every last eyelash of the old man, who was squinting into the bright light coming in from outside.

He again raised his eyes to the wall above the window, although he now seemed to be whispering something, something that I didn't understand. But when I stepped away from the window and tried to pass him, he spoke out loud to me, and this time in English.

"That is my wife up there," he said.

That's exactly what he said, pointing up at the wall above the window. "Your wife?" I asked in reply.

This old man must be a bit crazy, I thought to myself.

The monk in the library approached the old gentleman and shook his hand, after which the monk disappeared into one of the antechambers. From the looks of it, the two men appeared to be close, perhaps old friends or acquaintances...

I now backed away from where I had been standing before the window, and looked up to the place the man had indicated moments before.

There was a vaguely-drawn painting of a figure, something that could have been a vase, maybe, or perhaps some sort of design. Not only was the painting badly deteriorated after hundreds of years, but the glare from the window was also making what was left of the image extraordinarily difficult to discern.

"Is that a vase of some kind?" I asked.

"Does it look like a vase?"

"Yes, yes it must be a vase," I answered.

"Do you see the woman in the background wearing the red dress?" the old man continued.

I narrowed my eyes and looked intently at the painting, upon which something resembling a human figure seemed to float up out of the work.

"Why, yes, I do see something that looks like it could be a person," I answered.

"That is my wife," the old man said again.

Right, that did it. It was time to leave this mad old man and be on my way.

"Everyone here at the monastery," he went on, "says that the figure in the painting is a scholar of the religious organization painted by Rosenthal, but if you look closely, you can see that it's a woman, and not a man. I knew she was a woman the moment I laid eyes on

her—and the next moment, I fell in love with her. This all happened a long time ago.”

“But it's a vase, though,” I protested.

“The vase,” the old man asserted, “was painted over the figure of the woman in secco by Johannes Berg. He painted over her, but my wife wouldn't stand to be treated like that, and she revealed herself from the inside of the vase that was used to try to cover her.”

“What is 'secco',” I asked, somewhat at a loss for words.

“Rosenthal painted frescoes while the plaster on the wall was still wet, but 'secco' is a painting that has been done after a wall has dried. Frescoes are much stronger, by the way. The vase painted over the figure of the lady was done in secco, but as time has gone by the dominant fresco underneath has gradually won out and worked its way to the surface, and now looks to overpower the vase altogether. In another hundred years, it will be the vase that will seem to be covered over by the lady. It's a happy thing to think about, isn't it? Living human beings are always superior to mere physical objects. You can try to press them into a wall, even, but they'll never fail to overcome and win through.”

“And, the woman up there on the wall is... your wife?” I asked again.

“Yes, that's exactly right,” the old man confirmed.

“You must mean that she's your 'Lady,' as in the Virgin Mary...,” I offered.

“No, I was married to that woman in the painting. She descended from the wall, and stood right where you are now, looking out of the window. All that was left where she had been was the vase that had been used to try and cover her. We lived together as man and wife, and she passed away four years ago, which is when she returned to where she had been, right up there.”

As the old man spoke, I could see the figure of the woman taking on a clearer and more distinct form. There was no doubt that the painting was of a lady in red, and not of any scholar, as the monks all suggested.

“I run this restaurant,” the old man said, offering me his business card. It contained the name of the establishment, and a map showing how to get there.

“Are you from Japan?” he continued.

“Yes.”

“And you've traveled here to Melk by way of Vienna, I suppose?”

“That's right, by train from the west station.”

“Well, if that's the case then you haven't been through Krems. If you'd passed through Krems by car, then you surely would have noticed my restaurant. Jamek, which is a well-known Austrian wine, is right nearby. There's a sign out front of our place that says, 'Sandpiper Crow'.”

Sure enough, on the business card there was a picture of a sandpiper crow. The old gentleman didn't seem so shady, after all.

I told him that I had been by that way before, when I had come to Melk by car on my last visit many years ago.

“This is a very special window, you know,” the old man said. “If you're not in any hurry, why not have lunch at my restaurant? It's a twenty-minute drive from here.”

“But I'm not the same woman who has climbed down from the painting on the wall,” I



answered.

We both laughed. I decided to believe what this old gentleman was saying and go with him. It was partly the fact that he walked with a cane that helped me to feel comfortable in his presence.

We walked together to the parking lot of the Abbey. The old man told me that his name was Peter, and that he drove to Melk every day to see his wife.

The parking lot was in an open plaza at the top of a flight of stairs. When I observed that it must be difficult navigating all these steps with a cane, Peter replied that this was where his wife had come back to, so there was nothing to be done about it.

Peter drove a German luxury automobile that had been retrofitted to accommodate a handicapped driver.

While Peter had appeared to be somewhere around seventy years old when I first saw him in the dim light of the Abbey library, out here in the bright sun of the parking lot I could see that he was, in fact, much older.

“Who's looking after your restaurant while you're away?” I asked.

“My son's taken over the business,” Peter replied. “I work when I like, and also take off when I like. My boy used to be the head sommelier at Jamek, but when my legs gave out on me he agreed to run the restaurant in my place.”

I began to feel even more comfortable with my new acquaintance.

The Melk River flows off to the east, where it pours into the Danube. I remembered, upon seeing them again, the road that ran parallel to the Danube River, and the trees that lined the shoulders of the road. The trees were in the middle of shedding their autumn foliage, and the road was a flurry of falling leaves. The trees themselves were just trunks and baring branches which were blotted out by the glare of the sun reflecting off the river beyond, giving the impression of a picturesque, tranquil fall scene stretching off changelessly into eternity.

The “Sandpiper Crow” restaurant was a cozy little establishment with a parking lot in the front; the sign with the sandpiper crow painted on it was hard to miss. But the bird looked more like a black pigeon than a crow, with a band of gray feathers running diagonally down its shoulders over its wings. When I mentioned to Peter that I'd never seen such a creature back home in Japan, he answered that the sandpiper crow was everywhere in this part of Austria.

The entire mountain behind the restaurant was dyed a brilliant yellow hue—the color of grape leaves in autumn. It seemed that Peter's restaurant also served homemade wine.

“And,” Peter added in a low voice, “our wine is better than Jamek. Take it from my son, who says so himself.”

I suddenly realized that I had grown hungry. The only thing I had had all day was a semmel bread-and-ham sandwich on the train.

There were several groups of customers in the restaurant, but it looked like they were all on their way to visit Melk Abbey. There were only five tables in the entire place, all covered with a white tablecloth and decorated with a vase of cut flowers, just like a table at someone's home would be. Each vase was resting on a yellow grapevine leaf. The fragrance of baking bread and the smell of good cheese made one feel happy.

Peter introduced me to a young chef wearing an apron, a thin man with large eyes.

“This is my son,” Peter said.

When Peter introduced him, the man's eyes narrowed amid a crowd of freckles, and his face expressed a strange emotion, as though he were gazing out into a distant, shimmering haze of heat.

“Did you meet the woman on the wall?” he asked directly.

“Um, yes, I did. Your father explained how the woman was stronger than the vase that they used to cover her with. Was the woman really his wife?”

I watched the chef to see how he would react. But he resumed a faint smile, as though he was used to hearing this story, and didn't answer my question.

The young chef had black, Arabian eyes, and shiny hair. Not only did he not look like Peter, he looked positively foreign, not Austrian at all.

I found myself becoming a bit wary of Peter after this brief conversation with the man he introduced to me as his son. But all of it was neither here nor there. The chef and Peter seemed to have some sort of an understanding between them, an affinity based on mutual trust. Still, I couldn't help but wondering whether Peter was really the owner of this restaurant or not.

The main course of the lunch that was served was a fragrant dish of brook trout munier in white wine sauce. The sauce was a beautiful blend of white wine, herbs and strongly acidic, sour apples found only around Klems, all of which combined to lend a thick, rich accent to the fresh taste of the white brook trout.

Peter drizzled grape oil over his trout. He offered me some, too, but I refused. It appeared to be the oil of pressed grape seeds, and seemed to be slightly bitter. The bread at the restaurant was homemade, with a hard crust concealing a steamy, moist inside that became more flavorful the more one chewed it. All of these dishes had been prepared by the young chef whom I had met.

“He really is a wonderful chef,” I said to Peter. “But he doesn't look like you at all. He must take after the woman on the wall.”

“This is Koko,” Peter said, as his eyes relaxed.

“Is Koko your wife's name?”

“Koko, in red.”

“The woman from the picture, you mean? Or was your wife's name Koko?”

I don't know whether he had overheard our conversation, but the chef, who seemed to be a bit less busy than he had been before, brought over a photograph in a small frame and set it down on the tablecloth in front of us.

“This is his wife,” the chef said.

She wasn't wearing a red dress at all, but was instead a perfectly plain-looking country woman in a Tyrol outfit. And the chef had referred to her as being 'Peter's wife,' which meant the chef must not have been Peter's son, after all. He didn't act at all like a man who was showing someone a picture of his own mother.

When Peter had excused himself and gone to the restroom, I called the chef over to the table.

“Are you really his son?” I asked.

The chef just shrugged and said, “Peter will probably take you out into the vineyards when you're finished eating. Please go with him and listen to his story, even if just as a way

of thanking him for lunch. Peter worked as a chef at this restaurant for many years, but when his wife died I took over for him. His wife was a wonderful woman; they both looked after the 'Sandpiper Crow' for a long time. I even hear that it was Peter's wife who gave this place its name."

"Did I understand Peter correctly when he said that his wife had come down from the wall in the abbey library, and then gone back up into the painting again?" I asked.

"That whole episode has been a tremendous scandal at the monastery," the chef explained, with a mixture of playfulness and sadness in his eyes.

The chef went back to the kitchen as Peter was coming back from the restroom.

Peter and I left the restaurant together and went for a walk in the vineyards that stretched behind the building.

From a distance, the sloping field seemed to have been dyed in a single yellow hue, but from up close I could see that the leaves of each type of grapevine were of a subtly different shade, so that the vineyard was divided up into sections of different tones of yellow.

There were some plants, taller than the rest, on which the yellow leaves were still interspersed with green; looking closely, I could see bluish-green clumps of fruit hanging down from the vines. They didn't appear to be unripened, although the skin seemed hard and firm. Looking off to the shorter trellis off to the left, I could see that the grapes had already been harvested, and that the leaves, though still attached to the vines, were almost ready to fall off. There were splotches of red on the yellow leaves that still remained on the vines.

Peter walked slowly ahead with his cane, and I fell into step beside him.

According to his explanation, red grapes came from vines whose leaves also contained shades of red. He then explained about the different types of grapes, and the different wines that could be made from each type.

"The grapes on this vine," he said, "go into making the house wine that we drank with lunch. It's a hardy variety of plant, so it requires very little upkeep. When the cold wind comes blowing down over that hill and scatters the leaves, as it soon will, you'll definitely be able to tell how strong and supple the branches are."

"When will all the leaves have fallen off the vine?" I asked.

"About a month from now, I suppose," he replied. "The black branches twist together under the snow and bear up against the cold. If only my wife had been as strong as those vines..."

The thin path branched off into a number of other paths as it wended its way up the slope. The winding trails all seemed to contribute to the illusion of having become lost in a forest of yellow.

Even the roads that should have been in use by vehicles helping with the harvest were all completely quiet. A small shrine with a triangular roof and a crucifix inside stood at the crossroads; it seemed terribly out of place out here among the yellow fields. Although the wind and the rain had dulled the colors, the blood seeping from the head of Christ wearing the crown of thorns seemed fresh and real under the shadow of the roof.

The path wended and turned, but the grapevines were planted in straight rows, with long strips of bluish-green grass growing between the trellises far into the distance. I wondered whether the harvesting machines would have to drive over these stretches of grass to gather the grapes.

It was a beautiful afternoon; the light seemed to be in too great an abundance, so much so that the grapevines that still hung heavy with grapes, as well as the grapevines that had already been shorn of their fruits, all seemed to shine a golden color, as though in a dream.

But it was all too beautiful. And to be too beautiful was to be frightening. The gold in the Melk cathedral was also frightening, as was the gold lettering on the spines of the books that had filled the library for so many hundreds of years.

And as was the old man who walked through this golden vineyard, slowly hobbling along with his cane...

My steps slowed underneath me.

Was the old man really so crippled as that? And was that merely a cane, or something else?

I felt the brook trout I had just eaten begin to swim around in the pit of my stomach.

Where were we walking to? Peter hadn't spoken for several minutes. He had just continued walking to a destination that remained unknown to me.

The grapevines that stretched out before us now were markedly different from the ones we had passed through before, with leaves that were tinted red.

Peter left the paved road and entered onto the path that led into the midst of those vines. The grassy ground was spongy and soft beneath my feet, but not so soft that my shoes sunk into it.

"Where are we headed?" I asked.

My voice was noticeably stiff.

Peter didn't answer—he just kept walking.

Left and right we were shut in by walls of yellow and red, with a stone wall forming a cul-de-sac up ahead. We had come too far, it would be impossible to find my way back. The trout in my stomach did an acrobatic leap. It was nice of Peter to treat me to a meal, but there's nothing so expensive as a free lunch, I thought. I couldn't turn back now without thinking of a good reason for doing so. While I was trying to come up with an excuse, I noticed the back of Peter's neck glistening with sweat.

He stopped.

The grapevines had been cut back just enough to reveal a long bench.

Peter placed his cane between both knees as he lowered himself down to sit. He exhaled deeply, clearly tired out by the walk.

I also sat down, careful to leave about one more person's width of space between Peter and myself. So this is where we had been heading. This is how I was to repay Peter for the lunch he had offered me.

There were black leaves visible under the red and yellow ones hanging from the grapevine around the bench. These leaves had decomposed, and gave off a sweet scent. I hadn't noticed it while we had been walking, but the smell was almost overpowering, so pungent that it was hard to tell whether it was the smell of ripe or rotting fruit. It was the smell of earth and grass mixed together, and it clung to one's body and around one's face.

"The grapes are rotting, aren't they," I observed.

"The bacteria have entered into them, so they're rotting as they dry," Peter replied. "See

those white patches? Before too long, the red will have changed to gray, and that's when the grapes are at their sweetest. When the color changes is when we harvest the grapes."

Ah, so these grapes were noble rot grapes, to be used to make wine of the same name.

"If they don't rot then they won't be sweet, you see."

I don't know whether Peter had noticed my uneasiness or not, but he was playing with his cane, passing it from one hand to the other.

"Do you often meet people in the library and bring them up here?" I asked.

"Only women," he answered. "Koko had been standing right by the window, just like you were today."

"She... came out of the picture?" I asked again.

"Nobody ever believes me. Either that, or they say that the person hidden behind the vase is a man. All of the monks and everyone else at the monastery all said so. They all glared at me as though they wanted to haul me before the Inquisition."

He struck the ground forcefully with his cane, sinking the tip of it into the dirt. Peter's cheeks were flushed red and his eyes were bloodshot. I had the strong impression that his mind was somewhere far away, perhaps back where we had first met under the window in the abbey library. He shifted his gaze from the golden fields and stared up into the cavernous autumn sky.

"You don't mean to say..." I spoke in a low voice.

"I used to be a monk," Peter went on. "And that window opened up an entirely new world to me. For hundreds of years, that window has secretly been transporting monks out into the world beyond. Can you imagine how much temptation was caused by the woman that Rosenthal painted on that wall? There were no candles allowed in the library, and of course there are no fireplaces and no lamps, either, so everyone in the monastery relied on the light coming in through that narrow window to read by. And because it wasn't allowed to check books out of the library, all of the copying was done by the light of that window, as well. Many monks died at a young age, succumbing to the cold or to tuberculosis. I, too, was on death's door, when a woman came down from that wall and stood right there beside that window. It was Koko. She was wearing a red dress then. And she saved me. Yes, she came down to rescue me."

The heavy, pleasantly cool air of the library came rushing back to me. I am Koko, standing before the window, and there before me is the gaunt, pallid young man, eyes exhausted from his monastic discipline, barely clinging to life while urgently seeking to cling to the warmth of another human being. Yes, his eyes were worn out from his studies, but they were also the eyes of a man in love.

The young man's long, black robe was cinched with a cord around the waist, with a stiff white collar about his neck and a Cross hanging down at his chest. My entire being was moved at the sight of this Benedictine monk, shuddering in fear at the changes being wrought within his own body.

"And what happened then?" I said, urging Peter to continue.

Perhaps he was in need of a drink of water after our hike; he opened his mouth slowly and deliberately.

"Nothing," he replied. "I've been with Koko ever since."

"But after she passed away," I said, "she went back up to the library wall, where she stays

hidden behind the painting of the vase.”

“Yes,” Peter answered, “but her body lies at rest right here.”

“Where?”

“Here,” he said, motioning to the ground beneath the bench.

The wind blew up from the hollows of the vast earth. My body moved languidly at the pungent, damp fragrance of the sweetly rotting grapes fully ripened on the vine.

He must be kidding me. No, it must be the truth. The grape vines all around the bench were markedly redder and more beautiful than the rest of the vines in the vineyard, with grapes so far advanced in the noble rot, so heavy as to be almost drooping to the ground.

“That's certainly an interesting story,” I said.

My voice cracked; I thought that even Koko, sleeping beneath the dirt, would hear the beating of my heart.

A black shadow passed overhead and came to rest among some vine trellises a little ways in the distance, rustling the leaves.

When the old man cleared his throat, a bird about the size of a pigeon with a long, black beak emerged from among the vines, nimbly stepping out onto the grass and cautiously coming towards us. The bird had a marking like a gray muffler running around his neck.

The old man took a grape from one of the vines next to him and tossed it to the bird. The sandpiper crow—the “crow wearing a muffler” —darted over, took the grape into his beak and just as quickly flew off again.

“The grapes from this vine are especially sweet,” the old man said. “Would you like to try some, too?”

With that, the old man plucked another bunch of grapes from the vine, half of which were dessicated and atrophied, the color of dark heliotrope. It was really the most peculiar looking fruit.

“This is the smell I was talking about,” said Peter, bringing the fruit up to my nose.

More than fruit, though, the bunch of grapes seemed to be a living animal, quietly concealing a mind and a will. The scent that reached my nostrils was that of the breath exhaled by a living creature. A bewitching, truculent mass of condensed air wafted up and hovered around my face.

Peter's own face was close to mine, and between us hung that cluster of fruit, that living, breathing being.

I took the scent of the grapes into my lungs, and then found a grape that the gray spoilage bacteria hadn't reached yet and put it into my mouth. But that wasn't enough to satisfy me, so I took another grape—a collapsed, disintegrating one—and ate it, as well. The taste was more than sweet—it was as though the fermentation process had been progressing all the while that the grape had been hanging from the vine, so sharp was the tingling sensation that the fruit left on the tip of my tongue.

“It was this color, wasn't it?” Peter asked.

I looked at the grapes again.

“The woman in the picture... If I remember correctly, she was wearing this color dress,” he went on.

I called to mind that deep, dark color that could have been either red or black. And when I looked up at Peter, his eyes had welled up with tears.

“Thank you for everything, for such a pleasant lunch,” I said. “I’m glad to have met you. You and your wife are a lovely couple.”

I had had enough; I stood up and began to walk away, but Peter remained motionless, still sitting on the bench.

At the fork in the road where the smaller path joined up with the main walkway, I again passed by the little shrine with the crucifix inside. Christ seemed to be the guardian spirit of the field, hanging on the Cross.

I wondered what Jesus said to the former monk every day when he passed by this spot—the monk who had chosen the touch of a woman over the severities of the monastic way. The young chef at the restaurant had mentioned that the romance between the monk and the lady had caused an unprecedented scandal, but the word 'scandal' didn't seem to fit Koko, the woman I had seen in the photograph, at all. No, the woman in the photograph was a country girl, the kind of country girl one can find just about anywhere in the world, who had seen many years and had grown old.

When I returned to the restaurant, the chef was standing outside and seeing off some of his acquaintances in the parking lot.

“Peter is in the vineyard with Koko,” I said, and the chef nodded, understanding everything with these few words. The chef then asked one of the middle-aged ladies getting into her car if she wouldn't mind giving me a ride back to Sankt Pölten.

Rolling the sharp taste of the grapes around on the tip of my tongue, I got in the car and left.

## The Golden Fields of Melk

A long time ago, I visited Melk by car. It was then just the beginning of spring, and a white, shadowy moon hung over the forest that followed the course of the Danube River like the wall of a fortress.

Hanging low in the still light blue smoky sky almost touching the tops of the mountains as though hesitating to set, the moon chased the car as though it was skating across the sky.

“I’ll be back,” I said to the moon.

To keep that promise, I boarded a train at Vienna’s Westbahnhof Station. This time, the season was not spring but October, and the air was clear.

I was used to traveling alone in Austria.

On my previous trip, a Japanese woman who was attending the University of Vienna had driven me in her car, but not wanting to bother her again, I decided to take the train. The station attendants and the train crew all spoke English, and best of all, the English spoken by people in the German-speaking countries is easy to understand. I can get by in restaurants, hotels, and taxis with English.

The train reached Sankt Polten in forty minutes. There, while transferring to the local train, I became friendly with an old woman and her dog. The woman boasted that the abbey at Melk was the most beautiful place in the world, and even the dog put in a high-pitched bark.

The local train reached Melk Station in a little less than thirty minutes.

On top of a high hill, with crags and deep green attending it like clouds, the Abbey of Melk spreads out its umber roof high into the sky.

The long walls beneath the roof are painted in a design of alternating yellow and white stripes, and while these look as solid as the walls of a citadel, the green dome rising from the center and the two towers nearer to the Melk River are ornate and gorgeous to a fault.

The white and yellow and the subdued green patina of the two towers were fresh and vibrant, and the towers’ rounded lines, falling as though flowing down from their tips to the faces of the clocks, glowed here and there with a golden color.

Viewed by itself, this part seems more like a palace than a church or an abbey, and the interior of the church, too, is awash in gold and marble in myriad colors. The design, as well, down to the smallest detail, is composed all of soft curves. Not for nothing is it called the crown jewel of the Austrian Baroque.

With oceans of gold and hearts full of faith, the architects who renovated the church in the first half of the 18th century and made it what it is today must surely have intended to build heaven on earth on the heights of Melk. Clearly, what motivated them was not an enthusiasm born of love and longing, but an energy born of tenacity and determination.

When I previously stood in the interior of the church, I was so overwhelmed by the golden color that surrounded me that it seemed as though the feeling of reality had been sucked out of me, so much so that I was no longer even aware of the weight of my own body. I felt that this sensation shared something with the Japanese idea of the Western Paradise of



the Buddha, and I thought then that I wanted to feel the bewitching power of the golden color once more.

The history of this abbey before it shone forth as an example of the beauty of the Baroque begins in the 10th century when it was a fortress, and I heard that originally troops were stationed in the central area and a shrine was built there. The castles that protected the district called Mark took their names from tributaries of the Danube River, such as Enns, Ybbs, Melk, and Krems. The most important of these castles was Melk.

The house of Babenberg, which ruled these lands at the time, gave sanctuary to the monks of the contemplative orders and built a monastery for them, making it a stronghold of the Benedictine order.

After that, even as time passed and governments changed, the abbey not only maintained its position as a religious center, it continued to be at the summit of theological scholarship and art.

Of course, the abbey at Melk was beset by many trials. One of these was the political and economic upheaval brought on by the Reformation. Although it was a Benedictine abbey, Melk joined hands with the University of Vienna and took the lead in the Reformation, becoming the birthplace of the reform of the monasteries known as the Melk Reformation.

Interestingly, at this time Melk supported the ecumenical doctrine of the University of Vienna rather than siding with the Pope. This caused a rift between Melk and the Pope, but Melk placed its priority on theory, that is, scholarship.

Today science explains the truth, but in those times pursuing the truth meant knowing the mind of God. In such an environment, the abbey of Melk, succeeding in forging a new direction based on theoretical thought, was at the forefront of scholarship and became a place where intellectuals like those of our own day gathered.

The abbey was visited by fire many times. The region is cold, and during winter the only way to keep warm is to light fires. Located as it was on top of a promontory, the wind blowing up from the river would fan the fires of the abbey, and since it was up so high, water was scarce. The smallest accidental fire could turn into a disaster.

A fire at the end of the 13th century destroyed the library. Due to the sacrifices of the monks, precious manuscripts such as hymns and Easter plays dating back to the early days of the abbey were saved from the flames. From this time the abbey had a writing room where the monks worked tirelessly on creating miniature paintings and annals, but I heard that the greater part of these were lost in the fire.

Even more tragic was the great fire of 1736. Led by Jakob Prandtauer, the most skilled architect of the day, a team of interior designers, plaster artisans, and sculptors, bending all of their skills to the task, had almost finished renovating the abbey and were on the very verge of completion when the abbey was again struck by fire. Almost the entire roof and all of the decorated rooms were lost. The abbot, Berthold Deitmeyer, undertook the task of rebuilding, but he departed this world with his dream unfulfilled, and it was the efforts of the prior who took over from him that gave birth to the flower of the Baroque that now stands.

These two conflagrations brought great destruction, and there were apparently any number of smaller, less serious fires, giving the entire abbey an abnormal fear of fire. Perhaps the robes with the long skirts and full sleeves worn by the priests and monks are for keeping warm living a fireless life.

This region is one of the coldest in Europe, and when I was here in spring the Melk River was still iced over. Now, in autumn, even though the sky was still beautiful with the sparkling afterglow of summer, the temperature has already dropped to around 10 degrees, bringing thoughts of the long winter soon to come.

Along the stone-paved road running in front of City Hall, restaurants were open for business with cloth-covered tables and chairs lined up, but there were no customers to be seen, only local seniors relaxing over their tea. They had the appearance of people taking a break after completing the year's summer work, or resting after their life's work was done.

Even the main street was so narrow that the people working in the cafes and souvenir shops on opposite sides of the street could converse without raising their voices.

With its two steeples and the green dome looking down on the street, the abbey casts its protective and watchful eye over the entire life of the town.

Going up the gentle hill, a beautiful gate with a circular arch and peaked roof greeted me. I could see a similar gate further on. The abbey itself is deep within the interior, and while visitors cannot enter the monks' training area, they are permitted to enter the interior of the church and certain fixed locations. However, aside from myself, there was not a soul to be seen.

As I was about to pass through the first gate, a sound like that of a huge flock of birds taking flight came from the right and left sides of the courtyard. Instinctively, I pulled back, but I saw that it was not a flock of birds, but children. Dozens of children running all together went rushing under the gate and down the hill's stone-paved street. Once again, I was alone.

After I watched the children go on their way, the figure of a priest who seemed to be a teacher appeared, dressed in black clothes and a white collar. He approached me and smiled in greeting. With an expression that seemed to say, "that surprised you, didn't it?", he narrowed his eyes and said,

"We call them 'The Wind'".

"Indeed", I said, returning his smile.

"They're junior students from the gymnasium. When they wear their white formal clothes, we call them 'The Rabbit Wind'".

I wondered where the rabbits in street clothes had gone. Without answering my question and with his eyes laughing behind his glasses the teacher said, "They stop running when they're seniors".

Would the elite students among them later go on to even stricter training as Benedictine monks and eventually climb the ladder to the priesthood?

I walked to the next gate in the midst of the silence left after the passing of the wind.

It was quiet. I had heard that within that great building there were many people, from gymnasium students to monks, most of whom lived in dormitories, but the air, as though it had never been polluted by human breath, was crystal clear.

Silence is prized in religious places, whether they are Christian or Buddhist. It is this atmosphere that I like. Like the bouquet of a chilled white wine, it passes through the lungs and permeates the spirit. The chapel of the church intoxicated me like a chilled white wine

infused with a cool golden color.

There were a few motionless worshipers to be seen, but they were vastly outnumbered by the figures decorated with gold leaf that gazed down at me with beatific and calm expressions befitting those who dwell in Heaven. I felt some butterflies in my stomach at first but they soon quieted down.

Every inch of the main altar in particular was completely encrusted with marble and gold. Above the tabernacle, Peter and Paul clasped each other by the hand, loathe to part, seemingly encouraging each other to face their inevitable deaths with equanimity. They were gold from head to foot, and the prophets and figures from the Old Testament who surrounded them, like Daniel, Jeremiah, David, and Isaiah, were all of gold. The figures of the saints and angels above the altar reached almost to the ceiling and all of them blazed with the same golden color. Without meaning to, I found myself on my guard against what seemed to me to be a scheme to dazzle with sheer splendor.

Peter and Paul were both executed on the same day. Peter was crucified head down, and as a citizen of Rome, Paul was beheaded. A woman in a deep red mantle in the fresco above the main altar was wearing a crown of thorns on her head and instruments of torture were scattered at her feet. She had probably endured torture to reach such an exalted state. If so, then it would mean that beneath all that gold ran rivers of blood.

No matter how splendid and flamboyant it might be, Christianity has an element that teaches that the spirit is tested through mortification of the flesh, and human screams and misery hang over it everywhere.

Throughout history, it was common in the various regions of Europe for martyrs to first become saints and then become the patron saints of churches, which would venerate the saint's corpse or part of his body, and Melk was no exception to this. In the 11th century Melk brought in the corpse of Saint Koloman, an Irish pilgrim who had been hanged on an elder tree, before it had completely decomposed, and even today the saint's decorated skeleton can be seen laid out in a glass case edged with gold.

As I walked in front of the saint's casket, I felt a twinge of pity for him. Not only was he hanged on an elder tree, even after a thousand years he is still forced to expose his white bones to prying eyes.

After leaving the chapel you walk down a long corridor with iron chandeliers hanging from the white ceiling. I'm sure that putting electric light bulbs in the iron chandeliers must have been quite a recent development in the in the history of the abbey of Melk. With oil lamps or candles there must have been barely enough light to make out the vague figures of people walking in the corridor.

I walked up the wide stone staircase and went further down the exhibition hall corridor marked "The Kaiser's Room". In the Marble Hall I saw the first visitor since entering the building. A young woman wearing a backpack was holding what appeared to be literature, comparing it to a picture on the wall.

We exchanged smiles as I went past. I felt relieved. The Kaiser's Room, the Marble Hall: I could see why the rulers of Austria like the Babenburgs and the Hapsburgs had so valued Melk as a spiritual center. While it was a place for worship and spiritual training, it was, at the same time, a fortress and a palace.

Perhaps the Kaiser met with high-ranking churchmen in the Marble Hall to receive

God's word.

Going even further on, suddenly I was met with wind from the river.

I had come to the very front of the huge building, which was built in the shape of an "A". Below me, the town of Melk, the Melk River, and the gray-green trees surrounding them shimmered indistinctly under the white veil of the sunlight shining from almost directly overhead. Looking closely, I could see that the surface of the river was moving constantly in one direction.

Further along, that is, separate from the part of the abbey lined with rooms for the Kaiser, there was another more abbey-like area where outside visitors were only permitted to enter the library. This library is a more alluring place than the gleaming gold chapel. It was my desire to see the library again that had brought me back to Melk.

I opened the massive doors and entered. An atmosphere completely different from the sparkling golden color of the chapel hung over the library: heavy, musty and austere.

With the exception of the narrow windows opening on the right and the left, the walls of the long rectangular room extending back from the doors are completely packed from floor to ceiling with leather-bound books. All the leather covers of the books have letters or designs written in gold ink, but the golden color is dull and dark with the weight of the passage of hundreds of years. A mountain of the bodies of dead books.

Almost all of them had been copied by human hands and were packed with tremendous human energy. As I imagined this, the books came to appear to me as anything but corpses, and became, rather, distillations of voices, sighs, and sweat, brimming with power.

What was that feeling that came over me the last time I had stood in the center of this room? I wanted to taste it once more.

If I were to put it into words it wouldn't amount to much.

What incredible things humans have accomplished.

The handwritten "Book of Admonitions"<sup>i</sup> from the 9th century and the transcriptions of Vergilius from the 10th and 11th century are here. In the 12th century, the commentary of Hieronymus was transcribed here. Not only are the Commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict, Bibles, legal documents, and theological treatises here, even "The Life of Jesus" by Eva<sup>ii</sup>, considered to be the oldest piece of literature in German written by a woman, is also housed here. Two thirds of all of the transcribed books here are said to be from the 15th century, but not all of their pages have been opened. Just recently, if 1997 can be considered recent, there was a great commotion when Professor Christine Glassner opened a book transcribed in the late Middle Ages and discovered a fragment of the epic poem the "Nibelungenlied", transcribed around 1300, lovingly tucked in between the pages.

Aside from the transcribed books, there are what are called old editions, printed books from the first days of printing: 1,700 volumes from the 16th century; 4,500 from the 17th century; and from the 18th century a huge increase to 18,000 volumes. In total, this library houses 100,000 books.

I could only confirm a tiny part of this with my own eyes, and the only way for me, ignorant of German or Latin, to even make a guess at distinguishing between books on theology, law, geography, and astronomy was to consult the understated commentary.

Even so, the beautiful hand-transcribed volume opened on the display stand had a power

and vigor that took my breath away. Each individual letter was like an emblem, gorgeously written with every pen stroke brimming with love. I could not understand what was written. However, I could see how precious the letters were. Perhaps the letters themselves were the objects of the scribe's prayers.

If one stops to think about it, in Buddhism the sutras are transcribed too. It is not the search for meaning but the transcription of each character that is a religious act.

The monks took on this monumental task in the effort to draw closer to God. If that is true, then the 100,000 books here are the compressed prayers of the monks over hundreds of years.

Something was trying to force its way into my skin and breath. In this concentrated atmosphere, my life was as light and insignificant as a feather.....

As I walked near the windows, I felt the presence of someone behind me.

Distracted by the oppressive feeling brought on by the books, I felt the pressure of the person's presence against my back. Lost as I was in the mountain of letters, words, and prayers piled up over hundreds of years, there was no doubt that it was the presence of a real living person.

Turning to look, I saw an old man wearing a brown sweater who had passed slowly behind me by and was just on the point of retracing his steps. The presence of the books that filled the room was so concentrated that I had not noticed it, but in the library there was also a woman and a monk, wearing a long-skirted robe gathered at the waist.

The old man had walked slowly over to the window where I was standing and was looking up at the top of the window.

His round face was etched with wrinkles and the skin of his chin and neck hung loose, but his bloodshot eyes were sharp and poured out waves of grief. I caught my breath.

Seeing the state I was in, he chuckled timidly.

Being an old building, there were only a few narrow vertical windows and they only admitted a small amount of light. The old man could probably only see my silhouette. I, turning around, could see every hair in his eyebrows over eyes squinting against the brightness.

Turning his eyes back up to the top the window again, the old man muttered something. I couldn't understand it. As I started to walk away from the window, he addressed me in English.

"My wife is there..."

There is no doubt that is what he said, pointing to the wall above the window.

"Your wife?"

Perhaps the old man was crazy.

The monk approached us, shook the old man's hand, and disappeared into an interior room. I could feel the affection he had for the old man from his demeanor. It seemed that the two of them were friends or acquaintances...

I moved away from the window and looked up at the wall at which the old man was gazing.

An indistinct painting was there that looked like either a vase or a pattern of some kind. Not only had it deteriorated significantly over hundreds of years, the backlight made it difficult to see.

“It looks like a vase, doesn’t it?”

“Does it look like a vase to you?”

“Yes, it’s a vase.”

“Can’t you see a woman wearing red clothes deep in the interior of the painting?”

I looked closely. As I did, the figure of what appeared to be a person floated up into view.

“Yes, it looks like a person.”

“That is my wife.”

Yes, I needed to get away from this old man right away.

“...all of the people here at the abbey say that the person is a student of the order, painted by Rosenstahl. But if you look closely you can see that it is a woman. I could see right away that it is a woman, and I fell in love with her. That was a very long time ago, though.”

“It’s a vase.”

“Johann Berger painted the vase over the woman using the *fresco secco* technique. But my wife couldn’t bear to be treated like that and she showed herself from deep behind the vase.”

“...fresco secco? What is that?”

“Rosenstahl painted a fresco while the wall was still damp. Fresco secco is a type of wall painting where the painting is done on a dry wall. But the fresco was more durable. With the passing of time, the fresco appeared from underneath the vase, which had been painted when the wall was dry, and now it looks like it is about to push aside the vase in the foreground completely. In another hundred years the situation will be completely reversed. Isn’t it glorious? Yes, she’s a living person after all, not a thing. Even if you try to stuff her into a wall, you cannot do it.”

“That is your wife?”

“Yes.”

“You mean your Madonna?”

“I married her. She had come down out of the wall and was standing there looking out of the window, just like you were. Only the vase was left on the wall. She lived with me and died four years ago. And once again she returned to her place on the wall.”

Once it had been put to me that way, the figure of the person became clearer. Yes, it was not a male student but a woman dressed in red.

“I am the owner of this establishment”.

With these words, he took a name card out of his pocket. The name card had the name of a restaurant and a map printed on it.

“Are you Japanese?”

“Yes.”

“Did you come from Vienna?”

“I took a train from the Westbahnhof.”

“Then you didn’t come through Krems. If you had come through Krems by car, you would have seen my restaurant. We serve the famous Austrian wine called Yameck<sup>iii</sup>. It’s the restaurant right near the winery with the sign reading “The Collared Crow”<sup>iv</sup>.

There was a picture of a collared crow on the name card. He didn’t seem like a suspicious old man after all. I told him that I had been to Melk by car before and had come on that road.

“This window is special. If you are not in a hurry, please have lunch at my restaurant. It’s 20 minutes from here by car.”

“But I am not the woman who came down from that wall.”

We both laughed. I decided to trust the old man. Part of the reason I decided to trust him was that he was walking with a cane.

We walked to the parking lot. His name was Peter, and I learned that he drove to Melk every day to visit his wife.

The parking lot was built on a courtyard at the top of a flight of stairs. When I remarked that it must be hard for him to go up and down the stairs with a cane, he said that since his wife had returned to Melk he had no choice in the matter.

He drove a top of the line German car that had been modified for a handicapped driver.

In the dim light of the library I had thought he looked around 70 years old, but in the bright light of the parking lot I saw that he was clearly much older.

“Who is watching the restaurant today?”

“I work when I feel like it. I have turned the restaurant over to my son. He was the chief sommelier at the Yameck winery, but my leg gave out, so I had him take over.”

I felt more at ease with Peter.

The Melk River joins with the Danube and flows towards the east. I recognized the road and the trees lining the roadside. The trees were in the midst of vigorously shedding their leaves, and the fallen leaves danced on the surface of the road. The gaps between the bare branches of the trees were filled with the light off the surface of the river, creating a tranquil scene of a never-changing autumn.

The restaurant “The Collared Crow” was small and cozy with a parking lot in the front courtyard, but just as Peter had said the collared crow on the sign caught the eye. Rather than a crow, it was more like a black pigeon with a gray band running diagonally across its shoulders. When I said that I had never seen such a bird in Japan, Peter explained that they were everywhere here.

The mountains behind the restaurant were a solid mass of bright gold. It was the golden leaves of the grapevines. Peter told me the restaurant serves its own homemade wine, and in a low voice, he added, “It tastes better than Yameck. My son says so, so it must be true.”

Suddenly I was hungry. I had only eaten one Semmel roll with ham on the train.

There were a number of groups of guests in the restaurant who seemed to be on their way to Melk by car. It was a homey restaurant with only five tables and flowers gracing the white tablecloths. Under the vases were laid golden grape leaves. The fragrance of bread and the aroma of cheese made me feel happy.

Peter introduced me to a young chef wearing an apron. He was a thin man with large eyes.

“This is my son.”

When he was introduced to me, an odd emotion floated across his face, and he looked as though he was standing in the midst of bright sunlight, squinting at heat haze in the distance.

“Did you meet the woman in the wall?”

“Yes. I also heard about how the woman was stronger than the vase. Peter told me that she is his wife, right?”

I wanted to see how the chef would react. But he had already recovered his customary smile and did not answer my question.

The young chef’s eyes were black like an Arab’s and his hair was glossy and bright. Not only did he not resemble Peter at all, he looked like someone from a foreign country.

This put me a little bit on my guard against Peter. But it didn’t really mean anything. An intimate atmosphere of mutual tolerance and trust seemed to exist between them. I guessed that Peter was the owner of the restaurant after all.

The main course of the lunch I was served was a fragrant meuniere of river trout with a white wine sauce. The white wine, the herbs, and the apples that only grew in the vicinity of Krems, with their robust tartness, blended wonderfully together and imparted a rich flavor to the pure white flesh of the fish.

Peter put some grape seed oil onto his river trout. He recommended that I do the same, but I declined. I have heard that grape seed oil, made from the pressed seeds of grapes, is a little bitter. The homemade bread, with its hard crust but moist center, became more and more flavorful the longer I chewed it. The young chef had apparently made all of this himself.

“He is a wonderful chef. But he doesn’t look like you at all. He must take after the woman in the wall.”

“Koko.”

The old man’s eyes relaxed.

“Is that your wife’s name?”

“Koko of the red robe.”

“The woman in the picture, yes? Or do you mean that your wife is called Koko?”

Perhaps the chef had overheard this conversation, but when there was a lull in his work, he came over carrying a small frame containing a photograph of a woman and put it on the tablecloth. Then he spoke.

“This is his wife.”



She was not the woman in the red robe, but a plain, rustic-looking woman dressed in Tyrolean style clothes. The chef had said, “this is his wife”. As I suspected, it looked like he wasn’t Peter’s son after all. He did not have the attitude of a son showing someone a photograph of his mother.

When Peter got up to use the restroom, I called the chef over and asked him.

“Are you really his son”?

The chef did nothing more than duck his head.

“Peter will probably take you to see the vineyard. Please go with him for a while and listen to his story. Think of it as a way to thank him for the meal. For a long time, Peter was the chef at this restaurant. After he lost his wife I took over for him. His wife was a wonderful woman, and they looked after The Collared Crow for a long time, as a couple. I heard that it was his wife who gave the restaurant the name The Collared Crow.”

“He said that she came out of wall and then went back inside the wall?”

“It was a huge scandal at the abbey.”

When he said this, there was both playfulness and pity in the chef’s eyes.

Peter returned, so he moved away from the table.

Peter and I left the restaurant and walked towards the vineyards that spread out behind the restaurant. From a distance it looked like the slope was a solid expanse of gold, but the shade differed subtly from species to species, and each section of the vineyard displayed a different tone.

The green that still showed mixed between the golden leaves belonged to grapevines that were somewhat taller than the other kinds, and looking closely I saw that they had clusters of purple fruit. It didn’t look like the grapes were unripe, but the skins were firm and solid. One section to the left had even lower trellises; in another section the harvest was over and even though the leaves remained on the vines they were just on the cusp of withering and falling. In the leaves that remained, the gold was turning red in places.

Peter was walking slowly with his cane, and so I matched my pace to his.

Peter explained that the leaves of red grapes have patches of red and he explained the different types of grapes. He even explained the flavors of the wine made from different varieties.

“This vine goes into the house wine that we drank at lunch. It’s a strong variety so it’s the easiest wine to make. Soon, when the cold wind comes from beyond that hill and blows the leaves away, you can really see how strong and pliable the branches are.”

“When will all of the leaves fall?”

“About another month, I guess. The black branches are coiled together in the snow so they can withstand the cold wind. I wish my wife could have been this strong.”

The narrow road wound up the slope branching off here and there. Its meandering path gave me the illusion that I was lost in a golden forest.

The road, which must be reserved for farm vehicles during the harvest, was utterly silent. At a fork in the road a small shrine with a peaked roof had been built, and in it was a figure of the crucified Jesus. It was out of place in the golden forest. The wind and rain had peeled off

the paint, but, protected by the roof, the blood oozing out from beneath the crown of thorns on his head remained in all of its graphic luridness.

Even though the road followed a winding course, the grape vines were planted in straight lines, and in between the rows of vines bright belts of vivid green grass extended far into the distance. I supposed that this where the harvesting machines traveled.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Under the abundant afternoon light, the grapevines, both those that still had fruit and those that had been harvested, were dreaming a golden dream.

But it was too beautiful. Too much beauty is frightening. The golden color of the chapel at Melk frightened me. The golden covers of the ancient books that jammed the library frightened me. And this old man, slowly walking with his cane in the golden vineyard...

I slowed my pace.

Did the old man really have a bad leg? Was his cane just a cane?

It felt like the river trout I had eaten at lunch was swimming around in the bottom of my stomach.

How far were we going? He hadn't spoken for the last few minutes. He was simply walking towards some destination.

Grapevines with leaves suffused with red, clearly of a different type than those we had seen previously, stretched out in front of us.

Peter turned from the paved road and went into the middle of the vineyard. The turf underfoot was soft, but not so soft that one's shoes would sink in.

"How far are we going?" My voice was cheery and stiff.

He just kept walking.

On either side of us straight walls of red and gold ran on and on. They dead-ended at a stone fence. It would take a lot of effort to go that far. The river trout in my stomach writhed. Being treated to the meal was nice, but nothing is as expensive as something free. I would need some reason to turn back now. I searched desperately for one. The back of Peter's head was glistening with sweat.

He came to a halt.

In that one spot, the grapevines had been cleared away and a long bench had been placed there.

He sat down, put his cane between his knees and let out a long breath, as though he was completely exhausted.

I sat down also, leaving space enough for another person between us. So this was his destination. So this was where I was going to have to pay for the lunch to which he had treated me.

On the grapevines around us, black fruit could be seen beneath the red and gold leaves. They had rotted and exuded a sweet fragrance. I hadn't noticed it while we were walking, but it was suffocating. The thick air, where it was impossible to tell the difference between the smell of sweetness and the smell of rotteness, blended with the smell of the grass and the earth and clung to my face and body.

"The grapes are rotten."

“...the bacteria has gotten to them and they will dry out as they rot. Look, you can see something white on them, can’t you? A little bit longer and the red color will change to gray. That’s when they are sweetest. When the rot has gone that far the grapes will be harvested.”

Suddenly I remembered. These grapes will become the “noble rot” wine.

“So if they don’t rot, they don’t become sweet, right?”

He was just playing with his cane, as though he had seen through my nervousness.

“...Do you always invite someone in that library to lunch and then bring them here?”

“Only women. And only those women who stand by that window...like Koko was standing...”

“Escaped from out of the picture?”

“No one believed me. Even worse, they said that the person painted behind the vase was a man. Everyone at the abbey said so. And they looked at me with cruel eyes, like I was in front of the Inquisition.”

He rammed the cane he was holding into the ground. The tip sank into the earth. His cheeks and eyes flushed red with blood. He had the power he had when I met him in the library, where his spirit was off traveling in some distant place. His gaze broke loose from the golden vineyard and pierced the wide void.

“...by any chance...” I spoke in a low voice.

“I was a monk. That window showed me a new world. You know, that window is a window that has secretly led the monks out to the outside world for hundreds of years. Can you imagine how many monks the woman that Rosenthal painted has seduced? You cannot bring any flame into the library. There’s no heat, no candlesticks. So everyone could read books only by the narrow beam of light that window let in. You cannot remove books from the library, so the monks transcribed books by the window. Many of them died young from cold and tuberculosis. I too almost died. And then a woman came down out of that wall and stood by the window. It was Koko. When she came down out of the wall Koko was wearing a red robe. Oh, I was saved, she had come to save me.”

The cold, heavy air of the library at the abbey returned. I was Koko standing by the window, and before me stood a pale-faced youth, all skin and bones. His eyes were full of urgent yearning, the eyes of one who, worn out from his training and desperately groping for some human warmth, had fallen in love just at the point of death. The youth’s long black robe was tied at the waist with a cord; he wore a stiff white collar and had a cross on his chest. This Benedictine monk, thrilling to my body, was quaking in fear at the changes taking place in his own body.....

“What did you do then?”

He opened his mouth very slowly, as though to protect a dry throat.

“Nothing. Ever since then I have been with Koko.”

“But she died and is hidden behind that vase in the wall again.”

“But her body is sleeping here.”

“Where?”

“Here.” He pointed to the ground beneath the bench.

A wind blew up from the depths of the earth. My body swayed with the rich, mellow scent of the overripe grapes sweetly rotting.

He's lying. No, it must be the truth. After all, the red color of the grapevines flanking the bench was particularly beautiful and the noble rot had progressed to the point where the grapes were just on the verge of falling from the vine.

"What an interesting story."

My voice cracked. It seemed that even Koko would be able to hear the beating of my heart from her resting place in the earth.

A black shadow passed over my head. The shadow fell into a grapevine a little ways off, stirring a few of the leaves.

The old man made a sound in his throat, and from between the leaves, a long-beaked black bird about the size of a pigeon appeared and hopped down onto the grass. Cautiously, it approached us. It had a gray collar around its neck

The old man plucked a grape from the vine right next to him and tossed it towards the bird. The collared crow hopped quickly toward it, took it in its beak, and flew off.

"The grapes off these vines are especially sweet. Would you like to try one?"

He picked a fresh bunch off of the vine. It was a strange thing, gray and withered with half of its juice gone.

"...this is the smell. See?"

He brought the bunch of grapes close to my nose.

It wasn't fruit; it was a living thing, concealing some quiet purpose. The smell was that of the breath of a living thing. I was assaulted by the mass of voluptuous fumes that wafted out and settled on my face.

Peter's white face was right next to mine. Between his face and mine dangled that living thing.

I sniffed the grapes to confirm the smell, and then plucked one that had no mold on it and put it in my mouth. It wasn't enough to satisfy me, and so I tried another one that was on the verge of disintegration. The flavor was not sweet; rather, it left a sharp numbness on the tip of my tongue, as though the entire tree itself had fermented.

"It was this color, wasn't it?"

I wanted to make sure.

"...the clothes that the woman in that picture was wearing were this color, I'm sure of it..."

I remembered that it was a deep color that could be taken for red or black. There were tears in the old man's eyes.

"Thank you for the meal. I'm happy to have met you. You are a lovely couple."

I couldn't stand it any longer. I got up and started walking.

He remained seated on the bench, unmoving.

When I reached the point where the roads we had taken met, I encountered the shrine

once again. It seemed for all the world like Christ had been nailed to the cross be the vineyard's guardian deity.

I wonder what Christ says to him each time he passes this way, this ex-monk, who, defeated by his ascetic life, chose a woman over his god? The young chef had said that it was a great scandal that happened at the abbey, but Koko's picture was not something that deserved to be called scandalous. She looked just like any common country girl who had aged into an old woman.

When I got back to the restaurant, the chef had just come out to see off some guests who were friends of his.

"Peter is in the vineyard with Koko."

Hearing this, he nodded, understanding everything. Then he asked the middle-aged couple who were about to get in their car if they would give me a lift to Sankt Polten.

I got into the car, savoring the sharp sensation on the tip of my tongue.

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<sup>i</sup> This name is speculative. Since the author is not named, I could not search for it.

<sup>ii</sup> This name is speculative. Again, not being sure of the spelling, I could not find it.

<sup>iii</sup> This name is speculative. I found a winery with a vaguely similar name, but I'm not sure it's in the right region.

<sup>iv</sup> This name is speculative. A bird called a "collared crow" exists, but it is native to China, not Austria.

### **Melk's golden field**

Long time ago, I went to Melk by car. It was early spring and there was the blurry, white moon hanging over the forest that continued like a fortress along the Danube River. The sky still remained navy blue as if it was hesitant to become dark. As I drove by, the moon chased me sliding down from the lower edge of the mountain. "I will come back" I said to the moon.

Intending to keep that promise, I got on the train from Vienna West station. It was October, quite different from my last visit, and the air was clear. I was used to travelling alone in Vienna. During the last visit, the Japanese woman who was studying at University of Vienna drove me around but I did not feel comfortable asking her a favor again. That was why I decided to take a train this time. In Austrian railway, both the ground staff and the on-board staff speak English and above all, I find English spoken by German speakers is easy to understand. English is also understood by the staff at the restaurants, hotels, and also by the taxi drivers. I arrived at Sankt Pölten Station in forty minutes. While I was waiting for the connection to the local train there, I made friends with an old lady with a dog. She boasted that Melk abbey was the most beautiful monastery in the world and even her dog burked loudly as if it agreed to it. The local train arrived at Melk station in less than thirty minutes. The monastery is built on a high plateau with the boulders and thick greenery below as if it is rising from clouds and it is spreading its tanned, brawny sealing high up in the sky. The long wall below the sealing is painted in yellow and white stripes and it looks as sturdy as a fortress but the dorm in the middle and the twin tower rising along the Melk River are superbly ornamental and looks splendidly elegant. White and yellow painting and the dark green color from malachite on the twin towers are very bright and the smooth lines flowing down from the pointy top to the face of the clock are shining in gold. By only looking at this part, it is more like a palace than a church or a monastery but that is not all. There is abundant use of colorful marble and gold inside the church as well. On top of that, all the structure is designed in soft lines to the details. I understand why it is regarded as the greatest treasure of Austrian Baroque architecture. The architects, who reconstructed this church into what it is now in the early eighteenth century, must have tackled on this project with a huge sum of money and religious piety to create a heaven on earth. I can feel that it was not the passionate feeling like love or yearning but rather the darker and heavier energy like obsession that drove them going. When I entered the dorm in my first visit, I was completely overwhelmed by the golden color. When surrounded by gold, people lose sense of reality and they even stop feeling their own weight. I thought it was almost like the philosophy of Buddhism: *Jyodo* and I used to yarn to experience that divine power again.

The history of this monastery went back around tenth century, which was before it had become the current architecture praised as the jewel of Baroque era. It was originally a fortress. It was said that the army was first stationed at the central location and then the church was built. Several fortresses that were protecting the border area, which used to be named Mark, were called Enns, Ybbs, Melk, Krems and so on. Each named after the tributaries of Danube River. Melk was the most important fortress among them.

The Babenberg who reined the area at the time protected the monks. They constructed the monastery and made it the base of the Benedictines. As the time passed and the regime changed, the abbey, not only guarded its significant position as the spiritual centre, but also kept existing as the highest academic institute for the studies such as theology and art. Of course the Melk abbey had faced a lot of ordeals in the past. One of them was the political and economical unrest caused by the religious reformation. Melk abbey, however, in collaboration with University of Vienna, rather took the lead and became an integral part of the movement of the reinvigoration of monastic life which was called Melk Reform. The interesting thing is that during this period, Melk abbey chose to support the Conciliar Theory from University of Vienna, which expressed the final decision on spiritual matters should not reside solely on Pope but rather on the decision made in the gathering of the representatives from churches and followers. This deteriorated the monastery's relationship with the Vatican but the abbey clearly demonstrated its stance of prioritizing "theory", in another word, "scholarship" over the relationship with Vatican. Nowadays, science explains the truth. However, the pursuit of Truth meant learning the thoughts of God then. The fact that Melk abbey decided the new direction taking the theory into account during such time proved that it was the vanguard of "learning" and also it was the place where "intellectualism" close to that of the present day was gathered.

It was damaged by fire countless times. Burning wood was the only way to get heat in the cold winter of the region. The wind blowing up from the river stirred up the fire at the monastery. Water was constantly scarce on high ground. The little accidental fire became a disaster. The fire at the end of thirteenth century burned down the monastic library. There was a scriptorium in the abbey since that time. The room was devoted to writing. It was naturally adjacent to the library and works such as history writing, drawing the plants of buildings were all done in this room. Although, some of the particularly precious collection of manuscripts such as poems from early century and Easter plays escaped from the fire by the self-sacrificial act of monks, majority of such works were lost in this fire. The incident that was even more devastating was the huge fire on 1736. The most renowned architect of the time, Jakob Plandtouer was working along with other top designers, lacquer workers and sculptors on the construction at the time. The fire destroyed almost all the roofing and the decorated rooms on the verge of completion. Then Abbot, Berthold Dietmayr started the reconstruction plan but he did not survive to see it completed. The existing abbey, the Jewel of Baroque, was completed by the continuous effort of the vice abbot.

These two fires particularly brought tremendous loss to the monastery but there were also countless small incidents and the entire monastery was extremely afraid of fire. I wondered if the reason why that abbots and monks wear the long attire with loose sleeves would be for keeping the body heat without fire. This is definitely one of the coldest areas in Europe and when I came in spring, there was still ice on the surface of the Melk River. Now it is autumn and though the reminiscent sunlight of summer is still shining in the sky, the temperature is dropping to 10 degree Celsius and it reminds me the up coming long, cold winter.

There are several restaurants on the stoned street in front of the town hall but there are not many customers now and I only see the local elderlies slowly sipping tea. It seems like they are relaxing after having done the summer work, or the year work or

even the life work. Even that main street is as narrow as the people in the café on one side and souvenir shop on the other can talk without raising their voice. The twin tower and the green dorm are looking down the street and life in the town is always guarded and monitored by the monastery. When I went up the gradual slope, a beautiful arch gate with the triangle roof top welcomed me. There was another similar gate ahead. The abbey was located at the very far end. The ordinary people were not free to enter in the living and training space for monks, but were allowed in the church and the certain other designated area. However, I did not see a single soul around me. When I was about to enter the first gate, I heard a sound like a flock of birds flying away and instinctively stepped backward. It was not a flock of birds but a group of children. Dozens of children rushed out from the gate and went running down the cobbled slope. Then I was alone again. After I saw off the children, a teacher-like monk with black robe and white belt came out from the gate. He approached me and greeted with a smile. "We call them - a storm." he said with the expression as if he wanted to say "you must be taken aback" and creased his eyes with delight.

"Certainly they are." I said and smiled back.

"They are the younger students in gymnasium. We call them the "white storm" when they are wearing the white uniform." he said. I wondered where the rabbits without formal dress went running.

Ignoring my thought, the man said "They stop running as they grow older." His eyes smiled behind the glasses again. I wondered if some of the chosen ones among the children would become the Benedictine monks and reach to the position of abbot after the long, strict ascetic training. I walked toward the next gate in total silence. The wind had died out. I was told that lots of people, from students in gymnasium to the monks, are in the building and the majority of them are living in the dormitory, but the air surrounding the area felt pure as if it had never contaminated with human breath. In a religious place, no matter what religion it is, Christianity, or Buddhism or something else, silence is valued. What I really like about the religious place is this serenity. It seeps into my soul from the lung like a chilled white wine.

The chapel in the church added the coolness of gold to the "white wine" and I felt intoxicated. There were some believers praying motionless but there were several times more gilded giant figures around and they were benevolently staring me down just like the residents in Heaven. The initial little stir in the chapel settled soon and the silence dominated again. The main altar was decorated fully with marble and gold and Pietro and Paolo on the Ark were holding hands reluctant to part from each other. They could be bracing each other facing death but their entire body was in gold and the surrounding prophets who were in the Old Testament such as Daniel, Jeremiah, David, Isaiah were also covered in gold. Jesus crucified in altar rising high up the ceiling as well as all the accompanying angels were shining in the same color as well. When I saw this, I thought they were trying to dazzle me with luster and stood on guard.

Pietro and Paolo were executed on the same day. Pietro was crucified upside down and Paolo was decapitated as Roman. The woman in deep red cloak in Fresco painting, the painting drawn on a wet plaster, at the main altar was wearing a prickly crown of thorns and some other torture equipments were scattered at her feet. She must have reached to this spiritual height enduring agonizing torture. Then there must be a pool of



blood below this shining gold. No matter how luxurious and glittering it looked, there was a certain tendency in Christianity that they challenge one's spiritual achievement by inflicting pain on their flesh. I started to hear their scream and feel their agony lingering everywhere in the scene. In the history of many parts of Europe, you hear stories that a martyr becomes a saint and his body or a part of it is displayed and revered in the church as their patron saint. Melk also brought in the yet-to-be-decayed body of Saint Koloman, who was an Irish pilgrim hanged on Elderberry tree in the eleventh century. The lying skeleton dressed as a saint is still displayed in a gold hemmed glass case today. When I passed in front of it, I felt a little sorry for him. Not only he was hanged, but also he has to keep exhibiting his skeletonized body to people a thousand years later. I exited the chapel and walked along the long corridor with iron lamps hanging down from the white sealing. The installation of the electric bulbs must be a quite recent event in the long history of Melk abbey. I imagine that it was the frames from kerosene or candle that faintly revealed the silhouette of people back then. I climbed up the wide stone stairs, and walked further down on the corridor passing the room indicated as the Emperor's room. In the Marble room, I spotted the first visitor. It was a young woman carrying a backpack and she was comparing a picture on the wall with the one on something looked like a brochure. We exchanged a smile when we passed. I felt at ease. The same as the Emperor's room and the marble room, I kind of understand that family such as the Babenberg and the Hapsburg who reined Austria treasured Melk as the spiritual center. It was certainly the place for religious service and training but at the same time it was also a fortress and a palace. The marble room might have been used by the emperor to meet with high ranking clergyman to deliver the messages from God. When I walked further, I suddenly felt the river breeze. I came out to the tip of the huge building designed in A shape. The city, the river and all the surrounding pale green trees were veiled with white sunlight and swaying lightly. As I saw carefully, I noticed that the river surface was moving incessantly towards one direction. The further ahead, which is another side from the sequence of rooms for the Emperor, looked more like a monastery. The library was the only place that the outsiders were allowed to enter there. This library however, was the place as attractive as the shining chapel for me, if not more. The main reason why I wanted to come and visit Melk abbey again was because I wanted to come to this library. When I opened the thick door and enter the room, I noticed the heavy, damp, rigid air lingering, which was totally different from the shininess of gold in the chapel. The long rectangular room was stretching further in front of me and it was completely packed with leather bound books up to the sealing except the small windows on both sides. Although there were letters and patterns drawn in gold on the face of each and every book, they was oppressed from the hundreds of years of history and looked dark and dull. It was like a pile of dead books. Most of these books were transcribed by hand therefore, tremendous amount of human energy was spent on these books. When I thought about this however, it started to reveal itself as a place with dense energy with voices, sighs and sweat. What was the feeling that I felt when I stood right in the centre of this room last time? I wanted to feel it again. When it is expressed in words, it becomes banal. "What a wonderful achievement it is."

The hand written book since ninth century, "*Admonition*" and the manuscript of the books written by the Roman poet, Vergilius' in the tenth, eleventh century were here too. Theologian, Hieronymus' commentary was transcribed right here in the twelfth century. "*Rules of St. Benedict*", Bible, literatures on law, books of theology and not only that, the work of the first German female writer, Frau Ava's work "*Life of Jesus*" is

here as well. They say that the two thirds of the entire work stored here is from the fifteenth century but some of them have not even been opened yet. Quite recently, it was 1997 still, Dr. Christine Glassner was viewing one of the manuscripts from late medieval period and found a hand transcribed page of "*The Song of the Nibelungs*" (epic poem written between 1050-1350) neatly tacked in between the pages. It became big news.

Apart from the hand written manuscripts, they have very old printed books too. There are 1,700 books from the sixteenth century, 4,500 books from the seventeenth century, and when it comes to the eighteenth century, the number increases significantly and there are 18,000 books. In total, there are 100,000 books stored in this room. What I can see is just the fraction of it. Since I can read neither German nor Latin, I only can guess from the simple information given if it is about theology, or law, or geology. Yet, the particular manuscript displayed in the glass case was so beautiful and took my breath away. Each letter was written with affection as if drawing an emblem and the stroke of the pen was so elegant. I could not understand the meaning. However, it made me realize how precious letters were. I wondered if the letters themselves were the object of worship.

There is also the act of transcribing sutra in Buddhism. Perhaps the act of transcribing itself was a religious practice regardless of your understanding of the text. If the monks engaged in this gigantic task of creating manuscripts for the higher spiritual achievement, the 100,000 books in this room is the concentration of their pray over a several hundred years. I felt like something in the air was trying to force into my skin and breath. In this highly dense air, my life seems to be as light and frail as feather. When I walked towards the window, I felt someone's presence behind me. It was disguising itself in the words and letters and prayers accumulated in the room over the period of hundreds of years, but it was certainly the presence of a live human being. When I looked back, it was an old man with a brown sweater. He walk passed and was about to slowly come back. I did not realize it perhaps because of the strong presence of thousands of books in the room but there were also few other people around. I saw a woman and also a monk with the hem of his long gown tied at around the waist. The old man slowly came towards the window where I was standing by and stared at the wall above it. His round face was deeply lined and the skin from the chin to the neck was sagging a little. When I looked at his eyes, they captured my attention. His sharp red eyes were exhibiting deep sorrow. He also noticed my gaze and laughed shyly. As it is an old building, there are very few windows in the library and also the shape of the windows is a little particular. The vertical sides of the window are longer than the horizontal sides. The amount of light that can enter through such window is limited. I figured that from where he was, he probably could only see my silhouette. From where I was on the other hand, I could even see each eyelash on his squinted eyes shone by the sunlight. Staring at the high wall above the window, the old man mumbled something again. I did not understand what he said. When I was about to walk away, he said "My wife is up there" in English this time. He certainly said so and was pointing at the wall.

"Your wife?" I thought he might be crazy. A monk approached the old man. He shook his hands and walked away. From the way the monk behaved, I sensed his affection towards the old man, like they were long time friends. I step aside from the window and looked up the wall where he was staring. There was a blur drawing which

could be a vase, or some kind of a pattern. Not only the deterioration set in after several hundred years, but also the sun we were facing did not help me to see the picture clearly.

“Isn’t that a vase?” I asked.

“Does it look like a vase?”

“Yes, it is a vase. I think.”

“Can you see the woman with a red dress behind?”

I strained my eyes trying to see. Then I noticed a shape like a human being. “Oh yes, it can be a person.”

“That’s my wife.” When I heard this, I thought I had better leave him alone and walk away immediately.

“The people in the monastery said that it was a male scholar in the abbey that Rosenthal, the famous painter, drew. But if you look carefully, you can tell that it is a woman. I knew it was a woman from the first glance and fell in love. It was a long time ago.” He said.

“I think it is just a vase.” As I insisted, he further explained “The vase was drawn by an Austrian painter, Johann Wenzel Bergl over the original fresco drawing using secco technique. He painted it over the woman but she, my wife, could not stand such treatment and appeared herself beneath the vase.”

“What’s secco?”

“Rosenthal drew on wet plaster using Fresco technique. Secco is a painting drawn on dry plaster. However, the Fresco painting was stronger than the secco painting. As the time passed, the original fresco painting came out from the vase, which was drawn after the wall dried up. Now it is as if the vase on the surface would about to be pushed away. With another hundred years, the situation would be completely reversed. It is funny. An object certainly can not beat a living human being. She can not be contained in the wall.”

“..and you are saying that is your wife?” I asked.

“Yes, she is.”

“Do you mean it is a portrait of a woman you adore?”

“I married her. She came down from the wall and was looking out the window just like you were. Then there was only a vase left on the wall. She lived with me and passed away four years ago and went back there.” As I heard the old man’s story, the figure on the wall seemed to be getting clearer. It was certainly a woman with a red dress as he claimed. It was not a male scholar.

“I run a restaurant” He said as he took out a business card out from the pocket. The name of the restaurant and the direction were on the card.

“Are you Japanese?” he asked.

“Yes”

“Did you come from Vienna?”

“Yes, by train, from the west station”

“Then you did not pass Krems. If you had driven the road passing Krems, you would have spotted my restaurant. There is a very famous Austrian wine called “Jamek”. The restaurant is very close to the winery that produces it and there is a signboard with common ravens, black bird with grey mark on the neck.”

There was a picture of the bird on the card as well. It seemed he was not a suspicious person. I told him that I had driven to Melk through the road before.

“This window is very special to me. If you are not in hurry, please come and have lunch at my restaurant. It only takes twenty minutes by car.” He said.

“But I am not the woman from that wall.” As I said so, we both laughed. I decided to trust the old man. The fact that he was walking with a cane also helped me to trust him. We walked to the parking lot. His name was Peter and he said that he drives to Melk everyday to see his “wife”. The parking lot was located at the plaza up the stairs. When I sympathized with him and said walking up and down the stairs with a cane must be difficult, he replied that it was something he had to do since his wife went back to Melk. His car was an expensive German car with a little modification done for a disabled person. He looked as if he was close to his seventies in the dark library but he looked even older in the well lit parking lot.

“How are you managing the restaurant today?” I asked.

“I work when I feel like it. The business is passed on to my son now. He was the head sommelier at Jamek winery but took over the business when my legs started troubling me.” Having heard this, I found myself trusting him even more.

Melk River meets the Danube and runs to the East. I could recognize the road and the roadside trees planted along the Danube. The trees were shedding the leaves at the moment and the scattered leaves were dancing on the street. The lights reflected on the river was shining through the stripped branches and creating the picture of ever-lasting serene autumn.

The restaurant “Common Raven” was a relatively small one with limited parking space at the front garden but the signboard certainly attracted attention. It was more like a pigeon than a crow and there was a grey line running at the shoulder. When I said I have never seen such bird in Japan, he said they were very common around the area. There was a mountain covered in gold at the back of the restaurant. It was the golden leaves from grapes. Peter told me that the restaurant served home brewed wine. “It is better than Jamek. My son says so it must be true.” He added whispering. I suddenly felt hungry. I realized that I had not eaten since the semmel, a bread roll, with a piece of ham inside that I had on the train. There were a few pairs of customers. They all seemed to be the people who were heading to Melk. It was a simple restaurant with homely atmosphere. There were only five tables covered with white cloth and they were decorated with flowers. The yellow grape leaves were placed underneath the vase on the table. The smell of the fresh bread and cheese made me happy. Peter introduced me to a

young chef with an apron. He was a thin man with big eyes.

“It’s my son.” Peter said.

When he was introduced as such, the young chef’s face revealed an expression like when you were straining the eyes to see a mirage in the sun.

“Did you see the woman on the wall?” the chef asked me.

“Yes, I also heard the story that the woman is stronger than the vase. Peter said that the woman on the wall was his wife.” I was curious to see how the chef would react to my word. But he just smiled as he was used to such remarks and did not comment on it. His eyes were black like Arab and his hair was also shining like that of Arab. Not only he did not resemble Peter at all, he did not even look like a European. I could not open up with him straight away, but it did not matter much. It seemed that there was deep trust between Peter and the chef. It is probably true that Peter owns the property. The main course for the served lunch was herbed river trout meunière with white wine source. The well balanced source of white wine, herbs and the sour apples produced only around Krems gave rich flavor to the white meat of the fish. Peter drizzled grape seeds oil on the fish. He offered it to me as well but I turned it down. I was told that it was oil produced from grape seeds and it had a little bitter taste to it. The bread was home made as well. The surface was crusty and the inside was soft and moist. The more you chewed the more flavor it gave out. Everything was prepared by the young chef.

“He is a wonderful chef. But he does not look like you. Perhaps he took after his mother” I said.

“Coco” His eyes gave out warm expression as he said.

“Is that your wife’s name?”

“Coco, the lady in red dress.” Peter said.

“Is Coco the name of the woman on the wall? or is it your wife’s name?” I asked Peter again trying to clarify.

As if he overheard such conversation, the young chef brought a small framed picture of a woman as incoming orders settled down a little. He put it on the table cloth and said

“This is his wife.” It was not the red dress she was wearing. It was an ordinary looking country woman with a dress like the one from Tirol region, the western part of Austria. The chef certainly said “This is his wife”. I figured that probably he was not Pete’s son. It certainly was not the way that one would show someone the picture of his own mother. When Peter left for the restroom, I asked the chef if he was his real son. He only shrugged his shoulders.

“Peter would probably take you to the vineyard. I would appreciate if you could accompany him and listen to him in return for lunch. Peter was the chef at the restaurant for a long time though I took over the business after he lost his wife. His wife was also a wonderful person and they both really took a very good care of the business in “Common Raven” for a long time. I was told that it was his wife that gave the restaurant

the name, "Common Raven"." He explained.

"Peter said that his wife came out from the wall and went back in there." I said.

"Well, it was a big scandal at the monastery." When he said, his eyes expressed both mischievousness and pity. As Peter returned, he left the table.

Peter and I left the restaurant and went for a walk out into the vineyard at the back. From the distance, it was just a golden slope but there was actually a subtle difference in color in each area from the types of grapes they were growing. The kind that still has some green leaves left among the gold ones was a little taller than the other kinds and they were bearing bunches of green grapes. Probably they were ripe but the skin looked firm. On the left side of them had a different kind of plants which was a little lower in height and they were harvested already. Some of them still had few leaves left but they were about to fall and the part of the still hanging leaves were already red as well. Peter walked slowly with the help of the cane so I walked alone with his pace. According to his explanation, red color comes out on the leaves of the red grape trees. He explained the variety of species as well as the taste of the wine that specific species of grapes produced.

"The grapes from this tree produce the house wine that we had with lunch. It is a sturdy kind and takes least care. When the cold wind from the hill over there blows the leaves away, then you will see the sturdiness and elasticity of the branches." He explained.

"When would that happen?" I asked.

"Another month probably. They tangle the black branches in snow and endure the harsh winter. I wish my wife was as strong as this plant." He said.

Many narrow winding paths branched off as I walked up the slope and that snake like trails created an illusion of being lost in the golden forest. The road for the heavy machinery used during the harvest was also really quiet now. At the point where the path branched off, there was a small resting place with triangle roofs on top. Inside, there was a crucifix displayed. I found it unsuitable for the golden forest. The paint had crumbled a little but the blood trickling out from the prickly crown on the head of Jesus was still preserved well under the protective roof and looked quite vivid. The roads were winding but the grape trees were planted in straight line. Between each line, there was another line of green lush grass continued to the distance. The harvesting machine should run on this line during the season.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Both the already harvested and yet-to-be harvested trees were having a golden dream together under the abundant afternoon light. This is too beautiful. Being too beautiful is a scary thing. The golden chapel triggered scary feelings, so did the golden spines of the books packed in the century old library. Can I really trust this caned old man in the golden vineyard? Suddenly the thought triggered the suspicion in me again. It slowed my pace. Is he really having bad legs? Is the cane really a cane? I felt the sensation that the trout just ate for lunch was swimming at the bottom of the stomach. How far are we going to walk? I wondered. He has not uttered a single word for good several minutes. He just continues to walk to somewhere. I noticed that the leaves of the surrounding trees were tinged with red. They were clearly different

species from others. Peter suddenly diverted from the treaded path and veered into the field. As I followed, I felt the soft grass land at the bottom of my feet though it was not as soft as the shoes to be buried.

“Where are you going?” I feigned the cheerfulness and asked lightly but my voice betrayed me and it sounded stiff. He did not answer my question and kept walking. On the both sides, the red and gold walls were continuing. I could see a stone wall at the dead end. It was too far to walk up there. The trout in my stomach flipped again. They say nothing is more expensive than what you get for free. I needed to come up with a good reason to get down the mountain. My brain was spinning desperately looking for a plausible reason. Peter’s forehead was shining with sweat.

Suddenly he stopped. The trees at that specific area were cleared and there was a long bench. He placed the cane between the knees and sat down. Like he was tired, as expected after such a long walk, he exhaled deeply. I also sat down spacing enough for another person from him. This must be the location. I probably have to return the favor for the free lunch. There were black fruits bearing among the red and gold leaves on the surrounding trees. I realized the strong sweet smell of overripe or rotten fruit lingering in the area. I did not notice when I was walking but it was as intense to the extent that I almost felt stifling. The dense smell of rotten fruit mixed with the smell of grass and the dirt started to cling to my body and the face.

“They are rotten, aren’t they?” I asked

“The mold makes them dry as they get rotten. You see, there is a white object clung to the fruit? The color changes to grey after a while. At that point, they are the sweetest. When the process has advanced that far, then we harvest them.” He explained.

I see. I understood that these grapes are for producing the special wine affected with noble rot.

“So you have to let them rot to make them sweeter then.” I said.

As if he saw through my nervousness, he was playing with the cane in his hands.

“Do you often ask people at the library to come here?”

“Only women. Only the woman who are standing at the window. As Coco did.”

“As she came out from the wall?”

“Nobody believed me. Not only that, everyone at the monastery said the figure drawn beneath the vase was a man. And they all looked at me as if I was standing at Inquisition under the suspicion of heresy.” As he said so he struck the ground hard with the cane. I saw the cane sank into the ground. His face was blushed and the eyes were red. I felt the powerful presence of emotion that I felt when I met him in the library. His gaze was away from the golden field and was fixed high in the air.

“..... were you..?” I started in low voice.

“I once was a monk. The window showed me the new world. The window secretly kept taking the monks out to the outer world for centuries. Can you imagine how many monks were seduced by the female figure drawn by Rosenthal? The use of fire is strictly

forbidden in the library. There was no heat or candle stands so people relied on the narrow light that came in from the window to read books. The books were not allowed to be taken out therefore transcription was also done by the window. Many of them died young from the cold and tuberculosis. I was dying too. Then the woman came out from the wall and stood by the window. It was Coco. She was wearing a red dress. My life was spared. She came out to save me.”

I felt the library’s heavy, cool air to my skin again. I am Coco standing by the window and there is a pale, skinny young man standing in front of me. He has weary eyes from many years of **ascetic practice** and desperate for the warmth from another human being. They are the eyes that have fallen in love on the verge of life and death. The young man’s long black attire is tied at around the waist, it has the white hard collar, and he is wearing a cross on the chest. This Benedictine monk is deeply moved by my presence and trembling with fears for the changes happening inside of his body.

“Then what happened?” I asked.

He continued particularly slowly as if he cared for his dry throat.

“Nothing happened. I am with Coco since.”

“But she died and went back to the wall, didn’t she?”

“But her body is resting here.”

“Where?”

“Here.” He pointed at the ground beneath the bench.

A gust of wind blew up from deep under the ground. The sweet smell of overripe grapes shook my body. Is he making up the story? No, probably it is true. The tree beside this bench looked peculiarly beautiful for its red color and the fruits were well affected by the noble rot as if it was about to melt down.

“That’s an interesting story.” My voice went hoarse. My heart beat may well be heard by Coco resting beneath the ground. Suddenly, a black shadow crossed above the head. It dropped into the trees in a little distance and was shaking some leaves. When the old man made a sound from the throat, a long beaked black bird as the size of a pigeon peeked out between the leaves and jumped onto the grass. It cautiously approached us. There was a grey mark on the neck. The old man picked a grape from the nearby tree and tossed it. The raven hopped to it and quickly retreated as picked it up.

“The fruit of this tree is particularly sweet. Do you want to try?” He picked a bunch. They have lost a half of their juice and shrunk to a strange looking grayish purple object.

“It’s this smell. See?” as he said, he brought it to my nose. It was more like a living organism with the quiet will rather than fruit. It surely smelt like a breath from a living organism. The mysterious and aggressive mass of air lightly landed on my face. I saw Peter’s white face close by. The organism was hanging between his and my face. I checked the smell and then picked up a grape without grey mold and put it into the



mouth. Could not be entirely satisfied by it, I tried the rotten one as well. Rather than the sweetness, it left sharp numbness on the tip of the tongue as if the fermentation process had been progressing on the tree.

“It was this color.” I confirmed. “It was this color that the woman in the painting was wearing.” I remembered that it was a deep color that could be taken as red or black. There were tears in old man’s eyes.

I could not stand any longer. “Thank you for the grapes. It was nice meeting you. What a wonderful couple you two are.” As I said, I started walking. He did not move from the bench.

On the way back, I saw the crucifix again. It was pinned on the cross as if it is the guardian of the field. I wondered what Jesus says to the man who failed to fulfill the training and chose to be with a woman every time he passes here. The young chef said it was a big scandal but the picture of Coco did not look scandalous at all. She appeared to be an ordinary woman from the ordinary country side grew old. When I went back to the restaurant, chef was just coming out to see off some regular customers.

“Peter is with Coco in the vineyard.” When I said so, he understood all and nodded. He also kindly asked the middle aged couple, who were about to get in the car, to give me a lift to Sankt Pölten. I got on the car feeling the sharp sensation on the tip of the tongue.

## The Golden Fields of Melk

Takagi Nobuko

Many years ago, I took a trip by car to Melk. Spring was just beginning to make its influence felt. Above the forest which massed along the Danube like a fortress, a pale, hazy moon hung in the air. The sky, smoky with twilight, its blue diffusing, was still holding back from plunging into night. In this dimness the moon, having just risen above the mountains, seemed to be chasing liquidly after my car.

I'll come again, I said to the moon.

It was on an October day that I boarded a train from West Station in Vienna, to keep my promise. Being fall this time, the sky was without a trace of mist.

I was quite used to traveling about Austria alone.

The previous trip a Japanese woman studying at Vienna University had driven the car, but I didn't want to trouble her by asking a second time, so I decided on the train. The station workers and staff on the train all spoke English. I actually found the English of German speaking persons easy to understand. Restaurant, hotel, taxi --all I managed in English.

It took 40 minutes to reach Sankt Polten. While I was waiting there to change to the local train, I became friends with an old lady and her dog. She was happy to inform me that the monastery in Melk was the most beautiful in the world. Her dog affirmed this with a high pitched yelp.

The local train reached Melk in just under 30 minutes. The Melk Abbey, from its high place on the hill, spreads its sienna colored roof far into the air. The surrounding rocks and deep greenery seem like clouds in its sky. The long wall that stretches under the roof is adorned with a yellow and white striped pattern. It is solid enough to suggest it was intended for military purposes, but the green dome at the center and the two towers which face toward the Melk River yield to decoration, and are more gorgeously wrought.

The two towers are vivid with white, yellow, and green admixed with verdigris. They shine with gold here and there along a line that seems to flow downward from the spires at the top to the round dials of the clock faces. This part alone seems more like a palace than a monastery or church. However, the church inside is also liberally sprinkled with multicolored marble and gold.

The structure as a whole is marked by soft, curving lines, making it one of the finest examples of the Austrian baroque style.

Those builders in the first half of the eighteenth century who restored the Abbey to its current state, using all their faith and material resources, certainly tried to create a heaven on earth on the hill above Melk. One can see that, beyond the fires of emotional devotion, it took a persistent energy to bring this to fruition.

The last time I was inside, I felt overwhelmed by the sheer power of the golden hue. I think a person surrounded by gold, has the sense of reality stripped from them, to the point of no longer being able to feel the weight of his or her own body. This is also found in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, and I wanted to experience it again this time.

Before the Abbey reached its current form as an epitome of the Baroque, in the tenth century it was one of the military fortresses spaced out along and above the Danube. Where an army encamped, a church was built. The fortresses took their names from the tributaries of the Danube in their area: Enns, Ypps, Melk, Krems. The most important of these fortresses was the one at Melk.

The ruling family of the locality, the Babenburgs, gave protection to the monks and founded the Abbey, which became an important site for the Benedictines. After that, despite political and dynastic changes, the Abbey continued to thrive as both a religious center, and as a place for high achievement in religious scholarship and the arts.

Of course, the Abbey faced a number of challenges. When there was a movement for the economic and administrative reform of monastic practice, Melk joined with Vienna University to take the lead and guide the reforms instead of resisting them. This became known as the "Melk reform." Of interest here is that Melk sided with the theoretical arguments of Vienna University over the direction of the Holy See in Rome. Because of this relations with the Pope suffered, but the level of scholarship in the Abbey only became more advanced.

Nowadays we look to science for explanations, but then truth was a matter of understanding the will of God. In this, scholarship at Melk produced the most advanced and exacting knowledge, comparable in theoretical sophistication to the present time.

Many times it suffered disaster from fire. In the cold of winter the only source of heat was to burn wood. But the wind from the river was ready to fan the flames in the monastery up on the hill. In that high place there was never enough water. The slightest neglect of a fire often led to a major disaster.

A fire at the end of the thirteenth century destroyed the library. Through the sacrifice of the monks, precious hymnbooks and passion plays dating back to the earliest days of the Abbey were rescued. In that early period the Abbey had a workshop for producing books and finely detailed paintings -- most of these were lost.

An even more tragic fire occurred in 1736. That fire destroyed work on the Abbey that was nearing completion, by a group of artisans, sculptors and plasterers under the direction of the renowned architect Jakob Prandtauer. Almost all the decorated rooms and the roof were lost. The Abbot at the time, Berthold Dietmayr, immediately set out to rebuild but left this world before seeing it completed. Due to the efforts of his Assistant it was born anew as a flower of the Baroque.

Besides these two disastrous fires there were many minor ones. Because of this the whole Abbey was possessed by an almost abnormal fear of fire. Perhaps the purpose of the full sleeves and long robes worn by the monks and priests was to protect them from the cold on those days when they no chance of warming themselves any other way.

This is one of the colder localities in Europe. When I first came in spring the Melk river was still full of ice. Now it was autumn, and while the brilliant light of summer still sparkled in the sky, the temperature had already dropped about ten degrees, presaging the long winter ahead.

There was a line of tables draped in cloth in a restaurant on the cobblestone street in front of the city hall, but no sign of tourists, only elderly residents of the city, taking their time drinking tea. It was the scene of a place which made its livelihood in the summer, and, having finished its work for the year, was now catching its breath.

Even the main street of the town was not wide at all. Those who worked in the souvenir shops and cafes on either side could carry on a conversation across the way, without needing

to raise their voices.

Looking down on the street were the towers and green dome of the Abbey. It presided over the life of the town -- and steadily observed it.

Ascending the gentle slope, I was welcomed by an arched gate with a three-corner roof. In front of me was another such gate. While the inner quarters where the monks did their observances was off-limits, it was permitted to go inside the church and within a delimited area of the grounds. Besides me there was not a single person anywhere about.

Just as I was about to pass under the first gate, from the courtyard inside there was a sound, as of a flock of birds starting up in flight. I instinctively drew back, but it was not birds. Instead a group of some ten children came running out in a bunch, through the gate and down the cobblestone slope. Then, I was alone again.

There appeared a monk, wearing a black robe with white trim. Possibly he was the children's teacher, and had just seen them off. He approached, and with a smile greeted me. Startled, weren't you? his expression implied.

"We call that 'the wind.'" His smile deepened. "Truly."

I returned his smile.

"These are lower class students in the Gymnasium. When they wear their communion whites, we call it 'the wind of rabbits.'"

Where were these rabbits off to in such a hurry, albeit today in their usual clothes? The monk did not answer my question, but continued, "When they reach the upper grades, they no longer run." His eyes, behind his glasses, twinkled.

Perhaps in the future a few of this group would be chosen to enter the Benedictine order, and after a more arduous course of discipline than their current schooling, would ascend to the position of a Father in the order?

After 'the wind,' it was quiet again, and I went on through the next gate.

There was no sound. While I knew there were many people within these large buildings, from Gymnasium students to monks, it seemed that the air around me had never been soiled by human breath.

A place of worship, whether Christian or Buddhist, depends on the maintenance of silence. I loved this clear air. Like chilled white wine I let it imbue me, from my lungs deep into my soul.

In the chapel, the gold added a layer of coolness to the white wine, intoxicating me further. There were the figures of motionless worshippers here and there about, but they were outnumbered by the gold-leafed images, occupants of Heaven, looking down at me with majesty and serenity. At first the panoply before me seemed too bustling, but before long sank into silence.

The main altar in particular seemed almost buried in marble and gold. Above the tabernacle Peter and Paul were clasping hands, not wishing to part. They had both determined to die, and were encouraging each other in their resolve. Yet they, as well as the prophets from the Old Testament surrounding them, Daniel, Jeremiah, David, and Isaiah, were rendered entirely in gold. From the altar up to the ceiling, the angels and saints affixed to the wall were also all gleaming with the same color. I felt I had to be on my guard against all this radiance, a plot to dazzle my senses.

On the same day, Peter and Paul were both executed. Peter was crucified upside down, and Paul was beheaded by citizens of the town. The woman in the dark red mantle in the

fresco over the altar had on her head a crown of thorns, and there were instruments of torture scattered at her feet. It seemed she managed to climb to this high place after enduring torture. For this reason, below the gold a copious quantity of blood trickled down.

No matter how beautifully glittering in gold, Christianity is drawn to test the extremes of what flesh can endure. In the most exalted spheres there are also cries of suffering, representations of pain. Martyrs became saints, and in the churches their physical remains were preserved and worshipped. This occurred all across Europe. Here as well, the eleventh century Irish pilgrim Koloman, who was hung from an elder tree, was brought to Melk before his body decayed. Today, the Saint's white skeleton, dressed in an outfit, lies in a glass case bordered with gold ornamentation.

When I passed in from of this I felt a bit discomfited. It is one thing to be hung from an elder tree, but another to be forced to have one's bones exposed to peoples' stares for a thousand years.

I passed out of the chapel and walked down a long corridor. From the white ceiling, lights hung down on iron fixtures. In the Abbey's long history it must be only recently that these fixtures contained electric light bulbs. With either oil lamps or candlelight, figures of people must have appeared as though swimming up out of the dimness.

After ascending wide stone steps, I went into another corridor called the Emperors' Gallery, in which paintings were displayed, then on into the Marble Hall. Here, for the first time since entering the building, I encountered another sightseer. It was a young woman wearing a backpack. She was scrutinizing a pamphlet in her hand and comparing it with a painting on the wall. We exchanged smiles as we passed each other.

Here, I felt relieved. Even though these were the grand Emperors' Gallery and Marble Hall, the overall impression they gave was the extent to which Austria's ruling families, the Babenburgs and Hapsburgs, valued the monastery as a spiritual place. In this marble corridor the Emperor met with the high spiritual leaders, who perhaps imparted to him God's message.

Going further, I suddenly met with the wind from the river. I had come out at the foremost point of the huge building, shaped like an "A." Struck by the rays of the sun shining down from close above my head, the city, the river, and the surrounding grey-green trees, seemed to be shimmering inside a bell of light. Looking closely, I could just make out the continuous movement of water on the river surface.

Forward, the route flanked away from the continuation of the Emperors' Gallery, and towards the monastery proper. In this section, only the library was open to view by the public. The library held more fascination for me than the golden chapel. It was the reason I wanted to visit Melk again.

I pushed open the heavy door. Unlike the glittering chapel, the air inside was thick with humidity, unmoving, severe.

The long square room, apart from narrow windows that opened left and right, was packed with leather bound books from floor to ceiling. The books all had designs and lettering in gold, but over the travails of hundreds of years the gold had dulled and faded. A mountain of corpses -- but of books, not human beings.

Since most of the books had been copied by hand, they were dense with human energy. Rather than corpses, perhaps it was better to see them as brimming with strength, the material condensation of voices, sighs, sweat.

There was a certain feeling that drifted over me when I came here before and stood in the center of the room. I wanted to experience it again, and find out what it was. It was difficult to

put into words.

Human beings -- what amazing things they bring into being.

In this library there is a Homiliarium, dated as slightly later than the ninth century, and a tenth or eleventh century copy of Vergilius. In the twelfth century St. Jerome's scriptural commentaries were copied here. The Benedictine Rule, Bibles, spiritual and legal texts, even the earliest example of literature written by a woman in German, the "Life of Jesus" by Frau Ava, are here. Two thirds of the copied volumes date from the fifteenth century, but among them many pages within the books have not been examined. Only recently, that is to say 1999, the scholar Dr. Christine Glassner opened a late medieval book, and discovered inside it a carefully preserved fragment of a thirteenth century Nibelungenlied, causing great excitement.

There are also early examples of printed books: 1700 from the sixteenth century, 4500 from the seventeenth century, then it leaps to 18,000 from the eighteenth century. Altogether there are 100,000 books in this library.

Of course, at any one time one can only take in with one's eyes a small portion of all these books. As I know neither Latin nor German, I could barely discern whether a book in question was about astronomy, geography, law or religion, except by glancing at the printed explanations and taking a guess...

Even so, there was one hand copied book in the display case, that had such a forceful beauty I had to catch my breath. Each letter was like a decorated emblem, with love and care in each pen stroke. I had no idea of the meaning, but the individual letters had been given such significance of their own that I thought they themselves might have become the object of prayer.

Well, in Buddhism there is the practice of copying sutras. It is not a question of pursuing the meaning. The writing of each character is itself a religious act. The monks who copied these books, must have given themselves over to this exacting labor as a way of getting closer to God. The prayers of the monks over hundreds of years were compressed into these multitudes of books.

In this close, humid atmosphere, it seemed as though something was trying to penetrate into my skin, my breath. My life itself seemed as fleeting as a speck of down...

I went toward a window, and felt that there was someone behind me.

The compelling force from all of the books, the hundreds of years of letters, words, and prayers, felt like a living person breathing on the back of my neck. I may have felt overwhelmed by the mass of books, but one thing was certain -- there really was a person just behind me.

When I looked back, this person, who had just passed slowly by me from behind, now turned back in my direction. It was an older person wearing a brown sweater. Absorbed in the books, I hadn't noticed before, but besides me in the room there was also a woman, and a monk with the long train of his robe rolled up and tucked in at the waist.

The old person slowly approached to the place by the window near me, and looked up at the window.

His round face was crisscrossed with wrinkles, and although the flesh hung loosely around his jaws and neck his eyes were sharp, suffused with blood. A sadness coursed out from inside them, drawing my attention.

He became aware of my presence, and gave me a reserved smile.

Because it was an old building the few windows there were, were long and narrow. Only

a small amount of light shone through them. The old man probably saw me as only a silhouette. I, on the other hand, with the single beam of brightness from the window behind me, saw distinctly each separate eyelash of his eyes as he squinted upward.

Directing his gaze to the upper part of the window, he murmured something I couldn't understand. As I started to move away, he said something again, this time addressing me in English.

"My wife... is there." He pointed upward toward the top of the window.

"Your wife?"

Perhaps he was not quite right in the head.

At this moment the monk came up and shook hands with him, and then turned to go into an inner room. There was affection in his bearing. They must be acquaintances, or good friends...

I moved back and tried to see what the old man was looking at.

There was something painted on the wall. It had undergone considerable degeneration, and the light was in the wrong direction, but it seemed to be an image of something like a flower vase.

"Is that a vase?" I asked.

"It looks like a vase to you?" he responded.

"Yes, it's a vase."

"Don't you see the woman wearing red behind that?"

I concentrated on where he indicated, and it did seem as though a human figure came into view.

"That is my wife."

After all, it would be better to keep away from this person.

"The monks all say that this is the figure of a scholar of the order painted by Rosenthal, but if you look closely you can see it is a woman. At first glance I knew it was a woman, and I fell in love with her."

"It's just a vase."

"The vase is there, yes, but Johann Bergl painted it over the top of the figure of the woman with *secco*. Being painted over completely was something my wife couldn't stand, so she caused her image to reappear behind the vase."

"...what is *secco*?"

"Rosenthal painted directly onto wet plaster: a fresco. Painting on dry plaster is called *a secco* painting. However, fresco is stronger and more durable. Over time the fresco painting has gradually been coming back from behind the vase painted on dry plaster, and is in the process of expelling it entirely. In another hundred years the positioning of these images will be completely reversed. That is a cause for joy, don't you think? In the end, the living person over the thing. No matter how the object was impressed into the wall, it won't prevail."

"And that is your wife?"

"It is."

"Your -- how should I put it -- your Madonna?"

“I was married to her. She descended from the wall, and just where you were standing, she was looking out the window. At that time, the only thing remaining on the wall was the vase. She lived with me, but four years ago she died. After that, she returned up there.”

After hearing this, the figure on the wall did seem more clearly discernible. Certainly it wasn't a male scholar, but a woman in a red dress.

The man took a business card out of his pocket. “I am the owner of this place.” It had on it the name of a restaurant and a map of its location.

“You are Japanese?”

“Yes.”

“Coming from Vienna?”

Yes, by train from West Station.”

“Then you did not pass through Krems. If you had gone through Krems by car, you would have seen my restaurant. There is a well-known Austrian brand of wine called Jamek. Close by their vineyards, is my restaurant -- with a sign, ‘The Hooded Crow.’ ”

On the business card, there was a picture of the hooded crow. This was not just some crazy old man, then.

I told him I had come to Melk by car on a previous occasion.

“This window is very special. If you are not in a hurry, please come to my restaurant for lunch. It is twenty minutes by car.”

“But -- I am not the woman who descended from off of that wall.”

We both laughed. I decided I could trust this old man. The fact that he used a cane made me feel more secure.

We walked to the parking lot. He told me his name was Peter, and that he came to Melk every day by car to meet his wife.

The parking lot was built as an elevated flat area reached by a flight of stairs. I said it must be hard to go up and down these stairs with a cane. He replied that since his wife had returned to Melk, what could he do about it?

His car was an expensive German model, which had been modified to accommodate a person with disabilities.

In the darkness of the library he had seemed around seventy, but in the bright parking lot, it was clear he was older,

“What about your restaurant?”

“I work there when I feel like it. I have turned it over to my son. He was the chief sommelier at Jamek, but when my legs became bad, he took over for me.”

I felt more and more comfortable with Peter.

The Melk River flows into the Danube, which then winds eastward. I remembered the road that goes beside the Danube, and the line of trees beside the road.

The trees were in the midst of shedding their foliage, and the fallen leaves danced on the road surface. The space between the trees that were already bare was filled with the light reflecting off the river. It was the eternal scene of autumn come again, unchanged, tranquil.

The restaurant, equipped with a few parking spaces in the front, was small and compact,



but the sign, "The Hooded Crow" was certainly conspicuous. It looked more like a black pigeon, with an ash colored shawl running diagonally across the shoulders. When I said I had never seen one in Japan, Peter responded that it was a common bird in this area.

The mountain behind the restaurant was dyed with a pure yellow. This was the leaves of the grape vines. Peter's restaurant also served a wine they produced themselves. About which, he added in an undertone, "It is better than Jamek's. No mistake -- my son has said so himself."

Suddenly I felt hungry. On the train I had only had a semmel roll with a slice of ham inside.

Inside there were several groups of customers, who all looked as though they were tourists driving on to Melk. There were only five tables. A homey little place, the tables decorated with white tablecloths and flowers. At the base of each flower vase was a yellow grape leaf. In the air, the warm and comfortable odors of bread and cheese.

Peter introduced me to the young chef in an apron. He was a thin man with big eyes.

"My son."

As he was introduced in this way, narrowing his eyes against the sunlight, in the chef's face for an instant there arose the strange apprehension of glimpsing some distant illusion.

"And have you met the woman on the wall...?"

"Yes, I have heard the story of how the woman behind is stronger than the vase. She was Peter's wife, and all that."

I wanted to see his reaction. But he quickly reverted to a superficial smile, without directly answering my question.

The chef's eyes were black, Arabian, his hair lustrous. He looked like a foreigner, unrelated to Peter.

Again I felt a little wary of Peter. But whatever the truth was -- maybe it didn't matter. I could tell there was a closeness, a feeling of mutual acceptance and understanding between Peter and the chef.

It certainly seemed to be true that this was Peter's restaurant.

The main course of the lunch was a river trout *meuniere* in a white wine sauce. It was excellent. The white wine and herbs, blended expertly with an acidic apple unique to the Krems area, accentuated the firm white flesh of the trout.

Peter drizzled some grape oil on his trout. He recommended this to me, but I declined. He said it was an oil pressed from grape seeds, with a slight bitterness. The bread was also made at the restaurant. The outside was hard, but the inside was soft and moist, and full of flavor when one bit into it. All this was apparently made by the chef.

"He really is a wonderful chef. But he doesn't resemble you at all, Peter. He is much closer to the woman on the wall."

"Coco."

The old man's eyes softened.

"Was that your wife's name?"

"Coco of the red dress."

"The woman painted on the wall? Or the name of your wife?"

Perhaps from overhearing this conversation, or because there was a lull in the kitchen, the chef came in and laid on the tablecloth a framed photograph.

“This is his wife.”

Not in a red dress, but in a Tirolese outfit, it was an ordinary, countryside woman.

The chef referred to her as Peter’s wife. He did not really seem to be Peter’s son. It was not the attitude of someone showing a photo of his mother.

When Peter got up to go to the toilet, I called over the chef. “Are you really his son?”

The chef only shrugged his shoulders.

“Peter will probably want to take you for a walk in the vineyards. Please go with him for just a while and listen to his talk. Consider it a way of expressing thanks for the lunch. For a long time, Peter was the chef at this restaurant. After his wife died he brought me in to take his place, you know? His wife was a wonderful woman, and they ran this place together for many years. It was his wife who gave it the name, ‘The Hooded Crow.’”

“And the story of the woman who came down from the wall, and then returned to it?”

“That was a big scandal at the Abbey.”

His eyes sparkled with mischievousness and compassion.

As Peter was coming back, the chef broke off the conversation and went away.

Peter and I went out of the restaurant, and began to walk in the vineyards in the rear.

Although from a distance it looked a slope of uniform yellow, there were subtle differences of deeper and paler yellow depending on the type of vine, which showed each its particular hue in the different sections of the vineyard.

There were some leaves among the yellow that were still green. These were taller plants that, looking closely, had bunches of blue grapes. These did not seem to need more ripening, as the skin of the grapes was hard and firm. On the left side of the vineyard the trellises were lower, and here the harvest had already ended. The leaves still attached were about to wither and fall off. Many of these leaves had partially turned to red.

Peter walked slowly, using his cane, and I adjusted my pace to his.

He explained that those leaves with scarlet in them were from vines with red grapes. He told me about the different types of grapes, and what sort of wine was made from them.

“This one here, yields the house wine you had with lunch. It is a robust plant, with little need for care. Soon, from beyond that hill there, a cold wind will blow, scattering away the leaves -- then we can see clearly which branches are strong and still full of life.”

“When are all the leaves gone?”

After another month, maybe. In the middle of the snow we twine the black branches together to protect them from the cold wind. It was good my wife had the constitution for this kind of work.”

The narrow road, while spinning off any number of offshoots, began gradually climbing at a diagonal. This winding route gave the illusion of being lost within a yellow forest.

During harvest season this road must be filled with the trucks and equipment, but now it was completely silent.

At the point where the road branched off a small shrine partially covered by a three cornered roof was set up, with a crucifixion image inside. It was quite out of place within this

yellow forest. From the affects of wind and rain the color had peeled off. But the blood that flowed down from the crown of thorns, protected by the roof, still appeared fresh.

No matter how much the road wound about and twisted, the vine plants were set in straight lines. Between each of these lines, there ran a belt of fresh green grass. Perhaps the harvesting equipment rode along on top of this grass.

It was a beautiful afternoon. In the fullness of the afternoon light, both the vines still with grapes, and those already harvested, were together dreaming a dream of golden color.

But it was too beautiful. That which is too beautiful is frightening. The gold inside the Abbey chapel was frightening. The gold leaf spines of the books that took up all the space inside the library, was frightening.

Also the old man who walked with a cane slowly through this golden vineyard...

My pace slowed.

Were his legs really bad? Did he really need the cane?

The trout I had just eaten for lunch seemed to be jumping about in my stomach.

How far had we walked? For the last several minutes, he had said nothing. Just steadily walking towards a certain destination.

Now we were passing a different type of vine. Its leaves had turned entirely red.

Peter turned off the paved road and began walking between the vine rows. The grass was soft underfoot, but not enough that my shoes sank into it.

“How far are we going?” My voice was clearly strained.

He kept on walking.

To the left and right, walls of yellow and red were right upon us. At the end was a stone wall. If we went too far, it would be hard to find the way back. The trout in my stomach was wriggling. It was nice to be treated to lunch, but had it been expensive enough to justify this? I needed a reason to go back. I was frantically trying to think of a reason. In front of me, the back of Peter’s head was shining with sweat.

We came to a spot where the vines had been pulled out, and a long bench had been placed.

He planted his cane between his legs and sat down. He did appear tired, heaving a deep sigh.

Leaving a space between us, I sat down. This was our destination, apparently. Here was where I was going to return the favor of the lunch.

In the vines around us, below the red and yellow leaves, black grapes were hanging. These had rotted, and a sweet smell was wafting in the air. I hadn’t noticed it while walking, but now this made it almost hard to breathe. The smell of ripe and rotted grapes together, impossible to tell apart, mixed in with odors of grass and earth, entangled my face and body.

“These grapes, they are rotted, aren’t they?”

“A fungus attaches to them, causing them to rot and gradually dry out. See, that white extrusion on the grape surface? A little longer, and the red color will turn ashen. Then they will be at their sweetest. When they have reached that point, they are picked.”

Oh yes, I had heard of that. Wine of the noble rot.

“If they don’t rot, they don’t turn sweet.”

He seemed to be aware of how tense I was, but he just sat there, both hands idly toying with his cane.

“Do you always invite someone you meet in the library, and bring them out here?”

“Only women. Only those who stand by that window. Coco was like that...”

“Who escaped from the wall?”

“No one believed me. They even claimed that the figure painted behind the vase was a man. All the monks said that. They regarded me with such severity that they were ready to hold a convocation to expel me.”

He thrust his cane down suddenly, and it lodged in the earth. His cheek was flushed, his eyes red. He had the same forcefulness as when I encountered him in the library, when he seemed to be returning in his thoughts to something far away. His gaze flew past the golden vineyard, and pierced into the sky.

“So, you were...?” I murmured.

“Yes, I was a monk. That window taught me about an entirely new world. It was that window, which for hundreds of years, led the monks secretly into the outside world. Can you imagine how many monks were enticed by the woman Rosenthal painted? Inside the library one could not use fire. There were no heaters or candlestands. Everyone relied on the long thin rays of light coming through the windows to read. One could not remove the books, so copying was done next to a window. Many of them died young from the cold, or tuberculosis. I was also close to death. Then that woman came down from the wall, and stood by the window. It was Coco. She was wearing a red dress then. She had come down to help me. Ah, she helped me!”

The cold, thick air of the inside of the Abbey library came to life around me. I was Coco standing by the window. Before my eyes was an extremely thin youth with a pale face. His eyes were exhausted from his religious devotions. They were the eyes of someone who had always relied only on himself, but who now desired the warmth of a human body. The eyes of one who, beyond all else, even his own life, had fallen in love.

The youth’s black robe was tied by a rope at the waist. A stiff white collar, at the chest a cross. My whole form brought about in him an emotional upheaval, and this Benedictine monk was trembling with fear at the change arising inside his body.

“Then what happened after that?”

He spoke slowly, as though to spare his dry throat.

“Nothing happened. Coco and I were together from then on.”

“She died, and hid herself again behind the vase on that wall?”

“But her body is sleeping here.”

“Where?”

“Here.” He pointed to the earth below the bench.

A wind blew up from below the earth. The rich scent of the ripened grapes, the sweetly rotted grapes, swept upon me.

I had been tricked. No, maybe it was a true story. The scarlet hue of the grape vines near this bench was especially beautiful, and the grapes were in the final stage of noble rot, about to fall.

“An interesting story.” My voice was hoarse, cracked. I felt my heart was pounding loud

enough to be overheard even by Coco, underneath the ground.

A dark shadow passed by over my head. This shadow descended into the foliage of a grape vine not too far away, shaking any number of leaves.

The old man made a noise in his throat, and a black bird the size of a pigeon with a long bill appeared from between the leaves, and bounded down to the grass. It approached us with caution. Around its neck was an ash colored shawl of plumage.

The old man plucked a grape from a nearby branch and threw it down. The hooded crow hopped closer, grabbed the grape and then went off again.

“The grapes from that vine are especially sweet. Would you like to try one?”

He twisted off a bunch of grapes. They were a peculiar thing, the water content half gone, withered, an ashen purple.

“Here, smell.” He brought them under my nose.

It seemed less a fruit, and more a living being, keeping hidden its own quiet intent. A living being, whose expelled breath was the source of its scent. This fresh, raw breath wafted over me.

Peter’s pale face came close to mine. Between his face and mine, this living being dangled.

I checked the smell, then picked one grape that was not too decomposed, and put it in my mouth. That by itself was not enough to taste, so I chewed and ate it. More than sweetness, a sharp numbing sensation remained on the tip of my tongue, making me think that the grape had already begun fermentation while still on the vine.

“It was this color, wasn’t it?” I wanted to make sure. “The dress the woman wore, it was exactly this color...”

I remembered it was part red, part black, a deep color. Tears were welling up in the old man’s eyes.

“Thank you very much for the lunch. I’m glad I had the chance to met you. A truly exemplary husband and wife.”

That was it. I could take no more. I got up and started walking.

He stayed seated on the bench, without moving.

Where the road we had taken joined with another, I once again encountered the crucifixion image. It was as though it had been fixed there on the cross to be the guardian deity of the vineyards.

Whenever the former monk who broke the rules of his Order and picked a woman instead passes by, I wonder how the Christ addresses him? The chef had said it caused a great scandal at the monastery, but the photograph of Coco he showed me did not seem to be of a woman who fit with the term “scandal.” It was a daughter of the countryside such as one might see anywhere, who had grown to be an older lady.

When I got back to the restaurant, the chef was outside seeing off an acquaintance who had lunched there.

“Peter is in the vineyard -- together with Coco.”

He nodded, understanding completely. He then asked a middle aged couple, in the process of getting into their car, if they would give me a ride to Sankt Polten. Still turning over the sharp sensation of the grape on my tongue, I got into their car.



The Golden Fields of Melk

Takagi Nobuko

Long ago, I made a visit to Melk by car. Spring was still young then, and beneath the hazy white moon, an unbroken stretch of forest lay fortress-like on the bank of the Danube.

As if reluctant to give way to nightfall, a swath of sheer cerulean still smoldered in the sky at the mountain's edge. Gliding low across that slim little line of sky, the moon had chased my departing car.

*I'll come again*, I'd reassured it.

To try and fulfill that promise, I boarded a train from Vienna's Westbahnhof. Instead of spring, it was now October. The air had cleared.

And I had gotten used to traveling around Austria alone.

Previously, a Japanese student at the University of Vienna had obliged to take me, but I couldn't very well call on her again. So I opted to take the train. Plus, the station attendants and train staff all spoke English, and it was easy to understand German speakers' English more than anyone else's. Somehow, whether in restaurants, hotels, or taxis, I always managed to get along with English.

I arrived in St. Pölten after forty minutes. While transferring to a local train, I befriended an old woman with a dog, who boasted that the monastery in Melk was the most beautiful sight in the world. Even the dog gave a high-pitched yowl.

Melk Abbey itself lies on a tall hill surrounded by rocky bluffs and deep greenery—as if it were sitting above the clouds. A chestnut-brown roof spreads overhead, high in the sky.

Beneath its eaves, the abbey's long walls are painted in distinctive yellow and white stripes and look as solid as a citadel's ramparts. But the large green dome rising from their center, and moreover the two decorative towers facing riverward, are excessively opulent.

The two towers are a vivid white, yellow, and verdigris-darkened green, and the curling lines that flow down from the tips of their steeples to the faces of their clocks shine here and there with the glint of gold.

Just looking at this fraction of the abbey gives an impression closer to “palace” than to “monastery,” but in the church interior as well, multicolored marble and gold are employed in abundance.

Nevertheless, the decorative moldings are intricately detailed in gentle curves, and the abbey is known as none other than the pride of the Austrian Baroque.

There can be no doubt that the eighteenth-century architects who rebuilt the church in its current form—an enormous hilltop undertaking of gold and religious devotion—were trying to construct heaven on earth. It was furthermore plain to see that they did so not out of love or longing, but an energy more akin to implacability.

When I stood inside that church long ago, I had been overwhelmed by the sight of so much gold. *Humans surrounded by gold, I determined, become removed from all sense of reality, and can't even feel the weight of their own bodies.* The idea of such a state of existence could be found even in Japan, in the Pure Land school of thought. I decided then that I wanted to experience the golden magic one more time.

The abbey's history beyond its marvelous architecture began in the tenth century or so with its days as a fortress; troops were stationed in the central area before any cathedral was constructed. The castles that protected the borderland known as the Austrian March all took their names from the tributaries of the Danube: thus Enns, Ybbs, Melk, Krems, and so on. But by far the most important of these citadels was Melk.

The Babenbergers, who governed the site at the time, entrusted it to a group of contemplative monks, and they founded a monastery based on the Benedictine order.

Thereafter, even through new eras and new political leaders, the abbey continued to defend its status not only as a religious and spiritual center, but also as the pinnacle of the theological arts and other studies.

Of course, a number of ordeals assailed the abbey. Just one of these was the political and economic unrest caused by the Reformation. Melk allied itself with the University of Vienna and in fact took the initiative to restore monastic discipline, becoming the center of the movement known as the Melk Reform.

What's interesting is that Melk sided with the University on the theory of conciliarism, which maintained the superiority of church general councils over the Pope. In turn, relations with the papacy suffered, but theoretical thinking—that is, scholarship—prevailed.

At present it is science that drives man's quest for truth, but in those days, to seek the truth was to perceive God's will. Amid all that, this monastery that had grounded its new policies in theory stood at the vanguard of "scholarship" and had gathered a body of "knowledge" similar to the modern ideal.

Time and again, though, fire visited the monastery.

Kindling was the only form of winter heating in these cold regions. The wind rising off the river would fuel any blazes in the hilltop abbey, and water wasn't enough to counteract the high location. Trifling accidental fires assumed serious proportions.

At the end of the thirteenth century, fire completely destroyed the library. The hymns, Easter plays, and other precious works from Melk's early days managed to escape destruction, but not without sacrifice on the part of the monks. Though the abbey afterward housed a room for those literary arts, it is said that many of the monks' most industrious creations, such as extensive collections of annals and miniatures, perished in the fire.

Premier architect Jakob Prandtauer and his builders, artisans, and sculptors lent their talents to the reconstructive work. But even more tragically, after they had completed the majority of it and were poised to put the finishing touches on, nearly all of the new roofs and decorated halls were lost in a 1736 conflagration. Before he could overcome his disappointment, the abbot and initiator of the reconstruction, Berthold Dietmayr, passed



away. It was through the deputy abbot's efforts that the present-day flower of Baroque architecture was born.

These two enormous fires caused terrible damage, but there were also, it seems, countless smaller fires, and the whole monastery came to fear these blazes to an unusual extent.

Indeed, the long, full-sleeved robes worn by the priests and monks may have been chosen for the insulation they could afford to a lifestyle without flame.

The region is especially cold, even for Europe; when I came in spring, there was still ice on the river. Now that it was October, the last traces of summer's light were glimmering in the sky, but the temperature had already come down by twenty degrees or so. I imagined that the oncoming winter would be long.

On the cobblestone road in front of the city hall, a line of chairs and cloth-covered tables meant that a restaurant was open for business. But the elderly patrons looked less like visitors than locals, stopping for a leisurely cup of tea. Putting away their summer's work—no, their year's, their entire life's work—to take a simple breath.

This "main" thoroughfare was narrow enough for easy conversation even without the shouts of those in the cafes and souvenir stores to either side.

Looking down on the avenue were the monastery's green dome and two towers: watching over and keeping guard on all the city's life.

As I climbed the gentle slope that led toward them, a handsome gate rose to greet me, a circular archway beneath a triangular roof. I could see a similar gate further on ahead. The inner sanctuary of this place of learning was off-limits, naturally, but entry into the chapel and other set areas was permitted—though, aside from myself, there wasn't a single person present.

I was about to pass under the first archway when from all about the courtyard, there was a sound like a great flock of birds taking off. I drew back, but they were no birds: children. All at once, a throng of children charged through the gate and ran down the cobblestone road. And then I was alone again.

I watched the children go, and the figure of a sage monk appeared, dressed in black habit and white collar.

He approached and greeted me with a warm smile. With an expression that seemed to say *you must have been surprised*, he offered, "We have taken to calling them 'the wind.'" His eyes twinkled.

"I'm sure." I returned the smile.

"Those were the Gymnasium underclassmen. When they wear their white dress robes, we say they are like a flurry of rabbits."

And where were the casually-clothed rabbits going?

Without answering my question, he remarked, "Once they become upperclassmen, they do not run anymore." Behind his glasses, those eyes were laughing again.

A select group of students would soon be making the climb toward priesthood—would they undergo training even more relentless than this Benedictine monk?

Left in the silence of the wind's departure, I continued toward the next gate.

It was quiet. I had heard that the dormitories in the immense building before me housed innumerable people, from Gymnasium students to monks, but the air in the vicinity was as clear as if it had never been sullied by human breath.

Places of worship, whether Christian or Buddhist, value stillness and tranquility. This was the type of atmosphere that I enjoyed. Like a chilled white wine, it steeped in the lungs and permeated the soul.

And, infused with the chapel's cool gold, the wine left me intoxicated.

In the chapel were the shapes of just a few motionless devotees, but gilded figures in plenty. They looked down at me with calm, magnanimous gazes befitting of heavenly hosts. A few murmurs at the outset quickly settled into deep silence.

The main altar was exhaustively and especially bedecked in marble and gold. On the tabernacle, Peter and Paul clasped each other's hands in farewell. They appeared to be preparing for death, to be encouraging each other on, but their bodies were cast entirely in gold. Arranged around them were the prophets of the Old Testament—Daniel, David, Jeremiah, Isaiah—who were likewise wholly golden. Fixed above the altar, the saints and angels stretching nearly to the ceiling sparkled in the same color; thinking that the lustrous splendor was surely intended to dazzle, I put myself on guard.

Peter and Paul were executed on the same day. Peter was crucified upside-down, while Paul, as a Roman citizen, was beheaded. The crimson-cloaked woman depicted on the fresco above the altar bore a crown of thorns on her head, and instruments of torture lay scattered at her feet. Surely it was because she endured such torment that she had ascended to this great height; below the golden figures flowed a tremendous amount of blood.

For all its splendor and luxury, in Christianity the pain of the flesh is a test of the spirit, and drifting all about me were the shrieks of human suffering.

The idea that the martyred become saints, and that the church should revere a saint's remains as a form of blessed protection, is prevalent throughout European history. During the eleventh century, even Melk acquired a set of pristine remains: the relics of St. Coloman, an Irish monk who, during his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, had been hung from an elder tree. His ornamented bones still lay in a gold-trimmed glass case.

As I passed in front of it, I thought it a bit pitiful. On top of being hung from a tree, his skeleton had to be exposed like this a thousand years later.

I left the chapel and proceeded to walk down a long hallway. Iron lamps hung from the white plaster ceiling.

The addition of lightbulbs to the lamps had to be a very recent event in Melk's history. Oil lamps and candles would have cast faint, obscure silhouettes on these walls.

I climbed a broad stone staircase and entered another long corridor, leading into an exhibition hall with the appearance of an imperial chamber. In this marble room, I caught a glimpse of the first tourist I'd seen since entering the building. A young woman with a backpack was comparing what looked like documents in her hands to the paintings on the walls.

As I walked past her, we exchanged smiles, to my relief. With names like “marble chamber” and “emperor’s gallery,” it was evident that Austria’s rulers—from the Babenbergs and Habsburgs on down—placed great value in Melk as a sort of mental headquarters. At the same time that it was a center of worship and study, it was also a fortress and a palace for them.

Perhaps the emperor would meet with the high priest in this chamber to receive God’s message for him. As I moved on again, I felt a sudden breeze from the river.

I came out in front of a huge, A-shaped building.

The gray-green trees of Melk’s city and river rose up all around me, and the sunlight from nearly overhead draped over them like a wavering, shimmering white veil. I stared harder: no, the river surface was moving in just one constant direction.

On what now appeared to be the opposite side of the monastery from the emperor’s room, outsiders were only permitted to enter the library—a place much more fascinating than the gold-glittering chapel. It was because I wanted to see this library again that I came back to Melk.

As I pushed open the thick, heavy door, I became aware that behind it, a dank and oppressive air, completely unlike the golden chapel’s, was stagnating.

Except where a few small windows hung open on either side, the walls of the long, rectangular anteroom were piled to the ceiling with leather-bound books. Every one of these books featured golden lettering or a gilded inlay, but the dull, darkened gold bore the burden of several hundred years’ passage.

This was a mountain of dead books.

Yet the immense energy of the men who meticulously hand-copied those works begged to differ. As I imagined such human effort, it became clear that, far from carcasses, these books were collections of voices, sighs, and sweat, brimming over with power and vigor.

What was the sensation that had descended on me the last time I stood in the center of this room? I wanted to savor it one more time.

My words can hardly produce the same effect.

Humanity has given us the most amazing things.

There was a ninth-century collection of handwritten parables, and tenth, eleventh century manuscripts of Virgil. In the twelfth century, St. Jerome’s manuals were transcribed here. Guides to the Benedictine order, scriptures, legal documents, theological texts, nay, even Frau Ava’s “Life of Jesus”—considered to be the oldest German literature by a woman—they were all here. More recently, in 1997, historian Christine Glassner had opened a manuscript from the late Middle Ages when she discovered, filed in the binding, a fragment of the *Nibelungenlied* epic from circa 1300, causing a near-riot.

Aside from the handwritten manuscripts, there were the early printed works, or antique books. They numbered 1,700 volumes from the sixteenth century and 4,500 from the seventeenth century; that count rose sharply to 18,000 for the eighteenth century. In total, the library must have contained 100,000 volumes.

The number that I could ascertain through sight alone, though, was only a fraction of that. Understanding neither Latin nor German, I could only read through the humble explanation of the distinctions—theology, law, even geology and astronomy—and hazard an estimate...

Still, there was a breathtaking intensity to the gorgeous handwritten manuscript that was lying on display. The individual letters, like emblems, exhibited even in their pen-strokes the magnificence of the love behind their work. I may not have understood the meaning behind the sentences, but the lettering was simply that exquisite. I wondered if the letters themselves were an object of worship.

Come to think of it, there were hand-copied sutras in Buddhism as well. Perhaps the religious endeavor was in each letter's transcription, not in the inquiry after their meaning.

And the monks who produced these manuscripts—they, too, engaged in this extraordinary pursuit out of a desire to become closer to God. Given that, the 100,000 volumes here represented the condensation of several hundred years of monastic supplication.

Something potent was seeping into my skin and breath. And in the face of it, my individual existence was becoming as light and powerless as a feather.

I walked over to the window, and I sensed the presence of someone behind me.

It had been masked in the pressure of the books, but now it pushed at the nape of my neck. Though it was mixed up with the letters and words and prayers that had piled up over the hundreds of years, it was unmistakably the presence of a living human being.

I turned my head to look; he had passed behind me and was about to make his way back around. An old man in a tawny sweater. Lost in the thick, dense existence of the books that filled the room, I hadn't noticed, but there was also another young woman and a monk whose long robe was tied at his waist.

Slowly, the old man approached the window where I was standing. He was looking up above the window.

Wrinkles carved into his round face, and the skin hanging off his chin sagged down to his neck, but his bloodshot eyes were keen. So much sorrow and grief poured from them that I was taken aback.

When he noticed the state of me, the old man gave a reserved chuckle.

Windows were few in this old building, and long lengthwise. The light that entered was scarce; he couldn't have seen any more of me than a silhouette. Facing him, I could make out his individual eyelashes as he squinted against the glare.

Looking on up to the window again, the old man mumbled something. I didn't understand it. As I was about to leave the window to go over to him, he began speaking again, this time in English.

"That's my wife there."

Uttering those exact words, he pointed at the wall above the window.

"Your wife?"

Perhaps he was mentally disturbed.

The monk I'd seen earlier came by to shake the old man's hand before leaving toward the inner room. His deep affection for the latter was obvious from the exchange. The two bore the manner of companions, or acquaintances of some sort...

I moved away from the window and looked up to the old man's wall.

It depicted something indistinct that could have been interpreted as a vase or some kind of other design. Time had been cruel to the wall, and not only that, the backlighting was proving a hindrance again.

"Isn't that a vase?"

"Does it look like a vase?"

"It's a vase."

"You can't see the woman in red, inside it?"

I peered harder. Something not unlike a human figure materialized.

"It does sort of look like a person."

"That's my wife."

As I thought—I had best get away from this old man immediately.

"...Everyone in this abbey will say that it's just some religious scholar, that Rosenthal painted him. But look carefully, and you'll see that it's a woman. I could tell it was a woman on my first glance, and I fell in love with her. This was a long time ago, though."

"That's a vase!"

"You know, after the woman was painted, Johann Bergl painted that secco vase on top of her. He painted over her, but my wife couldn't bear such treatment—so she revealed herself from behind the vase."

"...Secco, you said?"

"Rosenthal painted his fresco on a wet wall. Secco is when they paint on a wall that's dry. But a real fresco is stronger. Ever since the vase dried, over time the fresco began to show more and more of itself from underneath, and now it looks like it's pushing aside the vase. In another hundred years, there'll be a complete reversal of the two. Delightful, isn't it? The living being prevails after all. They can try all they like to imprison her, but it won't do any good."

"And that's your wife?"

"That's right."

"Do you mean she's your Madonna?"

"She and I were married. She came down from the wall and stood looking out the window like that, like you were just now. There was only the vase left on the wall. We lived our lives together, and four years ago, she died. And she went back *there* again."

As he said so, the figure became clearer. It was definitely not some male scholar, but a woman in red.

"I'm the owner of this place." The man produced a business card from his pocket. On it were the name of a restaurant and a map. "You are Japanese?"

"Yes."

"Did you come from Vienna?"

"From the Westbahnhof, by train."

"So you didn't pass through Krems. If you had driven, you would have come here by way of Krems and seen my restaurant. There's a famous line of Austrian wine called Jamek; it's the restaurant near that winery, with a hooded crow on the sign."

There was a picture of the same hooded crow on the business card. He didn't seem to be an untrustworthy man.

I told him that I'd come to Melk by car before, via that road.

"This window is...very special. If you aren't in a hurry, come have lunch at my restaurant. It's a twenty minute drive away."

"But I'll have you know I didn't come from the wall."

We laughed together. I decided to believe the old man. I was also relieved to see that he was using a cane.

We walked to the parking lot. His name was Peter, and every day he came to Melk to see his wife.

The parking lot was an open plaza at the top of some stairs. When I remarked that it must have been hard for him to go up and down, what with his cane, he replied that because his wife had returned to Melk permanently, it couldn't be helped.

His luxury car was a German make that had been restructured for his disability.

In the dimly-lit library he had looked to be around seventy, but in the brightness of the parking lot, it was plain to see he was even older than that.

"Why are you going to the restaurant today?"

"I work when I like. My son handles everything now. I used to be Jamek's head sommelier, but since my legs went bad, I passed the baton down to him."

I felt more at ease around him.

As we passed the merger of the Melk and the eastward-flowing Danube, I recognized the road that ran along the river and the line of trees at the roadside. The trees were vigorously shedding their leaves, and the fallen leaves were dancing about on the road. On those trees that were now just branches, the light off the river's surface filled the gaps between the boughs, giving the impression of a gentle autumn's landscape that would go eternally unchanged.

The Hooded Crow restaurant was a cozy little place with a parking lot in the front. The crow sign certainly stood out. It looked more like a black pigeon than a crow, with a sash of gray plumage running obliquely around its shoulders. I'd never seen such a bird

in Japan before, and when I said so, he explained that they could be found all about this region.

Behind the restaurant, the entire mountain was drenched in yellow: the grapes' autumn colors. Right, Peter had said that his restaurant put out a homemade wine. And that wine, he added in a whisper, was "even tastier than Jamek's. My son said so, so there's no mistaking it."

I suddenly remembered my hunger. On the train, I'd eaten only a single bread roll with ham filling.

Inside, there were a number of patrons, but it seemed that everyone was en route to Melk. It was an intimate restaurant with only five tables, each covered in a white tablecloth and adorned with a flower. A yellow grape leaf served as a doily under each vase. The aromas of bread and cheese raised my spirits.

Peter introduced me to a young chef in an apron. He was a skinny young man with big eyes. "My son."

The so-introduced chef, standing in a sunny spot, narrowed his eyes. As if he were staring into a distant shimmer of heat, a curious deep emotion welled up in them.

"...Have you met the woman from the wall?"

"Yeah, and I've heard the story about the woman being stronger than the vase. Peter told you that she's his wife, didn't he?"

I had wanted to see what kind of reaction the chef would have. But he'd already recovered his practiced smile, and he hadn't answered my question.

The young chef's eyes were as black as kohl; his hair was lustrous and sleek. It wasn't just that he didn't look like Peter's son—he looked like a person from an entirely different country.

For a moment I became wary. But no matter if it were true. Between Peter and the chef there was a certain intimacy, as if each was confiding in, relying on the other. At least it seemed that Peter really was the owner of the restaurant.

Lunch was brought out. The main course was a savory trout meunière in a white wine sauce. Notes of wine, lemongrass, and a kind of sour apple particular to Krems blended together deliciously, and the sauce imparted these rich flavors to the trout's clean white meat.

Peter drizzled some grape oil on his trout. He offered it to me as well, but I declined. It was pressed from the seeds of the fruit, he said, and had a slightly bitter taste. The bread was also homemade, and while the crust was stiff, the inside was soft and moist, and the flavor came out as you bit into it. I was told that the young chef was responsible for all of it.

"He's a wonderful chef indeed. But he doesn't look at all like you. Surely he looks more like the woman of the wall."

"Coco." The old man's eyes softened.

"That's your wife's name?"

“Coco in the red dress.”

“The lady in the painting, you mean, right? Or Coco is your wife?”

At a pause in his work and having perhaps overheard our conversation, the chef brought over a small, framed photograph of a woman, set it on top of the table, and said, “This is his wife.”

She looked to be an ordinary woman with the air of a bumpkin, wearing not red, but Tyrolean-style dress. The chef had said that this was Peter’s wife. It looked like he wasn’t Peter’s son after all—he didn’t behave in the attitude of someone showing me his own mother.

Peter called for the chef’s help as he rose to use the bathroom. After he left, I asked, “Are you really Peter’s son?”

The chef merely shrugged. “Peter’s probably going to take you to the vineyard. If you want to thank me for lunch, would you keep him company for a bit, and listen to his stories? He was the chef of this restaurant for a long time. When he lost his wife, that’s when I took it up. She was a great woman, too, and they took good care of the Hooded Crow for a long time as husband and wife. He told me she was the one who came up with the name.”

“He said that she had come from the wall, and then she went back into it again?”

“It was a huge scandal at the abbey.” His eyes revealed a mix of mischief and pity.

Upon Peter’s return, the chef parted from the table. Peter and I left to take a stroll through the vineyards that stretched behind the restaurant.

From afar the slope had looked to be a solid yellow, but each variety of grape had its own delicate shade, and to each section of the vineyard there was a different hue.

The ones that still had some green mixed in among the yellow leaves were slightly taller than the other varieties, and upon closer inspection, bore green bunches of fruit. They didn’t look unripe, but the skin was tight and firm. On the left there was a shorter trellis, but this crop had already been harvested, and the remaining leaves were on the verge of withering. Some of the leaves were turning dark red.

With his cane, Peter walked slowly and leisurely, and I matched my pace to his.

He explained that the scarlet leaves belonged to red grapes. He told me of the different cultivars and as well about the flavor of the wine that could be made from each.

“This vine here is made into the house wine that you had at lunch. Because it’s so robust, it doesn’t need any special work. Soon the breeze will come down from the other side of that hill and blow all the leaves around, and you’ll see how strong and supple the branches are.”

“When will all of the leaves have dropped?”

“In another month, maybe. During the snow, these black branches here will intertwine to withstand the freezing wind. If my wife had only been this strong...”

The narrow path split into several forks as it climbed the slope. Such meandering invited the illusion that we had lost ourselves wandering in a forest of yellow.



Even the paths that I expected would be used as private farm roads during harvesttime were completely silent. At the crossroads, a small shrine with a triangular roof had been erected to house a crucifix. It was unbecoming of the yellow forest. Driving rains had caused the exterior paint to peel, but the blood oozing from Christ's crown of thorns, owing to the roof, remained fresh as ever.

Though the path twisted and turned, the grapevines never deviated from their lines. Between them, belts of lush green grass ran to the horizon, unbroken. I imagined that on top of these belts the harvesting machines must have made their way.

It was a lovely afternoon. The fruiting vines, the harvested vines, and all around us the ample afternoon light. Together, we were having our golden dream.

But all of this was too lovely. And that which is too lovely is frightening. Melk's golden chapel was frightening. The gilded spines crammed in the ancient library were frightening.

And the old man on a cane strolling through this golden vineyard...

My pace slowed.

Were his legs really lame? Was the cane really just an ordinary walking stick?

I felt as if the trout I'd just eaten had begun to swim around in my gut.

Where were we going? He hadn't said a word for several minutes. He was just walking toward some destination.

We came upon a kind of grape with red-tinged leaves, markedly different from the vines I'd seen up until now.

Peter stepped off the pavement, heading for the center of the field. The meadow-grass at his feet was soft and limp, but not tall enough to cover his shoes.

"Where are we going?" My voice was stiffly cheerful.

He simply walked on.

The red and yellow embankments to either side of me carried on straight ahead, only to dead-end at a stone wall. It was much too far; I'd run out of steam before I even got close. The trout in my stomach shifted limply. The meal had been great, but there was no such thing as a free lunch. At this point, I would need a very good excuse to go back. I frantically wracked my brain. Sweat glistened on the back of Peter's head.

He came to a stop.

A long bench stood where, in that single spot, the vines had been pruned away.

He rested his cane between his knees and lowered himself onto the bench. Whether he was worn out, he drew a deep breath all the same.

I sat down, too, leaving room for another person between us. So this was our destination. I presumed it was here that I'd have to return the favor of the meal somehow.

I could see black fruit beneath the red and yellow leaves of the vines that surrounded us. They gave off a rotting, sickly-sweet smell. Though I hadn't noticed during the walk, it was suffocatingly oppressive. The thickness of it—I couldn't tell whether it smelled

ripe or rotten—joined with the scent of the grassy soil and coiled itself around my body and head.

“These grapes must be rotten.”

“...There is a bacterium sticking to them that will dry out the fruit as it rots. Look, see that white thing there? Just a little longer, and the red will become gray. That is when they’re sweetest. Once they’ve gotten to that point, we harvest them.”

Ah, so this would become a “noble rot” wine. “So if it doesn’t rot, it doesn’t turn sweet, right?”

Whether or not he’d seen through my discomposure, he simply sat there, toying with the cane in his hands.

“Do you always invite someone from the library to come to this place?”

“Just women. The ones who stand at that spot by the window...the way Coco used to...”

“After sneaking out of paintings?”

“No one ever believed me. In fact, they said that the person inside the vase was a man. Everyone in the abbey said so. And they looked at me with furious, glaring eyes, as if I was on trial for heresy.”

He struck the ground with his cane. With a thud, the wood sunk into the earth. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes bloodshot. It was the intensity I’d seen when I first met him in that library, as if some distant part of his heart was being wrenched from him. His gaze leapt away from the golden fields to pierce the empty sky.

“...Perhaps they did,” I said in a low voice.

“I used to be a monk. That window showed me a new world. You know, for hundreds of years, that window was our secret passage to the outside world. Can you imagine how much Rosenthal’s woman tempted us? We couldn’t use any fire in the library. Not any kind of heating, not one candlestick. So everyone relied on that tiny ray of light coming in from the window to read. We weren’t allowed to carry the books out, so the manuscripts had to be copied by the window as well. Most of the monks contracted tuberculosis from the cold and died while they were still young. I was dying, too. And then a woman came down from the wall, and she stood there by that window. Coco. She was wearing a red dress. Oh, I was saved! She’d come to save me.”

His words recalled the library’s cool, heavy air. Standing by the window, I was Coco—and in front of me stood a pale, sickly-thin young man. His were eyes that had tired of studying; that sought human warmth, and were nearly clinging to what they had found; that, urgently, in the last stages of life, had fallen in love.

The young man’s long, black clothes were tied at the waist with a cord; a cross hung beneath his stiff white collar. This Benedictine monk moved me. I shuddered, afraid of the strange love that I felt awakening in my own body...

“And then what happened?”

He began to speak slowly and deliberately, so as to protect his rasping voice. “Nothing. I shall be together with Coco forever.”

“But after she died, she was completely hidden behind the vase again.”

“But her *body* sleeps here.”

“Where?”

“Here.” He pointed at the ground beneath the bench.

A breeze welled up from beneath the earth. My body trembled in its mellow scent: ripened grapes, sweetly rotting.

I’d been taken in. No, no doubt, the story was true. The vines beside the bench were an especially beautiful scarlet. The noble rot had advanced so far that the fruit were almost dropping off.

“That’s an interesting story.” My voice cracked. Surely Coco, lying deep in the ground, could hear my heartbeat.

A black shadow passed over our heads. It landed in a vine some distance away, sending a wild shaking through the leaves.

The old man made a sound, and a black bird with a long beak, the size of a pigeon, appeared from the leaves. It hopped onto the grass and cautiously approached in our direction. Around its neck was a sash of gray plumage.

Peter plucked a grape from the nearest vine and tossed it. With a shuffle, the crow ran to the fruit and, grape in beak, flew away.

“The grapes on this vine are a special kind of sweet. Would you like to try one too?”

After examining the vine, he picked a cluster for me. They were curious—partly dessicated, grayish-purple, and withered. “Do you smell that?” He held the fruit to my nose.

But it was less a fruit than a *being*, living and keeping its quiet resolution to itself. Its scent was a puff of living breath. A sudden rush of alluring air swept across my face.

Peter’s white face was very close. Between us, the living thing dangled.

I took another tentative sniff and picked a gray grape without the rot bacteria. Turning it in my mouth, unsatisfied, I tried another that was caving in upon itself. It wasn’t quite a sweetness: the grape left a sharp numbness on the tip of my tongue that made me think it must have fermented while still on the vine.

“It was this color, wasn’t it?” I ventured. “The lady in the painting. Her dress must have been this color.”

And I remembered. It was this color, this deepness that could have been red or black. Tears welled up in the old man’s eyes.

“Thank you for the meal. I’m glad to have met you. You make a wonderful couple.”

We had reached the limit. I stood and began to walk.

He didn’t move from the bench.

On the return path, I came across the crucifix at the crossroads again. As if it were the guardian deity of these fields, the cross held me still.

His training had torn him apart, and he had chosen a woman over the pious life. With what kind of voice did Christ call whenever the former monk passed by this shrine? The young chef had said it was the abbey's great scandal, but the photograph of Coco could hardly be called scandalous. Wherever she was, that young country girl would be getting on in years; it looked like she'd be an old woman by now.

When I returned to the restaurant, the chef had just come outside to see off an acquaintance.

"Peter is in the vineyard with Coco," I said. Without a further word, he nodded, understanding everything. Catching up to a departing middle-aged couple, he asked if they would be so kind as to take me to St. Pölten.

Rolling a sharp sensation over my tongue, I stepped into the car.

## The Golden Fields of Melk

I visited the city of Melk once, long ago, by car. It was early in the spring, and a hazy, white moon hung over the fortress of woods that ran alongside the Danube River.

The sky still wore a pale, indigo mist, like it was hesitant to darken completely, and the moon slid along after the car low to the ground, just barely off the edge of the mountains.

"I'll be back," I told the moon.

To fulfill that promise, I boarded a train at Wien Westbahnhof. Unlike the last time, now I came in October, and the air was clear.

I had gotten used to traveling alone in Austria.

The last time, a Japanese student at the University of Vienna had driven me, but I didn't want to trouble her again. That's why I took the train. The employees at the station and on the train could speak English, after all, and fortunately, it's easy to understand the English of German speakers. Restaurants, hotels, taxis--I could manage anything with English.

I arrived at Sankt Polten after forty minutes. While we transferred onto a local train, I made friends with an old woman and her dog, and she boasted that the monastery in Melk was the most beautiful in the world. The dog gave a shrill bark, too.

The local train made it to Melk Station in just under half an hour.

Atop a tall hill, the brown rooftop of Melk's abbey extended high into the sky, accompanied by clouds of rock and thick greenery.

Under the roof, yellow and white paint formed a striped pattern on the long walls, and they looked as solid as a citadel. But the green dome rising at its center, and the two towers standing even closer to the Melk River, were entirely too pompous in their decoration.

The towers were colored in vivid white, yellow, and dark, rusty green; gold sparkled here and there along the curved lines flowing down from the tips of the spires to the clock faces.

The towers alone gave me the impression that this was more like a palace than a church or monastery, but even inside, there was an abundance gold and multi-colored marble.

On top of that, all of the molding was made of soft, curved lines, down to the finest detail, and it was easy to see why this place was known as a gem of Austrian Baroque architecture.

Architects reconstructed the church into its current form during the first half of the eighteenth century, and there's no doubt in my mind that they were trying to create heaven on earth with their enormous amounts of money and piety. It was obvious that they hadn't moved out of any such passion as love or admiration, but with the energy of an obsession.

When I stood inside the shrine, I was overwhelmed by its gilded hue, and the thought occurred to me that when surrounded by so much gold, a person loses her sense of reality, and she can't even feel her own weight. It felt a lot like the Japanese ideas of Buddhist paradise, and I wanted to experience the golden-colored magic again.

Before it sparkled in Baroque beauty, I had heard that the history of the abbey started in the tenth century, in the age of fortresses, when a cathedral was built for the troops stationed at the site's center. The citadels defending the region known as Mlk were named Enns, Ybbs, Melk, and Krems after tributaries of the Danube. The most important of those

strongholds was Melk.

The Babenbergs, who ruled the region at the time, constructed the building to house meditating monks, and it became a base for the Benedictine Order.

After that, despite changes in the times that came with changes in the government, the monastery not only managed to maintain its position as a center of religion, but continued to exist as a pinnacle of theological arts and learning.

Of course, many trials assailed the Melk Abbey. One such trial was the political and economical unrest caused by the Reformation. Melk joined forces with the University of Vienna and actually took the lead in the Reformation, becoming the starting point for the monastic reformation known as the Melk Reforms.

What I find interesting is that at that time, the Melk Abbey chose the theories of the ecumenical council of the University over those of the Roman Pope. Their relationship with the Pope worsened because of it, but the significance is that they gave priority to reason, to learning.

These days, science explains truth for us, but back then, the pursuit of truth was to know the thoughts of God. For Melk Abbey to be able to hammer out a new policy based on logic in the midst of those ideas means that it was at the forefront of *learning*; *knowledge* close to our modern knowledge collected there.

More than a few fires visited the place.

The only way to stay warm in the winters of the cold region was to kindle a fire. The winds that blew up from the river fanned the flames of the monastery at the top of the hill. And because it was at a high elevation, there wasn't enough water. The smallest incidental flicker could become a big problem.

At the end of the thirteenth century, a blaze destroyed the library. Through the sacrifices of the monks, valuable works such as early Melk hymns and Easter dramas were saved. From that time, miniatures and chronicles were created with enthusiasm in the abbey's literary writing rooms, but many of them are said to have been lost.

Even more tragic was the great fire in 1736. Headed by Jakob Prandtauer, the greatest architect of their day, decorators, plasterers, and engravers exercised their talents on the abbey. They had almost completed their work on it, when it was beset with flames and lost almost all of its roofs and ornamented rooms. The abbot, Berthold Dietmayr, rose to the occasion and began reconstruction, but he didn't live to see it finished. It was through the efforts of the vice abbot that the Baroque flower was born as we know it today.

These two great conflagrations inflicted severe damage, but apparently there had been several minor blazes, and the entire monastery had an abnormal fear of fire.

Maybe the reason priests and monks wear those long-hemmed robes with such full sleeves is to defend against the cold in a life without fire.

The area is especially cold, even for Europe, and when I had come in spring, ice still covered the Melk River. Now it was autumn, and the lingering light of summer still sparkled beautifully in the sky, but the temperature had already dropped to about ten degrees Celsius, helping me to imagine the long winter that was on its way.

A restaurant lined with cloth-covered tables and chairs was open for business on the cobbled street in front of town hall, but at present there were no customers to be seen--only a local senior citizen leisurely drinking tea.

He had the air of one taking a break after finishing his work for the summer, for the year,

for his whole life.

Even the main street was so narrow that the people in the cafes and souvenir shops on either side of it could hold a conversation without shouting.

With the two steeples and the green dome of the abbey looking down on the street, all daily life in the town was watched over and observed by the monastery.

I climbed the gentle slope and was greeted by a beautiful gate with a round arch and a triangular roof. Ahead, I could see another gate just like it. The monastery is truly an inner sanctum, and no one was allowed into the training rooms--only inside the church and a few designated areas. Although there wasn't a single person there but me.

As I started through the first gate, I heard a sound like a large flock of birds taking flight from either side of the courtyard. I jumped back automatically to find that they weren't birds--they were children. Dozens of children dashed through the gate all at once and ran down the sloping, cobbled road. Then I was alone again.

After I watched the children go, a monk appeared wearing a black robe with a white collar; he seemed to be a teacher.

He approached and greeted me with a smile. His expression indicated that he expected my surprise as he spoke with a twinkle in his eye,

"We call them the wind."

"I can see why," I returned his smile.

"They are lowerclassmen at the secondary school. When they wear their white robes, we call them the wind of rabbits."

Where had the plain-clothed rabbits gone off to? Their teacher didn't answer my question.

"When they reach the higher grades, they stop running," his eyes smiled again behind his glasses.

I wondered if students chosen from among them would eventually go on to experience even stricter training as Benedictine monks, on their way up to becoming priests.

In the silence that fell once the wind had gone, I walked up to the next gate.

It was quiet. I had heard that there were lots of people inside the enormous building, from students to monks, and many of them lived in dormitories, but the air around me was very clear, as if it had never been soiled by human breath.

Be they Christian or Buddhist, religious places treasure silence. It's that air that I love about them. It permeates my soul from my lungs, like a chilled white wine.

The church's chapel added an intoxicating golden coolness to this white wine.

I saw a few unmoving worshipers, but there were several times that many statues. Decorated with gold leaf, they looked down on me, gently and calmly, as if they were the residents of Heaven. There was a stir at first, but the hall immediately sank back into stillness.

The high altar was buried in even more marble and gold, and Peter and Paul clasped hands in a reluctant farewell on top of the pyx. They were in the attitude of encouraging each other as they prepared for death, but their whole bodies were colored gold, and the prophets of the Old Testament stationed around them--Daniel, Jeremiah, David, Isaiah, and others--were all gilded as well. The saints and angels attached over the altar, almost up to

the ceiling, all glittered the same hue, and I couldn't help but raise my guard, sure this was some kind of plot to bewitch me with all the splendor.

Peter and Paul were executed on the same day. Peter was crucified upside-down, and Paul was beheaded as a Roman citizen. A woman in a crimson mantle was depicted in a fresco above the high altar; she wore a crown of thorns on her head, and instruments of torture lay scattered around her feet. She probably endured torture to have risen so high. That meant that a significant amount of blood must have been shed underneath all this gold.

No matter how extravagant or dazzling, Christianity has those aspects that injure the flesh and try the spirit, and the screams and suffering of men linger everywhere.

Martyrs become saints, and churches will worship those saints' bodies or pieces of their flesh as patrons. This custom is found in the histories of every place in Europe. As for Melk, an Irish pilgrim named St. Coloman was hanged from an elder-berry shrub, and his uncorrupted body was carried to the monastery. Now the saint lies as an ornamented skeleton in a gold-trimmed glass case.

When I passed by the case, I felt a little sorry for him. Not only was he hanged from a shrub, but he had to lie here a thousand years later, his bones exposed to public view.

I left the chapel and walked down a long hall with iron light fixtures hanging from a white plaster ceiling.

It must have been in Melk Abbey's very recent history that electric bulbs entered those fixtures. I imagine that the flames from lamp oil or candles would only serve to bring people's silhouettes vaguely out of the darkness.

I climbed a wide, stone staircase, and went further down the corridor of an exhibition hall designated as the imperial rooms. In the Marble Hall, I saw another sightseer for the first time since I entered the building. She was a young woman shouldering a backpack, and she was looking back and forth from what appeared to be some reference material in her hand to a painting on the wall, comparing them.

When I walked past her, we exchanged smiles. That was a relief. From the imperial rooms and Marble Hall, I could see that the Babenbergs, the Hapsburgs, and other rulers of Austria valued Melk as a spiritual stronghold. It was a place of worship and training, and at the same time, it was a fortress, and even a palace.

Maybe the emperor met with eminent clergymen in the Marble Hall and received messages from God.

As I proceeded further, I was suddenly hit with a breeze from the river.

I had come out at the farthest edge of the huge, A-shaped building.

The town of Melk rose up the hill by the Melk River. The greenish gray woods encircling the area swayed around them, blocking out the sunlight that shone like a white veil almost directly overhead. Looking closely, I could see that the river's surface moved constantly in one direction.

In that direction, there was another side of the building, different than the one with the string of rooms for the Emperor--the side that was more what I'd expect from a monastery. It was the side where the library was the only place outsiders were admitted. This library was more charming than the sparkling gilt chapel. It was to visit this library again that I wanted to come back to Melk.

I opened the thick doors and went inside. A heavy, damp, and stern atmosphere hung in the air, thoroughly unlike the golden radiance of the church.



Except for the narrow, open windows on either side, the long, rectangular room stretching before me was packed to the ceiling with leather-bound books. Designs and letters were painted in gold on all of the leather covers, but this golden color was dull and dark, and the books held the weight of hundreds of years. This was a mountain of literary corpses.

Most of them had been copied out by hand, and an immense amount of human energy had gone into them. As I imagined it, the books became far from corpses--they were overflowing with power, solid masses of voices, sighs, and sweat.

What was that sensation that fell over me the last time I stood in the center of this room? I wanted to taste it one more time.

Words couldn't do it justice.

It's incredible what human beings can do.

This place has a hand-written *Homiliarium* from the ninth century, and copies of Vergilius written down in the tenth or eleventh century. Manuals by Hieronymus were copied here in the twelfth century. Books of Benedictine precepts, Bibles, books of law, books on theology--yes, they even have Frau Ava's *Life of Jesus*, considered to be the oldest piece of German literature written by a woman. I've heard that two thirds of all of the copies were made in the fifteenth century, but not all of their pages have been opened. Just recently--or actually back in 1997--there was a lot of excitement when Professor Christine Glassner opened a manuscript from the latter end of the middle ages and discovered a fragment of the *Nibelungenlied* from around the year 1300 tucked carefully inside.

Aside from handwritten manuscripts, there are early printed books known as incunabula, plus seventeen hundred books from the sixteenth century, forty-five hundred from the seventeenth century, and in the eighteenth century, the number suddenly jumps to eighteen thousand. In total, one hundred thousand books are housed in this library.

But I could only actually look at a very small portion of them, and for me, who doesn't know Latin or German, there was no way to determine if a book was about theology, law, geology, astronomy, or whatever else. All I could do was look at the brief written descriptions and take a guess....

Even so, each beautiful handwritten manuscript in the display case had enough power to take my breath away. Every letter was like an emblem, and every mark of the pen was written gorgeously and with love. I can't understand what the text means. But to think that each letter would be so precious. I wonder if the characters themselves were a subject of prayer.

Come to think of it, there are hand-copied sutras in Buddhism, too. Maybe it isn't about the meaning--maybe the very act of copying the symbols is a religious undertaking.

The monks who created these manuscripts pursued this unbelievable work so they could get closer to God. In that case, the hundred thousand books in this library would be a compression of hundreds of years of monks' prayers.

Something started to force its way into my skin and breath. In this concentrated air, my little life was as insignificant as down feathers....

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When I walked nearby the window, I sensed someone behind me.

Blending with the weight of the books, I felt a presence, pressing against the back of my neck. It was obscured inside the hundreds of years of letters, words, and prayers, but it was

definitely the presence of a living human being.

When I turned, I saw that he had slowly passed behind me and was about to come back. He was an old man wearing a brown sweater. The aura of the books filled the room so heavily that I hadn't noticed, but there was also a woman, and a monk in a long robe, tied closed approximately at his waist.

The old man slowly approached the window where I stood, and looked up at the top of it.

Wrinkles creased his round face, and his skin hung loose from his chin to his neck, but his eyes were sharp and bloodshot, and they overflowed with sadness. I was taken aback.

He noticed me and smiled hesitantly.

We were in an old building, so there were only a few windows, and they were long, vertical ones. They didn't allow for much light, and the old man probably only saw me as a silhouette. Since I was facing the other way, I could make out every hair of his eyebrows as he squinted against the dazzling glare.

He looked back up at the high end of the window and muttered something. I couldn't understand what he said. I started to walk away from the window, but now he spoke to me in English.

"...That's my wife there."

That's definitely what the man said as he pointed at the wall above the window.

"Your wife, sir?"

Maybe he wasn't right in the head.

The monk came over and shook the man's hand, then left. From his attitude, I could sense his deep affection for the old man. They must have been friends or acquaintances....

I stepped away from the window myself and glanced at the wall the old man was looking at.

There was vague painting there--it could have been flower vase or a crest. Not only had it seriously deteriorated over the centuries, but it was even more impossible to make out in the backlighting.

"That's a flower vase, isn't it?"

"Does it look like a flower vase?"

"It's a vase."

"When you look deeper, can't you see a woman in red?"

I looked harder. When I did, I could make out something that resembled a person.

"Yes, it does look like a person."

"That's my wife."

I really did need to get away from this guy, and fast.

"...All the people here at the monastery say that that's a religious scholar, painted by Rosenstar. But if you look closely, you can tell it's a woman. I could tell it was a woman the first time I saw her, and I fell in love with her. But that was a long time ago."

"It's a vase."

"The flower vase is a secco painted over the woman by Johann Beragl. He painted it over the woman, but my wife wouldn't stand for such treatment, and she reappeared from

under the vase.”

“...What's a secco?”

“Rosenstar painted a fresco on the wet wall. The secco was painted on the wall after it dried. But the fresco was stronger. After a time, the fresco appeared from underneath the vase that was painted on the dry wall, and now it's about to push the vase out of the way. In another hundred years, it will have turned the tables completely. Isn't that a lovely feeling? Objects just can't beat living people. Not even when you try to imprison them inside a wall.”

“And that's your wife?”

“Yes, that's right.”

“You mean, she's like your madonna?”

“I married her. She came down out of the wall and stood there, looking out the window, like you were doing just now. At the time, only the vase was on the wall. She lived with me and died four years ago. Then she went back there.”

Now that he mentioned it, the image of the person *was* clearer. And he was right--it wasn't a male scholar, it was a woman in red.

“I'm the owner of this restaurant,” the man said, pulling a business card out of his pocket. The card had the name of the restaurant and a map.

“You're Japanese?”

“Yes.”

“Did you come from Vienna?”

“On a train from Westbahnhof.”

“Then you didn't pass through Krems. If you had come by car through Krems, you would have seen my restaurant. You know the famous Austrian wine, Jamek? Right near that winery, there's a place with a jackdaw sign. That's me.”

There was a picture of a jackdaw, a scarved crow, on the card, too. He didn't seem like a shady old man.

I told him that I had driven that way en route to Melk once before.

“This window is special, you know. If you're not in a hurry, have lunch at my restaurant. It's about a twenty minute drive.”

“But I'm not the woman from that wall.”

We both laughed. I decided to trust the old man. The fact that the man walked with a cane added to my peace of mind.

We walked to the parking lot. His name was Peter, and he drove to Melk every day to see his wife.

The parking lot had been built on a plaza at the top of a stairway. When I commented that it must be hard to go up and down the stairs with a cane, he said it couldn't be helped now that his wife was back in Melk.

He drove a high-class German car, remodeled for use by a disabled person.

In the dark library, he looked to be around seventy years old, but in the bright parking lot, he was clearly older than that.

“Who's running the restaurant today?”

“I work when I want to. Right now, my son is in charge. He was the head wine steward at Jamek, but after my legs went bad, I passed the baton to him.”

My sense of security toward Peter grew even larger.

The Melk River joined the Danube and flowed east. I recognized the road along the Danube, and the trees that lined it. The trees were enthusiastically shedding their foliage, and scattered leaves danced above the street. Light off of the river filled in the spaces between the now empty branches, giving the impression that the gentle autumn scene would remain eternally unchanged.

The “Jackdaw” restaurant was a cozy little place with a parking lot out front, but the scarved crow on the sign stood out quite a bit. It was more of a black pigeon than a crow, and a line of gray ran diagonally across its shoulders. When I said I'd never seen one in Japan, Peter explained that these birds were all over the place around here.

Behind the restaurant, all the mountains were completely dyed pure yellow. They were autumn grape leaves. Apparently Peter's restaurant served its own make of wine. And, he added in a low voice,

“It's even better than Jamek. My son says so, so it must be true.”

Suddenly, I realized I was hungry. I hadn't eaten anything since the one semmel roll with ham I had on the train.

There were a few tables with customers, but they all seemed to be in the middle of a drive to Melk. The restaurant was family style and had only five tables, with flowers sitting decoratively on their white table cloths. Under each vase was a yellow grape leaf. The scent of bread and the aroma of cheese filled me with a sense of joy.

Peter introduced a young, aproned chef. He was a thin man with big eyes.

“This is my son.”

When thus introduced, a strange, deep emotion rose to the chef's face; it was almost like he was squinting to look at a distant shimmer of heat in the sun.

“...Did you meet the woman in the wall?”

“Yes, and I heard about how the woman is stronger than the vase. Mr. Peter said that she is his wife?”

I wanted see how the chef would react. But he was already back to wearing his practiced smile and didn't answering my question.

The young chef's eyes were an Arabic black, and his hair was glossy. Not only did he not resemble Peter, he looked like someone from another country.

I grew just a little wary of Peter. But that didn't matter. There was a sense of closeness between Peter and the chef, like they trusted and confided in each other. At any rate, Peter probably really was the owner of the establishment.

For lunch, I was served a fragrant dish of river trout meuniere in a white wine sauce. The sour apples that can only be found in Krems blended nicely with the white wine and spices, adding a rich flavor to the clean, white meat of the trout.

Peter poured grape oil over his trout. He offered some to me, but I declined. He explained that it was a slightly bitter oil, squeezed from grape seeds. The restaurant baked its own bread, too. It was hard on the outside, but the inside was soft and moist, tasting better every time I chewed. And he said the young chef had made it all.

"He's a wonderful chef. But he doesn't look like you, Mr. Peter. I bet he takes after the woman in the wall."

"Coco." The old man's eyes softened.

"Your wife's name?"

"Coco in the red dress."

"The woman in the picture, right? Or is your wife Coco?"

Maybe the young chef had caught our exchange; he paused from his work, brought over a small frame containing a picture of a woman, and placed it on the table cloth. And he said, "This is his wife."

She was an ordinary, country woman, wearing not a red dress, but traditional Tyrolian garb. The chef said she was "his wife." Apparently he really wasn't Peter's son--his attitude didn't indicate that he was showing me a picture of his mother.

When Peter got up to go to the restroom, I called the chef over and asked him.

"Are you really his son?"

The chef only shrugged at me.

"Peter will probably take you to the vineyard. Please go with him and listen to what he has to say. Think of it as payment for the lunch. Peter was the chef at this restaurant for a long time. I took over after his wife passed away, though. His wife was a wonderful person, and the two of them both protected the Jackdaw for a long time. I hear his wife was the one who gave it its name."

"I hear she came out of a wall, then went back into the wall?"

"It was a big scandal at the monastery," the chef said, mischief mixing with pity in his eyes.

Peter came back, and the chef left the table.

I exited the restaurant with Peter, and we took a walk to the vineyard that spread out behind it.

From a distance, it looked like the entire slope was one shade of yellow, but up close, the hue changed subtly with the different types of grapes, and each section displayed a different color.

There were still unchanged leaves mixed with all the yellow, and that plant was just a little taller than the other types. I took a closer look and saw bunches of green fruit. They didn't look unripe, but the skin was hard and firm. There were lower trellises to the left, but the vines had already been harvested, and the leaves, though still attached, were about to wither and fall. A part of the remaining foliage had turned red.

I matched my pace to Peter's as he walked slowly with his cane.

According to his explanation, red grapes' leaves have a crimson tint to them. He described the different plants and the flavors of the wines they each produce.

"This is the vine where we get the grapes for our house wine, the one you drank at lunch. It's a sturdy plant, so it takes the least work. The cold winds will come from over those hills before long and blow the leaves off, then you'll be able to see how strong and supple the branches are."

"When will all the leaves fall?"

“In about a month, I suppose. When it snows, the black branches twine together to endure the cold wind. If only my wife had been so strong.”

The narrow walkway branched into several as it climbed the slope. As they snaked along, they created the illusion that I'd gotten lost in a yellow forest.

There was a farm road that must have been used by the restaurant's car during harvest, and it, too, was very quiet. A small shrine with crucifix under a triangle roof stood at the crossroads. It didn't fit in with this yellow forest. Its color had peeled off in the wind and rain, but thanks to that roof, the blood that seeped from under Christ's crown of thorns still looked fresh.

The paths twisted and turned, but the grapevines were planted in straight lines. And between them, belts of verdant grass extended far into the distance. Most likely, machines would travel over those belts for the harvest.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Vines that still had fruit and vines that had already been stripped all dreamed golden dreams under the more than plentiful afternoon light.

But it was too beautiful. Anything too beautiful is frightening. The gold color in the church at Melk was frightening, and the gilt painted covers that buried the library for centuries were frightening.

And so was the old man, walking slowly with his cane, through these golden grape fields....

My pace slowed.

Had the old man's legs really gone bad? Was his cane really just a cane?

I felt like the trout I had just eaten was swimming around the bottom of my stomach.

How far were we going to walk? He hadn't spoken a word for several minutes. He only walked on toward his destination.

Vines stretched before me, carrying leaves with a reddish tint, clearly different from the grapes I had seen up until now.

Peter turned from the paved road and went into that field. The ground at our feet was soft from the grass, but not enough to bury my shoes.

“How far are we going?” My voice was obviously tense.

He just kept walking.

Walls of red and yellow continued in straight lines on either side of us. There was a stone wall at their dead end. It was very far away, and it would be tough covering that distance. The river trout flipped over in my stomach. It was nice to be treated to lunch, but there's nothing more expensive than free. I would need a good reason if I was going to turn back now. I desperately searched for one. The back of Peter's head glinted with sweat.

He stopped.

The grape vines had been cut away in just that one place, and a long bench was placed there.

He put his cane between his knees and sat down. He let out a long sigh; he must have been very tired.

I sat down, too, leaving enough room for someone to sit between us. This was our destination. This was where I would most likely have to pay for my lunch.

I could see black fruit hanging under the red and yellow leaves of the grape vines around us. It was rotten, and a sweet scent wafted from it. I didn't notice it while we were walking, but it was suffocating. I couldn't decide if the smell was ripe or rotten. The air was thick with it, and it mixed with the smells of the grass and the earth, coiling around my body and face.

"The grapes are rotten, I see."

"...They're infected with bacteria, and they dry up as they rot. See that white on them? In a short while, the red color will turn to gray. That's when they're most sweet. When they get to that point, that's when we'll harvest them."

Oh, I see. So this is noble rot, used for botrytized wines.

"They don't get sweet if they don't rot?"

He only played with his cane in his hands; maybe he could see my anxiety.

"...Do you always invite people to come here from the library?"

"Only women. And ones who stand by that window... Just like Coco did..."

"After coming out of the picture?"

"No one believed me. Not only that, they tell me the person painted under the vase was a man. All of the monastery's people say it. And they look at me with stern eyes, like they suspect me of heresy."

He pounded the ground with his cane. It sank into the ground. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes bloodshot. He had that same intensity as when we met in the library, as if he had flung his heart somewhere far away. His gaze leapt from the golden fields and pierced the empty sky above.

"...Could it be?" I asked in a low voice.

"I was a monk. That window taught me about a new world. You see, that window has secretly been bringing monks to the outside world for hundreds of years. Can you imagine how many monks have been tempted away by the woman Rosenstar painted? Fire isn't allowed in the library. There's no heating and there are no candles. So they all read the books by nothing but the long, thin light of those windows. No one can take the books out, so they copied all the manuscripts by the windows, too. Many monks died at young ages from the cold and tuberculosis. I almost died, myself. That's when a woman came down from that wall and stood by the window. It was Coco. At the time, she was wearing red. Oh, I was saved. She had come to save me."

The cool, heavy air of the abbey's library came back to me. I was Coco, standing by the window, and an emaciated, pale-faced young man stood before me. His eyes were worn out from his training, earnestly pleading for human warmth, just barely alive. They were the eyes of a man in love.

The man's long, black robes were tied with a cord around his waist; he had a stiff, white collar, and a cross at his breast. The Benedictine monk was deeply impressed by my entire body, afraid of the changes going on in his own....

"So what did you do then?" I opened my mouth slowly and deliberately, to protect my dry throat.

"I won't do anything. I will be with Coco forever."

"She passed away and hid behind the vase on the wall again."

“But her body sleeps here.”

“Where?”

“Here.”

He pointed at the earth under the bench.

A wind blew up from the bottom of the ground. The damp, balmy scent of sweetly rotting grapes made me dizzy.

I was being tricked. No, I think he was telling the truth. The red of the grape vines beside the bench was especially beautiful, and the fruit's noble rot had progressed so far that it was about fall off.

“That's interesting.” My voice was hoarse. I felt like even Coco, buried in the earth, could hear my heart beating.

A black shadow passed over my head. It fell into the vines a little way off, shaking a few leaves.

The old man cooed, and a black bird with a long beak, about the size of a pigeon, emerged from the vines and hopped down onto the grass. Then it cautiously approached us. It had scarf of gray around its neck.

The old man picked a grape from the closest vine and threw it. The scarved crow dashed forward, took the grape in its mouth, and ran away.

“The grapes on this vine have a special sweetness. Would you like to try one?”

He plucked a new bunch of grapes. Half of them had lost all their moisture and withered into mysterious, grayish purple objects.

“...Smell this,” he said, bringing them to my nose.

They were less like fruit and more like living things, with quiet wills of their own hidden inside. Their scent was like the breath exhaled by a living thing. A mass of enticing, aggressive air spread across my face.

Peter's white face was right beside mine. Those living things dangled between us.

I smelled the fruit, then picked one that had no rotting gray bacteria and put it in my mouth. That wasn't enough, so I tried another one that had started to succumb. What remained on my tongue was more of a sharp tingling than a sweetness; it made me think the grape must have fermented on the vine.

“This was the color, wasn't it?” I asked for confirmation. “...I'm sure this was the color the woman in that painting was wearing...”

I remembered a deep color that could have been either red or black. Tears had risen to the old man's eyes.

“Thank you for the food. I'm glad to have met you. You are a lovely couple.”

I couldn't take any more. I stood up and started to walk.

He stayed on the bench, unmoving.

At the crossroads back the way I had come, I encountered the crucifix again. His figure was nailed to the cross like the vineyard's gaurdian deity.

How did Christ address this former monk, who chose a woman over his training, whenever the man passed by here? The young chef had said that it was the abbey's biggest scandal, but “scandalous” was certainly not an appropriate description for that photograph of



Coco. She looked like a country girl who could have been from anywhere, who had gained in years and become an old woman.

When I got back to the restaurant, the chef was just seeing off some acquaintances of his who had come for lunch.

“Peter is with Coco in the vineyard.” I told him, and he nodded in complete understanding. Then he asked the middle-aged husband and wife who were getting in their car if they would take me to Sankt Polten.

I got into the car, rolling a sharp sensation over the tip of my tongue.

## The Golden Fields of Melk

It was many years ago that I visited Melk by car. At the time it was still early spring, and a hazy white moon hung above the forest that skirts the Danube River like a fortification.

The sun declined with some hesitation, and the sky retained hints of pale indigo. Lower down, just over a mountain peak, the moon slipped along after the car as if giving chase.

I'll come again, I said to the moon.

And sure enough, I had kept my promise, as I found myself travelling by train from Vienna's West station. Only now it was October, and the sky was perfectly clear.

I had become accustomed to solitary journeys in Austria.

Last time, I had been driven around by a Japanese woman attending Vienna University, but I didn't want to trouble her again, so I decided to take the train. The station attendants and train staff could all speak English, and the English of German speakers is easy to understand. In restaurants, hotels, and taxis, you can get by with English.

After forty minutes, the train arrived at Sankt Pölten. While waiting to transfer to a local train, I made friends with an elderly woman with a dog, who boasted that the beauty of Melk Abbey was unrivalled the world over. Even the dog gave a high-pitched howl of agreement.

It was less than thirty minutes before the local train reached Melk Station.

Melk Abbey sits on the top of a hill, surrounded by a cloud of rocks and lush foliage, its brown, broad roof extending into the high sky.

Beneath the roof, the long walls are painted in horizontal stripes of alternating white and yellow. Though the building has the appearance of a fortress, the emerald green dome standing in the center—and even more so, the two decorative towers rising over the Melk River—present a picture of surpassing beauty.

Each tower is a bright mixture of white, yellow and the green of rusted copper, with flowing lines that fall in a curve from the tip down to a clock face, flashing gold in all directions.

Looking at this part in isolation, it seems more of a palace than a church or abbey. If anything, this impression is strengthened when one goes inside the church, which is bedecked in multi-colored marble and gold.

With sinuous lines that reach every inch of its detailed mouldings, it's known as a treasure of Austrian baroque style.

To be sure, the architects who reconstructed the church to its present form in the early eighteenth century were trying, by way of vast expense and great piety, to create an earthly paradise on the hill above Melk. Clearly it was a tenacious energy, rather than the passions of love or desire, that drove them.

When I had previously stood within the hall of the church, I had been overwhelmed by the golden color. When completely surrounded by gold, human beings lose their sense of reality, even to the point where they can no longer feel their

own bodies. This fact is also well understood within the Japanese idea of the Pure Land, I thought, and wanted to feel the magical power of gold once more.

Before its emergence as a glittering baroque beauty, the abbey began its life sometime around the tenth century as a fortress. It seems that the sanctuary was built in the central area for troops garrisoned in the fortress. The fortresses guarding the local border areas known as the Mark were given the names of the various tributaries of the Danube River: Enns, Ybbs, Melk and Krems. The most important of these strongholds was Melk.

The abbey was founded as a Benedictine monastery, under the patronage and protection of the ruling Babenberg family.

Over the centuries, despite a change in political rulers, the abbey not only preserved its status as an important religious institution, it also played a leading role as a center for theology and the fine arts.

Of course, Melk Abbey also faced a great number of trials and tribulations, including the political and economic disturbances brought about by religious reformation. Instead of resisting these forces, the abbey joined with Vienna University to bring about a series of monastic reforms now known as the “Melk Reformation.”

It is interesting that at that time Melk Abbey chose to follow the ideas of the Vienna University Ecumenical Council rather than the Pope. For that reason, relations with the Vatican deteriorated, while theory—that is to say scholarship—was given priority.

Today, science is our primary means of discovering truth, but at that time the pursuit of truth was a matter of knowing the intentions of God. As such, Melk Abbey, with its new foundation in theoretical work, became a leading light in “scholarship” and a place where something close to modern “thinking” came to assemble.

And there were countless conflagrations.

In colder regions, fires are the only means of heating. The wind whipping off the river would only agitate the flames engulfing the hilltop abbey. And because of its elevation, sufficient water could not be found. A trifling accidental fire would turn into a serious blaze.

At the end of the thirteenth century, a fire destroyed the library. At that time, some monks gave their lives to protect the precious works, including hymns, and Easter plays from Melk’s early period. The abbey still has a room for art and letters, but most of the energetically created miniatures, annals, and the like were lost forever.

Even more tragic was the great fire of 1736. Under the direction of the greatest architect of the day, Jakob Prandtauer, a group of master designers, stonemasons and sculptors had nearly finished their work, when the flames suddenly attacked, destroying nearly all of the roof and the workshop. The abbot of the time, Berthold Dietmayr, took the initiative to reconstruct the buildings, but did not live to see the project completed. It was through the efforts of the succeeding abbot that this “Baroque flower” was brought to life.

These two huge blazes caused great damage, and it seems there were many other less destructive fires. As a result, the entire abbey became paranoid of fire.

The priests and monks wear long garments with ample sleeves, probably to protect themselves against the chill of a life without fire.

Situated in the heart of Europe, this is an area that gets especially cold. Ice covers the Melk River well into spring. Now it was fall, and while the sky still sparkled with the beautiful sheen of summer's end, the temperature had already dropped below ten degrees centigrade, giving me the impression that a long winter was on its way.

A restaurant had opened on the stone-paved road in front of the town hall, its cloth-covered tables lined up in a row. There was no sign of customers, however, just some elderly locals comfortably sipping tea.

A summer's, a year's, an entire lifetime of work finished—now time for a rest. Such was the mood.

Although a main street, it was narrow enough for the people working in the cafés and souvenir shops on both sides to converse without raising their voices.

Looking down on the street were the abbey's twin spires and emerald green dome. Every aspect of life in this town is watched over and guarded by the abbey.

Walking up the gentle slope I came to a beautiful gate, with a triangular roof atop a rounded arch. Just ahead, a similar gate can be seen. It's forbidden to enter the abbey's inner sanctuary, where training takes place, though certain sections of the church are open to visitors. However, at this time there was not another soul in sight.

As I was passing under the first gate, from all sides of the courtyard came the sound of what I thought was a large flock of birds taking flight. I stepped back involuntarily, before realizing that it was not birds, but rather a group of several dozen children who had rushed en masse through the gate and begun to run headlong down the stone-paved slope. And then, once again, I was alone.

After the children had passed a monk appeared, dressed in black clothes and white collar and to all appearances a teacher.

He approached, greeting me with a smile. Noting my surprise, he grinned broadly and said: "We call them the wind."

I returned his smile. "I can see why."

"They're the school's underclassmen. When they're wearing their ceremonial whites, we call them the rabbit wind."

I asked where the rabbits were going in their civilian clothes, but instead of answering my question, the teacher said, "When they get to be upperclassmen, they no longer run." Again, behind his spectacles he smiled with his eyes.

At length, a few among those students will be chosen to enter the order of Benedictine monks, and, after passing through a period of intense training, ascend to the level of priest.

In the deep silence that followed the passing of the wind, I walked towards the next gate.

It was very quiet. I had heard that within the huge building there were many people, from young students to monks, a great number of whom passed their daily lives sequestered within its walls, and yet the clear air outside gave no hint of being stained by human breath.

In any religious place, whether Christian or Buddhist, silence is crucial. I love this kind of atmosphere. As with a cold glass of white wine, it permeates one's entire being, from the lungs to the soul.

In the chapel of the church, under the combined influence of this white wine and the cool feeling of gold, I felt intoxicated.

There were a few motionless worshippers in the church, but they were vastly outnumbered by the statues sheathed in beaten gold. These dwellers of paradise gazed down upon me effortlessly. The ripple of commotion that arose within me upon my first viewing of them relapsed into stillness.

The main altar, in particular, is buried in marble and gold. Above the tabernacle stand a pair of statues of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, their hands grasping each other as if reluctant to part. Resolved to die, they seem to be giving each other encouragement. Their entire bodies are sheathed in gold, as are the statues of various Old Testament prophets such as Daniel, David, Jeremiah, and Isaiah that surround them. Standing before these saints and angels, extending from the altar near to the ceiling and all shining with the same brilliance, I had to force myself not to fall prey to the bewitchments of their charms.

Peter and Paul were executed on the same day. Peter was crucified upside down. Paul, as a Roman citizen, was decapitated. On the fresco painted on the wall above the main altar stands a woman in a scarlet cloak wearing a crown of thorns, instruments of torture strewn about her feet. I suppose she was elevated to such a place because she endured torture. Which is to say that beneath all this gold flows a river of blood.

No matter how splendid and shiny its art, Christianity holds the notion that the spirit must be tested via bodily pain, and thus the cries and sufferings of humanity fill every corner of the church.

When a martyr is canonized as a saint, that saint's body or a part of the body is preserved within a church, where it is used as a means of reverence. This is something that occurred in all regions throughout Europe's history. At Melk, as well, the corpse of the eleventh-century Irish pilgrim Saint Coloman, who had been hanged on an elderberry bush, was brought into the church prior to full decomposition. Even now, his decorated white bones lie in a glass case fringed with gold.

Passing in front of the case, I felt a little sorry for him. As if it were not enough to be hanged on an elderberry bush, to then have your skeleton exposed to public gaze for the next millennium.

Emerging from the chapel, I walked down a long corridor illuminated by iron lamps on the white plaster ceiling.

These iron lamps are fitted with light bulbs, which must be very recent additions to the history of Melk Abbey. One can imagine how things used to look under flickering candles and oil lamps, when all one could see were dim shadows of human figures.

Going up a broad stone staircase and walking further along the corridor, I passed by an exhibition hall displaying objects from the imperial rooms. In the next marble room, for the first time since entering the building, I encountered another person. A young woman shouldering a backpack was comparing the wall paintings to a document of some sort in her hands.

In passing, we exchanged smiles. I felt relieved. Seeing these imperial rooms and marble halls, it's clear that Austria's rulers, the Babenbergs and Hapsburgs, felt the importance of Melk Abbey as a spiritual center. In addition to being a place for worship and religious training, it served as both a fortress and a palace.

Perhaps within these very marble halls emperors met with high-ranking clergymen in order to hear the message of God.

Moving on, I suddenly felt the breeze of a river.

I had arrived at the leading edge of an enormous A-shaped building.

Illuminated from high above by the bright sunlight, the hill town of Melk and the Melk River, along with the greenish-grey trees of the surrounding forest, appeared to float, as if covered with a white veil. Upon close inspection, the surface of the river was constantly moving in one direction.

Further along, that is, on the side across from the extended imperial rooms, in the part of the building that appears most like a monastery, stands the library, which is the only place on that side open to the public. This library is even more charming than the abbey's golden, glittering chapel. The reason for my return to Melk was to visit this library again.

Entering through the thick doors, one is enveloped by a heavy, damp, strict atmosphere—completely different from that of the gilded church.

With the exception of the space taken by the narrow windows to the left and right, the long, rectangular room was packed floor to ceiling with leather-bound books. Though their leather-bindings bore gold designs and letters, the golden color had long-since dulled and darkened. Bearing the burden of several centuries of neglect, what was left was a pile of book cadavers.

As most of these books had been copied by human hand, they were packed with an enormous amount of human energy. With a little imagination, it's clear that these are not just corpses—you could sense the overflowing energy, as well as the voices, sighs and sweat concentrated within.

What was that feeling that had enveloped me the last time I stood in the center of this room? I wanted to taste it once again.

When put into words, it doesn't seem very special.

It's truly amazing, the lengths to which human beings will sometimes go.

Here one can find "rule books" penned in the ninth century, as well as codices of Virgil from the tenth or eleventh century. In the twelfth century, the instruction book of Hieronymus was copied here. There are manuals of the Benedictine precepts, Bibles, books of law and theology, even a copy of the *Life of Jesus* by Frau Ava, considered to be the first female writer in the German language. It is said that two thirds of the codices are from the fifteenth century, but not all of the pages of these books have been opened. Very recently (well, 1997), it was big news when scholar Christine Glassner discovered a fragment of a codex of the *Nibelungenlied* dated to around 1300 carefully placed within the pages of a late medieval manuscript.

Besides the hand-copied manuscripts, the collection also includes some "old editions" from the early days of the printing press, as well as 1700 works from the sixteenth century and 4500 from the seventeenth century. Arriving at the eighteenth century, the number dramatically increases to 18,000 volumes. In total, the library holds over 100,000 books.

You can only take in a small portion of the books in a single glance. As someone who understands neither Latin nor German, all I could do was guess at the

classification of books into categories such as theology, law, the sciences, and astronomy, based on a glance at the brief written explanations.

In spite of this, the beauty of a single hand-copied manuscript on display was enough to take my breath away. Each letter was an emblem in itself—the traces of the pen revealing the love with which it was composed. The letters may have been incomprehensible to me, but they were of incredible value. I thought the letters themselves would be fit objects of worship.

This reminded me of the Buddhist practice of hand-copying sutras. You do not worry about the meaning of the words; it is the very task of transcribing the characters that is the religious practice.

In similar fashion, the monks who produced these manuscripts engaged in their extraordinary work in order to come closer to God. That is to say, within these 100,000 books are compressed several centuries of monastic devotion.

Something overbearing had forced its way under my skin and into my breath. Within this concentrated air, I felt the insubstantiality of my own feather-like life...

As I walked towards the window, I sensed the presence of someone behind me.

After the oppressive feeling brought on by the books, the presence of another person felt like a further weight pressing down on me. Though mingled together with the words, letters and prayers of several centuries, what I felt was surely the presence of a flesh and blood human being.

When I looked back, the person slowly passed behind me, before returning to where I was standing. It was an old man wearing a brown sweater. I had not previously noticed other people among the overbearing presence of books in this room, but now I saw that, in addition to another woman, there was a monk dressed in a long garment tied around the hips. The old man slowly made his way to where I was standing, his eyes fixed on the upper portion of the window.

His round face was etched with wrinkles, and the skin sagged from his chin to his neck. I was taken aback by his sharp yet swaying bloodshot eyes, which fairly streamed sadness.

Noticing my reaction, he smiled shyly.

Because it was an old building, the few windows were long and narrow. Very little light could enter through these, so it was likely that all the old man could see of me was a silhouette. Having turned to face him, I could see his eyes squinting in the glare, and could even make out the strands of his eyelashes.

With his eyes once again raised to the upper part of the window, the old man muttered something I couldn't understand. I moved away from the window, and this time he addressed me in English.

".... That's my wife up there."

This is really what he said, as he pointed his finger to the wall above the window.

"Your wife?"

Perhaps the old man is crazy.

The monk came over to the old man and shook his hand, and then moved to a place further inside the room. To all appearances, the monk had deep affection for the old man. They seemed to be friends or close acquaintances....

I moved away from the window, and raised my eyes to the wall upon which the old man's gaze rested.

I could make out a vase and a design, but the rest of the painting was unclear. In addition to the intense damage caused the passing of several centuries, the glare from the window was also once again interfering.

"That's a vase, right?"

"Does it seem like a vase?"

"It's a vase."

"Can't you see the woman behind it, wearing red?"

I concentrated my attention. All at once something like the figure of a person floated before my eyes.

"Yes, it does seem like a person."

"That's my wife."

I should get away from this old man as soon as possible.

"...All the people here in the abbey say that person is a scholar belonging to the religious organization Rosenstahl was painting. But if you look carefully you can see it's a woman. I knew it was a woman at first sight, and I fell in love with her. That was a very long time ago."

"It's a vase."

"That vase was painted by Johann Berger in *secco* over the image of the woman. The woman was painted over. However, as my wife is not one to take that sort of treatment, she reappeared inside the vase."

"... and *secco* is?"

Rosenstahl painted with fresco technique, while the wall was still wet with plaster. *Secco* is the technique of painting on a dry wall. However, works created in fresco were more resilient. Because the vase was painted on a dry wall, over time the fresco underneath began to show through, and now the surface-layer vase has been almost completely brushed aside. After another hundred years the turnabout will be complete. Wonderful, isn't it? Clearly living human beings win out over things. Even if we tried to push her back into the wall, we couldn't do it."

"And that's your wife?"

"Yes, that's right."

"You mean she's your 'madonna'?"

"We got married. She came down from the wall, and stood just where you are now, looking out the window. Only the vase remained on the wall. We lived together until she died, four years ago. Then she returned again to her place on the wall."

As he said this to me, the human figure became clearer. Indeed, it was not a scholar or anything of the sort, but a woman in a red dress.



"I'm the owner of this place," the man said as he pulled a business card from his pocket.

On the card was the name of a restaurant along with a map.

"Are you Japanese?"

"Yes."

"You came from Vienna?"

"By local train, from West Station."

"Then you didn't pass through Krems. If you had travelled through Krems by car, you would surely have noticed my restaurant. There is a famous Austrian wine called Jamek. Just past that winery is a restaurant with a sign on which appears a hooded crow."

There was a picture of a hooded crow on the business card, as well. Maybe he wasn't a suspicious old man after all. I told him that I had travelled that road by car on my previous trip to Melk.

"This window is very special. If you're not in a hurry, please come to my restaurant for lunch. It takes twenty minutes by car."

"But I'm not the woman who came down from the wall." We both laughed. I decided to trust the old man. The fact that he carried a cane added to my peace of mind.

We walked to the parking lot. His name was Peter, and he drove to Melk every day to see his wife.

The parking lot was built on a plaza up a set of stairs. It must be difficult, I said, to go up and down these steps with a cane, but he replied that since his wife had returned to Melk, it couldn't be helped.

He had a German-made luxury car, remodelled for a disabled person.

Back in the darkness of the library he had seemed about seventy, but now in the bright parking lot it was clear he was even older.

"Who's looking after the restaurant today?"

"I work there whenever I like. My son runs it now. He was the chief sommelier at Jamek for a long time, but when I began having problems with my legs, I passed the baton to him."

My sense of ease with Peter grew stronger.

The Melk River meets the Danube, and flows from there towards the East. I recognized the line of trees skirting the road that runs along the side of the Danube. Now the trees were in the midst of shedding their leaves, and scattered leaves danced in the road. The spaces between the branches of the denuded trees were filled with light reflected off the surface of the river, giving the impression of a gentle autumn that might last forever.

The parking area in front of the Hooded Crow Restaurant was compact, but sure enough the crow on the sign was enough to catch one's eye. Looking more like a black pigeon than a crow, it had a grey band running obliquely from its shoulders. When I told him I had never seen one in Japan, he explained that this type of bird is common to the area.

At the rear of the restaurant was a hill, saturated in brilliant yellow. These were yellow grape leaves. I was told that Peter's restaurant produces homemade wine. And he added in a whisper: "It's better than the wine at Jamek. My son says so, so make no mistake about that."

I suddenly felt hungry. All I had eaten on the train was a piece of ham stuffed in a bread roll.

There were a few customers in the restaurant, all of who seemed to be on their way to Melk by car. It was a family-style restaurant, with just five tables, each one covered in white cloth and decorated with flowers. Placed beneath each vase was a yellow grape leaf. The aroma of bread and the odor of cheese gave me a feeling of happiness.

Peter introduced me to a young chef wearing an apron. He had large, narrow eyes.

"This is my son."

During the introduction, a strange emotion appeared on the chef's face, as though he were looking at a distant mirage through eyes half-closed in the sun.

"...Did you meet the woman on the wall?"

"Yes, and I also heard the story of how the woman was stronger than the vase. He told me that she's his wife."

I wanted to see the chef's reaction. However, he had already recovered his service smile, and didn't respond to my question.

The young chef's eyes were black like those of an Arab, and his hair shone. Not only did he not resemble Peter in any way, he looked like a foreigner.

My guard against Peter was raised slightly. But that was not important. I got the sense that Peter and the young chef were on intimate terms, so that between them there was something like mutual trust and forgiveness. It seemed likely that Peter was indeed the owner.

The main course of the lunch was an aromatic river trout meunière bathed in a white wine sauce. The white wine and herbs combined deliciously with the strong, sour apples that can only be found in the area around Krems, lending a richness to the flavor of the immaculate white flesh of the river trout.

Peter poured grape oil over the river trout. He recommended I do the same, but I refrained. He said the oil was made from squeezed grape seeds, and is slightly bitter. The bread was also homemade, with a firm crust and a soft and moist center, and a flavor that deepened with every bite. I was informed that everything was the work of the young chef.

"He's an excellent chef. But he doesn't look like you. Perhaps he looks a lot more like the woman on the wall."

"Coco." The old man's eyes grew soft.

"That's your wife's name?"

"Coco in the red dress."

"The woman in the picture? Or is Coco your wife?"

Perhaps overhearing this conversation, the chef, who was in the midst of a pause from his work, brought over a small, framed picture of a woman and set it on the tablecloth. He said:

“This is his wife.”

It was a plain-looking, country woman, wearing not a red dress but rather Tyrolese traditional dress. The chef had said that this was Peter’s wife. It would seem, then, that he was not Peter’s son, as he wouldn’t act in such a way about a photo of his own mother.

When Peter went to the restroom, I called the chef over to inquire:

“Are you really his son?”

The chef only shrugged.

“Peter will take you through the vineyard. In exchange for lunch, please do me the favor of accompanying him and listening to his story. Peter was the chef of this restaurant for a long time. Since he lost his wife, I’ve taken over responsibility for it. His wife was also a terrific woman, and for many years the couple looked after the Hooded Crow. I’ve heard that it was his wife that came up with the name Hooded Crow.”

“But what about the business of her coming down from the wall, and then returning to the wall?”

“It was a huge scandal at the abbey.”

When he said this, the chef’s eyes expressed both mischief and sadness.

As Peter had now returned, he left the table.

Peter and I left the restaurant to take a stroll in the expansive vineyard out back.

From a distance the slope seemed to be of a single yellow hue, but it became clear to me that each variety of grape could be distinguished by its subtle shade, and thus each section of the vineyard was of a different color tone.

One type, slightly taller than the others, had a few shoots of green still scattered among its yellow leaves. Upon close inspection, one could see bunches of green grapes attached to the vines. They did not seem immature, and yet their skin was hard and firm. To the left was a harvested shorter trellis, some of whose withered leaves had fallen to the ground. Parts of the remaining leaves had changed to a crimson color.

Peter walked slowly with his cane, and I kept the same pace.

According to Peter, the leaves of red grapes are flecked with crimson. He went on to explain the particular varieties, as well as the various flavors produced by each type.

“This tree is used to make the house wine we drank at lunch. It’s a vigorous breed that doesn’t require a lot of maintenance. Soon the cold wind will blow from over that hill, scattering the leaves, and you’ll be able to see the strength and flexibility of the branches.”

“When do all the leaves fall?”

“In another month, perhaps. As the snow falls, the black branches become entangled, and this helps them withstand the cold. I wish my wife had been that strong.”

The narrow road branched in several directions as it ran up a slope. The meandering path created the optical illusion that we had accidentally entered a yellow forest.

The farm road must be used by specialized vehicles during harvest time, but now it was deathly quiet. At the point where the roads separate, someone had erected a small shrine with a triangular roof. Inside was a crucifix. It didn't seem appropriate within this yellow grove. The wind and rain had peeled off its color, but thanks to the protection of the roof the blood oozing from Christ's crown of thorns remained fresh.

Though the road twisted and turned, the grapevines were planted in a straight line. And between each row was a belt of verdant grass extending far into the distance. The harvesting machines must run along this band.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Under the abundant glow of the afternoon sun, the unharvested and harvested grapevines floated together in a golden dream.

And yet, it was too beautiful. Things that are too beautiful can be frightening. The golden sanctuary at Melk was frightening, as was the gilded binding on the ancient tomes in the book-lined library room.

This old man, hobbling with his cane through the golden vineyard, as well...

My pace slowed.

Are the old man's legs really bad? Is the cane just a cane?

I felt as if the river trout I had just eaten was swimming in the pit of my stomach.

Where were we going? He hadn't said anything for a few minutes. He just walked on towards some destination.

Continuing ahead of me I noticed a completely different type of grapevine from the ones I had seen earlier, with red-tinged leaves.

Peter stepped off the road to enter into this field. The grass was soft underfoot, but not so much that one's feet sank into the earth.

“How far are we going?”

My voice was both light and nervous.

He just continued walking.

To our left and right the wall of red and yellow continued in a perfectly straight line, which eventually came to an end at a stone wall. It would be a struggle to go so far as that. The river trout sloshed about in my stomach. I was happy to have been treated to lunch, but free things are often the most expensive. At this point, I needed a pretext to turn back. I frantically searched for a reason. The sweat was shining on the back of Peter's head.

He came to stop.

In that area alone the vines had been cut and placed on a long bench.

Placing his cane between his knees, he sat down and let out a deep breath of exhaustion.

I too sat down, leaving ample space between us. So this was our destination. Perhaps here I will have to return the favor of having been treated to lunch.

On the grapevines surrounding us I could make out the black fruit underneath the red and yellow leaves. As these were rotting, a sweet scent hung in the air. I hadn't noticed while we were walking, but the smell was nearly suffocating. I couldn't distinguish whether the smell in the rich air was of ripe or rotting fruit, but it mixed together with the smell of the grass and earth and enveloped my face and body.

"The fruits are rotting, aren't they?"

"...As the grapes dry, bacteria causes them to rot. Look, you can see the white growth. It won't be long before the red color turns grey. That's when they are sweetest. And that's the point at which they are harvested."

Ah. These are grapes that become wine by 'noble rot'.

"They only become sweet through rotting, right?"

Perhaps noticing my nervousness, both of his hands toyed with his cane.

"... Do you often seek out people in that library, and bring them to this place?"

"Only women. And only those who stand in the spot near that window... as Coco did ...."

"When she slipped out of the painting?"

"No one believed me. Not only that, they insisted that the person painted under the vase is a man. Every single person at the abbey said so. And they looked at me with such unsparing eyes, as though I were on trial for heresy."

He stabbed the ground with his cane. The cane sank into the earth. His cheeks were flushed, and his eyes bloodshot. The intensity I had seen when we first met in the library appeared again, as if he were sending his spirit somewhere far away. His glance leapt over the golden fields and pierced the high open sky.

"Were you...?" I said in a low voice.

"I was a monk. That window delivered to me a whole new world. For centuries, that window has secretly allowed monks to escape to the outside world. Can you imagine how many monks have been seduced by the woman painted by Rosenstahl? You can't light a fire in the library. There is no heating, nor candles. Therefore, in order to read a book, they had to depend on the narrow beam of light streaming through the window. Because they could not take the books out of the library, they had to copy their manuscripts by the window. A great many of them died at a young age from tuberculosis brought on by the cold. I, too, came close to dying. Then a woman came down from the wall and stood by the window. It was Coco. At that time, Coco was wearing a red dress. Ah, I was saved—she had come to rescue me."

I was brought back to the cool, heavy air of the abbey's library room. I was Coco, standing by the window, and before me stood a pallid, frail young man. His eyes, exhausted from training, clung to a hint of human warmth. Near the end of their rope, these eyes had fallen in love.

The young man wore a long black garment tied around the hips by a cord, with a stiff white collar and a cross on the breast. This Benedictine monk is deeply moved by my entire being, and is fearful of the change arising within himself.

"So, what did you do then?"

I opened my mouth slowly, to protect my dry throat.

“Nothing. I stayed with Coco.”

“Who died and returned to the wall, where she hid behind the vase.”

“But her body sleeps here.”

“Where?”

“Here,” he said, pointing to the ground beneath the bench.

A wind gusted up from the ground. I was bowled over by the luxurious smell of the fully ripened grapes, which were in the process of both sweetening and rotting.

He was deceiving me. No, this was surely a true story. The vines beside the bench were an especially vivid crimson hue, and the low-hanging fruit had begun the process of noble rot.

“That’s an interesting story.”

My voice was hoarse. It seemed as though the sound of my heartbeat could be heard even by Coco, lying under the ground. A dark shadow passed over our heads. The shadow descended upon a vine a little away from us, rustling its leaves.

The old man made a sound with his throat, and suddenly a black, long-beaked bird, about the size of a pigeon, appeared between the leaves and jumped down to the grass. It cautiously made its way towards us. On its neck was a grey band.

The old man plucked a grape from the vine closest to us and tossed it on the ground. The hooded crow hopped over to devour it before running away.

“This fruit is especially sweet. Would you like to taste it?”

This time he plucked a bunch. Having lost half their moisture and atrophied to a greyish purple, they were odd-looking things.

“...Can you smell that?”

He brought it close to my nose.

Rather than a bunch of fruit, it seemed like a living being, keeping to itself with quiet determination. Its scent was the breath of a living being. A cloud of aggressive, erotic air softly covered my face.

Peter’s white face was very close. Between Peter’s face and my own hung this living being.

I first checked the smell with my nose, then picked a grape without grey fungus and popped it into my mouth. Unsatisfied, I decided to try a rotting one. More than sweet, it left a sharp tingling on the tip of my tongue, which made me think that it had reached an advanced stage of fermentation while still on the vine.

“This is the color.”

I tried to remember.

“...Surely, this is the color of the dress worn by the woman in the painting....”

I recalled the deep color, simultaneously red and black. The old man’s eyes filled with tears.

“Thank you for the meal. It was nice to meet you. You make a wonderful couple.”

I had reached my limit. I stood up and walked away.

He continued to sit on the bench, without moving.

At the junction in the road, I once again met with the crucifix. He was nailed to the cross as if a guardian deity of the field.

Whenever the ex-monk, who had forsaken his training for a woman, passed by this spot, what did Christ say to him? The young chef had referred to the huge “scandal” at the abbey, but the photo of Coco did not fit with what you would call a scandal. She looked like the sort of country girl you could find almost anywhere, who over the years had turned into an elderly woman.

When I returned to the restaurant, the chef had stepped out to see off some customers whom he knew.

“Peter is in the vineyard with Coco,” I said.

He nodded in complete understanding, and asked the middle-aged couple getting into their car whether they would be so kind as to drive me to Sankt Pölten.

Still savoring the sharp sensation on the tip of my tongue, I stepped into the car.

## The Gilded Fields Of Melk

A very long time ago I visited the town of Melk by car. Spring had barely arrived and a wispy white moon hung over the woods that ran alongside the River Danube, looking as they did like arboreal strongholds. The sky still shrouded itself in a faint shade of dark blue as if wavering in its resolution to let the sun set. And then, from low in the sky, from an imperceptible spot in the mountain ridge, the moon slide out in its pursuit of my car.

'I'm back,' I said to the moon.

I had boarded a train leaving Vienna West Station in my attempt to fulfill this promise. Unlike my previous trip the season was now different: it was October and the air was clear.

I was used to lone travel through Austria. Last time I had gotten a Japanese woman attending the University of Vienna to drive the car but now I chose to travel by train as it would also avoid having to ask her to do the same again. What was more, the staff at the train station and those on the train could converse in English, and, above all, I found the English spoken by such German-speaking people to be easy to understand. I could get by with my English in restaurants, hotels, and in taxis.

Within forty minutes I arrived at Sankt Pölten. There, while waiting to transfer to a local train, I befriended an elderly couple with a dog, the woman boasting that the greatest beauty in the world was to be found at *Stift Melk*, the Austrian Benedictine Melk Abbey. With a high-pitched howl even the dog joined in the boasting.

In a little under half an hour the local train arrived at the station in Melk. The abbey at Melk stands high on an outcrop that dominates and brings the rocks and luxuriant green foliage below to its knees, as if the abbey were a cloud on high with its bronzed brown roof expanding high up into the vaulted heavens.

The long walls below the abbey's roof are painted different striations of yellow and white to signify the different purposes of each section but the walls, in turn, help to make the abbey look as sturdy as a citadel, whereas the green dome rising from the centre, and additionally the two towers standing close to the River Melk, are ornamental, and excessively splendid.

The whites, yellows, and subdued greens of discoloured copper colouring the two towers were vivid, and in many parts of these multicoloured, stained lines that seemed to flow down from the pinnacles and fall towards the clock's dial--assuming a bent rotundity as they progressed--one could see the glistening of golden hues.

The mere sight of this gives an impression more akin to having viewed a palatial building than of having seen a church or abbey, whereas the interior of the abbey church disabuses this notion by making generous use of multicoloured marble and gold.

Close attention to detail in all moulding of form in the church has ensured the forms are aligned in gentle curves, making 'the pride of Austrian Baroque architecture' an apt descriptor for the building.

The architects, who in the eighteenth century rebuilt this abbey church into its current form, were doubtless trying to build, above the hills around Melk, a veritable heaven on earth through the means of monstrous sums of money and upon the strength of their religious devotion. That the energy of obsession rather than the passion of love and adoration did achieve this is readily apparent to one's eye.

When I earlier stood within this church I thought that anyone would have been overwhelmed by its golden colour, and embraced in it they would lose their sense of reality and find themselves experiencing a sense of utter weightlessness. Believing this kind of



experience to be something that gels with the ideology of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan, I hoped once more to experience corporeally the magical power of those golden hues.

The abbey's history, before it shone as an example of impressive Baroque beauty, begins with such periods as its time as a fortress around the 10th century--with an army first being stationed in the central part of the grounds--before the church was subsequently built. Protective fortresses, guarding against the remote frontier regions called marches, took the names of tributaries to the river Danube and included such names as Enns, Ybbs, Melk, and Krems. The most important of these strongholds was Melk.

The first to extend their authority into the region, the House of Babenberg protected the contemplative monastic orders and established the abbey, making it a secure base for the Benedictines.

Though times and rulers did subsequently change, the abbey not only managed to keep its position as a religious hub, it also continued to exist as a pinnacle of the arts and learning, with theology as its central focus.

Numerous ordeals naturally afflicted the abbey at Melk. One of these was the economic and political unrest that resulted from the Reformation. Rather than fall victim to the unrest Melk joined forces with the University of Vienna and actually took a lead in the reforming process, becoming the origin of abbey reforms that came to be known as the Melk reformation.

Of interest here is that, at this time, Melk Abbey rejected the papacy in favour of choosing the doctrine of ecumenical councils as supported by the University of Vienna. Relations with the Pope deteriorated as a result, but this choice now meant that the abbey gave preference to doctrinal matters, that is, to learned scholarship.

We now look to science to explain what is true for us, but around the 16th century the pursuit of truth was governed by knowledge of the thinking of God. Amid this prevailing attitude Melk Abbey, which was able to manifest a new policy based on doctrine, stood at the vanguard of learning, and represented a physical concentration of individuals who were probably close in nature to modern-day 'intellectuals'.

Countless times the abbey was struck by fire. In these cold regions lighting a fire was the only means of winter heating. Wind blowing up from the river would fan any flames from the abbey, perched as it is above its rocky outcrop. Water was also in short supply due to the abbey's elevated position. Even a small accidental fire would develop into a sea of flames.

A thirteenth-century blaze did in fact destroy the abbey library. At the time of the fire monks who later fell victim to it managed to save valuable artworks, such as copies of early Melk songs of praise and Easter plays, from destruction. The abbey also contained a room for the authoring of literary works. Dating from around the time of the fire, this room saw the tireless creation of such works as miniatures, annals, and chronicles, but the vast majority of this output, they say, has been lost.

There was even greater tragedy to come: a great fire in the year 1736. Artisans, including decorators, stuccowork experts, sculptors and engravers, gave full scope to their talents with the foremost architect of the day, Jakob Prandtauer, leading the work that saw it almost finished when flames burst upon the abbey shortly before the work's completion. The flames took almost all of the rooves and decorated rooms in its wake. The incumbent Abbot of Melk, one Berthold Dietmayr, took action to ensure the work's reconstruction but died with the disappointment of the still unfinished work frustrating him. Subsequent efforts by the abbey's Prior produced the existing epitome of Baroque design seen today.

While these two great fires caused great damage and injury there appears also to have been several smaller fires that, while not growing into raging infernos, caused the entire abbey to be fearful of fire to an abnormal extent.

Would the fact that the priests and monks wear habits with long hems and generously flowing sleeves be due to the fact such clothing protects against the cold for those who cannot avail themselves of the warmth of fire?

The geographical region is a particularly cold one in Europe and when I visited in the spring the Melk River was still frozen with ice. It was autumn now and a beautiful glistening light--the remnants of summer--radiated in the sky, but the air temperature had already dropped to about 10 degrees Celsius (50 degrees Fahrenheit) and caused my brain to contemplate the long winter that was to come.

Although the restaurants open for the day had tablecloths spread out and chairs lined up on the stone-paved road before the town hall, I could see no prospective customers at the time as an elderly local couple, relaxed, drank some tea. The scene suggested to me the idea of people taking a rest after seeing through the work of summer, the year's work, and the work of their lifetimes.

Even here the main street was so narrow in breadth that the café owners and souvenir shop vendors on either side could conduct a conversation without having to raise their voices. Overlooking the street were the two steeples and the green dome of the abbey. The abbey gazes over and keeps watch on all aspects of the town's life.

Climbing a gentle slope I was met by a beautiful gate topped by a triangular roof and a round arch. I could see the same sort of gate ahead again. The abbey is indeed an innermost sanctuary where visitors cannot trespass upon the monks in their practice, but visitors are given access to the inside of the church and to a fixed area of the abbey. Despite this freedom of access there was not a soul to be seen apart from myself.

As I passed through the first gate I instinctively pulled back due to a sound--like that of a great flock of birds launching into flight--that came from either side of the courtyard; a sound not of birds but, as it turned out, of children. Scores of children began running out all at once, passed through the gate, and went running down the stone-paved slope. Leaving me, once more, alone.

After seeing the children off, an instructing-master-like monk dressed in a black robe with white collar appeared. He approached me and gave a salutatory smile. In an expression equivalent to saying that I must have been surprised by what I had just seen, he said, 'We call them the *breeze*,' and narrowed his eyes.

'They sure are.' I returned his smile.

'They're the lower level classes from the gymnasium. When they wear the formal white robes we call them the *rabbit breeze*.'

Giving no reply to my question about where the plainclothes rabbits had gone, the instructor's eyes laughed behind his spectacles as he said: 'Once they reach the higher level classes they stop running.'

Would the chosen students from their number eventually undergo more rigorous ascetic training as Benedictine monks and then climb all the way to the titles of Father?

In the echoing silent aftermath following the *breeze*'s departure I walked towards the next gate. Silence. Within the walls of this vast edifice exist a vast number of individuals ranging from gymnasium pupils to monks, and although I have heard that the majority of

them live within the dormitories, the air around where I stood was very clear and serene, as if it had never been violated by human breathing.

Seats of religious activity, whether Christian or Buddhist, place importance on respecting silence. It was this atmosphere of clear air that I liked. Like chilled white wine it permeates its way through our spirit, emanating its way out from the lungs. The place of worship in the church, where this white wine was amplified by the pleasing coolness of golden hues, intoxicated me.

Several motionless figures of the devout faithful could be discerned, but the exceedingly more numerous statues and images decorated with gold leaf appeared to be those who dwelt in heaven, and they looked down at me in the ease of their serenity. What was at first alive now immediately withdrew into silence.

Of particular note was the main altar with its wall-to-wall marble and gold, and the images of Peter and Paul adorning the tabernacle, each clasping the other's hand, reluctant to leave their companion. It seemed to me that they were ready to die and were giving themselves supportive encouragement, and yet the entire length of their bodies was a golden colour, with the scene arranged to include other figures from the Old Testament including the prophetic Daniel and Jeremiah, King David, and the prophet Isaiah, all of whom were gold. The saints and angels attached above the altar almost all the way to the ceiling glittered, one and all, in the same colour. I assumed a defensive attitude thinking that this was a trick to bewitch me through the use of brilliance.

Peter and Paul were executed on the same day. Peter was crucified head down and Paul, as a citizen of Rome, was beheaded. A woman wearing a scarlet cloak is depicted in the frescoes above the main altar, she wears a crown of thorns on her head and at her feet lay strewn the tools of a torturer. I assume that by withstanding the pain of the torture she was able to make her way to this elevated position. This means that tremendous quantities of blood flow beneath their golden hues.

No matter how grand and gorgeous it might be done, in Christianity there is a custom of putting one's resolve to the test by punishing the flesh, and all through this place there hang the cries and agony of humanity.

While the history of each part of Europe shows the development of how martyrs become saints, and how a church then reveres a saint's remains or a part of the flesh of their body as a patron saint for that church, the same is true of Melk. An Irish pilgrim in the 11th century brought the still incorrupt remains of Saint Coloman, who had been hanged to death on an elderberry shrub, to Melk where even now the saint lies in repose in a golden-edged glass case, his skeletal bones donning decoration. When I passed before the case I felt a little pity well inside me. After having been hanged to death on an elderberry shrub the saint, a thousand years on, has to have his bones exposed to the public in this way.

Leaving the place of worship I walked along a long corridor where iron-cased lighting hung down. The placing of electric light bulbs into these iron casings was probably a very recent thing in the history of Melk Abbey. With the aid of oil lamps and candles one would seemingly just be able to make indistinct shadows of people emerge from the darkness.

Climbing up broad stone steps I passed deeper along into the corridor of an exhibition room that was labelled the Kaiser's Room. In the Marble Hall I came across the first sightseer I had seen since I entered the building. She was a young woman wearing a backpack and was comparing the paintings on the wall with what seemed very much like pertinent literature held in her hand. We exchanged polite smiles as we passed each other. I was feeling quite relieved now. Whether it was through the vehicle of the Kaiser's Room or the Marble Hall, I now understood that the rulers of Austria, including the House of Babenberg and the Hapsburgs,

treasured this abbey at Melk as a spiritual stronghold. While also acting as a seat for worship and monastic training, the abbey was a fortress and a palatial edifice at the same time.

The Marble Hall was witness to meetings between the Kaiser and those of high ecclesiastical office, and perhaps even to scenes where the word of God might have been revealed to the sovereign.

Proceeding further along I was suddenly struck by a wind off the river. I had reached the apex of a massive A-frame structure.

The town of Melk that I had climbed up, the river Melk, and the greenish grey trees that enclosed the surrounding area were covered with, and flickered with, the light of the sun shining from almost directly overhead, as if concealed under a white veil. Looking closer I could discern that the surface of the river was flowing inexorably in its one single direction.

What lay ahead was, in short, the continuation of rooms intended for the Kaiser on one side, and then separately on the very other side--which was a location typically becoming of an abbey--the only place that outsiders are allowed to enter: the library. This library represented a more seductive place for me, even more than the glittering golden church. Visiting the library was another reason for wanting to visit Melk once more.

An amount of heavy, damp, and inclemently stagnating air struck me as I opened the thick door to enter the library. The long square room that stretched deeper inside was utterly buried under stacks of leather-bound books that stretched up to the ceiling save for the space around narrow windows built on either side of the room. Gold paint had been used to draw patterns and write lettering onto all the leather-clad volumes, but the golden colour had now dulled and darkened, under the combined weight of centuries upon centuries of time, resulting in what was now their mountainous mortal remains.

The majority of the books had been copied by human hand and therefore brimmed with serious amounts of human energy. Upon imagining this fact the books appeared to me, far from being a collection of literary corpses, to be an organism bursting with the force of life, an agglomeration of those toiling human voices, their sighs, and their sweat. What had been that sensation issuing forth the last time I stood in the centre of this room? I wanted to experience that sensation once more.

When put in words it seems like nothing of consequence, but what wonderful things humans can make for us. Some of those things are housed here. A book on cautionary lessons for handwritten calligraphy, used since the ninth century, as well as handwritten copies of Virgil's works dating from the tenth and eleventh centuries are found here. In the twelfth century monks made manuscript copies of Saint Jerome's commentaries by hand. Works on Benedictine religious precepts, editions of the Bible, volumes on jurisprudence, theological works, and, to my surprise and joy, a work by the honourable Ava on the life of Christ, a work thought to be the oldest example of women's literature written in the German tongue, are all housed here. Fully two thirds of all the manuscript works date from the fifteenth century but not all of their pages have seen the light of the present day. Only very recently--though it was in 1997--a professor by the name of Christine Glassner was studying a late medieval manuscript and discovered a fragment of another manuscript, dated to about 1300, of the epic poem *Nibelungenlied* (The Song of the Nibelungs), carefully inserted and fastened into the manuscript she was studying. The discovery caused quite a stir.

Augmenting its collection of hand-copied manuscripts, the library also holds a number of incunabula, or books from the earliest period of printing, 1700 books dating from the sixteenth century, 4500 books from the seventeenth century, and then a marked rise to 18,000 books that were produced in the eighteenth century. In total this library is home to 100,000 books, manuscripts, and incunabula.

Only a small fraction of these can be seen from standing in the library. Being ignorant of Latin or German I had no option but to rely upon the meagre explanations provided to even have a hope of guessing whether the works were showing theological, jurisprudential, geological, astronomical, or other subjects. Despite this handicap a single hand-copied volume placed in a display case had a breath-taking degree of intensity. Each and every letter in it, along with the marks of the quill, were splendidly gorgeous and had been laid down lovingly upon the page, as if each were a distinctive emblem in itself. Deciphering the meaning of the writing was beyond me. The letters, however, were seen to be so precious as to warrant the kind of care and attention lavished upon them. Perhaps they saw the very letters themselves as the object of their devotion.

This thought reminded me of how Buddhist sutras are hand-copied by the religion's adherents. In that practice one doesn't inquire into the meaning of the sutra because the very act of copying each character *is* the religious practice.

The monks who copied Melk's manuscripts engaged in their gargantuan task to come closer to their God. Given that premise the 100,000 works held in this place therefore represent the compressed form of centuries of monkish prayers.

I could now feel something forcing its way under my skin and my breathing thus affected. In this enriched and concentrated atmosphere my life and its moorings were about as steady as a feather in the wind ...

Walking closer over to the windows I sensed someone behind me. The sense of someone being in the room with me pressed at the back of my neck, though it was hidden beneath the oppressive weight of the books. Though lost in the centuries-old accumulation of letters, words, and devotional prayers, the sensation of a living human being existing there was unmistakable.

Turning around I could see that this person was slowly passing by and was now about to come back again. An elderly man dressed in a brown jumper. I hadn't realised, what with the overly weighty and unignorable presence of the books filling the room, but another lady and a monk so dressed that the bottom edge of his long habit was gathered up at his waist were also in the room.

The brown-jumpered elderly gentleman slowly approached the area around the window where I stood and looked up at the more elevated section of the window. Wrinkles lined his round face and, while the skin from his jaw to his neck was sagging, his eyes were bloodshot and keen, and I was taken aback because grief flowed slowly from them. The gentleman got wind of my look and gave a reserved smile.

The sheer age of the building meant that windows were few and those that did exist were shaped to be long vertically. Only sparing light made it through the window so that, in all likelihood, this elderly gentleman could have only seen me in silhouette. From my perspective, having turned around, I could see each and every eyelash of his narrowed eyes in the most graphic of detail.

Looking up once more at the higher part of the window, the elderly man murmured something. I couldn't pick out what he had said. As I motioned to move away from the window and pass by him he began talking to me in English.

'..... up there, is my wife.' He definitely said as he pointed to the wall containing the upper part of the window.

'Your wife?' I wasn't too sure whether he was fully *compos mentis*.

A monk approached, shook hands with the elderly gentleman, and then disappeared into a room further in. I felt, from the look of it, like there was deep affection being shown for the old man. Seemingly the two of them were something like friends or acquaintances ...

Moving away from the window I too surveyed the wall at which the old man looked. Pictured, indistinctly, was an image that could equally have been a vase or equally have been patterning of some kind. Not only had the passage of centuries caused severe deterioration, it was also hard to see properly as I was looking into the sun.

'That's a vase, isn't?'

'Does it look like a vase to you?'

'Looks like a vase to me.'

'Can you not make out a woman wearing red clothes further back?'

I looked closer. Closer scrutiny helped bring out the shape of what appeared to be something human.

'Yes, I can see a human in there.'

'That's my wife.'

I should have gotten well away from the old man at this point of course.

'... all the monks and the people at the abbey say that figure is a scholar of our religious order painted by Rosenthal. But if you look closely you can see it is a woman. I saw at a glance that it was a woman, and fell in love. It was awfully long ago, though.'

'It's a vase!'

'Well, as for the vase, the woman was painted first and then Johann Bergl painted over the top of it in secco. Although the image of the woman was painted over, my wife couldn't stand to be treated like that and so she has made an entrance from behind the vase.'

'... what's secco?'

'Rosenthal painted frescoes onto walls that had wet or fresh plaster. Secco is where they do the painting onto walls that have dried plaster. But the thing is that the fresco-painting was more resistant. After the drying process the fresco-painting started to appear, along with the passage of time, from underneath the painted vase, and now it is on the verge of completely pushing aside the vase that you can see on the upper surface. In another hundred years their order will be completely reversed. What a delight, eh? Of course a living human being outdoes a material object any day! And they can't force it back into the wall either; it just won't work.'

'That woman is your lady wife?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Does that mean she's your *madonna*?'

'I got married to her. She came down from the wall and then, just like you were now, she stood looking through the window and gazed outside. Back then the only thing left in the wall was the vase. She lived with me, and four years ago she passed away. And then, once more, she returned to her place *up there*.'

Now that he had mentioned it the image of a human being started to appear to me more clearly. It definitely wasn't anything like a male scholar but a woman dressed in red.

'I'm the owner of this place,' the man said taking a business card out of his pocket.

Adorning the business card were the name of a restaurant and a map.

'Are you Japanese?'

'Yes.'

'Did you come here from Vienna?'

'From Vienna West Station, by train.'

'Then you didn't go through Krems. If only you had come through there by car then you would have spotted my restaurant. There is a famous variety of Austrian wine called Jamek. My restaurant is right beside the Jamek winery; it has a sign out the front showing a crow with a ruff around its neck.'

His business card also exhibited a picture of the ruffed crow he had mentioned. Seemingly there wasn't anything suspicious about the old gentleman.

I said that I had, in the past, come to Melk by car and passed along that very road.

'This window really is special! Say, if you're not in a hurry, please have lunch at my restaurant. It's twenty minutes by car.'

'Yes but, you've got to understand, I'm not the lady that climbed down from the wall up there!'

We both laughed. I decided to trust the old man. The fact that he was using a walking stick also increased my sense of security.

We walked to the car park. He said his name was Peter and that he drives his car over to Melk every day to see his wife. The car park was built in a wide open space that required us to climb steps to reach it. When I commented that climbing up and down steps with a walking stick must be pretty hard going he said he couldn't do anything about that because his wife had fully returned to Melk. His car was a luxury German-made automobile altered for driving by a person with a physical disability. In the gloom of the library he had looked to be around seventy but in the light-bathed car park he looked much more advanced in age.

'Shouldn't you be at the restaurant today, though?'

'I work when I like. At the moment I've handed it over to my son. He was the head *sommelier*, or wine steward, at Jamek, but as I did my foot in, I've passed the baton to him, so to speak.' My relief and sense of safety around the old man increased once more.

The river Melk flows into the Danube and from there flows to the east. Roads along the Danube and lines of trees on the sides of these roads made for an attractive spectacle. In the middle of losing their leaves with a vengeance, the leaves leaped and danced on the road. Denuded trees left only with naked branches had the open spaces between their limbs filled with the light shining off the surface of the river, giving the impression of autumn's everlasting immutability and calm.

While it was true that the 'Ruffed Crow' was a cosy little eaterie with parking provided in the front garden, the ruffed crow on the sign out front definitely caught your eye. Depicting more a black pigeon than a crow, the bird had a diagonal grey band running around its shoulders. I pointed out that I had never seen the likes of it in Japan, to which he explained that such birds were commonplace around here.

The mountains behind the restaurant were stained a brilliant yellow colour. The yellow leaves of grape vines. Apparently Peter's restaurant offered its own home-made wine. He added, in a low voice, that this home-made wine was: 'Better tasting than Jamek's. There's no doubt about it because my son says so!'

Suddenly I felt a twinge of hunger. I hadn't had anything since the single ham *semmel* bread roll I'd had on the train.

While a few groups of people patronized the restaurant I thought they were all probably on car trips that would lead them to Melk and had just stopped on the way. A homely restaurant with only five tables, the white tablecloths were decorated on top with flowers. Coasters under the vases displayed the yellow grapevine leaves. The wafting aromas of bread and the scents of cheese made one feel blissful.

Peter introduced me to a young chef bedecked in an apron. A slim man with large eyes.

'This is my son.'

Introduced in this way the chef's face showed signs of emanating a mysterious emotional strength, the like of which is seen when one stands in a sunny spot, narrowing the eyes, and gazes at the simmering of the hot air in the far distance.

'..... did you meet the woman from the wall painting?'

'Yer, and I also heard about how she's more resilient than the vase. I hear she's Peter's wife, isn't she?'

I had wanted to see how the chef would react to this. But he had already regained his practiced, familiar smile, and didn't give an answer to my question. The youthful chef's eyes were Arabian black and his hair was also a glossy black colour. Not only did he not look like Peter, he actually looked like an exotic foreign national.

To a small extent I put myself on guard as far as Peter was concerned. But such moves were totally unnecessary. Cordial signs indicated that the chef and Peter had mutual trust and relied upon each other. There was no doubt then that Peter was the owner of the restaurant.

The main course of the lunch we had consisted of a brook trout meunière, where the fish is sprinkled with flour and cooked in lightly browned butter, along with other fragrant cuisine topped with a white wine sauce. The white wine, sweet herbs, and the acerbically flavoured apples only available in and around the Krems area complemented each other when blended together like this and imparted a rich flavour to the immaculate white flesh of the brook trout.

Peter drizzled grapeseed oil onto his trout. He offered me some too but I declined. I'm told it's a slightly bitter-tasting oil made from pressed grape seeds. The bread was also homemade. While hard on the outside, it held the wet moisture within its interior, releasing its flavours as one bit into it. I was told that the young chef had made all of it.

'You have a wonderful chef there, you know. But, Peter, he doesn't look like you. I bet he resembles the lady from the painting on the wall though, doesn't he?'

'Coco.' The old man's eyes relaxed.

'Your lady wife's name?'

'Coco of the red robes.'

'You mean the lady in the painting? Or do you mean your wife is Coco?'

He might have heard something of this conversation but the chef, having reached a stage where he could take a break from his work, brought over a framed picture of a woman and placed it down upon our tablecloth. And then he spoke.

'This is his wife.'

The picture showed a nondescript rustic woman wearing Tyrolean-style clothing, but no red robes. The chef had said this was Peter's wife. Of course it therefore seemed the chef



wasn't Peter's son after all. He didn't have the manner of someone showing a photo of his own maternal parent.

When Peter got up to go to the toilet I called the chef over and asked him directly.

'Are you really Peter's son?'

The chef merely made a show of shrugging his shoulders.

'Peter'll probably take you down to the vineyard. Please just hang out with him for a little while and listen to his story. Think of it as a way to say thanks for the lunch. Peter was the chef here for a very long time. I took over after he lost his wife, though. His wife was a wonderful woman and the two of them looked after this 'Ruffed Crow' restaurant for a long time. I believe it was she, his wife, who gave it the name the 'Ruffed Crow'.'

'He said she came out of the painting on the wall and then went back into the wall?'

'It was a major scandal up at the abbey.' The chef's eyes, when he spoke, implied both playfulness and pity.

Peter now came back to the table so the chef left us. Peter and I left the restaurant and embarked on a walk to the vineyard, which spread out at the back of the restaurant. Seen from afar it looked like a slope in the single colour of yellow, but the vineyard showed us different hues for each different grouping of grape variety, in which the shades of colour were subtly different.

A vine that still had green intermingled with yellow vine leaves was only marginally taller than the other varieties, and upon closer inspection I realised that the vine held bunches of green fruit. The fruit didn't look unripe but the skin was firm and hard. A shorter trellis on the left side of the vine showed signs of the harvest having finished and, while there were nevertheless leaves still attached, they were on the verge of dropping their withered forms to the ground. Parts of the remaining yellow leaves had changed to a deep red colour.

Peter walked slowly with his walking stick and I kept my pace the same as his. According to Peter's explanation, the leaves of red grapevines contain crimson. He explained to me the varieties of grape. There was explanation too of the wine flavours made from each.

'This vine, here, yields the house wine we had at lunch. It's a hardy strain of grape that needs the least work. Soon the cold wind from the far side of those hills will come, scattering the leaves and nicely revealing the strength and suppleness of the branches!'

'When will all the leaves fall?'

'In about another month, I reckon. The black branches bind and entwine together in the snow, staving off the effects of the chill wind so the plant can survive. If only my wife had been that stout, though.'

The narrow path we were on broke into several branches and climbed its way up the slope. Its meandering produced the perceptual illusion of having lost one's way in this yellow forest.

Even the roads that one would expect to be used by specialised vehicles as agricultural roads during the harvest season were still in silence. A small shrine with a triangular roofing stood at the fork in the road, housing an image of the Crucifixion. It was unbecoming in the yellow-leafed forest. Exposure to the elements had peeled away and cast off the colouring paint but the blood staining the head area under Christ's crown of thorns was vividly fresh-looking thanks to the protection of the roof.

Even when the path was winding the rows of grapevines were always perfectly straight in

their planted rows. And in between these rows, stretching on into the distance, was a continuing lush green belt of grass. One assumes the harvest machinery proceeds along this belt.

A delightful afternoon. Under the superabundance of afternoon light both the still-fruiting grapevines and the harvested vines dreamed in golden light. But this was too beautiful; too much beauty is frightening. The golden hues of Melk's church were likewise terrifying, so too the gold-painted spines of the books filling its library through centuries of time. And this old man walking slowly with his walking stick through this golden vineyard, he too ...

My feet, slowed. Was the old man's leg really defective? Was his walking stick just a walking stick and nothing else? It felt like the brook trout that I had just eaten was swimming around at the base of my stomach.

How far were we going to walk? For the last few minutes he hadn't spoken a word. He was merely walking towards his destination and nothing else.

Clearly a different variety to the grapevines we had seen so far, we now saw vines with leaves tinged red. Peter now stepped off the paved surface of our path and entered this red-tinged field. The grassed soil was soft underfoot but not so soft that it would bury your shoes.

'Just how far are you going?' My voice was justifiably stiff.

He merely walked on. On either side there extended a straight wall of red and yellow. This dead end terminated at a stone fence. So far away it would be too far to reach. The brook trout moved limply in my stomach. It was great to be treated to a meal but nothing's more expensive than that which is free. To turn back now at this late stage I would need some sort of excuse. Desperately I hunted for one as the back of Peter's head glistened with sweat.

Peter came to a full stop. Only around this spot had the grapevines been cut away and an extended bench placed there. Placing his walking stick between his thighs, he sat down, and perhaps because he was as tired as one would expect he exhaled a deep breath of air. I sat down too, leaving room for one invisible person between us. So this spot had been our destination. This must be the spot where I am obliged to return the compliment of having been treated to lunch. Beneath the red and yellow leaves of the surrounding grapevines I spied dark fruit. These were overripe and wafted a sweet smell through the air. While we had been walking I hadn't noticed but this smell was so strong it was stifling. Dense air made it impossible to distinguish between the smell originating from ripened grapes, or whether rotten ones--intermingled with the aromas of the grass and soil--and then entwining around my body and face, were the origin.

'Those grapes are overripe, aren't they.'

'... with the bacteria on them as they rot they actually dry out. There, you can see something white on them. After a bit more time the red colouring will change to grey. That's when they are at their sweetest. Once it gets to that point we'll harvest them.'

Ah, now I realised, they turn into the wine made from grapes affected by noble rot.

'You see the grapes won't become sweet unless they rot.'

Maybe because he perceived my nervousness he used both his hands to play idly with his walking stick.

'... do you always invite someone from that library and bring them out here?'

'I only invite the women. And only those who had been standing before that window ..... as Coco had done .....

'Slipping out from the picture?'

'No one believed me. And what was worse they said the individual depicted behind the vase was a man. Everyone at the abbey said so. And they all looked at me with eyes full of reproach. They'd have liked me up before the Spanish Inquisition on a charge of heresy.'

With a thud he stabbed the walking stick he held in his hand into the earth. It stuck into the ground. His cheeks flushed and his eyes were bloodshot. There was such compelling force there that he could show the mental state he had on that fateful meeting in the library here in this remote location. His gaze shot from the golden-hued field to penetrate high into the sky.

'... could that mean, by any chance ...?' I said in a low voice.

'I was a monk. That window opened up a new world for me. That window, it had been secretly luring monks into the outside world for centuries. Can you begin to imagine just how many monks were tempted by that woman Rosenthal painted? In the library you can't light any flames. There is no heating or candlestick holders. Which meant everyone relied only on the slender light entering the room from the windows to read their books. Because the books couldn't be taken out of the library the copying was done beside the window too. Most of them died while still young from the cold and pulmonary tuberculosis. I was on the brink of death too. At that point she came down from inside the wall painting and stood by the window. It was Coco. She was wearing red when she came down. Oh, I was saved, she had come to save me.'

The pleasantly cool heavy air of the abbey's library came back to me. I was Coco standing beside the window and before my eyes stood the emaciated youth with the pallid face. His eyes were totally exhausted from the ascetic training, and as if clinging to the faint hope of finding any human warmth, his eyes showed he had fallen in love, compellingly, and meanwhile he was barely able to stay alive.

The youth's long black robes were tied at his waist with cord, his collar white and stiff, a cross depicted on his chest. This Benedictine monk had been touched by my entire corporeal being, and trembled with fear at the upheaval occurring within himself ...

'Then, what did you do after that?'

As if caring for his dry throat he opened his mouth especially slowly.

'I did nothing special. I've just been with Coco the whole time.'

'She passes away, and then once again hides herself in the wall painting, behind that vase.'

'But her *body* is resting here!'

'Where?'

'Here,' he said pointing to the earth beneath the bench.

A wind blew up from the depths of the earth. My body trembled at the fragrantly moist smell of fully ripened grapes as they sweetly went off.

I'd been tricked. Oh, but it was probably a true story. For the crimson of the grapevines beside the bench was especially beautiful and the vines were advancing with their noble rot as the grapes seemingly hung to the vine, on the brink of oozing down it.

'What an interesting story.' My voice was hoarse. I thought that Coco lying in the ground could hear the loud beating of my heart.

A dark shadow passed over head. The shadow fell into a grapevine only a little distance from us and shook a number of leaves. After the old man made a sound in his throat a long-beaked black bird, roughly the size of a pigeon, appeared from between the leaves, and nimbly landed on the grass. And, while remaining cautious, the bird approached us. Around its neck the bird had a ruff of grey. The old man plucked a single grape from a vine close at hand and threw it. The ruffed crow dashed out smoothly and quickly, grabbed the grape in its beak, then fled.

'The grapes off this vine are exceptionally sweet. Would you like to try one too?'

Once more he plucked off a bunch of grapes. Having already lost their inner juicy moisture, the grapes were a strange object that had withered to a greyish purple.

'... it's this smell you know, see!' he said, bringing the grapes closer to my nose.

More than being fruit they were living things quietly hiding their own intent. They smelled of the breath breathed out by a living organism. An agglomeration of seductively aggressive air gently assailed my face.

Peter's white face was very close by. These living organisms dangled in the space between my and Peter's faces. I assured myself of the aroma with my nose, then took hold of one round globe unspoiled by the grey putrefying bacteria, and held it in my mouth. This alone was not enough of a challenge now and so I tried eating the disintegrating grape. Less of a sweet taste than something leaving a sharp numbness on the tip of my tongue, suggesting, in all likelihood, that fermentation had progressed while the grape remained on the growing vine.

'So this was the colour.' I satisfied myself of the fact.

'... the lady in that picture was wearing clothes that were definitely of this colour ...'

I recalled how they had been of a deep hue that could have been taken to be red or to be black. Tears welled up in the old man's eyes.

'Thank you for the lovely meal. I was very glad to have met you. You both make a wonderful couple, I can see that.' I had now reached my limit. I stood up and started to walk off. He remained seated on the bench, motionless.

Where the paths we had come down converged I once more encountered the image of the Crucifixion. As if it were some kind of tutelary god in an agricultural field, like those found in Asia, the image was fixed onto the figure of the cross. What sort of message would Christ be saying to the erstwhile monk each time he passed this way, a monk who had broken off his religious austerities and chosen a woman? The youthful chef had spoken of a major scandal at the abbey but the photo of Coco seemed wrong for a descriptor of scandalous proportions. Her appearance in the photo suggested a nondescript country girl who had, through the natural aging process, become an old woman.

Returning to the restaurant I found the chef outside, about to send off some customers with whom he was acquainted.

'Peter is spending some time with Coco back at the vineyard!' I said, and the chef nodded his head to show he understood all. And then he was kind enough to request the middle-aged couple who were about to get into their car to give me a lift to Sankt Pölten. I got into the car with a sharp taste lingering on the tip of my tongue.

TAKAKI Nobuko

The Golden Vines of Melk

My first visit to Melk was a long time ago, and I came by car. It was early fall, a white hazy moon hanging over the forests that girdled the Danube like fortresses.

The sky had darkened during the drive to a not-quite completely black blue, as though it was hesitant to finally go out completely. Low in the sky, just barely higher than the mountaintops, the moon skated along after the car.

"I'll see you again," I told it.

Now, to keep the promise, I was boarding a train departing from Vienna West Station. This time it was October, and the sky was clear.

And this time I'd gotten used to traveling through Austria alone.

The last time, I had made the drive to Melk with a young Japanese woman studying at the University of Vienna. But I wasn't about to impose again, so I set my mind on taking the train. The station staff and conductors could be expected to speak at least some English, and English as spoken by German-speakers is English at its most comprehensible. I figured I would get by just fine in my hotels, restaurants, and taxis.

I made it to Sankt Pölten in forty minutes. During the wait for the local train to Melk I made friends with an older couple and their dog. The woman was effusive. "Oh, the Melk Abbey! It is the most beautiful sight in all the world!" Their dog endorsed her testimony with a high bark.

From there I arrived at Melk station in just under thirty minutes.

Melk Abbey stands on a high ridge, dominating the stone and dark green landscape below while reaching its tea-colored roofs out high in the sky.

The long walls underneath the roofs were painted in alternating bands of yellow and white, looking fort-like and sturdy. But the green dome standing up from the center and the two towers on the side facing the Melk River were ornamented and gaudy.

The two towers were a striking blend of white, yellow and a deep muted verdigris, the edges glowing with gold as they flowed down, filling out into roundness at the faces of their clocks.

The effect created by these elements was more of a palace than a church or a monastery. But the same was true of the sanctuary interior, where gold and colored marble were lavished on every surface.

And all of it was executed in soft curves down to the most delicate details, the reason for its reputation as the crown jewel of Austrian Baroque.

The architects of the abbey's renovation in the early eighteenth century had possessed obscene reserves of gold and faith alike, and must have seen it as their chance to attempt recreating heaven here on earth. You can clearly sense that it wasn't love, wasn't desire, wasn't passion of any kind that drove them to the abbey's completion. It was the energy of the possessed.

When I had stood in the sanctuary before, I had thought that people must arrive here and find themselves stunned by the volume of golden color, surrounded by so much gold, that momentarily they slip loose from their normal sense of reality, and feel as though they escape their own bodies. Not so different from the strategies of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan. I had told myself that I would have to go back again to understand the strange bodily sensation of all that gold.

The history of the monastery, before it was reborn as the shining light of the Baroque Age, dates to around the tenth century, when it was a fortress. The accounts say that soldiers were stationed there first, and a church for their use followed. This was the seed of today's abbey.

Fortresses protecting the area called the Austrian March were given the names of the Danube's tributaries: Enns, Ybbs, Melk, and Krems. Most important of these was Melk.

The Babenbergs, who ruled Austria at the time, founded the Abbey there to protect the monks' contemplation, and made it a stronghold of the Benedictine order.

Later on, as the times and politics changed, still Melk Abbey maintained—and in fact enhanced-- its position as a religious center and a center for the arts and scholarship, particularly theology.

The Abbey faced many attempts at attack, of course. One of these was the Protestant Reformation and subsequent political and economic upheavals. Surprisingly, perhaps, Melk joined interests with the University of Vienna, supporting the religious reform, and became the driving force behind a movement within the monastic establishment that came to be known as the Melker Reform.

The interesting thing was that Melk had taken the positions argued by the University of Vienna during the Council of Constance, against the authority of the Pope. Relations with Rome deteriorated afterward, but it seemed the Abbey had chosen to put reason and scholarship first.

Nowadays science explains our world for us, but in that age seeking truth was synonymous with seeking the mind of God. Melk, for being able to strike out on its own path in pursuit of reason, turned into a center of scholarship and a place where "knowledge" of a modern kind could gather.

The abbey was assaulted by fire too many times to make a definitive count possible.

Melk has always been a cold place and once had only fire to warm its winters. But the rising winds blowing from the river fed every fire at the hilltop abbey. Isolated at the top of the hill, it had no adequate supply of water. Small accidents could turn into huge blazes.

The scriptorium itself was destroyed by fire once in the late thirteenth century. This time, thanks to the sacrifices of the abbey's monks, Melk's priceless early hymns and Easter pageants were saved from the fires. But while there was already an active manuscript industry at the abbey, energetically producing miniatures and compiling chronicles, it seems most of these works of the abbey's own were among the losses.

The greater tragedy was the fire of 1736. Under the supervision of the greatest architect of the day, Jakob Prandtauer, and with the skilled labor of artisans, lacquerers, and woodcarvers, major construction was finished and the project was a tiptoe away from completion. Suddenly it was engulfed in a fire that led to the loss of almost all the roofs and decorated rooms. The Abbot, Berthold Dietmayr, mandated its immediate reconstruction, but died heartbroken soon after, and it was under his Sub-Abbot's energies that the existing flower of the baroque was cultivated.

Although these two great fires caused the biggest losses, there were endless fires that fell just short of calamity, instilling an extreme paranoia about fire in every resident of the Abbey.

Perhaps it is cold (and the need to stay warm in a fireless environment) that created the tradition of wearing such long robes and ample sleeves.

Melk lies in an especially cold region, even by Europe's standards, and on my previous summertime visit, the river was still covered in ice. This time, in fall, the sky was still glowing with summery light, but the temperature had already dropped to the low tens, hinting at a long winter to come.

Restaurants were open all along the cobble road in front of the town hall, with cloth-covered tables and chairs lining the way, but there were few customers, just the local old folk relaxing over tea.

A town stopping to breathe after a summer's, a year's, a life's work.

Even on this main street, the path was narrow enough that you could have a conversation with someone in the cafe or shop on the other side without raising your voice.

Standing above the street, the two towers and the green dome of the abbey kept announcing their presence in and watched over all of daily life.

When I climbed the gently rising hill up to the Abbey, I was greeted by beautiful gate built from a triangular roof set upon a round arch. Another arch of the same style was visible just beyond. The Abbey itself is actually something like a Holy of Holies or the Japanese Buddhist *Oku-no-In*, a place of worship not open to outside eyes. Entry is permitted within the church sanctuary and additional rooms specifically designated for visitation. But I didn't encounter a single other person in any of these rooms.

As I started to round the first corner beyond the gate, I heard a sound ringing off all sides of the inner garden walls, something like a large flock of birds suddenly taking flight. I jumped back, startled, then peered out cautiously only to discover not birds but a flock of children. A pack of dozens of them came running by and turned at the gate, then thundered down the stone-paved street downhill. Very quickly I was alone again.

As I watched them disappear, a professorly monk in a black robe with a white collar arrived in the courtyard from the same direction.

He came towards me offering a smile of greeting. *You must have been startled!*, his face seemed to say. He squinted and then spoke. "We call them 'the wind'!"

I smiled. "I can see why!"

"These are the younger students from the Gymnasium. When they wear their white robes, we call them 'the bunny wind.'"

I wondered aloud where his bunnies might have gone to in their play clothes. Without answering my question, his eyes laughed behind his glasses.

"When they get older, they stop running!"

Would a select group among these students eventually face a much stricter regimen as Benedictine monks, and finally priests themselves?

I made my way to the next gate in the silence the wind had left behind.

It was quiet. Inside the buildings' enormous volume there were plenty of occupants, from the gymnasium students to the monks, with most of them living within the cloister walls. But there was a stillness and purity to the air as though had never been soiled by human breath.

Religious sites, whether Christian or Buddhist, cultivate silence. It's that atmosphere that draws me to them. They give you a chill like cold white wine that seeps into you lungs-first.

The sanctuary added cold metallic gold to the cup, rounding out the intoxication.

There were a few silent worshippers inside, but the gilt shapes of saints outnumbered them tenfold, looking down on us with a generous placidity from on high.

The highest density of gold and marble was around the altar, and above the tabernacle you could see the figures of Peter and Paul mournfully bidding one another farewell. You sense that they have both accepted the nearness of death and are offering encouragement. But the doomed pair are made entirely of gold. Around them, the Old Testament prophets, Daniel, Jeremiah, David, Isaiah, and other Old Testament characters stand executed in gold. Angels and saints ascend from the altar to the ceiling, all shining gold. It was rhetoric, a game of light to bewilder the senses. My skepticism had been awakened.

Peter and Paul were put to death on the same day. Peter was crucified upside down and Paul, sentenced as a Roman citizen, was beheaded. In the fresco hanging over the altar, a female figure in a deep red cape places a crown of thorns on his head. Instruments of torture are scattered at her feet. The image asks you, is it because he stood up to this degree of torture that he was so greatly honored? And if so, for all the golden figures in this room there must be a great river of blood

flowing underfoot.

No matter how elegant or beautiful the work of art, Christianity's pervasive theme of testing the spirit through the pain of the body means that it always introduces a shadow of human suffering and despair.

Martyrs became saints, and the bodies (or body parts) of those saints traveled long distances to churches which came to venerate them as patron saints, a custom that existed in all parts of Europe at one time or another. In the eleventh century, in Melk's case, it was the body of Saint Coloman, an Irish pilgrim who was hanged from an elderberry tree, which arrived at the church showing no signs at all of decay. Now his bones, bleached and stripped bare of any flesh, are still at the Abbey, lying in repose in a gilt glass case.

As I passed the front of the case, I felt a twinge of pity. Not only had Coloman been violently hanged from an elderberry branch, but for a thousand years since his bones had been slowly bleached in plain sight of anyone who cared to look.

I left the sanctuary and found myself walking down a long white-walled corridor with iron lanterns hanging from its ceiling.

Replacement of the fires in those lanterns with light bulbs would be considered a recent change in Melk's history. By the traditional candle and lamplight, human figures would have been at most vaguely illuminated.

I climbed a stone staircase to a hallway that led finally to a room marked as the Imperial Hall. Inside this marble room I finally spotted another sightseer, for the first time since entering the abbey grounds. She was a young woman wearing a backpack, studiously comparing a guidebook-looking object in her hand against what she found on the walls.

We exchanged smiles as I passed her. I felt normal again. Between the Imperial Hall and the Marble Hall, it was clear that the rulers of Austria-- the Babenbergs and the Hapsburgs-- had placed a high value on Melk as a spiritual asset. At the same time that it was a place of religious contemplation, it was also their fortress and palace.

Perhaps the Marble Hall was one where the Emperor would meet with high-ranking clerics to receive the Word of God.

As I continued forward, I suddenly felt a wind coming from the direction of the river.

I had wandered to the very tip of the giant, A-shaped building.

I looked out over the city I had just scaled, over the Melk River, and over the pale green trees that lined its margins. They waved back and forth in the wind and sunlight, breaking the veil of light that streamed down from above my head. Straining my eyes, I could see the constant motion of the river's surface.

Beyond this point-- beyond, in other words, the cluster of rooms reserved for Imperial use, there was another, more churchly part of the monastery, where only the scriptorium was open to the general public. To me, this library was the more appealing counterpart to the golden shining sanctuary. This was the room that had compelled me to visit Melk again.

When the heavy door opened, a completely different atmosphere from the church, heavy, musty, and challenging, hung inside.

The room, long with square corners, was packed with leather-bound books right up to the ceiling, except for two small windows on either side. They were all marked with gilt letters and designs, and yet the gold was dimmed and dulled, and after however many hundreds of years' accumulation, the place had become like a cemetery mountain for books.

These books were all, or almost all, copied by hand. A tremendous amount of human energy lay trapped inside their pages. So maybe then they were more than corpses. Full of power, concretions of voices, breath, and sweat.



So what was it that I had felt here before and wanted to feel again, so badly that I had to come back?

Something not verbal.

Humans surprise you sometimes with the tremendous things they do.

This was the room that held Melk's 9th century and later manuscripts of Saint Benedict's *Admonitions* and the 10th and 11th century copies of Vergil. In the 12th century the works of Hieronymus were transcribed here. Benedictine canonical texts, scripture, legal treatises, theology, and indeed the oldest known work of Women's literature in German, Ava's *The Life of Christ*, are here too. Of all the manuscripts, fully two thirds date to the 15th century, and of most of these not a page has yet been opened. Recently (so to speak-- it was 1997), a professor named Christine Glassner created a considerable stir when she opened a tome from the late middle ages to find a 13th century scrap from the *Nibelungenlied* lovingly pressed inside.

Beyond even the manuscript texts, there were early block printed books, numbering seventeen hundred from the 16th century, 4,500 from the 17th, ballooning to 18,000 from the 18th.

In all, the scriptorium houses some 100,000 books.

With your own eyes you could confirm only a sliver of that total, and with no Latin or German knowledge to go on, I could tell no difference between theology, law, geology, or astronomy, and had to content myself with sheepishly reading from the written explanations and trying to connect the few dots I could.

But one beautiful handwritten volume on display shocked me enough to stop my breath. Each letter was embellished, every scratch of the pen lovingly planned and executed. I couldn't understand the phrases, but understood that here were words treated as something truly precious. Words themselves created as an act of prayer

Of course when you think about it, Buddhism has transcription as prayer too. Writing one letter at a time, with no thought to the meaning. That amounts to a religious act too.

The monks who created these books undertook this punishing work in hopes of growing closer to God. On that assumption, the hundred thousand books here encapsulated the collective prayers of centuries of devoted monks.

Some feeling in this room was trying to force its way into me, through my skin and my breath. Trapped in this compressed space, my little life felt helpless to fight back.

I walked up to one of the windows and could feel someone behind me.

Mingled with the sensation of the books pressing in on me, the human presence came like a tap on the shoulder. Even though it was tangled with the centuries of letters, words and prayers pressing in on me, it was an undeniable human presence.

When I turned, he had passed me by and was about to turn and come my way again. He was an old man in a tan sweater. I had been too lost in the idea of the books that packed the room to notice anything else, but now I saw that there was also a woman in the room, and a monk with a long robe cinched around his waist.

The old man was inching toward the windowsill where I stood, looking upward toward the top of the window.

His round face was carved by wrinkles, and the skin from his chin to his neck hung loosely down, but his eyes were red and sharp, and he seemed to be off-balance with fear and shock.

He noticed that he had caught my attention and smiled at me shyly.

The old building's windows were tall and narrow, and few in number. The amount of light they allowed was meager too, and I think I must have appeared as nothing but a silhouette to the old man. For my part, facing back at him, my eyes were still sensitive from squinting against the light outside,

and I was highly aware of each of my own individual eyelashes.

Still looking intently at something high up on the window, the old man murmured something. I couldn't understand what it was. As I moved away from the window and tried to squeeze past him, he spoke to me in English.

"That's my wife in there," the old man said with confidence, pointing up at the wall around the window.

"Your wife?"

The monk walked over to us and shook hands with the old man, then headed off to the inner room. You could sense his affection for the old man in the gesture. They must be friends, or at least acquaintances.

I stepped away from the window and cast my eyes toward the wall where the old man was looking.

There was vague image painted on the wall, something you could have taken for a vase or even some kind of pattern. The contribution of centuries of unkind glare, but also the glare of the sunlight of that moment.

"Isn't that just a vase?"

"Oh yes? Does it look like one?"

"It is one."

"Don't you see a woman dressed in red inside?"

I strained my eyes. Suddenly I could make out something like a human shape.

"Oh. That does look like a person."

"Yes, that is my wife."

I started to wonder if I should try to get away from this man.

"The monks all say that the person you see right there is a religious scholar painted by Rosenthal. But if you look more closely, you can tell that it's a woman. I knew immediately, and fell in love with her then and there. But that was a long time ago, now..."

"But it's just a vase."

"The vase, you see, is an image that Johann Bergl painted as *secco* over the image of the woman. He painted over her, but she wouldn't stand for it, so she still shows herself through the vase."

"What do you mean, '*secco*'?"

"Rosenthal painted a '*fresco*,' on a wet wall. A '*secco*' is a painting made on a dry wall. But the fresco is the stronger image. As time passes, the fresco starts to show through from beneath the vase that's over it, and now it's ready to overpower the vase before too much longer. It should have rendered the vase totally invisible in say another hundred years or so. I'm sure it must be a relief for her, the victory of her living spirit over an object. You see, even though they tried to bury her in the wall, they failed."

"And this painting is your wife?"

"Yes, she is."

"You mean she's your personal Madonna?"

"I mean I married her. She came down from that wall, and she was standing there just like you were a moment ago, looking out the window. When she was standing there, only the vase was left on the wall. She and I lived together until she died, four years ago. And then she reappeared here."

The human figure had grown more distinct as he spoke. It was clearly not a male scholar now, but a woman in red.

"I am the owner of this place."

He pulled a business card from his pocket.

The card showed the name of a restaurant and a map of its location.

"You are Japanese?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And you came from Vienna?"

"By train from West Vienna Station."

"Oh, then you didn't pass Krems. If you had come by car through Krems, you would have seen it. We grow a famous Austrian wine called Jamek in Krems. Our restaurant is right by the wineries, with a white-collared crow on the sign."

The same bird appeared on the card. The old man didn't seem so suspicious after all.

I told him that I had taken the route through Krems on a previous car trip to Melk.

"This window, it's special, you know. If you're not in a rush, please have lunch with me at my restaurant and I'll tell you all about it. It is twenty minutes by car."

"Don't forget now, I'm not the woman from the wall."

We both smiled. I decided to trust him. One ingredient adding to my peace of mind was his visible reliance on a cane.

We walked to the parking lot. His name was Peter, and the trip to Melk was part of his daily ritual, specifically so he could visit his wife.

The parking lot for the abbey was built as a plaza at the top of a staircase. When I commented that the climb must not be easy for him with his cane, he replied that since his wife had returned to Melk it couldn't be helped.

His car was a high-end German model modified to accommodate his limited mobility.

In the dim of the library he had looked to be about seventy, but in the bright plaza it became clear that he was much older.

"What's happening with the restaurant while you're away?"

"I only work when I please. I've turned it over to my son now. He was a professional sommelier of Jamek wines, but since I injured my leg I've handed him the baton."

I felt my trust toward Peter grow still larger.

As we drove, the Melk River joined with the Danube, flowing toward the East. The road following the river and the trees running along either side of it were familiar. The trees had lost almost all of their leaves, and the fallen leaves danced around on the surface of the road. The sight of trees reduced to clusters of branches, the gaps between filled in with the light reflected up from the river, impressed on me an image of a gentle, eternal autumn.

The White-Collared Crow was quaintly well appointed with a parking lot set in a front garden, but it was the bird on their sign that stood out most. Not so much a crow as a black dove, it had a white diagonal stripe wrapping its shoulders. I've never seen one in Japan, I said, and Peter told me that they were everywhere you looked in this part of Austria.

In the distance behind the restaurant, an entire range of mountains stood painted bright yellow by the leaves of grapes. I wondered aloud if Peter's restaurant served its own house-made wine.

"We do, he chimed in, and it's even better than Jamek. My son says so, which leaves no doubt about it."

Suddenly I became aware of my empty stomach. All day I'd eaten only the ham and *semmel* rolls

served on the train.

The restaurant had a few customers inside, and all of them gave the impression of being in the middle of a breather while making the drive to Melk.

The entire restaurant was only five tables, country style, with white tablecloths and flowers on each table. Each flower vase sat on a yellow grape leaf, and the smells of bread and cheese enriched the air with the warmth of happiness.

Peter introduced me to a young and apron-wearing chef. He was thin with large eyes.

“My son.”

The young chef's face after showed a strange emotion at this introduction, like when a person narrows his eyes in bright sunlight to look at a shimmer of hot air writhing far away.

“You met the woman from the wall?”

“Yes, and I heard the story about the woman being stronger than the vase, also. Se was Mr. Peter's wife, yes?”

I was trying to get some kind of reaction out of the Chef. But he already gone back to smiling an affable smile, and didn't respond to my question.

The young Chef's eyes had an Eastern black color and his hair shone with the same rich blackness. He neither looked like Peter's son, nor indeed did he look at all Austrian.

I cautioned myself to distrust Peter's good nature more. But then again, it didn't really matter if they weren't related. There was clearly something between the two of them, a feeling of mutual and intimate trust. Peter's story about being the owner of the restaurant, first of all, was probably true.

The main course of the lunch served to us was a trout meuniere in a fragrant white wine sauce. The white whine and herbs, along with tart apples that were a local specialty of Krems, combined to give the simple purity of the white fish a hearty, satisfying taste.

Peter sprinkled his fish with grapeseed oil. He offered some to me as well, but I declined. The oil, though common on local tables, is said to be slightly bitter. The bread was made at the restaurant too, crunchy on the crust but springy inside and full of trapped warmth, and more delicious with every bite. All made, Peter said, by the young Chef.

“He's a fantastic chef, really. But I must say, Peter, that he doesn't resemble you very much. He must take after his mother?”

“Coco.”

The old man's eyes softened.

“Was that her name?”

“My Coco with her red dress...”

“The woman in the painting? Or do you mean something else?”

Maybe it was because the turn of conversation had caught his ear, or maybe it was just because he'd hit a light stretch in his duties in the kitchen, but the Chef emerged at that moment with a framed photograph of a woman and placed it on the tablecloth.

“This is his wife.”

She wasn't wearing red but a traditional Tyrolean dress instead. A perfectly plain country woman. The chef called her Peter's wife. It seemed he really wasn't their son after all. He didn't set it down the way you would a photo of your late mother.

I called the chef over a little later, when Peter had excused himself to use the restroom.

“Are you his son, really?”

The chef shrunk back, pulled his head into his shoulders a bit.

“Peter will probably take you out into the vineyards. Think of it as a gesture of gratitude for the meal, and give him a chance to tell his story, if you can. Peter was the chef at this restaurant for many years. In fact the two of them ran the White-Collared Crow together for most of that time. And it was his wife who gave it the name.”

“But you're telling me that she came down from that wall and has gone back up into it now?”

“There was a bit of a scandal about it at the Abbey, you know.”

He had a glint of mischief and possibly pity in his eyes just then.

Peter had come back by this time, and the chef quietly disappeared from the tableside.

Peter and I left the restaurant soon after and started walking into the fields behind it.

Looking from afar it had seemed like a whole slope of uniform yellow, but in fact it varied subtly in specific shade all over, according to the variety of grape, showing different coloration in each of the divided fields.

Where there were points of green mixed among the yellow leaves, these belonged to a variety just slightly taller than the other vines, and if you looked closely you could see that there were fruit still hanging from their branches. Although not seemingly unripe, their skins were still hard and resilient. To the left of these was a field of shorter raked vines, already harvested for the season, and what leaves remained on them were ready to fall at any minute. Some of the remaining leaves had started to show red edges around their yellow centers.

Peter made his way gradually, grasping his cane, and I slowed to keep to his pace.

According to Peter's explanation, the plants that produce red grapes are the ones whose leaves also turn red themselves. He explained the different varieties of grapes around us, and the character of the wines you could make from each.

“This one, this is what we use to make the wine we had at lunch. It's a sturdy type that needs only minimal attention. If you were here a little later, when the cold winds start to blow from over that hill, then you'd really see the strength and flexibility that's in these branches.”

“How much longer until all the leaves have fallen?”

“Oh, another month or so. The black branches will come curl up in a tangle in the snow to stand up to the cold wind together. If only my wife had been so hardy.”

The narrow footpath led uphill at an angle, splitting into countless other paths as it went. The twisting way it ran on gave me a feeling of being lost in a golden forest.

Even the wider roads where you would have expected smaller trucks to be passing by during the fall harvest season were locked in silence. At a fork in the path, there was a tiny shrine capped with a triangular roof, sheltering a crucifix. It seemed wrong for the golden forest. Much of the carving's painted color had been worn away by the wind and rain, but the blood beneath Christ's crown of thorns remained shockingly red thanks to the roof's protection.

However much the path itself turned and coiled, the vines around it always went on in a single straight line. In between, a green green belt of grass stretched out into the distance. This must be where the larger harvesting machines passed through.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Under the ample afternoon sunlight, the unharvested vines and the bare ones were dreaming an amber-colored dream together.

But it was too beautiful. And beauty in excess is terrifying. The golden church in Melk had been too, and so had been the library's packed shelves and golden-spined volumes.

And so was this old man, marching with his cane through these golden fields.

I slowed down.

Was the old man's leg really injured? Was the cane really a cane?

I felt something move in my stomach. The trout meuniere, swimming.

How far were we going? He'd said nothing for several minutes now. We were just walking toward whatever destination he imagined.

Now we came to vines that were clearly different from any we had seen so far. Row upon row of red-orange vines stretched before us.

Peter stepped off of the path and advanced into the field itself. The grass underfoot was soft, but not soft enough for us to sink into.

"Where are we going?"

I knew the fear in my voice was obvious.

He just kept walking.

On either side of us were razor-straight walls of red and yellow. Where they ended, a stone wall stood. It was far away and the climb looked long and difficult. The trout in my stomach thrashed. I was grateful for the meal, but it wasn't worth all this. But I would still need a reason to turn back on him now. I searched desperately for one. Ahead of me, sweat glistened on the back of Peter's head.

He stopped.

The grape vines had been cut back and a long bench sat in the open space.

He set the tip of the cane between his feet and lowered himself onto the bench, and it seemed he was tired after all because he let out a deep breath. I sat down too, leaving a person's width of bench between us.

So this had been our destination. This was where I had to make my payment for the meal I'd been invited to.

On the vines surrounding us, you could see black fruit hanging beneath the red and yellow leaves. They were overripe and rotting, releasing a sweet smell into the surrounding air. While we were walking I hadn't noticed it at all, but now it was strong enough to make it almost difficult to breathe. The air was so heavy it was impossible to tell anymore if it was ripeness or rot, and the weight of their combined with the smell of the grass and soil to tangle together in the nerves of my face and chest.

"These grapes are rotting on the vines, aren't they?"

"The bacteria latch on and they rot and dry at the same time. See, they have a bit of white fuzz on them. A little longer and the red will turn an ash color. That's when they're at their sweetest. And that's when they're harvested."

Of course. It was noble rot.

"No sweetness without decay then."

I wasn't sure if he sensed my anxiousness, but he just sat there, juggling his cane between his hands.

"Do you always go to that library and invite someone along, all the way out here?"

"Only women. And even then only women who stand by that particular window. Just the way Coco did."

"Yes, yes. When she stepped out of the wall."

"You know, nobody ever believed me. And they insisted that the person hidden inside the vase was a man. Every one of them at the monastery said it. And they were harsh with me, they treated me with the worst sort of scorn you could imagine."

He picked up the cane and jammed the tip hard into the soil. His face was flushed and his eyes were

red. It was like at the library before. There was an intensity that seemed to be twirling his heart around form afar. His gaze flew from the golden fields to stab into the high emptiness above.

“Wait...”

I whispered.

“I was a monk. That window showed me an entirely new universe. For so many centuries, that window had snuck monks out into the outside world. Can you imagine how many monks the woman that Rosenthal painted must have seduced? You can't light a fire in the scriptorium. No stoves and no lamps. Everyone relied on the light of those long thin windows to read by. But you couldn't take books out of the room either. So all manuscripts had to be copied by the window too. Most of the scribes died young from the cold or from pneumonia. I was already dying too. And then suddenly a woman stepped out of the wall and was standing beside me. Coco. She was wearing red then.

“She saved me. She came just to save me.”

This seemed to summon up the heavy chilled air of the scriptorium for both of us. I was Coco, standing at the window's edge, and in front of me was a gaunt and pale young man. His eyes were exhausted from the efforts of his training, and because he knew he was within an inch of his life, he was desperate for some human warmth to cling to. That and his eyes were in love.

His long black robe was tied with a cord and he had a stiff white collar, and on his chest he wore a cross. This monk of the Benedictine order already understood his reaction to me and was shivering in shock and fear at the alienness of his own body.

“So? Then what did you do?”

He waited to let his dry mouth recover and opened it again with agonizing slowness.

“Nothing. We simply were together from then on.”

“And when she died, she went back into hiding behind that vase in that wall.”

“Yes, but her body is sleeping here.”

“Where?”

“Here.”

He pointed at the ground beneath the bench.

A wind came up like something from the very bottom of the earth. My body was shocked at the thick fragrance of the sweetly deteriorating, ripe as ripe could be fruit.

It was a trick. No, no it must be the truth. All the vines surrounding this bench were an extraordinarily beautiful red, and they were further along in molding too, nearly dropping off the vine.

“It's an interesting story.”

My voice came out hoarse. I could hear my own heart beating and I suspected that underneath us Coco could too.

A black shadow passed over my head. It landed in one of the grape vines, rustling a few of the branches.

The old man produced a call from his throat and a black, long-beaked bird about the size of a pigeon appeared out of the leaves and dropped effortfully onto to the grass. He came warily toward us. He had a grey stripe around his neck.

The old man plucked a bunch from a vine just beside him with his fingertips and tossed it toward the bird. The collared crow bobbled toward the fruit, snatched it up, and disappeared.

“The fruit from these vines are especially sweet. Will you try one?”

He plucked another bunch from the tree. It had lost the better half of its moisture and shrunken to an ashen purple. A strange-looking thing.

“Don't forget the smell,” he said, holding it to my nose.

It was less like a fruit than like an animal with its own intense private thoughts. It smelled like breath and warmth. It had a seductive, aggressive smell, and seemed to want to pull and bury my face into itself.

Peter's white face was right beside mine. Between us dangled the purple animal.

I confirmed the smell with my nose, then grabbed a tiny fruit without any of the ashen mold clinging to it and placed it in my mouth. But I felt like I'd held back, and I grabbed another one that was more fully afflicted. What they had was more than just sweetness, it was as though they were already fermenting on the tree, and it left a sharp tingling sensation on the tip of my tongue.

“So this was her color, then?”

I had a theory to confirm. “...Because this is the same color the woman in the painting was wearing.”

I remembered it as a dark color, that looked as black as it did red. Tears were collecting in Peter's eyes.

“Thank you for everything,” I said. “I'm glad I had the chance to meet you. You're a remarkable couple.”

I had reached my limit. I stood and started to walk away from the bench.

He stayed where he was, not moving an inch.

I came to the crucifix again at the meeting of the roads. This time he seemed like the protective spirit of the fields, although unusual for being pinned to the cross.

What did Jesus have to say, each time he passed by, to the monk who had chosen a woman over his vocation? The young chef had said there'd been a scandal, but the word scandal didn't suit the woman I'd seen in Coco's picture. She had a face you'd find anywhere, on any older country woman.

When I arrived back at the restaurant, the young chef was standing outside seeing off a pair of customers.

“Peter is still with Coco in the fields,” I told him.

He nodded sympathetically. Then he called out to the middle-aged couple getting settled inside their car.

“Will you take this woman to Sankt Pölten?”

I slid into the car, mulling the sensation on the tip of my tongue, still sharp.



“The Golden Fields of Melk”

By Takagi Nobuko

A long time ago, I once visited Melk by car. At the time spring was still in its early phases, and above a forest that continued along the Danube River like a fortress, a pale, hazy moon glimmered.

As if hesitating to set, the sky was still blushed in light navy blue. Around its lowest reaches, just barely beyond the tips of the mountains, the moon glided after my car.

Come again, it said.

In order to fulfill that promise, I get on a train from Vienna West Station. Unlike my previous visit, it's October, and the air is clear.

I've become used to traveling alone in Austria.

Last time I came, a Japanese woman studying at the University of Vienna had been nice enough to drive me to Melk. However, being reluctant to ask her again, I decide to go by rail this time. The station and train staff can all speak English, and more than anything, their German-accented speech is easy to understand. Whether it's hotel, restaurant, or taxi, I always manage to get by with English.

It takes 40 minutes to reach Sankt Pölten. There, while waiting to switch on to the local train, I become friends with an elderly woman walking her dog. She boasts that Melk Abbey is the most beautiful monastery in the world, and her pet lets out a high-pitched howl of agreement.

The local train reaches Melk in less than 30 minutes. Melk Abbey is located on the top of a high knoll, encloused by stone and deep verdure, with a brown roof that spreads over the sky.

Long walls beneath the roof are painted in striped patterns with yellow and white. While this makes the abbey appear solid and fortified like a stronghold, the green dome rising from the center and the two towers standing near the Melk River are decorative, and rather extravagant.

The towers' yellow, white, and verdigris-darkened green colors are all vivid. Round lines trickling down here and there from the tower cusps to the clock dials glitter with gold. Just from seeing this much, the abbey already starts to look more like a palace than a church or monastery – and in truth, its inner sections have been decorated lavishly with gold and multicolored marble. Additionally, all of the edifices are minutely detailed with soft curves, proof of the abbey's status as one of the most treasured products of Austrian Baroque architecture.

In the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when architects reconstructed the church into its modern form, they must have gathered all their capital and religious piety with the intents of constructing a heaven for this world. This masterpiece has clearly been born not from passionate feelings such as love or aspiration, but a different kind of energy, something more like pure tenacity.

I imagine that when these halls were first built, its inhabitants were overwhelmed by the golden colors and swallowed up into a gilded haze, disconnected from all sense of reality, unable to any longer sense even their own physical weight. And so, feeling that this sensation can also be tied to the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism, I return to once more experience that auriferous magic.

The history of this abbey before it began to radiate with Baroque beauty begins in the 10<sup>th</sup> century during the age of fortifications, when armies were stationed in center areas and sanctuaries were erected. These forts used to protect the remote region of Malk took names from tributaries of the Danube River such as Enns, Ybbs, Krems, and Melk – the greatest citadel of them all.

At this time, the Babenberg family who controlled the area established the abbey to shelter Benedictine monks. In the following ages, the abbey changed ownership many times, but always kept its position as a prominent center of not only religious activity, but also theological scholarship

and art.

Of course, Melk Abbey has faced many trials over the years, such as political and economic disturbances due to religious reformations. At last, Melk joined hands with the University of Vienna to take the initiative against these problems with the Melk Reform, a movement that became the wellspring for other monastic counter-reformations.

The interesting part is that through this action, Melk Abbey was actually choosing the theories of the Ecumenical Council of the University of Vienna over the Pope himself. This naturally led to a worsening of the relationships between Melk and the Papacy, but was proof that the abbey was prioritizing theory, or rather, education.

Nowadays, science explains truth to us. At the time of the Melk Reform, however, the pursuit of truth was knowing the intents of God. In the midst of all this, Melk Abbey, the monastery that was successfully able to step forward in a new pursuit of theory, thereon became the forefront for “scholarship,” a place where “intelligence” similar to that which we know today was able to flourish.

It was burnt down time and time again.

In a cold region such as this, kindling fires was the only source of heat. The wind billowing up from the river, though, often became the source of conflagrations on the hill. Since the abbey was in a high location, water was also not easy to come by. Even the tiniest accidental fire could become a disaster.

The fire at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century ended up destroying the library. Thanks to the sacrifices of the abbey's monks during the crisis, priceless items such as hymns from the monastery's early days and Easter plays escaped immolation. At the time, the abbey had its own arts and writing room where miniatures and chronologies had been vigorously created, but treasures such as these were mostly lost.

The most tragic event of all happened in the devastating fire of 1736. Before the accident, the greatest architect of the period, Jakob Prandtauer led a massive construction project where artisans such as decorators, plasterers, and sculptors were invited to display their abilities on the abbey. After most of the work had been finished, and just before the finishing touches were made, the monastery once again fell victim to fire, and almost all of the roof ornaments were burned away. Despite the current Abbot at the time, Berthold Dietmayr's determination to lead the reconstruction of the abbey, he unfortunately passed away shortly after, and the Baroque flower which exists today was born from the efforts of Dietmayr's Vice-Abbot.

These two great fires wrought considerable havoc to the abbey, and it seems that there were also numerous smaller fires – so many, in fact, that the entire staff of the monastery is said to have feared flames to an unusual degree. The reason why priests and monks wore long trousers and full sleeves on their uniforms could possibly have been to protect themselves from the cold winters during their fire-free lifestyles.

This region is rather cold compared to the rest of Europe, and even when spring comes, there is still ice frozen across the Melk River. Now, it is autumn, and while the vestiges of summer still sparkle beautifully in the sky, the temperature has already dropped below 10 degrees, enough to make one imagine the long winter ahead.

To the side of the stone-paved road in front of city hall is an open restaurant with chairs and tables decorated with crosses. Today, though, there is not a customer within the shop, save for an elderly local calmly drinking tea. He looks to be relaxing, having finished another year of his lifelong work with the end of summer.

This main road is so narrow that one person standing by the gift shop across the street can easily have a conversation with another sitting at the cafe without either having to raise their voices. Looking down on the road are the two pointed spires and the emerald dome of the abbey. It is eternally watching, monitoring every part of life in this town.

Maybe that's why I see a beautiful gate with a round-arched triangular roof to greet me as the slope continues upward. I can see another ahead of me now. Of course, the deepest areas of the abbey where monks train and discipline themselves are prohibited to the public, but the sanctuary and other special areas are free to enter. There isn't anyone else here besides me, though.

Stepping through the first gate, I can hear what sounds like birds rustling to take flight from within the garden. After unconsciously taking a step back, I realize the sound is not birds, but children. All at once, dozens of children run through the gate, stampeding down the stone slope. With that, I'm alone again.

After I watch the children go off, a teacher-looking monk dressed in a black clothes with a white collar appears.

He approaches and greets me with a smile. His expression seems to query my surprise.

"We call them wind," he narrows his eyes.

"Makes sense," I smile back.

"They're beginners at the gymnasium. When they wear the white uniforms, we call them rabbit wind."

I wonder where the little rabbits in plainclothes ran off to. The teacher doesn't answer my next question.

"Once they become advanced, they won't have to run anymore." Again, the eyes behind his spectacles laugh.

Will the chosen students out of that group of children undergo stricter training as Benedictine monks, eventually rising up to become priests? In the subdued aftermath of the wind, I walk towards the next gate.

It's quiet. I heard that a large number of people, from gymnasium students to monks, live out their lives within this vast structure...but the air is so clear that it seems completely uncontaminated by human breath.

Religious places, whether they be Christian or Buddhist, value silence. This air is what I love. Like chilled white wine, it permeates from my lungs through to my soul.

The chapel adds a golden, pleasantly cool sensation to this white wine and intoxicates me. There are many motionless believers here, but the number of human statues decorated in golden leaves are exponential that amount. Just like inhabitants of heaven, they are gently, quietly looking down upon me. At first, I get excited, but quickly, silently sink back down.

The altar is exorbitantly covered in gold and marble, and above the tabernacle, Peter and Paul are struggling to join empty hands with one another. It looks like they are preparing for death and encouraging one another. Their entire bodies are golden, as are the names of the other prophets below them: Daniel, Jeremiah, David, Isaiah, along with other characters from the Old Testament. Angels and saints high above the altar, nearly reaching the ceiling, shine in the same hue. All this brilliance is part of some secret design to try and bedazzle me, I fear, putting myself on guard.

Peter and Paul were executed on the same day. Peter was crucified upside-down, and Paul, being a Roman citizen, was beheaded. The woman wearing a crimson robe in the fresco above the altar has a crown of thorns, and torture devices are scattered at her feet. If a human withstands torture, will they rise this high? If that is so, then below all this gold must flow a tremendous torrent of blood.

No matter how splendid and dazzling it all may seem, a part of Christianity is about wounding the body and testing the mind. Around every corner, screaming and suffering await. Martyrs become saints, and the church worships the physical parts of their corpses as patron saints. This has continued all throughout history in various parts of Europe. Here in Melk lie the remains of Saint Coloman, the 11<sup>th</sup> century pilgrim from Ireland who was hung by a dead elder tree. His corpse was

entombed before it could decompose, and even to this day, remains as bleached white bone decorated in saintly ornaments, stretched out in a glass case with golden fringes.

As I pass by now, I feel a little sorry for him. Not only was the man hung on an elder tree, but his bones were put on display for all to see for the next thousand years.

Leaving the chapel, I walk down a long hall where iron lighting fixtures hang from white ceilings. The point at which light bulbs were placed into the iron is probably still a recent event for Melk Abbey. I almost expected to see nothing more than the flames of candles and oil lamps making faint shadowy figures dance up and down.

Rising up wide stone steps, I head deeper into the corridor to the galleries known as the Imperial Rooms. Entering a marble chamber, I spot my first sightseer. It's a young woman wearing a backpack, comparing a painting on the wall to some kind of document in her hand.

I walk past and share a smile with her. That feels better. It isn't just the name of these marble chambers...I know well that Melk Abbey is something that rulers of Austria, such as the Babenbergs and Hapsburgs, have treated with care as a precious spiritual location. While it is a place of prayer and training, this monastery is simultaneously a fortress and palace. Even in this very marble chamber, an emperor may have met with a high-ranking clergyman to be informed of a divine message from God.

As I continue on, a river breeze suddenly hits my face. I've stepped out to the highest point of the enormous A-shaped structure. The town and river of Melk, along with the greenish gray arbor surrounding the area, are wearing the sunlight from overhead like a white veil, vacillating. Looking closely, I see that the surface of the river is moving incessantly in one direction.

Beyond the area where the Imperial Rooms extend outward is a separate, yet truly monastery-esque area of the abbey where only the library is allowed to be accessed by outsiders. This library is even more charming than the shining golden chapel. In fact, one of the reasons I wanted to visit Melk again was specifically to come back to this place.

Opening the thick door, a heavy, damp, and solemn air entirely different from the of the auric brilliance of the chapel billows out. Apart from the slender open windows on either side, the long, rectangular room is buried right to the ceiling in leather-bound books. The patterns and text behind each of these leather covers are gilded, but this gold color is dull and dark, bearing the heavy weight of hundreds of years. This room is more like a mountain of biblio-corpses.

As most of these tomes have been penned by someone's hands, this room is packed with a terrible mass of human energy. Just imagining this makes me see not only corpses, but clumps of sweat, sighs and voices, overflowing with power.

What was that feeling that came down on me the last time I stood in the center of this room? I've been longing to experience it again. There's no way to describe it in words...

What awe-inspiring things humans are capable of doing.

In the library one can find copies of a Homiliarium handwritten sometime after the 9th century, and the 11th century works of Virgil. As for the 12th century, duplications of Hieronymus' manuals can also be seen here. Books on the Benedictine precepts, the Holy Bible, law documents, texts on theology, and what is believed to be the oldest piece of female literature in the German language, "Life of Jesus" by Frau Ava, are all on these shelves. Apparently two thirds of the books stored here are from the 15th century, but not even all of their pages have been turned yet. Recently in 1997, Dr. Christine Glassner opened a copy of a late middle-century book only to find a portion of a roughly 700-year old recopying of The Song of the Nibelungs bound carefully within, which caused a great panic.

Other than handwritten copies, first prints of books called old editions number in at 1700 from the 16th century, 4500 from the 17th century, and a whopping 18,000 from the 18th century. Altogether, there are 10,000 tomes collected in this library.

Only a small part can be witnessed by the naked eye, however -- and to a person like myself, who has no understanding of Latin or German, the difference between texts on theology, law, geology, and astronomy is indiscernible. My only hope is to guess which is which by reading the scant explanations provided...

Despite this, the intensity of a single one of the beautiful hand-copied books on display is still enough to make me lose my breath. Like emblems, each one of the letters on these pages has been penned gracefully, with love. I have no idea what any of the sentences mean. This is how important these letters were, though...letters that were possibly an object of worship themselves.

That reminds me, there are hand-copied sutras in Buddhism as well. The characters aren't meant to give answers, but to be reproduced as a religious act.

These monks too engaged themselves in agonizing work in order to get closer to God. And so, for hundreds of years, their prayers have been compacted in these 10,000 volumes.

It feels like something is trying to force its way through my breath and skin. Within this concentrated air, my puny life is absolutely helpless...

As I walk past a window, I sense the presence of someone behind me. Wrapped in the feeling of oppression pulsating from these books, the back of my neck is pressed by a human aura. But however submerged within the century-spanning prayers, words, and letters I may be, this mortal presence still feels unmistakably raw.

Turning around, I can see him move slowly past me and then return. It's an old man in a brown sweater. The presence of the books packed within this room was so thick that I didn't even notice -- there is also another woman, and a monk with long cuffs tied off around his hips.

The old man moves steadily toward the window where I am and looks up at it. Wrinkles are etched in his round face, and skin droops down around his neck from his chin. But his eyes are vibrant and sharp, so the sorrow that had gradually begun to flow out from me is dissipated with a sigh.

He notices my expression and smiles reservedly.

There are few windows in this old structure, and they are all vertically long. The amount of light that escapes through is sparse, so he can probably only see my silhouette. From my standpoint, however, I can see each eyelash protruding from his dazzling narrow eyes.

Once again staring at the upper portion of the window, the old man whispers something. I can't understand it. This time, as he walks away, he speaks to me in English.

"...that's where my wife is." Firmly declaring that, he points to the high part of the window.

"Your wife?" Maybe he isn't all there.

The monk approaches the old man, shakes his hand, and then moves into a deeper room. From the way he moves, I can feel the love and compassion the monk bears toward the man. Maybe they're acquaintances, or friends...

I step back from the window and look to the part of the wall that the old man fixed his eyes upon. There is a painting of some patterned vase that I can't quite make out. It's not just that the hundreds of years since its creation have caused it to degrade; the light from the window is also hindering my eyes.

"Is that a vase?"

"Does it look like a vase?"

"It's a vase."

"Can you see the woman in red within?"

I concentrate. Gradually, a somewhat humanoid figure floats into view.

"Yes, it does look like a person."

"That's my wife."

Maybe I should get away from this old man after all.

"...all the people of this abbey say that person is a religious scholar painted by Rosensthal. But if you look closely, you can see it's a woman. I knew it was a woman the first time I saw it, and fell in love. That was a long time ago, however."

"It's a vase."

"The vase is something that Johan Berger painted with secco over the woman he first drew. He may have painted over her, but my wife can't stand that sort of treatment, and shows herself to me from behind that vase."

"...what is secco?"

"Rosenstahl painted a fresco on a moistened wall. The secco is the painting that was done over after it dried. The fresco was stronger, though. After it dried, over time, the fresco has gradually appeared from underneath, and now it looks like it's about to overpower the vase on the surface. After another hundred years, it should be completely restored. Amusing, isn't it? I guess living humans really do win out over objects after all. You can't try to force them down no matter how hard you try."

"And that's your wife?"

"Yes indeed."

"You mean she's your Madonna?"

"I married her. She came out from that painting and stood right where you're standing this very moment, then looked out the window. When that happened, only the vase was left on the wall. She lived together with me and died four years ago. And then she went back up *there*."

As he speaks to me, the figure in the painting becomes clearer. It really doesn't look like a male scholar anymore, but rather a woman in red.

"I'm the owner of this place." The man takes out a card from his pocket. It has the name of a restaurant and a map on it. "Are you Japanese?"

"Yes."

"Did you come from Vienna?"

"On a train from West Station."

"So then you didn't come by the Krems. If you had come by a car along the Krems, my restaurant would have caught your eye. We carry the famous Jamek brand of Austrian wine. My restaurant is the one close to the winery, with a sign bearing a hooded crow."

There is a picture of a hooded crow on the card as well. He doesn't seem like a suspicious old man. I tell him that I once visited Melk by car.

"This window is special, you know. If you aren't in a hurry, please have lunch at my restaurant. It's twenty minutes by automobile."

"But I'm not the woman who came down from that wall."

We both laugh. I decide to believe the old man. The fact that he has a cane with him also puts me at ease.

We walk to the parking lot. His name is Peter, and he drives to Melk every day to see his wife. The parking lot is in a wide space at the top of some stairs. After I say that it must be tough going up and down these with a cane, he replies that since his wife has returned to Melk, he has no choice.

His vehicle is a German luxury car modified for the handicapped. In the dark library Peter appeared to be in his 70s, but in the bright parking lot, it's clear that he's higher up in his years.

"What have you done about the restaurant today?"

"I only work when I like. Right now my son is taking care of it. He was a Master Sommelier at the Jamek winery, but since my legs got bad, he's been switching in for me."

My sense of security towards Peter grows stronger.

The Melk River meets up with the Danube and flows eastward. I can remember seeing the trees and the road beside it before. The trees are in the process of dropping their leaves, which are dancing on the path. The gaps in those of which only their branches remain are filled with light from the surface of the river, and this gentle, permanent landscape is impressed in my mind.

The parking lot of the "Hooded Crow" restaurant is positioned snugly next to its garden. The sign really does stand out. The crow looks more like a black pigeon, with gray lines running diagonally across its shoulders. After saying that I've never seen such a bird before, Peter tells me they are quite common around these parts.

Behind the restaurant, the entire mountain range is dyed in pure yellow. It's the color of grape leaves. Peter's restaurant also seems to serve their own homemade wine.

And according to him, he says to me in a low voice, "it tastes better than Jamek. That's what my son says, so you know it's no lie."

Suddenly I remember my empty stomach. All I have eaten today was one piece of semmel with ham inside the train.

There are a number of customers within the restaurant, and I think they're all in the middle of a drive around Melk. It is a homely restaurant with only five tables and flowered white crosses. Within the vases are yellow grape leaves. The scent of bread and cheese fills me with joy.

Peter introduces me to a young chef in an apron. He's thin and has big eyes.

"This is my son."

After he is introduced, the chef narrows his eyes in the sunlight, as if staring at a distant shimmer of hot air. A deep, strange expression crosses his face. "...did you meet the woman on the wall?"

"Yes, I heard about how she's stronger than the vase. She's Mr. Peter's wife, isn't she?"

I want to see what kind of reaction the chef gives me, but he simply shows me a practiced smile and doesn't answer. The young chef's eyes are dark and Arabian, with slick, glossy hair. Not only does he not resemble his father, he looks like someone from a completely different country.

I restore my guard a bit towards Peter, but it turns out that doesn't really matter. Between the chef and Peter, I feel a mutual sense of intimacy, trust, and forgiveness. At the very least, Peter was telling the truth about being the owner here.

The main course of my lunch is savory brook trout meuniere in white wine sauce. The wine, herbs, and sour apples that can only be found around the Krems are all blended together wonderfully, and the white meat of the trout is pure and filled with flavor.

Peter pours grape oil over his river trout. He offers it to me, but I decline. It looks to be slightly bitter oil mixed from different types of grapes. The bread is also homemade, and while the outside is hard, the inside is packed with moistness, providing a deep taste with every bite. Peter tells me that the young chef made all of this.

"What a wonderful chef! But he doesn't look like you, Peter. He must resemble the woman in the wall."

"Coco," his old eyes soften.

"Your wife's name?"  
"Coco in red."

"The lady in the picture, right? Or do you mean your wife is Coco?"

As if he had been listening to our conversation, the young chef brings out a picture of a woman in a tiny frame and sets it on the tablecloth. Then, he says "this is his wife."

It's a normal, rural-looking woman wearing not red, but Tyrol-style clothing. According to the chef, this is Peter's wife. I guess he isn't Peter's son after all -- this isn't how someone presents a picture of their own mother.

When Peter gets up to use the toilet, I call over the chef and ask him. "Are you really his son?"

The chef merely shrugs. "Peter is going to take you to the grape fields. Go with him and listen to his stories. Think of it as a way to thank him for lunch. Peter was the chef of this restaurant for a long time. After he lost his wife, though, I took it over. His wife was a wonderful woman who helped him keep the Hooded Crow going for quite a while. She's the one who thought of the name."

"She came out of the wall and then went back in?"

"It caused quite a scandal at the abbey." As he says this, the chef's eyes glow with mischief and compassion.

Peter comes back, and the chef leaves. The two of us leave the restaurant and walk out to the grape fields spreading across the back.

From faraway, the yellow of the leaves looked to be all the same color, but I can see now that the shade slightly differs by type, presenting to me a varying scope of color tone. The yellow leaves that still have some verdure mixed between them are a little higher up than the others. By looking closely, I can see that some are bearing green fruit. They don't look to be unripe, but the skin is hard and firm. To the left on one side is a low rack bearing a completed harvest with full leaves just about to wither. Part of the yellow on the leftover leaves has started to turn to a deep red color.

Peter walks slowly while holding onto his cane, and I match my steps to his. He says that the red color of the grape leaves is mixed with crimson. He explains to me about each type, as well as how each wine tastes.

"We turn these ones into the house wine you drank today. This type is very durable, so it's the easiest to deal with. Soon, when the cold wind comes from over those hills and blows around the leaves here, it'll be easy to understand how flexible and strong each branch is."

"When will all the leaves fall?"

"In another month, maybe. In the snow, these black branches entwine with one another and withstand the cold wind. If only my wife and I had been this healthy."

The bony path branches off in several directions and continues upwards onto a slope. Its meandering creates an illusion that I'm wandering in a golden forest.

A farm road that is most likely used for special vehicles transporting the harvest is also completely silent. There are tiny little triangular-roofed shrines at each fork with crucifixes in them. They don't seem appropriate for this yellow forest. Colors have been dulled by the wind and rain, but thanks to the awnings, the blood trickling down from the crown of thorns around Christ's head still looks fresh and raw.

Despite how the road curves, the line of grape trees continues straight down. In between, a lush belt of grass continues far into the distance. Machines for harvesting probably follow this belt straight down.

It's a wonderful afternoon. Beneath the excessive afternoon light, grape trees still bearing fruit and others that have already finished their harvest see golden dreams together.

This is too beautiful, though. And that scares me. The aureate chapel in Melk also scared me, as did the gilded spines that filled the century-spanning library.



So does the old man with the cane walking slowly through these golden grape fields...

My legs slow.

Does the old man really have bad legs? Is that cane really just a cane? The river trout I just ate feels like it's swimming around in the bottom of my stomach.

How much more does he intend to keep walking? He hasn't spoken for the last several minutes. All he's doing is moving toward some unknown destination. Now, a clearly different type of tree from the grape ones before with reddish tinged leaves surrounds me.

Peter enters this new field from the paved road. The meadow feels soft beneath my feet, but not loose enough to swallow up my shoes.

"Where are we going?" My voice has stiffened.

He just keeps walking.

A wall of red and yellow continues straight to the left and right. At both dead ends are a stone fences. They're so far away that reaching either one seems too difficult. The trout in my stomach oozes around. I'm glad to have gotten lunch, but it couldn't have been this expensive. I'll need a reason to turn back now, though. As I desperately search for one, sweat glimmers on the back of Peter's head.

He stops moving.

The grape trees have been cleared away in this spot, and there is a long bench. He places the cane between his legs and sits down, letting out an understandable sigh of fatigue. I also sit down on another portion of the seat. So this is where he was heading. Is this where I'll finally have to repay my debt?

Black fruit is visible under the red and yellow leaves of the grape trees around us. They're rotten, and letting out a sweet odor. I didn't notice it while walking, but it's enough to make me feel suffocated. The air is so thick that I can't tell if it's a rotten smell or a ripe smell; all I know is that it's mixing with the smell of grass and earth, wrapping around my face and body.

"These grapes are rotten."

"...Bacteria gets on them and rots them while they dry up. See those white things? After a little more, that red color will change to gray. That's when they're the sweetest. Once they get that far, it's harvest time."

I see. So this is where noble rot wine comes from. "So they don't get sweet unless they rot?"

As if he's noticed my nervousness, Peter simply runs his cane through both hands.

"...do you always meet people in that library and bring them here?"

"Only women. Besides, you were standing at that window...just like Coco was..."

"After she came out from the painting?"

"No one believed me. Not only that, but they said the person behind that vase was a man. All of the people in that abbey said that. They were looking at me like they wanted to put me on trial for heresy."

He stabs the cane deeper and deeper into the ground. He's digging into the earth. His cheeks are flushed, and his eyes bloodshot. Just like when I met him in the library, he has an aura that takes my heart faraway. His eyes jump from the golden fields and pierce the empty sky.

"...could you be...?" I say in a low voice.

"I was a monk there. And that window showed me a new world. That window, you know, is something that has taken monks to the outside world for hundreds of years. Can you imagine how many monks the woman Rosenstahl painted has tempted? Fire can't be used in the library. There

aren't any candlesticks or heating either. That's why the only thing people can use for warmth is the slender light coming in from that window. Books aren't to be taken out, so copying was done there too. Many ended up getting tuberculosis from the cold and died at young ages. I almost did myself. That's when the woman came down from the wall and stood in front of me. It was Coco. She was wearing red then. Ahh, she sure helped me out then...she came to save me."

The cool, heavy air from the library starts to come back to me. I'm Coco standing by the window, and in front of me is a thin, pale-faced young man. His eyes are fatigued from training, earnestly longing for human warmth. Just barely alive, they are eyes of a man in love.

The long black clothes of the young man are bound with a cord around his waist, with a hard white collar and a cross on his breast. This Benedictine monk is compelled by my entire body, and petrified by the transformation happening inside him...

In order to protect my parched throat, I deliberately open my mouth slowly. "Then, what did you do?"

"Nothing. Coco is always with me."

"Didn't she die and go back behind the vase in the wall?"

"But her body is sleeping right here."

"Where?"

"Here." He points to the earth beneath the bench.

Wind blows up from underground. The moist smell of ripe grapes rotting and becoming sweet makes my body sway. He's lying to me. No, it must be a true story. The crimson leaves on the grape tree next to the bench look unusually beautiful. Its fruit has ceased to fall, and is continually steadily toward a noble rot.

"Interesting story." My voice cracks. It feels like my heart is pounding so hard that Coco, deep in the ground, might even be able to hear it.

A black shadow passes over the top of my head. It falls onto a grape tree some distance away and shakes the leaves.

The old man clears his throat, and a pigeon-sized black crow with a long beak appears from the leaves and hops onto the grass. It carefully approaches us. Around its neck is a gray hood of feathers.

Peter takes a piece of a grape from a nearby tree and throws it. The hooded crow moves over, snaps it up, and then runs away.

"The grapes of this tree are especially sweet. Would you like to try some too?"

He takes off another bunch. They're half-dehydrated, grayish-purple, and shriveled up. Truly strange.

"...this is the smell. Here," he moves them up to my nose.

More than fruit, they seem like living creatures bearing quiet, hidden intentions. It smells like the kind of breath a living thing would spit out. The bewitching, aggressive clump of air softly lands on my face.

Peter's white face is close by. Between us hang the creatures.

I double-check the smell with my nose, and then choose one without any decay on it and place it in my mouth. That alone turns out not to be enough, however, so I try eating another collapsed one. Rather than sweetness, a dull numbness is left on my tongue, as if fermentation has happened on the tree itself.

"So this is the color," I inspect it. "...it's exactly the same as the clothes the woman was wearing in that picture..."

I remember a deep color that could be seen as either red or black. Tears are welling up in the old man's eyes.

"Thank you very much for the delicious meal. I'm glad to have met you. You and your wife are a splendid couple." I've reached my limit. I stand up and start walking.

He remains on the bench, completely still.

At a fork in the road on the way back, I once again meet up with the crucifixes. They hold their shapes firmly, as if protecting the fields.

I wonder what kind of voice Christ speaks in whenever the ex-monk who chose a woman over his training passes by here. The young chef said it was a great scandal in the abbey, but in the picture I saw, Coco didn't appear to be the kind of woman who would be wrapped up in anything like that. She just looked like an everyday country girl who had gotten on in her years.

I return to the restaurant just as the young chef is seeing off some friends who have come to eat.

"Peter is together with Coco in the grape fields." As I say this, he nods in full understanding. Then he asks the middle-aged couple about to get into their car if they wouldn't mind driving me to Sankt Pölten.

Rolling over the numb sensation with my tongue, I step into the car.

## **The golden truth of Melk**

I visited Melk by car once, a long time ago. It was early spring, and a white, misty moon hung above the forest that followed alongside the Danube like a fortress.

As if hesitant to fall into night, the sky was still hazed in a soft, deep blue. Low in the sky, barely above the tip of the mountains, the moon glided along after the car.

I told the moon I would be back.

Attempting to keep that promise, I boarded the train at Vienna Westbahnhof. Unlike last time, it was October, and the air was clear.

I had become used to travelling alone in Austria. Although last time a Japanese girl attending the University of Vienna had driven me, I was taking the train as I was reluctant to ask her again. After all, both the station attendants and the train staff could speak English, and the English of German speakers is easy to understand. I could get by with English in restaurants, hotels and taxis.

I reached St Pölten in forty minutes. While changing over to a local train there, I was befriended by an old woman with a dog. She boasted that the abbey in Melk was the most beautiful in the world; even her dog gave a high-pitched bark.

The local train arrived at Melk in a little less than thirty minutes.

The towering brown roof of Melk Abbey stretched out like a cloud to match the rocks and deep greens atop its high hill.

While the long wall beneath the roof, painted in yellow and white stripes, looked as solid as a citadel, the green dome rising from its centre and the further two towers standing on the side closest to the River Melk were decorative and extremely florid.

White, yellow and a green like a dulled verdigris were vivid on the two towers, and here and there the curved lines descending to the clock faces, as if flowing down from the tips of the towers, gleamed with gold.

The impression one gets from looking at these parts alone is closer to that of a palace than of a church or abbey, and the church interior also features multi-coloured marble and gold in abundance.

Moreover, all the forms are of gentle curves, down to the finest detail, to the extent that the design is said to be a masterpiece of Austrian Baroque.

The designers who altered the church to its present form in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, through vast amounts of both gold and devotion, must have been trying to make a heaven on earth atop the hills of Melk. It is clear that, more than a passion of love and longing, their energy was an obsession.

When I had previously stood within the church, I had been overcome by all the gold and reflected that, when surrounded by such colours, one loses all sense of reality and becomes unable to perceive even one's own weight. This is a sensation shared by Japanese concepts of the Pure Land of the Buddha, I thought, and would often wish to once again experience the magical power of the colour gold.

The history of the abbey as a shining beauty of the Baroque began in the tenth century with its time as a fortress, when it is said that the church was built with the army first stationed in the central area. The fortresses that defended the frontier regions, called marks,

had names taken from the tributaries of the Danube, such as Enns, Ybbs, Melk and Krems. Melk was the most important fortress of them all.

The House of Babenberg, which ruled the territory at the time, founded the abbey in patronage of the contemplative Benedictine monks, and made it their base.

Even as rulers changed and times moved on, not only did the abbey subsequently guard its status as a centre of religion; it also maintained its existence as a pinnacle of theology and other fields of scholarship and the arts.

Of course, Melk Abbey underwent many tribulations, one of which was the political and economic turmoil of the Reformation. Melk aligned itself with the University of Vienna and was in fact at the forefront of that movement, becoming the source of a reform of abbeys known itself as the Melker Reform.

What is interesting is that at that time, Melk Abbey opted for the theory of the ecumenical council of the University of Vienna over the Pope. While this led to a deterioration in relations with the Pope, the Abbey had given priority to theory: in other words, scholarship.

Although today science explains it for us, the search for truth at the time was through knowing the word of God. Against that background, Melk Abbey, which was able to strike out on a new policy in light of theory, was at the leading edge of “scholarship”, with “intellectuals” similar to those of today gathered there.

The abbey was ravaged by fire time and time again.

Being a cold locality, building a fire was the only way of providing warmth in the winter. The wind blowing up from the river fanned the flames of the hilltop abbey. As a high location, there was also insufficient water. A little accidental fire could lead to disaster.

The library was destroyed in a fire at the end of the thirteenth century, when valuable works from the early days of Melk, including hymns and Easter Plays, were saved from going up in flames through the sacrifices of the monks. There has been a scriptorium in the abbey since those times, and it is said that many of the miniatures, chronicles and other documents that were tirelessly created there were lost.

Even more tragic was the great fire of 1736. Jacob Prandtauer, the preeminent architect of the time, and other decorators, plaster crafters and sculptors had shown their talents and finished most of their work, bringing the abbey within a step of completion, when it was taken by the flames and almost all the roof and decorative rooms were lost.

Although the then abbot, Berthold Dietmayr, took action towards the abbey's reconstruction, he passed away still disappointed. It was the efforts of his prior that yielded the flower of the Baroque that exists today.

While the greatest damage was brought by these two infernos, there were also several other blazes, albeit not so catastrophic. All those at the abbey had an extraordinary fear of fire.

It was perhaps to keep out the cold in their lives without fire that the monks and priests wore long-tailed, heavy-sleeved robes.

The area was a particularly cold one, even for Europe, and the River Melk would still be frozen over when spring arrived. It was now autumn, and while the sky sparkled beautifully with the embers of the summer light, the temperature had already fallen to around ten degrees, bringing to mind the coming long winter.

Although a restaurant lined with cloth-covered tables and chairs was open for business on the cobbled road in front of the town hall, there were no signs of customers save for the elderly locals leisurely drinking their tea.

The impression they gave was that they were catching their breath after the toil of a summer; a year; a lifetime.

Even this main road was narrow enough that people in the cafes and souvenir stores on opposite sides could carry on a conversation without raising their voices.

Looking down over the road were the two spires and the green dome of the abbey. In this town, the abbey watched over and guarded all aspects of life.

Ascending the gentle slope, I was greeted by the beautiful gate, with its triangular roof resting upon a round arch. Beyond that I could see another similar gate. The abbey really is like an inner sanctuary, and although one cannot sit in on the religious training, entry into the church and other certain sections is permitted. Having said that, there was not a soul there apart from me.

When I went to pass through the first gate, I heard a sound like a flock of birds taking flight on both sides of the courtyard, and jumped back reflexively. It was not birds, however, but children. Dozens of children came running through the gateway at once and tore off down the cobbled slope. Again, I was alone.

After seeing off the children, a monk – seemingly their teacher – appeared, dressed in a black robe with a white collar.

He came up to me and greeted me with a smile. “We call them the wind,” he said, narrowing his eyes with an expression as if to assume that I had been startled.

“Indeed.” I returned his smile.

“They are the junior students from the gymnasium. When they are in their white robes, we call them the ‘wind of rabbits’.”

I wondered aloud where the plainclothes rabbits had gone. “When they enter the upper grades, they stop running,” the teacher said without answering my question, again with a smile behind his glasses.

Could it be true that it would be students chosen from among them who would eventually undergo stricter training as Benedictine monks and make their way up to become abbots?

In the silence after the wind had passed, I walked towards the next gate.

It was quiet. While there were many people within the vast building, from students of the gymnasium to monks, most of whom I had been told lived in the dormitories, the surrounding air was very clear, as if it had never been sullied by human breath.

In places of religion, be it Christianity or Buddhism, silence is precious. It is this atmosphere that I like; it soaks into the spirit through one’s lungs, like iced white wine.

Adding a gilded chill to this white wine, the abbey’s church intoxicated me.

Although there were a few motionless believers about, the number of gilded statues was many times more, and they looked quietly and benevolently down on me like residents of heaven. There was a murmur at first, but it soon died down.

The main altar in particular was buried in marble and gold, with Peter and Paul taking each other’s hands above the tabernacle, reluctant to part.

While one might imagine them prepared for death, reassuring each other, their entire bodies were golden; the Old Testament figures laid out all around them, such as the prophets Daniel, Jeremiah, David and Isaac, were also in gold. The saints and angels affixed above the altar, almost up to the roof, all shone in the same colour. I braced myself, suspecting that this was all a trick to bewitch me with splendour.

Peter and Paul were executed on the same day, with Peter nailed up upside-down and Paul decapitated as a citizen of Rome. The crimson-cloaked woman depicted in the fresco above the main altar had a crown of thorns upon her head and instruments of torture scattered at her feet; no doubt she reached such an elevated position by withstanding her torture. The message behind all this was that vast amounts of blood had flowed below all this gold.

No matter how magnificent and extravagant this might have been, there is a part of Christianity that involves the harming of the flesh and the testing of the spirit. Human screams and agony hung throughout the air.

Throughout Europe there is a history of martyrs becoming saints, and churches consecrating parts of the remains and bodies of those saints as tutelaries. In Melk too, the remains of St Coloman, an Irish pilgrim who was hanged from an elder tree in the eleventh century, were brought in before they had fully decomposed. Even now, the saint lies as a decorated skeleton in his gold-edged glass case.

I felt a little sorry passing before the saint. On top of being hanged from an elder tree, a thousand years later he still had to have his skeleton exposed like this for all to see.

I left the church and began walking down a long hallway with white walls and iron lights hanging down from the ceiling. Looking across the history of Melk Abbey, it would have been only very recently that these iron lights had electric globes installed. In the flame of paraffin or candles, figures must have been only dimly silhouetted.

I ascended a broad stone staircase and headed further along the hallway in a display area marked as the Emperor's Gallery. In the Marble Hall was the first sightseer I had encountered since entering the building. The young woman shouldered a backpack and was comparing the paintings on the walls with what looked like reference materials she was holding.

We exchanged smiles as we passed. I was relieved. Be it the Emperor's Gallery or the Marble Hall, it was clear that the Houses of Babenberg and Hapsburg and the other rulers of Austria cherished Melk as their spiritual home. While it was a place of worship and religious training, it was also a fortress and a palace.

In the Marble Hall the Emperor would meet with eminent clergymen who perhaps conveyed the word of God.

As I proceeded further, suddenly I was hit with the breeze from the river.

I had emerged to the A-shaped foremost point of the colossal building.

The town of Melk and its river, and the grey-green trees surrounding them, rose up hazily in the sunlight shining down from almost directly overhead, as if covered in a white veil. Looking closely, the river surface was in continuous motion in a single direction.

From this point on – that is, in the side of the building separate to that housing the Emperor's rooms – was an area that was more what one would expect of an abbey, and in which outsiders were permitted to enter only the library, a place that was more fascinating than even the sparkling golden church. It was to come to this library that I had wanted to visit Melk once again.

Upon opening the thick door and entering, there was a musty, austere air, heavy with dampness and completely different to the golden sparkle of the church.

The rectangular room stretched a long way back and, other than where there was a gap for the narrow windows on either side, was packed to the rafters with leather-bound books. Although there were designs and characters inscribed in golden ink on all the leather covers, the gold was dull and muted with the weight of several centuries. It was a book graveyard.

Most had been copied out by hand, and were packed with tremendous human energy. With that in mind, far from corpses, the books came to appear overflowing with power, like masses of voices, sighs and sweat.

Just what was that sensation that had come upon me last time I stood in the centre of this room? I wanted to taste it again.

It was something that cannot be put into words.

Humans do the most incredible things. Here there are handwritten “sermons” dating from the ninth century as well as transcriptions of Virgil from the tenth and eleventh centuries. The commentaries of St Jerome were transcribed here in the twelfth century. There are commentaries on the Benedictine Rule; Bibles; literature on jurisprudence; and theological texts, not to mention *Life of Jesus* by Ava of Melk, said to be the oldest work of literature written by a woman in the German language. Although two thirds of all the transcriptions are apparently from the fifteenth century, not all of their pages have yet been opened. Just recently – in 1997, at any rate – there was a great fuss when Dr Christine Glassner opened a transcription from the late Middle Ages and found a fragment of a transcription from around the year 1300 of the epic poem *The Nibelungenlied* stored carefully inside.

Apart from manual transcriptions, there are some of the earliest printed books, known as *incunabula*, as well as 1,700 books from the sixteenth century; 4,500 from the seventeenth; with an abrupt leap to 18,000 from the eighteenth century. In total, 100,000 books are shelved in this library.

One can only take in a mere fraction of those at a glance. Even when it came to the categorisation into theology, jurisprudence, geography and astronomy, all I could do, being unable to understand Latin or German, was hazard a guess by looking at the modestly written descriptions.

Nonetheless, there was a breathtaking power in the beautiful hand transcription that had been placed on the display stand. Each individual letter was written lovingly like an emblem; even the impression of the pen was splendid. I didn’t know what the words meant, or that letters could be so precious. Perhaps those very letters were the objects of prayer.

Now that I think of it, in Buddhism they also transcribe sutras by hand. Perhaps it is a religious act to reproduce each character without questioning its meaning.

If it was true that the monks who produced the transcriptions had also taken on such an extraordinary task in order to draw closer to God, then several centuries of monks’ prayers had been condensed into the 100,000 books here.

Something was trying to force its way into my skin and breath. In an atmosphere so thick, my own life was as unreliable as a feather.

Walking close to the window, I sensed that someone else was behind me. Difficult to distinguish from the oppressive feeling brought on by the books, the person’s presence pressed against the nape of my neck. While mingled in with the characters, words and prayers piled up over the centuries, it was unmistakably the presence of a living person.



I turned around to see the person slowly walking back after having passed behind me. It was an old man wearing a light brown sweater. Although I hadn't noticed, as the presence of the books covering the room was so powerful, there was also a woman and a monk with his long robe tails fastened up around his waist.

The old man slowly drew closer to the window, where I was, and looked up at the top of it.

While there were wrinkles carved into his round face and the skin from his chin to his neck also sagged, I was surprised at his eyes, which were charged and keen, but from which a sorrow also slowly flowed.

Noticing my look, he smiled reservedly.

Being old, the building had few windows, and those it had were horizontally long. Little sunlight entered through them, so to the old man I must have looked like a mere silhouette. As for me, turning out of from the light, I could see each individual eyelash above his eyes, which were squinting in the glare.

While again looking up at the top part of the window, the old man mumbled something that I couldn't understand. Then, as I went to walk away from the window and past him, he spoke to me in English.

"My wife is up there," I was sure the old man said, pointing at the wall at the top of the window.

"Your wife?"

Perhaps the old man was disturbed.

The monk then came up, shook hands with the old man, and left to a room to the back. Judging from that, I could feel his affection towards the old man, as if the two were friends or acquaintances.

I too stepped away from the window and cast my eye up to the wall at which the old man was looking.

An ambiguous picture was drawn there, one that could be taken as either a vase or a motif. Not only had the centuries of deterioration been severe; it was also difficult looking into the oncoming light.

"That's a vase, right?"

"Does it look like a vase?"

"It's a vase."

"Can you not see a woman dressed in red behind it?"

Looking closely at it, a figure somewhat like a person did come into focus.

"Yes, it does look like a person."

"It's my wife."

It was time to get away from this old man after all, it seemed.

"... Everyone here at the abbey says that person is a religious scholar painted by Rosenstahl. But if you look hard, you'll see it's a woman. I knew it was a woman as soon as I saw it, and I fell in love. That was quite a long time ago now, though."

"No, it's a vase."

“The vase is a secco, painted over the top of the woman by Johann Berger. He painted over the top of her, but my wife couldn’t stand to be treated like that, so she showed herself from behind the vase.”

“What’s a secco?”

“Rosenstahl painted his fresco onto the wet wall. A secco is a fresco painted on a dry wall. But the fresco was stronger. With time, it became visible from beneath the vase, which was painted after the wall had dried out. Now it’s about to push aside the vase on the surface. In another hundred years, they will have completely replaced each other. Funny, isn’t it. Living people over objects; that’s the way it goes. You couldn’t keep her shut up in the wall even if you tried.”

“That’s your wife?”

“That’s right.”

“She’s your *Madonna*, then?”

“I married her. She came down from the wall and was standing there, like you just were, looking out the window. The vase was all that was left on the wall then. She lived with me, but she died four years ago. Then, she went back up there.”

Now that he mentioned it, the figure of a person did seem a lot clearer, and it wasn’t a male academic; it definitely was a woman in red.

“I’m the owner of this place,” he said, producing a business card from his pocket.

On the card was the name and map of a restaurant.

“Are you Japanese?”

“Yes.”

“Did you come from Vienna?”

“By train, from the Westbahnhof.”

“You wouldn’t have been through Krems, then. If you had come by car, passing through Krems, my restaurant would have caught your eye. We have the famous Austrian wine, Jamek. The restaurant is just near the winery, with a grey-necked raven on the sign.”

There was a picture of the grey-necked raven on the business card, too. He didn’t seem like a suspicious old man.

I told him that I had been along that road on my way to Melk by car before.

“This window is special, you know. If you’re not in a hurry, please have lunch at my restaurant. It’s 20 minutes by car.”

“I’m not a woman that has come down from that wall, though!”

We shared a laugh. I decided to trust the old man. That he walked with a cane was another source of comfort.

We walked to the parking lot. His name was Peter, and he said that he drove to Melk every day to see his wife.

The parking lot was built as an open area at the top of a staircase. When I said that it must be difficult to go up and down the stairs with his cane, he replied that, as his wife had returned to Melk, it couldn’t be helped.

His car was a German luxury car and was remodelled for the use of the physically disabled.

Although in the dark library he had looked roughly 70 years old, in the bright parking lot he was clearly older.

“What have you done with the restaurant today?”

“I work when I like. At the moment I have left it to my son. He was the head sommelier at Jamek, but now that my leg has given out, I’ve passed the baton to him.”

I felt still more at ease with Peter.

The River Melk meets the Danube and runs eastwards. The road along the Danube and the trees beside it were impressive. The trees were right in the middle of losing their leaves, which fluttered about in the road. Light from the surface of the river filled the gaps between the bare branches, giving the impression of gentle autumn scenery that would remain changeless for all eternity.

The restaurant “Grey-necked Raven” was cosy, with car parking in the front garden, but the bird on the sign definitely did stand out. It was more of a black dove than a raven, and had a diagonal grey band running across its shoulders. When I told Peter that I had never seen one in Japan, he explained that they could be found anywhere in the area.

To the rear of the restaurant, the mountains were entirely swathed in a pure yellow. It was the yellow leaves of grapes. At Peter’s restaurant, they stocked homemade wine, he said, before adding in a low voice, “And it’s even better than Jamek. I know it’s true, because my son says so.”

I suddenly felt hungry. I hadn’t eaten anything since a single bread roll filled with ham on the train.

There were a few groups of customers at the restaurant, but they all looked as if they were stopping off on a drive to Melk. The restaurant was homely, with only five tables decorated with flowers on top of white tablecloths. The vases rested on yellow grape leaves. There was a feeling of happiness from the aromas of bread and cheese.

Peter introduced a young chef wearing a white apron. The chef was thin, with large eyes.

“This is my son.”

A curious sentiment came across the face of the chef being so introduced, like when one narrows one’s eyes in the bright sunshine to look at a distant location, hazy in the heat.

“Did you meet the woman on the wall?”

“Yes, and I heard about how she is stronger than the vase. I hear that woman is Peter’s wife?”

I wanted to see how the chef would respond, but he gave a practised smile and did not reply to my question.

The chef’s eyes had the black of Arabic descent, and his hair was slick. Not only did he not look like Peter; he looked like someone from another country.

I became a little cautious of Peter. It didn’t really matter, though. It appeared that there was a close relationship of mutual trust and confidence between him and the chef.

It was probably true, at least, that Peter was the owner.

The main course of the lunch that was brought out was an aromatic dish of meuniere of river trout with white wine sauce. The white wine and the herbs combined deliciously with

the quite sour apples that could only be found in the Krems area, giving the pure, understated flesh of the river trout a rich flavour.

Peter poured grape oil over the trout. He recommended that I do the same, but I declined. It was apparently a slightly bitter oil made by pressing grape seeds. The surface of the bread, which was also homemade, was hard, but the inside had remained gently moist, and the flavour came out the more I chewed it. The young chef prepared it all, I was told.

“He’s really a wonderful chef, isn’t he? But he doesn’t look like you, Peter. He must look more like the woman on the wall.”

“Coco,” he said, his eyes wistful.

“That’s your wife’s name?”

“Coco in red.”

“The woman in the painting? Or is Coco your wife?”

Having perhaps overheard our conversation, the chef, who had time to pause from his work, brought over the photograph of a woman in a small frame and placed it on the tablecloth.

“This is his wife,” he said.

The photograph was of a plain, rustic woman, wearing not red, but Tyrolean-style clothes. The chef had said it was Peter’s wife. So it seemed that he was not Peter’s son after all. It wasn’t how a person shows a photo of his own mother.

When Peter got up to go to the toilet, I called over the chef and asked, “Are you really his son?”

He just shrugged at me.

“Peter will take you to the vineyards, no doubt. Please go along and listen to him for a while; think of it as your thanks for lunch. For a long time, Peter was the chef of this restaurant. I took over after he lost his wife. She was a wonderful woman, and together the two of them looked after the “Grey-necked Raven” for many years. I understand that it was his wife who gave it its name.”

“What about her coming out of the wall and then going back into it?”

“That was a serious scandal for the abbey.”

As he said this, the chef’s eyes were filled with both mischief and sadness.

He left the table when Peter returned.

Peter and I went out of the restaurant and strolled out to the vineyards that stretched out to its rear.

From a distance, it had looked like the slopes were a uniform golden yellow. However, the shade in fact varied subtly depending on the variety of grape, giving each section a different hue.

Some, slightly taller than the other varieties, still had a green intermingled with their yellow leaves; looking closely, it was bunches of green fruit. While these grapes did not look unripe, their skin was tough and firm. To the left of those vines, on one side were lower trellises that had already been harvested. Although these vines still had leaves, they were about to wither and fall. The yellow of those leaves that did remain was partly changing to red.

Peter walked slowly with the aid of his cane, and I matched my pace to his. According to his explanation, the leaves of red grapes also had the colour red mixed in. He told me about the different varieties, and about the taste of the wine made from each.

“This vine is used for the house wine that you drank at lunch. It’s a hardy variety, so it takes the least work. The cold wind will soon come from the other side of that hill and scatter the leaves; when it does, you will be able to see the strength and suppleness of the branches.”

“When do all the leaves fall?”

“In maybe another month. In the middle of the snow, they intertwine their black branches to withstand the cold wind. If only my wife had been as strong.”

The narrow trail diverged many times as it winded up the slope. Its serpentine path evoked the illusion of losing one’s way in a forest of yellow.

Even the paths that would have been used as farm roads by special vehicles during the harvest season were deserted. Where the paths diverged there was a small shrine with a triangular roof and an image of the Crucifixion inside. It was out of place in the golden yellow forest. Although the colour was peeling off in the wind and rain, thanks to the roof the blood seeping from beneath the crown of thorns on the head of Christ remained vivid.

No matter how the path twisted and turned, the grape vines grew in straight lines. Between each row, a strip of lush green grass stretched into the distance. Machines for the harvest must have gone along those strips.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Both the grapevines that were still fruiting and those that had already been harvested were having dreams of gold under the abundant afternoon sunshine.

All this was too beautiful, however, and when something is too beautiful, it is frightening. The gold of Melk’s church had been frightening, and the gilded spines of the books that covered the centuries-old library were frightening too.

And this old man, walking slowly with his cane through the golden vineyards...

My pace slowed.

Did the old man really have a bad leg? Was his cane just a stick?

I felt like the river trout I had just eaten was swimming around at the bottom of my stomach.

I wondered how far we were walking. He had said nothing for the past several minutes. He was simply walking towards his destination.

The rows of grapevines here were clearly a different variety to those I had seen so far, their leaves tinged in red.

Peter left the paved pathway and entered the vineyard.

The grassy ground was soft, but not so much that my feet sank into it.

“How far are we going?” My voice was high and strained.

He just walked on.

The screens of red and yellow stretched out straight on both sides. There was a stone wall at the end of them. Surely it would be impossible to reach it, being so far away? The river trout in my stomach squirmed. It was all well and good to have been treated to lunch, but there’s nothing so expensive as that which is free. If I was to turn back now, I would need

some reason. I looked desperately for that reason. The back of Peter's head glistened in the sun.

He stopped still.

Here alone, the grapevines had been cleared away and there was a long bench. Perhaps tired after all, he breathed deeply after placing the cane between his knees and sitting down.

I sat down too, leaving a gap the width of a person between us. This was our destination, and it must be here that I would have to pay him back for lunch.

Black fruit was visible on the surrounding grapevines beneath the red and yellow leaves. The fruit was rotting, and let a sweet smell into the air. Although I hadn't noticed while we had been walking, it was suffocatingly sweet. The air, so thick that I couldn't tell if it was the smell of rotteness or ripeness, mixed in with the smell of grass and dirt and coiled itself around my body and face.

"These grapes are rotting, aren't they?"

"The bacteria gets onto them and they dry out as they rot. Look, there's some white stuff on them. After a little longer, the red will change to grey. That's when they're at their sweetest. We harvest them when it gets that far."

I understood now; these were used for noble rot wines.

"If they don't rot, they don't become sweet?"

I don't know whether he had spotted my nervousness, but he simply toyed with his cane.

"Do you always invite someone from the library and bring them here?"

"Only women, those who are standing by that window... just like Coco..."

"After she slipped out of the painting?"

"Nobody believed me. In fact, they say the person painted behind the vase is a man. The entire abbey said that. And they looked at me like it was the Inquisition."

He thrust the cane he was holding against the ground. It sank into the dirt. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes red. There was a power just like when I first met him in the library, as if his spirit was somewhere off in the distance. His gaze jumped away from the golden vineyards and pierced through the high, empty sky.

"Do you mean..." I said in a low voice.

"I was a monk. That window showed me a new world. It has been slipping monks away to the outside world for centuries, that window. Can you imagine just how many monks the woman Rosenstahl painted has seduced? You can't use fire in the library. There is no heating, and no candlesticks either. So, to read the books, they all relied on the long, slender rays of light coming in through the window. You can't take the books out, so they transcribed them by the window too. Most of them died young from the cold and tuberculosis of the lungs. I almost died too. That's when the woman came out of the wall and stood at the window. It was Coco. She was dressed in red. I had been spared; she came to save me."

The chilling, heavy air of the abbey's library came rushing back. I was Coco, standing by the window, and in front of me was an emaciated, pallid-faced young man. His eyes were exhausted from religious training; desperately earnest and close to death, seeking the warmth of another human, they were the eyes of a person in love.

The long black garb of the young man was tied up around his waist. His collar was stiff and white and he had a crucifix at his chest. This Benedictine monk was stirred by my entire body and was shuddering in fear at the tumult taking place within his own...

"So what did you do after that?" I asked with deliberate slowness, to cover for my dry throat.

"Nothing. I have been with Coco the whole time."

"And after she passed away, she was hidden again in the wall, behind the vase?"

"But her body lies here."

"Where?"

"Here," he said, pointing at the ground beneath the bench.

A wind blew up from the surface of the earth. My body twitched at the pungent smell of the overripe grapes sweetly rotting.

I was being tricked. But no, surely what he said was true? The deep red of the grapevines beside this bench was particularly beautiful, after all; the noble rot had proceeded to the point that the juices seemed as if they were about to flow out.

"That is an interesting tale."

My voice was cracked. The sound of my heart would have almost been audible even to Coco, within the earth.

A dark shadow passed over my head. The shadow came down into the grapes a little way away from us and shook the leaves.

When the old man let out a shout, a bird about the size of a dove, black and with a long beak, appeared from among the leaves and lightly dropped down on the grass. It then cautiously came towards us. Its neck was grey, as if it was wearing a scarf.

The old man tore a grape from an adjacent vine and threw it. The grey-necked raven hurried over, took the grape in its mouth and flew away.

"The grapes from this vine are especially sweet. Will you try one?"

He wrenched off another bunch. Having lost half their juice, the greyish-purple withered grapes were most unusual.

"Yes, this is the smell!" he exclaimed, holding them to my nose.

More than fruit, the grapes were like a creature silently concealing its intentions. It smelt like the breath expelled by a living thing. A mass of alluring, aggressive air brushed against my face.

Peter's white face was right beside me. The creature was hanging down between his face and mine.

I sniffed to see how they smelled, then pinched off one that was not coated in grey mould and put it in my mouth. That was not enough, so I ate another partly crumpled grape. More than a sweetness, it left a sharp numbness on the tip my tongue, as if it had already started fermenting on the vine.

"This was the colour, wasn't it?" I asked Peter. "The clothes the woman in the painting was wearing were definitely this colour..."

I remembered the rich colour, somewhere between red and black. Tears were welling in the old man's eyes.

“Thank you for lunch. It really was a pleasure to meet you. You make a wonderful couple.”

I had reached my limit. I stood up and started walking away.

He stayed motionless, sitting on the bench.

I came across the Crucifixion again at the crossroads on my way back. Jesus was nailed to the cross just like the guardian of these vineyards.

I wondered what he said each time the former monk passed by this place – the monk who, worn down by religious training, had chosen a woman. The young chef had said that it was a great scandal for the abbey, but the photograph of Coco was nothing like one would expect of a scandal. She just looked like any old farm girl who had aged and become an old woman.

When I returned to the restaurant, the chef had just come outside to see off an acquaintance that had dined there.

“Peter is in the vineyard with Coco,” I said, to which he nodded understandingly. He then kindly asked the middle-aged couple about to get in their car whether they could take me to St Pölten.

I got into the car, rolling around the sharp sensation that was on the tip of my tongue.



**The Golden Fields of Melk**  
**By Takagi Nobuko**

**\*\*p75**

I visited Melk once by car many years ago. It was still early in the spring at that time and a hazy, white moon hung above the forest that skirted the Danube like a fortress. The sky was tinted a light indigo as if hesitating before finally plunging the land into night. From the low outskirts of the mountain, the moon glided after the car a short ways.

"I'll come again," I said to the moon.

With the intent to fulfill that promise, I boarded a train from the Vienna West Station. The October air was clean--it was a different season from the spring of my last trip and I had become used to traveling alone around Austria.

My previous trip, a Japanese woman attending the University of Vienna had taken charge of the driving, but I had reservations about troubling her again and decided to travel by train. The station attendants and staff aboard the trains speak English, but not only that,

**\*\*p76**

the English in German-speaking countries is truly easy to understand: whether you are in a restaurant, hotel, or taxi, you can get by with English.

It was forty minutes to Sankt Polten, where, while waiting to catch the local train, I made friends with an elderly couple leading a dog. The woman boasted that the Melk Abbey was the most beautiful in the whole world--even the dog let out a high-pitched yelp in turn.

The local train arrived at Melk within thirty minutes.

Amongst crags and deep greenery that stretched out like a bank of clouds, the Melk Abbey sat hunched spreading its dark brown roof high in the sky atop a tall hill. Below the roof was a grand wall, which, due to the juxtaposition of yellow and white paint, looked strong and sturdy as a fortress; however, the green dome that rose up in the center and the two towers that stood nearer to the Danube were decorative and inordinately gorgeous. The two towers were a vibrant mix of white, yellow, and a green dulled with verdigris that seemed to flow curving down from their pinnacles to their clock faces, glittering golden here and there.

At first glance, it felt more like a palace than a church or a monastery, and even within the church precincts, multi-colored marble and gold were used luxuriously. Furthermore, to even the finest detail, all the works were composed of soft curves that attested to their reputation as Austrian

**\*\*p77**

Baroque masterpieces.

In the first half of the 18th century, the architects that rebuilt the church into its present form must have attempted to build a heaven on earth, pouring their religious fervor and an enormous sum of money into the hilltop at Melk. It is plain to see that it was not love nor longing nor passions of the like, but an energy bordering on obsession that drove them.

When I had previously stood within the chapel, I remember feeling overwhelmed by all of the gold; I thought that man, when completely surrounded by gold, has all sense of reality stolen from him to the point where he can feel his own body weight no more. And in that regard, I felt a relevance to Jōdō Buddhist thought, and desired to experience for myself once again the aureate spell.

The monastery's history before shining as a beacon of Baroque beauty began in the 10th century as a fortress. It is said that a temple was constructed in the center, where troops had been garrisoned. Forts positioned to guard the frontier region known as March were each named after tributaries of the Danube: for example, Enns, Ybbs, Melk, and Krems were established. Amongst them all, the most important garrison was the one positioned at Melk. The Babenberg family who ruled the region at the time became patrons of an order of contemplative monks and established the monastery as a hub of Benedictine activity.

Thenceforth, even through political vicissitudes and the passage of time, the monastery continued to maintain its status not only as a religious center, but also as the pinnacle of art and theology-centered scholarship.

**\*\*p78**

But this is not to say that trials did not plague the monastery from time to time. One such tribulation was the political and economic unrest brought about by the Reformation. Meeting the upheaval with equanimity, Melk began their own reformation, joining with the University of Vienna to take the reigns of what would be the starting point of monastic change, known as the Melk Reform.

Of interest here is that rather than siding with the Pope, the Melk Abbey chose to side with the University of Vienna at the Council of Constance, summing up a movement to prioritize logic or academics even at the expense of their relationship with the Pope at Rome.

Today, science is the bearer of truth, but at that time, verity was believed to be found in the seeking after the mind of God. And it was during such a time that the Melk Abbey, where a new course was chartered based on logic, took its place at the vanguard of academic progress and become a stomping ground for intellect comparable to that of the present.

Again and again, the monastery was struck by fire. In a region as cold as Melk, ones only protection from the cold was the heat provided by fire. However, the wind that blew up from the river would fan the hilltop monastery's flames and a lack of water was only one of the maladies that affected the abbey, for even a small fire could escalate into a serious incident.

The abbey library was devastated in the outbreak of fire at the close of the 13th century. Thanks to the sacrifice made by the monks, however, early Melk Abbey hymns, Easter Plays, and other invaluable works were saved from incineration.

Thereafter, the monastery was equipped with a room dedicated to writing and literature and the priests involved themselves in the vigorous production of miniature paintings and annals; however, it is said that most

**\*\*p79**

of these have not survived to the present.

Even more tragic was the damage incurred in the great fire of 1736. After most of the labor had been completed and one small step before the unveiling of the masterpiece constructed by the decorators, plasterers, and sculptors led by Jacob Prandtauer, the most skilled architect of his day, an inferno destroyed most of the monastery roof and ornamental chambers. Berthold Dietmayr, the abbot of the time, rose to the task of reconstruction, but did not live to see the monastery's completion, leaving the work in the hands of the prior, under whose charge the Baroque flower blossomed into the beauty it maintains to this day.

While these two great fires brought devastation to the monastery, there seem to have been numerous fires that did not end in disaster, leaving the Abbey as a whole terrified of fire

to an unusual level. Thus, perhaps to accommodate what became a living free of fire, these priests and monks wore long gowns with abundant sleeving to ward off the cold.

The region is especially cold, even for the middle of Europe, and when I had visited last in the spring, the Melk River was still frozen over. This time it was August and the vestigial light of summer sparkled brilliantly in the sky; the temperature, however, had already dropped to around ten degrees Celsius, presaging the long winter ahead.

On the rock-paved road in front of the town hall stood restaurants with cloth-draped tables and chairs set out open for business, but there was not a customer in sight. I cast my eyes towards the tableau of local elderly drinking their tea leisurely

**\*\*p80**

as if basking in the completion of their summer's, year's, or perhaps, life's work.

Even the main road was so narrow that the people in the cafés and souvenir stores on both sides of the street could carry on a conversation without raising their voices. The monastery's two towers and green dome were overlooking the street; every element of daily life was being watched over--guarded--by the monastery.

Climbing up the gradual slope, I was greeted by a triangular roof rest atop a beautiful gate with a rounded archway and up ahead I could see another similar gate. The monastery was the hall located deepest in the compound of buildings, and while entrance to the place of austerities was not allowed, the church and another predetermined area were open to the public. But all of this is to say that there was actually not a living soul present besides myself.

It was when I was passing under the first gate that a sound like a cloud of birds taking flight rushed towards me from both sides of the courtyard. I instinctively drew back, but the cloud of birds turned out to be tens of children, who suddenly burst out running at once, passing through the gate and racing down the rock-paved slope.

And then, once again, I was alone.

After watching the children run off, a priest dressed in black with a white collar, who one could only think to be some sort of teacher, appeared. As he came my way, he greeted me with a smile. Looking half as if he was going to ask, "Surprised, weren't you?" he smiled and said, "We call them 'the wind.'"

**\*\*p81**

"How appropriate." I returned the smile.

"The preparatory school underclassmen. When they are wearing their white formal robes, we call them 'rabbits of the wind.'"

*Where did the plain-clothed rabbits run off to?*

"Once you are an upperclassman, you no longer run." He continued without answering my question, his eyes smiling behind his spectacles.

*Would a student selected from amongst his peers undergo even stricter religious training as a monk in this Benedictine monastery until finally rising to the highest position of priest?*

Through the stillness and calm after the wind ceased I walked to the next gate. It was quiet. Within this vast expanse of a building, from the school pupils to the monks, there were many people--most of whom apparently boarded on the premises--but the surrounding air seemed as if it had never been tainted with the breath of their masses; it was pure.

Within religious spaces--whether in Christianity or in Buddhism--tranquility is valued. It

is this air that I am fond of. Like a chilled white wine, it passes through your lungs and soaks into your soul.

The church's worship hall intoxicated me with white wine and gilded coolness.

**\*\*p82**

There were several worshipers in perfect silence, but the gilded statues like heavenly beings quietly and leisurely overlooking where I stood greatly outnumbered them. At first the area was pulsating, but it soon sank into silence. The high altar was particularly embedded with marble and gold, and Peter and Paul atop the tabernacle stood hand in hand reluctantly bidding farewell to each other. And while these two seemed to have made their preparations for death and be engaging in encouraging each other, they were covered from head to toe in gold, the same as the characters from the Old Testament placed around them, such as the prophets Daniel, Jeremiah, David, and Isaiah.

The saints and angels hung from just shy of the ceiling down to a place above the altar all shone the same color, and I consciously guarded myself against what I took to be an intrigue to dazzle with luster.

Peter and Paul were both put to death on the same day: Peter was crucified upside down and Paul was beheaded as a Roman citizen. The woman wearing a crimson cape in the fresco above the high altar had a crown of thorns upon her head and stood with torture implements strewn about her feet.

*Perhaps it is after enduring torture that one reaches such glory.* That is to say that underneath all of the gold, blood was flowing profusely.

No matter how luxurious and beautiful, there is an element of persecuting the flesh for the testing of the spirit which permeates Christianity and man's cries and anguish hangs throughout.

**\*\*p83**

A martyr rising to sainthood and his relics being taken in by a church and revered as a patron saint was not an abnormal event throughout Europe. In the 11th century, while on a pilgrimage, the Irish Saint Coloman was sentenced to hanging on an elderberry bush and before his remains decomposed, they were brought into Melk Abbey, where his adorned bones rest inside a gold-rimmed glass case even to this day.

Passing in front of the case, I found myself feeling sorry for the saint. He has had to feel the prying eyes of visitors for a thousand years, all because the elderberry bush had become his gallows.

I exited the worship hall and proceeded down a long hallway with steel lighting hanging down from a whitewashed ceiling. In the abbey's long history it was probably only quite recently that light bulbs were introduced. The light from paraffin lamps and candles must have barely been enough to descry obscured silhouettes.

I ascended a set of broad, stone stairs and continued further down the hallway of a display hall marked as the "Imperial Chambers." In the Marble Hall, I spotted the first sightseer since I had entered the building. A young woman shouldering a backpack, she was comparing a picture on the wall with some materials held in her hand. As I passed, we exchanged smiles. I felt relieved. From the Imperial Chambers to the Marble Hall, it was plain to see that Austria's sovereigns, whether they be the Babenburgs or the Habsburgs,

**\*\*p84**

cherished the Melk Abbey as a spiritual center. At the same time as being a place of

worship and religious training, it was also a fortress and a palace.

The Marble Hall was where the emperor met with high-ranking members of the clergy and was surely instructed on the will of God.

As I proceeded further, a wind suddenly surged up from the river. I went out to the far edge of the enormous building, which was built into the shape of the letter "A."

Surrounded by reseda woods, the slightly risen area comprised of the town of Melk and the Melk River wavered in the sunlight from above that it crowned like a white vale. I strained my eyes to see the face of the river moving incessantly in one direction.

Moving along past the string of rooms of the Imperial Chambers was another wing of the building looking much more as an abbey should, where individuals not associated with Melk Abbey were only allowed to enter the library. This library was a far more alluring place than the worship hall resplendent in gold. One reason that I wanted to return to Melk was that I had wanted to visit the library again.

I opened the thick door and stepped inside--the heavy and damp, harsh air was fusty and stagnant, quite unlike that of the gilded worship hall.

The square room elongated towards the back was, save for two narrow windows that opened on the right and left, densely packed with leather-bound books stacked all the way to the ceiling. The binding of every one of them had patterns and letters painted in gold,

\*\*p85

yet the gold was dull and darkened with the load that hundreds of years had put upon them; this, surely, was a mountain formed from the corpses of books.

The majority of them were manuscripts that had been copied down by hand and thus imbued with a great amount of human energy. Imagining that, far from a lifeless corpse, they came to look like collections of voices and sighs and sweat, overflowing with power.

*What was that sensation I had felt rain down upon me the last time I stood in the center of this room?* I wanted to experience it once more.

Words alone are insufficient to describe the feeling. .

*Oh, the fecundity of the human mind! Man can do absolutely amazing things.*

*The Book of Discipline* manuscripts from the 9th century onwards and even the 10th and 11th century manuscripts of the poet Virgil are housed here. In the 12th century, Saint Jerome's commentaries were transcribed here. Commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict, Bibles, legal documents, and theological literature--but not only these works, even *The Life of Jesus* by Ava of Melk, who is considered to be the earliest female writer in the German language--can be found in the library. Two-thirds of all the manuscripts are said to be from the 15th century, but there are still books in the collection that have yet to be opened.

Just recently--or rather, in 1997, which seems so recent in light of the materials under consideration--Dr. Christine Glassner caused a great stir when she revealed a fragment of a *Nibelungenlied* manuscript dated to around 1300 AD that had been filed delicately inside a late medieval manuscript she had opened.

Besides books transcribed by hand, early printed works are stored here in great numbers: 1700 works from the 16th century,

\*\*86

4500 from the 17th century, and after heading into the 18th century, the number jumps to 10,800 works. In total, 100,000 works are enclosed within the library walls.

Yet it is only a small fraction of their total that you can scan with your own eyes. And for someone like myself, who does not understand Latin or German, attempting to differentiate the theology, law, earth science, and astronomy books from one another turned out to be a great enough challenge, leaving me to make my best guess based on the skimpily-written explanations.

Even so, the beautiful manuscript on the display stand had a breathtaking vigor. Every single character was like an emblem written gorgeously and filled with love--even the ink splotches. And while I could not understand the meaning of the text, I had a realization of just how important the act of writing was. Perhaps writing, in and of itself, became an object of prayer.

Now that I think about it, sutra transcription is also found in Buddhism as well. And perhaps it is not in questioning the meaning, but in the copying of that one character that we find the religious act.

The monks who wrote the manuscripts engaged themselves in this extraordinary work in an attempt to get closer to God. This means, then, that hundreds of years of prayers are pressed into the hundred thousand books here.

Something was forcefully trying to penetrate my skin and enter into me with each breath I took. In this condensed, packed air, my life was as powerless as a feather....

\*\*p87

As I passed close to the window, I felt the presence of someone behind me. My senses dulled by the feeling of oppression exuded by all of the books, I was unaware of their presence until I suddenly felt it on the back of my neck. And while it was obscured amongst the prayers and words and letters of hundreds of years of human creativity, this was unmistakably the presence of a flesh-and-blood human.

I turned around only to see the figure who had slowly passed behind me begin to come back my direction. It was an elderly person wearing a brown sweater. The presence of the books filling the room was so strong that I had not noticed the existence of others: there was also a woman and a monk wearing a long gown tied at the waist in the room as well.

The elderly man slowly came towards where I was standing next to the window, eyes raised to a spot somewhere above me. And while his round face was carved with wrinkles and the skin from his chin to his neck was sagging, his bloodshot eyes were piercing and the sorrow pouring out from them startled me. He seemed to notice my reaction and smiled diffidently.

The building was old, and the windows were few and vertically long. To the old man I must have been nothing but a silhouette outlined by the minimal light that was allowed to shine in from the outside. From my perspective, however, I was able to see every lash of those eyes squinting into the sunlight. He looked up once again to a spot above the window, mumbling something that I could not understand.

He approached me as I attempted to distance myself from the window and go past him, this time speaking to me in English.

\*\*p88

"My wife is over there." I am sure this is what the old man said as he pointed to the wall above the window.

"Your wife?" *A crazy old man?*

The monk approached the old man, shook his hand, then disappeared into the back room.

From the nature of their exchange, one might think them friends or acquaintances, for I could feel affection in the monk's treatment of the old man.

I, too, stepped away from the window and turned my gaze towards where the old man was looking. A vague drawing one could interpret as either a vase or a pattern decorated the wall. Not only was the deterioration after hundreds of years severe, the glare of the sun was hindering my view.

"Isn't that a vase?"

"Does it look like a vase?"

"Yes, it does."

"Do you see the woman in red, behind it?"

I strained my eyes until the profile of what looked to be a person emerged.

"Oh, it *does* look like a person."

"That's my wife."

\*\*p89

*A crazy old man, after all.* I wanted to get away from him as soon as possible.

"The people of this abbey will all tell you that it's really just the painting of a church scholar by Rosenthal. But if you look closely, you can tell it is a woman. I knew it was a woman the first time I saw it--I fell right in love. But that was a long, long time ago."

"But it's a vase."

"The vase is an *a secco* by Johann Wenzel Bergl painted over her. But she couldn't stand that kind of treatment, so she's letting herself be seen from behind the vase, there."

"*A secco*? What is that?"

"Rosenthal painted his fresco on a damp wall. *A secco*, however, refers to a mural painted onto a dry wall. Eventually, the stronger of the two turns out to be the fresco. Therefore, from under the vase, which was painted after the wall dried, the fresco painting gradually emerged. It looks like it is going to push the vase off the wall any minute. Give it one hundred years and the two will be switched. Amusing, isn't it? It's not just a thing, but a living person, after all. Even if you try to chain her up in the wall, it's no use."

"So that is your wife?"

"Yes."

\*\*p90

"So you mean that she is 'your Madonna?'"

"We were married. She stepped down from that wall and stood just as you were standing there a minute ago, looking out of the window. At that time, only the vase remained on the wall. She lived with me, but died four years ago. It was then that she returned back over there."

Having heard his story, the image of a person become clearer and clearer. It was no man of academics, but clearly a woman in red.

"This is my place." He pulled a business card out from his pocket. On the card was printed the name of a restaurant and a map. "You're Japanese?"

"Yes."

"Did you come here from Vienna?"

"From the Vienna West Station by train."

"Which would mean that you didn't pass the Krems. If you had come by car along the Krems, you would have seen my restaurant. We're the place with the scarfed crow signboard next to the Jamek winery. Jamek wines are famous here in Austria..

\*\*p91

The picture of the scarfed crow was also printed on the business card. He didn't seem to be a suspicious old man. I told him that I had previously taken that route by car when I visited Melk before.

"This is a special window. If you aren't in a hurry, please come and have lunch at my restaurant. It's only twenty minutes by car."

"But, you know, I'm not the woman who came down from that wall." We both laughed. I decided to believe the old man. Seeing he was using a cane also eased my nerves.

We walked to the parking lot. His name was Peter and he said that he drove to Melk everyday to meet his wife. The parking lot was built atop a clearing accessed by a set of stairs. When I mentioned that going up and down the stairs with a cane must be difficult, he said that because his wife had returned to Melk, he had no choice. He drove a high-class German car, which had been modified for the physically handicapped.

In the dark library, I took him to be around seventy years old, but in the bright parking lot I was able to see that he was far more advanced in age.

"Is the restaurant closed today?"

\*\*p92

"I work only when I want to. Now the place has been taken over by my son. I was the sommelier at Jamek, but after I injured my leg, I passed the baton on to him."

I felt more and more at ease with Peter.

The Melk River joins with the Danube, and runs heading East. I had a recollection of the road following the Danube and the row of trees along the side. The trees were in the middle of ridding themselves of their leaves, leaving them to dance across the road.

The bare trees filled the gap left by their fallen leaves with flickers of light from the face of the river, characterizing the mild, forever-unchanging autumn landscape.

"The Scarfed Crow" was a cozy little place with a parking lot in the forecourt, but the signboard displaying the restaurant's namesake definitely stood out. More than a crow, it looked like a black pigeon with a diagonal gray band on the shoulder. When I mentioned that I had never seen the bird in Japan, he explained to me that it was everywhere in the region.

The mountain behind the restaurant was wholly died a deep yellow: the autumn leaves of grapevines.

Apparently at Peter's restaurant they served home-made wine. "Which," he added in a subdued tone, "is more delicious than Jamek's. My son says so, so you know it has to be true."

I suddenly realized how hungry I was. I had only eaten one ham-on-Semmel sandwich on the train.

\*\*p93



There were several parties at the restaurant, all no doubt stopping in to eat on their drive to Melk. There were only five tables in the homey restaurant, each with a flower set atop a white tablecloth. The coasters placed under the flower vases were yellow leaves from the grapevines. The aroma of bread and the smell of cheese put me in a happy mood. Peter introduced me to a young, slim chef with big eyes who was donning an apron.

"This is my son."

When introduced as such, a peculiar and apparently deep-rooted emotion materialized itself on the chef's face. It was as if he was looking out at a shimmering mirage in the distance from underneath the blazing sun.

"...Did you meet the woman on the wall?"

"Yes, I did, actually. I also heard about how she happens to be stronger than the flower vase and that she's Peter's wife." I had wanted to see the chef's reaction, but he had already regained his accustomed smile, leaving my question unanswered.

The young chef, with his black eyes reminiscent of an Arab and lustrous hair, looked not only nothing like Peter, but as if he was from a completely foreign land.

My guard rose a bit against Peter. But that was really none of my business: there was something intimate between Peter and the chef, as if they were forgiving and trusting each other at the same time.

\*\*p94

Furthermore, Peter's claim to be owner of the restaurant was probably true.

The lunch's aromatic main course was a brook trout meunière with a white wine sauce. The well-matched white wine, herbs, and tart apples found only around the Krems gave the clean white meat of the brook trout a rich flavor. Peter sprinkled the brook trout with grapeseed oil and offered me some as well, but I declined. It was apparently a slightly bitter oil made from pressed grape seeds. The bread, which was also homemade, looked firm on the outside but the inside was still moist. The more I chewed, the more the flavor developed. Apparently, all of it had been prepared by the young chef.

"He's a fantastic cook. But I have to say that he looks nothing like you, Peter. He must take after the woman on the wall."

"Coco." The old man's eyes softened.

"Your wife's name?"

"Coco in the red clothes."

"The woman in the picture? Or are you saying that your wife's name is Coco?"

Perhaps overhearing our conversation, the chef, whose work had slowed,

\*\*p95

came over to our table and set down a small frame with the picture of a woman inside.

"This is his wife."

She was not wearing red, but rather Tyrolean dress, and looked rustic and plain. The chef said that she was Peter's *wife*. He did not seem to be Peter's son, after all. It did not feel as if he was introducing his own mother.

I called the chef over when Peter had entered the restroom.

"Are you really his son?" I asked.

He simply drew back, his head downcast..

"He'll probably take you into the vineyard, so tag along and listen to his story. Think of it as paying him back for lunch. For a long time, Peter was the chef here, but I took over after he lost his wife. She was a wonderful woman, and for many years they took care of "The Scarfed Crow" together as a couple. Apparently she was actually the one who came up with the name.

"And what about her coming out from the wall and then returning back?"

"That was quite a scandal at the abbey." There was both mischief and pity in his eyes.

\*\*p96

He left as Peter returned to the table.

Peter and I left the restaurant and began our walk towards the vineyard that stretched out behind the restaurant. From a distance, the hillside looked as if it was completely painted in yellow, but as each variety of grape was a slightly different shade, each section of the vineyard give off a different hue of yellow. The plants with green still peering out from between yellow leaves were slightly taller than the other varieties, and upon close inspection were bearing green clusters of fruit. They did not look unripe, but the skin was hard and firm. Stretching out to the left was a shorter pergola from which the yield had already been collected, and although the vines still had their leaves, they were seconds away from withering and dropping. Even the leaves that were remaining had patches amongst their yellows of recently died reds.

Peter led himself slowly with his cane and I matched my pace with his. According to his explanation, red grapes have a tinge of red mixed into the color of their leaves. He explained to me the different varieties of grapes and about the different flavors yielded by each.

"This tree, here, is where the house wine we drank at lunch came from. It requires the least care, because it's a strong one. Pretty soon a cool wind is going to come up from over that hill over there and scatter the leaves--you can really see how strong, yet yielding, the branches are when it comes."

"When will all of the leaves finally fall?"

"In another month, I suppose. They endure the cold wind by intertwining their black branches together in the snow. I wish my wife had been that strong."

\*\*p97

We climbed the slope, following narrow paths that branched off here and there. Snaking up the side of the hill like this gave the illusion of being lost in a yellow forest. Even the roads that were specially designated as farm roads during the harvest were still and quiet. At a fork in the road stood a small shrine with a triangular roof and inside was a crucifix. It did not fit the yellow forest. The coloring was peeling from years of wind and rain. Owing to the protection of the roof, however, the blood running down Jesus' brow from the crown of thorns on his head was vividly preserved.

The grapevines were planted in a straight line, cutting their way through the meandering road, and through them ran a belt of green grass that continued far ahead of me. *The machines they use in the harvest probably run over that patch.*

It was a beautiful evening. Under the abundant afternoon light, the vineyard was dreaming a golden dream, both the trees that still had fruit on their branches and those that had already yielded their fruit to the harvest.

This was too beautiful, however. When something is too beautiful, it becomes

frightening. The gold worship hall at Melk was also frightening. With their spines painted gold, the books that packed the centuries-old library were also frightening.

And the old man with a cane slowly walking the golden vineyard...

My pace slowed.

**\*\*p98**

I wondered if the old man's leg was actually bad--if his cane was just a cane.

I began to feel the brook trout I had just eaten swimming at the bottom of my stomach.

*How far are we going to walk?* For the past few minutes, he hadn't said anything: he simply continued walking towards our destination.

Grapevines with reddish leaves of an obviously different variety from those I had seen up until then stretched out before me.

Peter left the paved road and headed into the field. The grass was soft, but my shoes did not sink into the ground.

"How far are we going to go?" I stiffened, my voice becoming high-pitched.

He simply continued on.

Walls of red and yellow continued straight on both sides until finally stopping at a stone wall in the distance.

*It's so far--we'll never reach it.* The brook trout inside my stomach writhed. I appreciated him treating me to a meal, but there is nothing as expensive as something free.

*To turn back now, I need a reason.* I frantically sought for one. The back of Peter's head was glistening with sweat. He stopped.

**\*\*p99**

There was a long bench set out at a place where the grapevines had been cleared. As he placed the cane between his legs and squatted down, he let out a deep sigh as if he was actually exhausted. I left an opening between us and crouched down as well.

*So this is where he was taking me.*

*So this is where I have to repay him for the meal.*

Below the red and yellow leaves, I could see black fruit on the grapevines around me. They were rotten and gave off a sweet smell.

I had not noticed it while I was walking, but it was actually stiflingly pungent. I was unsure as to whether it was tinged with the scent of ripe or rotten fruit, but the thick air mixed with the smell of the grass and the soil and twined about my body and face.

"The grapes are rotten, aren't they?"

"Bacteria grows on them and they dry as they spoil. See, look here: do you see this white growth? After a little while longer, this red will change into gray. That's when they are the sweetest. When it gets to that point, we'll begin the harvest."

*Ah! So these are going to be made into noble rot wine!*

"So if they don't spoil, they won't sweeten."

Perhaps sensing my nervousness, he simply stood playing with his cane with both hands.

"..Do you always invite someone at that library and bring them here?"

**\*\*p100**

"Only women. And only ones standing by that window...like Coco was."

"When she came out from the painting?"

"No one believed me. Not only that, everyone said that the person painted behind the vase was a man. All the people at the monastery said that. They looked at me with such cruel eyes, as if they were going to put me before the Inquisition."

He stabbed the ground with his cane. It sank into the dirt. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes bloodshot. There was a vigor as if your heart was being manipulated somewhere far, just like when I had first met him at the library. His gaze darted from the golden fields and pierced the distant void.

"Does that mean that...?" I asked in a hushed tone.

"I was a monk. That window showed me a whole new world. For hundreds of years, that window secretly lead monks to the outside world. Can you imagine how many of us Rosenthal's woman tempted? In the library, you can't use fire. Because there's no heater and there are no candle sticks, everyone depends on that thin slip of light that comes in through the window to read anything. Because you're not allowed to take books out of the library, manuscripts are transcribed by the window. Many of us died young from the cold and tuberculosis. I almost died once, as well. It was then

**\*\*p101**

that she came down from the wall and stood near the window. Coco. She was wearing red clothes. Oh, I was saved! She came to save me!"

The abbey library's cold, heavy air was creeping back upon me. I was Coco, standing by the window, and before me was standing a gaunt, pale-faced youth. Those eyes, exhausted from religious training, were the eyes of a man who had fallen in love while knocking on death's door--so desperate they looked as if they were going to jump out and cling to you, seeking human warmth. The youth's black, long garb was tied at the waist with string, his collar was white and stiff, and his chest bore a cross. This Benedictine monk stirred at my whole body before him and trembled at the frightening change within himself....

"So what did you do after that?" Attempting to favor my dry throat, I deliberately opened my mouth slowly.

"I'm not going to do anything. I am going to be with Coco forever."

"But she passed away and now she's hidden behind that vase on the wall again."

"But her body is resting here."

"Where?"

"Here." He pointed to the dirt beneath the bench.

**\*\*p102**

A wind blew up from the very base of the earth. My body churned at the fragrant, moist smell of overly ripe grapes sweetening as they spoiled.

*I am being lied to. No, surely it's a true story.* Next to the bench stood a vine whose crimson was especially beautiful--its fruit was well past ripe and looked as if it was going to run right down the tree.

"That's an interesting story." My voice cracked. I feared my beating heart would be heard even by Coco, lying under the ground.

A black shadow passed over my head and fell into a patch of vines a ways removed. Several leaves rustled. The old man cleared his throat and a black, long-billed bird the size of a pigeon appeared from between the leaves and flitted down to the grass. It cautiously approached us. Around its neck was a gray scarf.

The old man picked a grape from the nearby vine and tossed it towards the bird, who nimbly ran over, took the grape in its mouth, and scurried off.

"This vine's fruit is especially sweet. Would you like to try one?" He again approached the vine and snatched a cluster.

It was a strange sight: half dehydrated and atrophied into a grayish-purple.

**\*\*p103**

"See, this is the smell," he said as he positioned the fruit below my nose. But rather than a fruit, it seemed more like a living thing with a hidden, quiet intention. It smelled like the exhaled breath of a living thing. A seductive and aggressive waft of air rose to my face.

Peter's white face was right in front of me. And between our faces hung that living thing.

I checked the smell with my nose and then picked one grape that did not have the gray putrefactive fungus on it and put it into my mouth. Not feeling satisfied with the one I picked, I tried one that was beginning to crumble apart. Rather than a sweet flavor, it left a sharp numbness on the tip of my tongue that made me wonder if it had not begun to ferment while still on the vine.

"This was the color, wasn't it?" I asked. "The clothes the woman in the picture was wearing...they were definitely this color." I remembered it was a deep color one could take for either a red or a black. Tears were welling up in the old man's eyes.

"Thank you for the meal and it was nice meeting you. You're a wonderful couple." I had reached my limit. I stood up and began to walk.

**\*\*p104**

He didn't move from his seat on the bench.

At the fork in the road we had taken, I ran into the crucifix once more.

It was as if He was the field's guardian deity hanging upon that cross.

Every time the former monk, who had collapsed in the face of strenuous austerities and chosen a woman, passed by, what words did Jesus called out to him, I wondered. The young chef had mentioned a major scandal at the monastery, but after seeing Coco's picture, I could not help but feel that she would have caused no such thing. She simply looked as if the neighborhood farm girl had put on years and become an elderly woman.

I returned to the restaurant just as the chef had come outside to see off visiting acquaintances.

"Peter is with Coco in the vineyard."

The chef nodded, understanding everything. He then asked the middle-aged couple climbing into their car if they would take me as far as Sankt Polten.

Tossing the sharp sensation around with the tip of my tongue, I got into the car.

## The Golden Vineyard

by Takagi Nobuko

I had already traveled to Melk by car a long time ago. It wasn't quite spring at the time, and the moon hung dimly above the trees that line the banks of the Danube.

The sky still had a faint blue smudge on the horizon, as if the sun had wavered before setting completely.

I had told the moon I would return.

Intent on keeping my word, I boarded a train from Vienna West Station. This time it was October, and the air was cool and crisp.

By now, I had gotten used to these solo trips through Austria.

Last time, a Japanese girl who studied at the University of Vienna had driven me there, but I felt awkward asking her again, so I took the train. After all, the station and train staff all speak English, and the English of German-speaking people is generally quite easy to understand. For hotels, restaurants and taxis as well, I was sure I could manage.

We reached Sankt Pölten station in forty minutes. While waiting for my transfer to the local train line, I spoke to an old woman. She boasted that Melk Abbey was the most beautiful place in the world. Even her dog barked in agreement.

The local train reached Melk Station in a little under half an hour.

Melk Abbey was perched on a high hill, surrounded by massive rock formations and deep green woods and topped with a high brown roof.

The tall walls that support it were painted in bands of white and yellow which made it look like an impregnable fortress, but the green dome rising out from the center and the two towers located on the Melk River side were clearly decorative elements, and quite superb at that.

The towers were painted a vivid green with tints of white, yellow and blue, and the rounded lines which seemed to flow down from the tips to the clock faces shone golden.

From this sight, I had the impression not of a church or a monastery, but rather something like a palace. In fact, the interior of the chapel was also decorated lavishly with multi-colored marble and gold paint.

All the shapes were made of soft curves, right down to the smallest detail. It was easy to see why this is considered the crown jewel of the Austrian Baroque style.

There's no mistaking that the architects who restored this abbey in the first half of the eighteenth century were trying to build an earthly paradise out of gold and faith. They must have been fueled not by love or admiration, but by pure obsession.

The last time I had stood in the chapel, I was overwhelmed by the golden colors and realized that when human beings are completely surrounded by gold, we go into a trance-like state in which we lose all perception of reality and can only feel the dull weight of our own bodies. I had felt a connection between that state and the concept of pure land, the "paradise" of many Buddhist sects, and wanted to experience that golden magic again.

The history of the abbey goes back to the tenth century, when it is believed troops were first stationed and a temple erected in what is now the central section. All the forts which protected the Mark border region were named after tributaries of the Danube: Enns, Ybbs, Melk, Krems, and so on. The most important was the fort at Melk.

The Babenbergs, rulers of the Duchy of Austria at the time, protected the monks and founded the abbey, which became the stronghold of the Order of Saint Benedict.

In the centuries that followed, as new rulers came and went, the abbey continued to protect the region as its religious center and established itself as a focal point for theological knowledge and art.

Of course, it also underwent its fair share of trials, prime among which was the political and economic upheaval caused by the Reformation. The monks banded with the University of Vienna and actually led the reformation efforts for monasteries, in what came to be known as the Melk Reform.

A particularly interesting point is that at the time, rather than side with the Roman Catholic Pope, Melk Abbey chose to embrace the theories put forth by the University of Vienna's ecumenical council. This resulted in worsened relations with the Vatican, but it is further evidence of the extent to which the abbey prioritized scholastic knowledge and theory.

Of course, these days, science gives us much of our understanding of reality, but back then, the pursuit of the truth was linked to the idea of reading God's thoughts. The monks at Melk were able to hammer out a new research direction based on existing theories, and the abbey became known as an institute on the cutting edge of knowledge, where intellectuals gathered.

It was ravaged by fire countless times.

The winters are cold, and the only source of heat available was fire. The wind that rises from the river to the top of the hill helped fan the flames. The altitude meant that water was in short supply. All these factors made it very easy for the slightest accident to quickly become an inferno.

Fire destroyed the library at the end of the thirteenth century. Hymns, Easter dramas, and many other precious documents from Melk's early history only escaped destruction thanks to the fatal sacrifices of many monks. A writing room existed at the abbey at the time, in which all matter of miniatures were produced and annals were religiously kept; unfortunately, many of these did not survive the blaze.

Even more tragically, in 1736, fire struck just as a team of ornamentalists, sculptors, and plasterers led by Jakob Prandtauer, the best architect of the era, was a step away from finishing a major renovation campaign. Nearly all the rooms and roofs were ruined. Berthold Dietmayr, the abbot at the time, died of a broken heart as the work was restarting, and it was through the efforts of the vice-abbot that the baroque masterpiece we see today was born.

These two great blazes caused a lot of damage, but so did the countless other smaller fires that dot the abbey's history; hence, today, an almost irrational fear of fire inhabits the place.

The priests and monks who dwell there wear long, thick robes to protect against the cold, as they are forbidden from using fire.

This region has a particularly frigid climate. When I had visited in the spring, patches of ice were still floating on the river. This time it was fall, and although remnants of summer light still lit up the sky, the temperature had cooled to around ten degrees centigrade, foreboding the long winter ahead.

A restaurant was open on the cobblestone street which faced the city hall, but there were no customers yet, only a few seniors from the area sipping tea leisurely.

They looked like they were taking a break after finishing the summer's labor, although in their case it may as well have been a lifetime's worth.

The main street was very narrow: the employees at the souvenir shops and cafes on either side could have probably spoken to each other without raising their voices.

The twin towers and green dome of the abbey looked down upon the street: everything that happened in this village was overseen by their stern presence.

As I climbed the gentle slope, I came to a beautiful gate made of a round arch topped by a triangular roof. I could see another similar structure further up the hill. The abbey was truly a sanctuary, so visitors were denied access to the training grounds. The chapel and certain other designated areas were open to the public, but at that instant there was no other man, woman, or child in sight.

When I passed through the first gate, I heard a noise rise up from both sides of the courtyard, like a large flock of birds taking flight. I stepped back only to see dozens of children come running out, pass through the gate, and head down the hill. In an instant, I was alone again.

After I had waved the children off, a monk appeared, probably their teacher. He wore black robes with a white collar.

He walked toward me and smiled, guessing that they had startled me.

"I call that the wind," he said as his eyes narrowed.

"Indeed..." I returned his smile.

"Lower year students from the gymnasium. When they're wearing their robes, I call that the rabbit wind."



I asked him where those robeless rabbits could have gone. He ignored the query and said, "When they get older, they stop running." Something smiled behind his spectacles.

The chosen among them would soon undertake the harsh training of a Benedictine monk, ultimately becoming priests.

After the wind died down, I walked to the next gate in solitude. Everything was silent. Many people inhabited this enormous structure, from the gymnasium students to the monks, yet the air outside was clear, as if it had never been sullied by human breath.

I had always enjoyed the particular atmosphere that inhabits religious sites. Whether they be Christian or Buddhist, silence was valued there. The air penetrated straight to my nerves, like a glass of cool, sharp white wine.

The chapel was similarly inebriating, with an added golden chill. The few motionless believers inside were vastly outnumbered by the statues which looked down serenely upon us, gilded in gold. A faint murmur went through the room, then all was quiet again.

The main altar was covered in marble and gold. Above the tabernacle, Peter and Paul were holding hands and bidding each other farewell, resigned to death. Their bodies, shining golden, were surrounded by the prophets Daniel, Jeremiah, David, Isaiah, and other Old Testament figures, all covered in gold from head to toe. The saints and angels which adorned the walls almost up to the roof all shimmered in the same color. I tensed up.

Peter and Paul died on the same day. Peter was crucified upside down, while Paul, a Roman citizen, was beheaded. On the fresco directly above the main altar, a woman in a crimson mantle wore a crown of thorns, various instruments of torture strewn at her feet. She had endured the torture, and now had almost earned her place among the golden figures. Her blood flowed under their feet.

She reminded me that testing the faith by bruising the flesh was also a part of Christian lore. The screams and torment of countless people must float around that place.

There is a long history all over Europe of churches worshiping body parts, in some cases entire corpses, believed to be those of their patron saints. Saint Coloman was an eleventh century Irish pilgrim who was hung from an elderberry tree at Stockerau, outside Vienna. His undecayed corpse was moved to Melk, and his adorned skeleton still lies on display today inside a glass coffin lined with gold.

As I passed in front of him, I felt a great deal of pity. As if it wasn't enough to die by hanging, his skeleton has been exposed to the eyes of the world for a thousand years...

I stepped out of the chapel and into a long hallway where iron lamps hung from a white ceiling.

Considering the full history of the abbey, it is only recently that these lamps were fitted with light bulbs. When they used oil or candles, they could not have done much more than project vague, blurry shadows.

After climbing some wide stone steps, I proceeded down the hallway leading to an exhibition labeled "The Imperial Rooms." It was in the marble hall that I first laid eyes upon a

fellow sightseer: a young woman wearing a backpack who was examining a painting while reading from a pamphlet.

We exchanged smiles as I walked past her. I felt relieved. Walking through the imperial rooms and the marble hall, I realized that the Habsburgs, the Babenbergs, and all the other rulers of Austria cherished Melk Abbey as a spiritual center. The fact that such garish rooms existed here must mean that the abbey had been seen not only as a place of worship and training, but also a fort and a palace.

It was probably in the Marble Hall that the emperor met with high-ranking clergymen who would convey God's will to him.

I moved on and soon started to feel the wind that comes up from the river.

I came out at the leading edge of an enormous building shaped like a wedge.

I looked down at the village and the river. The sunlight reflecting on the ash green treetops that surround the village looked like a white veil. The surface of the river was moving slowly but continually in one direction.

Further ahead was a section of the abbey distinct from that which contained the Imperial Rooms, and where outsiders were only allowed into the library. The library was even more spectacular than the golden chapel, and was the prime reason I had wanted to visit Melk again.

Upon pushing open the massive door, I was hit not with a golden gleam like in the chapel, but rather a mass of heavy, humid, unbreathable air.

All four walls were densely packed with leather-bound volumes all the way up to the roof, except for a few narrow windows on the left and right. The books had gold painted designs and characters inscribed on the spines, but the weight of hundreds of years had left the paint dull and dim.

The vast majority of these had been transcribed by hand, and I could feel the human energy contained within them. Rather than a pile of old, dead books, I saw an amalgamation of voices, sighs and sweat overflowing with power.

What had been that sensation that came down upon me the last time I stood at the center of that room? Whatever it was, I wanted to experience it again.

I suppose if I had to put it into words, it would probably be insignificance.

Or astonishment at the things human beings can accomplish.

A ninth century hand-written volume titled "Admonition" and tenth and eleventh century Virgil manuscripts both reside there. In the twelfth century, treatises by Saint Jerome were transcribed there. The Benedictine Canon, the Bible, countless legal and theological treatises, even the oldest known work of female literature in German ("Das Leben Jesu" by Frau Ava): they can all be found there. Roughly two thirds of the manuscripts are from the fifteenth century, but some of them have never even been examined. In 1997, Dr. Christine Glassner caused quite a sensation when she found an extract of "The Song of the Nibelungs," an epic which originated around the year 1300, in a manuscript from the late Middle Ages.

The library houses around 100,000 books in all, including a great many from the early days of printing: 1,700 from the sixteenth century, 4,500 from the seventeenth, and 18,000 from the eighteenth.

Of course, an individual could only ever examine a small fraction of that total, and for someone like me who reads neither Latin nor German, there wasn't much to do but look at the modest explanations for the various sections (theology, law, earth science, astronomy, ...) and try to guess the contents of individual books.

Still, a transcribed volume which had been laid out on a stand took my breath away. Every single letter had been traced beautifully, with love. I couldn't understand the meaning of the sentences, but what I did understand was how precious the written word was. I wondered if *it* had been the object of all those prayers...

Now that I think about it, transcription is also done in Buddhism. I suppose that writing a word or character repetitively, without thinking about its meaning, can be a religious act.

After all, the monks who made these manuscripts pursued this excessive labor in order to get closer to God. Their hundreds of years of prayers were literally condensed into these hundred thousand books.

I felt like something was trying to forcibly enter my body through my mouth, my skin. Inside this room with its dense atmosphere, my life was as fragile as a feather.

When I walked up to the window, I sensed someone's presence behind me.

Under the overwhelming pressure of the books and their hundreds of years of characters and words and prayers, I only felt a slight tingling on the back of my neck, but there was no mistaking it - this was a real flesh and blood person.

I turned around and saw an old man who had passed slowly behind me and was now coming back around. He was wearing a brown sweater. The books' presence was so strong that I hadn't noticed, but there were two other people in the room: a woman and a monk whose long-hemmed robes were held at the waist.

The old man slowly came over and looked up at the top of the window.

His round face was inscribed with wrinkles and the skin covering his neck drooped, but his eyes were keen, bloodshot, seeming to flow in and out of melancholy. I was taken aback.

He noticed my expression and let out a timid laugh.

The library was an old building, so its windows were few and longer on the vertical. The light that streamed in through them was very faint, so the old man must have perceived me only as a silhouette. However, as I was looking back at him, I could see every detail of his squinted eyes, every individual eyelash.

He looked up at the window again and mumbled something I couldn't catch. As I tried to walk past him away from the window, he addressed me in English.

"... My wife is up there," I thought I heard him say as he pointed at the portion of wall above the window.

"Your wife?"

I thought he might be senile.

The monk came over and shook the old man's hand, then disappeared into a back room. I sensed he had some affection for the old man, like they were friends or at least knew each other.

I stepped away from the window and looked up at the wall where the old man was staring.

I made out a vague drawing, like a flower vase or some kind of design. It had badly deteriorated over the hundreds of years, and I could not discern the details as I was staring into the light.

"Isn't that a flower vase?"

"Does it look like a vase?"

"Well, it is a vase."

"Behind that, you don't see a woman wearing a red dress?"

I focused my eyes, and a figure rose to the surface.

"Yes, I can see her."

"That's my wife."

I thought I had better get away from this eccentric.

"Ask anyone here at the abbey and they'll tell you that's a painting Rosenstahl made of a scholar from the Order. But if you look very closely, you can see it's a woman. I saw her right away, and fell in love with her. That was a long time ago..."

"But... It's a flower vase."

"The vase is a secco Johann Bergl painted to cover up the woman. They tried to cover her up, but my darling wouldn't take it and starting showing her face from behind the vase."

"... What's a secco?"

"Rosenstahl painted his fresco on a wet wall. A secco is when the painter paints on a dry wall. But the original fresco was stronger! It's been rising up all these years under the secco vase, so right now they're about even. In a hundred years they'll be totally reversed! Isn't it amusing? If you try to paint an inanimate object over a living human, it just doesn't work!"

"And that's... your wife."

"Yes that's right."

"Your madonna?"

"I married her, you know. She came down out of that wall and was looking outside just like you're doing now. Only the vase remained on the wall. She came to live with me and died four years ago. Now, she's back in there."

As I listened to him, the woman's image became clearer. Indeed, it looked much more like a woman wearing a red dress than a scholar now.

"I own a place near here," he said as he took out a small card from his pocket.

On it was the name of a restaurant and a map indicating its location.

"You are Japanese?"

"Yes."

"Came from Vienna?"

"By train, from the western station."

"Then you didn't pass through Krems. If you had come by car, you would have definitely seen my restaurant. There's a famous Austrian wine called Jamek, we're near their winery, the restaurant with the jackdaw sign."

A drawing of the hooded crow also adorned the card he had given me.

I mentioned I had come to Melk by car on a previous trip.

"This window is... special. If you're not in a hurry, please come and have lunch at my restaurant. It's twenty minutes away by car."

"Are you sure? I didn't come out from that wall, you know..."

We both laughed. I decided to trust him. The fact that he walked with a cane definitely helped.

We started walking toward the parking lot. His name was Peter, and he drove to Melk every day to see his wife.

The parking lot was a wide space at the top of a flight of stairs. I told him that it must be harsh going up and down those steps every day, but he simply replied that his wife had returned here, so it couldn't be helped.

He drove a German luxury sedan that had been adapted for his handicap.

In the darkened library, he had looked around seventy, but now that we were outside, I could see he was clearly much older.

"Who's minding the restaurant today?"

"I only work when I feel like it. Right now, my son's in charge. He used to be the head sommelier for the Jamek Winery, but my legs got bad, so now I'm passing the torch on to him."

I trusted him more.

After Melk River empties into the Danube, it flows eastward. I had vague memories of the road along the Danube and the trees that lined it. We were right in the middle of the foliage season, and dead leaves danced on the paved road. Space between bare branches was filled in by sunlight reflecting off the surface of the river. It was one of those peaceful autumn landscapes that will probably be identical in a million years.

The Jackdaw was located in a cozy house whose front lawn had been converted to a parking lot. The bird on the sign did indeed stand out, but it looked more like a black pigeon with a grey stripe running diagonally down at the shoulders than a member of the crow family. I told Peter I had never seen any in Japan. He explained that they were commonly found just about anywhere in the region.

Behind the restaurant, the mountains shone bright yellow from the grapevine foliage. Peter told me his restaurant served homemade wine. "Even better than the Jameks. My son says so, so there's no doubt about it," he added under his breath.

I suddenly realized how hungry I was. I hadn't eaten anything since the bread roll and ham on the train.

There were a few other groups in the restaurant, probably all stopped on the way to Melk. It was very cozy, only five tables covered with white linens and decorated with flowers. The base of the flower vases was decorated with yellowed wine leaves. The smell of bread and cheese brought up my spirits.

Peter introduced me to a young chef wearing an apron. He was a slender man with large eyes.

"This is my son."

As he was being introduced, I noticed a peculiar emotion rise up in the chef's eyes, like he was squinting in the sunshine looking at a distant haze.

"... Did you meet the lady of the wall?"

"Yes, I heard all about how she's stronger than the flower vase. Peter's wife, right?"

I wanted to see how he would react, but he just smiled and did not answer.

The young chef looked somehow Arabic, with his black eyes and lustrous hair. Not only did he not resemble his father, he looked like a product of a different continent.

I started to wonder why Peter would lie about such a thing, but decided that it did not matter. There seemed to be an intimacy between them, a kind of mutual trust or leniency, and after all, Peter's claim of owning a restaurant had also been truthful.

The main course that day was trout meuniere served with a fragrant sauce containing white wine and herbs blended with a variety of apple which is known for its high acidity and only available around Krems. The sauce gave a nice tangy flavor to the pure white flesh of the fish.

Peter drizzled some grapeseed oil on his trout. He recommended I try it as well, but I turned him down. Apparently, it has a slightly bitter flavor. The bread was also made in-house: it had a firm crust and a moist, chewy center. Everything had been prepared by the young chef.

"He is truly an amazing chef, but Peter, I really can't see the family resemblance. I suppose he takes after his mother from the wall."

"Coco."

The old man's eyes relaxed.

"Was that your wife's name?"

"Coco in her red dress..."

"The woman in the painting? Or is Coco your wife?"

The chef, whose work in the kitchen was easing up, fetched a photo of a woman from a small frame and laid it on the table cloth.

"This is his wife."

She was an ordinary woman, if a bit provincial, wearing not red but old-fashioned Tyrolean clothes. I guess the chef was not Peter's son after all. His manner was not that of a man showing off a photo of his own mother.

When Peter left for the washroom, I called the chef over and asked him.

"Are you really his son?"

The chef only shrugged.

"Peter will ask you to go for a walk in the vineyards. Please go with him and listen to his stories... Think of it as payment for the meal. Peter was the chef of this restaurant for a very long time. After he lost his wife, I took over. She was a wonderful woman, and for many years they took care of The Jackdaw together. It was her that suggested the name."

"Yes, he told me how she came down from the wall, and then went back in after she died."

"You know, that was a big scandal at the abbey."

His eyes were filled with half mischief, half sympathy.

At that moment Peter returned, and the chef wandered off.

Peter and I exited the restaurant and started walking toward the vineyard that stretched out in back.

From a distance it seemed a uniform yellow plane, but the different varieties of grapes led to subtle variations in hue.

One sort in particular was slightly taller than the others and had a few green leaves mixed in. Upon closer inspection, I found clusters of green fruit hanging off the vines, ripe but with a firm skin. On their left, on a lower rack, some of the plants had already been harvested and were now withering away, their golden leaves taking on a reddish tinge.

Peter walked along slowly with his cane. I matched my pace to his.

He explained that the leaves of vines that produce red grapes have some red mixed in with the green, and all about the characteristics of the wines one could make from the different varieties of grapes.

"This one, that's the house wine you drank with lunch. It's a very robust breed, so it doesn't require much maintenance. When a cold wind blows in from over that hill and shakes the leaves, that's when you can really see the strength and flexibility of these branches."

"When do all the leaves fall off?"

"Another month or so, I'd say. Those black branches will tangle together under the snow in order to withstand the cold winds. If only my wife had been so sturdy."

The narrow trail split into countless branches as we went up the hillside. All this zig-zagging probably looked like we had gotten lost in the golden forest.

Even on the farm road used by the tractors at harvest time, everything was still. At a fork in the road, I found a small shrine, simply a triangular roof over a crucifix; it felt out of place. The wind and rain had stripped away most of the paint, but thanks to the roof, the blood trickling down from the crown of thorns still looked vivid.

Even as the path twisted to and fro, the vines on each side had been planted in straight lines. A belt of green grass separated them; it was probably needed by the machinery at harvest time.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Bathed by the abundant sunlight, the vines, whether loaded with ripe fruit or bare and skeletal, were sharing a last golden dream.

But this was too beautiful, and things that are too beautiful are scary. The golden chapel in Melk was scary, and so was the golden lettering on the books covering the walls of the library.

And this infirm old man, slowly making his way through the golden vineyard...

My legs slowed down.



Were his legs really crippled? Did he really need that cane?

The trout started to swim at the bottom of my stomach.

When would he stop walking? For the last few minutes he had been silent.

The vines around us were of a different variety now; their leaves bore subtle notes of crimson.

Peter veered off the paved road and into the field. The ground was soft, but not so soft that our shoes sank.

"Where are we going?"

My voice was noticeably tense.

He just kept walking.

Walls of red and yellow leaves stretched ahead on either side of us. At the dead end, I could see a stone wall. It looked so far, I never thought we could make it there. The trout in my stomach flopped around. I was thankful for the meal, but as they say, there is no such thing as a free lunch. To turn around and go back at this point, I would need a good reason. I searched desperately. The back of Peter's head glistened with sweat.

He stopped.

The vines had been cleared there, and a long bench laid out.

He stood his cane between his knees, sat down and exhaled deeply.

I also sat down, leaving some space between us. So this had been his destination. This was where I would have to repay him for the meal.

I could see black fruit clumps under the red and yellow leaves of the vines around us. They were rotting, and emitted a sweet fragrance. I hadn't noticed while we were walking, but the smell made it hard to breathe. That heavy smell, somewhere between ripe and rotten, mixed with the vapors of the earth and grass and wrapped itself around our bodies.

"Are those grapes rotten?"

"... Bacteria have started breaking them down as they dry out. See, there's some white stuff on there. In a little while, they'll change from red to gray; that's when they're sweetest, and when we pick them."

"Ah, is that what they call noble rot wine?"

"If it doesn't rot, it won't become sweet."

As if he guessed my nervousness, he fiddled with his cane.

"... Do you take everyone you meet in the library to this place?"

"Only the women. And only if they stand by the window... just like Coco did..."

"Like they came out of the wall?"

"No one believed me. They all said it was a man painted behind the vase, everyone at the abbey. They looked at me like I was a heretic."

He struck the ground with his cane. It dug in. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes bloodshot. He looked just like when I had met him in the library. His eyes leapt from the golden vineyard, pierced a distant void.

"... Maybe," I started in a low voice.

"I was a monk. That window showed me a new world. That window, you know... It helped monks escape to the outside for hundreds of years. Can you imagine how many monks that woman seduced? It was forbidden to use fire in the library. There were no heaters, no candles, so everyone read by the band of light that came in through the window. It was also forbidden to take out books, so transcription was also done by the window. Many of the monks died young, from the cold and tuberculosis. I was dying too, you know, but then a woman came down out of the wall and stood by the window. It was Coco, she was wearing her red dress. Ah, she saved me, she really saved me."

The cool, heavy air of the library wafted back into my mind. I was Coco, standing by the window, a skinny, pale-faced boy before me. His eyes were full of the exhaustion of training, desperate for human warmth, barely alive but in love.

The youth's long, black robes were tied with a string at the waist. His collar was white and stiff; a cross adorned his chest. This Benedictine monk, moved by my body, feared the changes occurring inside his own...

"What happened then?"

He opened his mouth slowly.

"Nothing. I'm always with her."

"She died, and returned to the wall to hide behind the flower vase."

"But her body sleeps here."

"Where?"

"Here."

He pointed to the ground beneath the bench.

A wind rose up from the bottom of the earth. My body swayed in the dank fragrance of rotting grapes.

He was lying. No, but it had to be true. The red vine leaves around this bench were so beautiful, their grapes rotting away while fighting the force of gravity.

"What a nice story."

My voice cracked. Even Coco in the ground could probably hear the sound of my heartbeat.

A shadow passed over my head and settled on a nearby vine, shaking a few leaves.

The old man cleared his throat. A black bird flew out from between the leaves and settled on the grass. It then moved toward us with precaution. It had a gray stripe.

Peter picked a grape from a vine next to him and threw it. The jackdaw ran over, gobbled it up, then ran back just as quickly.

"The grapes on this vine are particularly sweet. Do you want to try one?"

This time he wrenched off an entire bunch. The grapes were half dried and had congealed into a grayish purple mass.

"... See, can you smell that?"

He held the bunch up in front of my nose.

The grapes did not look like fruit anymore, they had a mind of their own. The smell was like an animal's breath. An offensive mass of air crept onto my face.

Peter's white hair was now almost touching me. The life form dangled between our faces.

I took a whiff, then picked a grape whose surface was free of mold and popped it into my mouth. Peter said that wasn't enough, so I tried one that was decaying. The taste was not as sweet as I had anticipated, but it left a sharp numbness on the tip of my tongue.

"That was the color..."

I was sure of it.

"... The woman in the painting, that was the color she wore..."

I distinctly remembered the color, a deep shade somewhere between red and black. Tears welled up in the old man's eyes.

"Thank you for the meal. I'm very glad I met you. You two are a wonderful couple."

I had reached my limit. I stood up and started walking.

He stayed behind on the bench, immobile.

At the fork in the road, I saw the crucifix again. The figure nailed to the cross was the Genius of the vineyard.

I wondered what Christ called out when a former monk who forsake his training for a woman passed by. The young chef had called it "quite a scandal", but Coco's photo somehow

was not suited to scandals. She had looked like a plain old, dime-a-dozen country girl who had simply grown old.

When I made it back to the restaurant, the chef was outside, saying good-bye to some acquaintances.

"Peter's in the vineyard with Coco."

He nodded, having guessed what had happened. I asked the middle-aged couple for a lift to Sankt Pölten.

I got in the car, still rolling that numbness around in my mouth.

## The Golden Land

Long ago, when I first visited Melk, I was traveling by car. It was early spring and a faint, glimmering moon hung in the sky above the forest running like a fortress along the Danube River. The sky was still only smudged with indigo, as if it were reluctant to give in to the night, and, as we headed back to Vienna, it seemed that the pale moon was chasing us, gliding along the ridge of the mountains.

I'll come again, I promised that moon.

In October, I kept my word and boarded the train at West Vienna Station. Another Japanese woman studying at the University of Vienna had driven me to Melk on my first trip but I was reluctant to ask her again.

And, by then, I'd learned to travel alone in Austria. The station attendants and the staff on the trains speak English. Best of all, Germans speaking English are easy to understand so I could get by in restaurants and hotels, and whenever I needed to take a taxi.

Unlike the first time I'd traveled to Melk, it was autumn. The air was crisp and clear.

It took me forty minutes to arrive in Saint Polten and, while I was waiting to transfer to the local train, I chatted with an old lady traveling with her little dog. She boasted that Melk had the most beautiful abbey in the world and, with an ear-piercing yip, it seemed even her dog agreed.

Then, in a little under thirty minutes, the local train arrived at Melk Station.

High on the hill, Melk Abbey spreads its dark roof across the sky. The stones and deep green of the forest seem to follow in its wake like clouds.

The high walls under its roof are painted in yellow and white stripes. They're solid enough for a fortress but the green dome rising at their center and the two towers that stand beside the Melk River look purely decorative. The white and yellow of the two towers and the smoky green patina of the domes that top them are brilliant. Their lines shine golden as they curve down to the dials of the two clocks that front the towers.

This part of the Abbey looks more like a palace than a religious center. The lavish use of marble and gold inside the church reinforces this impression. And everything, even the detail work, forms flowing curves. It's easy to see why they say that Melk Abbey is the greatest treasure of the Austrian Baroque.

The people who designed the current abbey in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century spent enormous amounts of money in their religious fervor. It's as if they were trying to build a heaven on earth on that hill. Obsession seems like a better explanation than love or religious devotion for all the passion and energy they expended.

The first time I'd stood inside the church, I'd been overpowered by the gold. I'd thought that perhaps, when people are surrounded by that much gold, it does something to their sense of reality. I'd felt like I was floating and it had occurred to me that the sensation was similar to that experienced by the followers of Pure Land Buddhism when they stand before the golden statue of Amida Buddha.

Later, I'd dreamed of feeling that golden magic flow through my body again.

The history of Melk began in the Era of Fortresses, around the 10<sup>th</sup> century, long before the Abbey shone in its current Baroque beauty. At first, they say, an army was stationed in the central area and then a chapel was constructed on the site. The fortresses that protected the remote regions called *marks* were later named after the branches of the Danube River: Enns, Ybbs, Melk, and Krems. The most important of these was Melk.

The ruling family in the area at that time was the House of Babenberg. They were the patrons of the Benedictines, a contemplative order of monks, and they founded the Abbey at Melk to serve as the Benedictines' religious center. Later, even when the rulers and the times changed, Melk Abbey not only continued to maintain and protect its status as a religious center but, to this day, it has continued to be a respected seat of theological learning and art.

With such a long history, of course Melk Abbey has endured a number of crises. One of these was the political and economic turmoil that resulted from the Catholic Reformation. Melk aligned itself with the University of Vienna and took a leading role in the transformation of monastic life known as the Melk Reforms.

It's interesting that the Benedictines at Melk chose to side with the ecumenicalism of the University of Vienna rather than with the Pope because this led to a deterioration in the relationship between the Abbey and the Vatican. The Benedictines at Melk put a priority on knowledge based on the intellect; in short, they chose learning over the Pope.

Today we believe that science holds the key to knowledge but, at that time, discovering the truth meant understanding the meaning of God's words. The fact that the Benedictines were able to come up with a new framework for learning based on logic put them on the cutting edge of "academics." The modern definition of intellectualism was forming at Melk Abbey.

The Abbey also suffered a number of fires. The area is so cold that the monks had no choice but to build fires for heat. Small accidents had the potential to become disastrous because the winds blowing up from the river fanned the flames on the hill and, since the monastery is high above the river, there was no way to get enough water up to extinguish them.

The library was destroyed in a fire at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Thanks to the monks' selfless courage, valuable early works including books of sacred music and transcriptions of the Easter Drama escaped being burned; however, there's also a scriptorium in the monastery, where the monks worked long and hard at their chronicles and illuminations and much of that work was lost.

The fire of 1736 was even more tragic. Artisans, fresco artists and sculptors working under the direction of Jakob Prandtauer, the most skilled architect of the time, had almost completed their painstaking work on the Abbey when fire destroyed most of the roof and many of the decorated rooms only shortly before they were completed. Although Berthold Dietmayr, the Abbot of Melk at that time, strongly advocated rebuilding, he died disappointed. It was the Prior who succeeded him who was responsible for turning Melk Abbey into the jewel of the Baroque it's considered to be today.

These two disasters caused heavy damage but, although they didn't cause as much destruction, there were several smaller fires. As a result, everyone in the Abbey grew almost pathologically afraid of fire. It may be that the priests and monks began to wear their long skirted robes and wide sleeves as a way to protect themselves from the cold in lives denied heat.

This area is colder than most in Europe and, when I'd visited in the spring, there was still ice on the Melk River. In October, the sky shone with a beautiful light, the afterglow of summer, but the temperature had already dropped to around 50 degrees, foreshadowing the long winter to come.

The caf  s beside the narrow cobblestone street that runs in front of City Hall were open. The chairs were outside and the tables were still spread with their cloths but there were almost no customers left. Only the older locals sat comfortably drinking tea. It was as if they'd finished their work – maybe for the summer, maybe for the year or maybe for the rest of their lives – and were finally able to relax. And, even though we were on a main street, it was so narrow that the people in the caf  s and souvenir shops on either side could talk to each other without raising their voices.

Gazing down on us were the two towers and the green dome of the Abbey. In this town, the Abbey watches over everyone, overseeing every life.

When I climbed up the gentle slope to the Abbey, a beautiful arched gateway with a triangular roof welcomed me. A similar gateway was visible further ahead. The monastery actually is further inside the Abbey. Visitors aren't allowed to enter it but they are allowed into the chapel of the church and certain other areas. On this day, however, there was no one else in sight.

But just before I went through the first gate, I heard a sound from either side of the courtyard, as if flocks of birds had taken wing. I stepped back. Not birds, but children. They suddenly streamed out, running through the gate and sprinting down the flagstone path that ran down the slope. In a moment, I was alone again.

And then a man appeared. He was dressed in black, wearing a white collar. He seemed to be a teacher. From his expression I could see that he knew I'd been startled.

He came over and greeted me with a smile. "We call them 'the Hurricane.'" His eyes were warm.

I returned his smile. "I can see why."

"They're in the lower grades in the school. When they're dressed in their choir robes, we call them 'the Hurricane of White Rabbits.'"

I wondered where the rabbits who'd just rushed past me in street clothes had gone.

"When they're in the higher grades, they'll stop running." Behind his glasses, his eyes were smiling.

And then, I thought, perhaps some of them will continue their training and become Benedictine priests.

In the calm left by the passing of the Hurricane, I continued walking to the next gate. It was quiet. A number of people, including pupils and monks, are inside the vast Abbey every day. Many of them live in dormitories there but the air around me was as pure as if it had never been polluted by human breath.

In religious places, both Christian and Buddhist, a high value is put on quiet and tranquility. I love that atmosphere. It seems to sink into my lungs and move through my spirit like the essence of chilled white wine.

Inside the chapel of the church, the fresh, cool feeling of the gold blended with that wine, intoxicating me. There were a few worshippers sitting unmoving in the pews, but they were far outnumbered by the gilded statues that gazed down at me with all the forgiveness

and calm you'd expect from the inhabitants of heaven. At first, I thought I heard the sound of murmuring but the chapel soon sank back into silence.

The high altar is decorated with even more marble and gold, and, directly above it, are the statues of Peter and Paul. They reach for each other's hands, as if they're reluctant to part or maybe as if they're encouraging each other to accept death. Their bodies are covered in gold and the statues of the Old Testament prophets like Daniel, Jeremiah, David and Isaiah ranged around them are also golden. The saints and angels up near the ceiling all shine with the same color.

But I felt myself recoil a little. I suspected that all their splendor was designed to serve as a distraction.

Peter and Paul were executed on the same day. Peter was crucified upside down, and Paul, a Roman citizen, was beheaded. A fresco on the main altar shows a woman in a deep red cape wearing a crown of thorns. Instruments of torture are scattered at her feet. Doubtless, she endured torture to achieve her sainthood.

Under all this gold runs a river of blood. No matter how splendid and shining Christianity appears, it tests the spirit by tearing the flesh. Anguish and the screams of the tortured fill the air.

When martyrs ascend to sainthood, they're adopted as the patron saints of churches that venerate their bodies or even pieces of them. This custom exists everywhere in Europe, including at Melk. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Abbey took in the uncorrupted body of St. Coloman, an Irish pilgrim who was hung from an elder tree. Now the Saint's costumed skeleton lies in a glass case that's edged in gold. When I passed in front of it, I felt pity for him. He was hung from a tree and, a thousand years later, his bones were still on public display.

I left the chapel, then walked down a long corridor with an iron lamp hanging from its white ceiling. In the long history of Melk, that iron light fixture has only very recently held a light bulb. In the past, I imagine, lamp oil and candles caused the figures of those who walked here to appear only as shadows.

I climbed up a flight of wide, stone stairs then walked further down a corridor past a sign that marked the Imperial Rooms. In the Marble Hall, for the first time since I'd entered the building, I saw another tourist, a young woman wearing a backpack. She held what looked like a guide book and was comparing a page in it to a picture on the wall. When I passed her, we exchanged smiles. I was relieved not to be alone.

In both the Marble Hall and the Imperial Rooms, you can clearly see that the ruling families of Austria, the House of Hapsburg and the House of Babenberg, put a high value on Melk as their spiritual base. Melk was a place for adoration and religious training and, at the same time, it served as a fortress and a palace. In the Marble Hall, the emperors possibly met with the prelates who passed God's messages on to them.

Advancing further, I suddenly felt the wind from the Melk River. I'd reached the top edge of the vast A-shaped complex. Below me, I could see the water, the town that I'd climbed up from and the ashy green leaves of the trees surrounding them both. Everything was shimmering softly as if the landscape were veiled by the sun that shone almost overhead. When I looked carefully, I could even see the steady current on the surface of the river.

Off to the side, away from the rooms used by the Emperor, is the section of the Abbey that looks more monastic. Outsiders are prohibited from entering any rooms there but the library. That room was more fascinating to me than the shining golden chapel. The real reason I'd wanted to return to Melk was to visit the library once again.



When I pushed open the heavy door, the dank, solemn atmosphere that had accumulated in the room felt totally different from the shining air of the chapel.

The library is a long rectangle and, except for the narrow windows on the left and right, it's covered from floor to ceiling by leather bound books. On all of their covers, the designs and letters are drawn in gold but the color has been dulled and darkened by the weight of the hundreds of years the books have been there. They almost seem to be mountains of corpses.

But most of the books were transcribed by hand and so they're full of an enormous amount of human energy. Looking at them that way, they aren't corpses at all; rather, they overflow with power. They're a massive collection of voices, sighs and effort.

When I'd stood in the center of this room the last time I visited, I'd wondered at the emotion that had washed over me and I wanted to experience it one more time. If I put it into words now, it doesn't sound all that special.

The library overwhelmed me with the incredible feats human beings have accomplished.

There's the "Book of Admonitions" from the 9<sup>th</sup> century and from the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, transcriptions of Vergilius. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the commentaries of Hieronymus were transcribed here. There are copies of commentaries on the Rule of St. Benedict and of the Bible, law documents and theology books. But there's even more. The library's collection also includes a copy of the "Life of Jesus" by Ava, the earliest female author writing in German.

They say that two thirds of all the transcribed books in the library are from the 15<sup>th</sup> century but that not all of their sections have been opened. Recently, actually in 1997, Dr. Christine Glassner was examining books transcribed in the later period of the Middle Ages when she discovered a fragment of the "Song of the Nibelungs" dating from around the 1300's carefully inserted into one of them. Her discovery caused a huge sensation among academics.

In addition to the transcribed books, the earliest printed books, the *incunabula*, are also part of the collection. There are 1,700 from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, 4,500 from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the number increased significantly to 18,000. In total, there are 100,000 books stored in the library.

Since I don't understand Latin or German, I could identify only the subjects of some of the books, guessing whether they were about theology, the law, geology or astronomy from the brief descriptions provided by the Abbey. Even so, a beautifully transcribed book lying on an exhibition table had a breathtaking impact. Each letter was a symbol of love; even the pen strokes beautifully expressed that love. I didn't understand the meaning of the sentences but I could feel how precious each letter was. Each one represented a prayer.

I know that Buddhists transcribe sutras. Even without perfectly understanding the meaning of a sutra, transcribing each of the characters that forms it is a religious act in itself. The monks who transcribed these books also took on their enormous task in order to get closer to their god.

Several hundreds of years of prayers are compressed into the hundred thousand books in Melk's library.

That knowledge forced itself through my skin, into my breath, into me. In the charged atmosphere, my own small life seemed as frail as a feather.

When I walked closer to the window, I sensed another's presence. I became conscious that the pressure I felt from the books was now mingled with the feeling that someone else was near. Even through the hundreds of years of accumulated letters, words and prayers in the library, I knew another human being was standing behind me.

When I looked back, a figure passed me slowly and then turned. An old man in a brown sweater. Because the books so dominated the library, I hadn't noticed before that there were also a woman and a monk in the room with us.

The old man walked slowly to the place by the window where I was standing and looked up. Deep lines were carved in his round face and the skin under his chin hung slack but I was startled by his eyes. They were bloodshot but sharp. It was the sorrow that welled in them that most struck me.

He seemed to notice my reaction to him and smiled hesitantly.

Because it's an old building, there aren't many windows and their shape is long and narrow. They don't admit much sunlight and, to the old man, I was probably only a silhouette against the window. From my point of view, I could see every eyelash as he squinted his eyes against the light.

When he returned his gaze to the area over the window, he murmured something I didn't understand. I turned from the window and was about to pass him when he spoke to me in English.

"My wife is there," he said clearly. He was pointing at the wall above the window.

"Your wife?" Is he crazy? I wondered.

The monk came up to the old man and shook his hand, then left to an inner room. From his demeanor, I sensed affection for the old man. It seemed they were friends or at least acquaintances.

I stepped back from the window and gazed up at the wall where the old man was looking.

There was a painting. It was unclear whether it was a vase or some sort of design. Not only was it faded from the hundreds of years it had been there but the backlight made it difficult to make out.

"It's a vase, isn't it?"

"Do you see a vase?"

"I think so."

"Under that, can you see a woman dressed in red?"

I stared up. Gradually, I was able to make out what might have been a human figure. "Yes, I see what you mean."

"That's my wife."

Just walk away, I told myself.

"The people in the monastery all say that it's a Benedictine scholar painted by Rosenthal. But if you look at it carefully, you'll see that it's a woman. The first time I saw her, I knew she was a woman. And, at that moment, I fell in love." He paused and added, "That was a very long time ago."

"But it looks more like a vase to me."

“Johann Bergl covered the woman with the *fresco secco* of a vase. He painted over her but my wife wouldn’t put up with that. She came out from behind the vase.”

“What’s a *fresco secco*?”

“Rosenthal painted his fresco on wet plaster. If you add the word *secco*, it means that the paint’s applied to dry plaster. But the traditional fresco is stronger. Over time, she’s emerging from under the vase painted on the dry wall. Now she’s pushing through its surface. In another hundred years or so, the order will reverse. Funny, isn’t it? Flesh and blood always win over an inanimate object. It doesn’t even matter if you’ve tried to imprison her in a wall.”

“So you say that’s your *wife*?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I married her. She came down from that wall and was standing looking out from this window, just like you were doing. And then only the vase was left on the wall. She lived with me until she died four years ago. Then she returned here.”

As he spoke, the figure became clearer to me. I could now see it wasn’t a male scholar. It was a woman in dark red.

The old man took a business card from his pocket. “I own this place.” On the card was the name of a restaurant and a map. “Are you Japanese?”

“Yes.”

“Did you travel here from Vienna?”

“I took the train from West Station.”

“Then you didn’t pass Krems. If you’d driven through Krems, you would have seen my restaurant. There’s a famous Austrian wine named Jamek. My restaurant’s very close to the winery. There’s a sign hanging out front with the picture of a hooded crow on it.”

There was also a hooded crow on his business card.

He owns a business. Maybe he’s all right after all, I thought.

I told him that when I’d traveled to Melk before, I’d driven down that road.

“This window is very special to me,” he said. “So if you’re not in a hurry, please come have lunch at my restaurant. It’s only twenty minutes from here.”

“As long as you know I’m not the woman who came down from the wall,” I said and then we both laughed.

Because of that laugh, I decided to trust him. The fact that he needed a cane added to my sense of security.

As we walked to the parking lot, I learned that his name was Peder and that he drove to Melk every day to meet his “wife.” The parking lot is in an open plaza below the Abbey. We had to climb down stairs and I commented that it was probably difficult for him to go up and down with his cane.

He told me that since his wife had returned to the Abbey, he had no choice.

In the dim library, he’d looked around seventy but, in the bright parking lot, it was clear that he was much older.

“Who’s running the restaurant today?” I asked him. We got in his car, an expensive German make that had been modified for use by a disabled person.

“I work when I feel like it. I’ve turned the restaurant over to my son. He was the chief wine steward at Jamek but, when my leg got bad, I passed the torch to him.”

He had a family. My trust in Peder grew.

The Melk River joins the Danube and runs to the east. The boulevard along the Danube and the trees lining it looked familiar to me. Fallen leaves were dancing in the street. Some of the trees were already bare but the bright surface of the river filled their empty branches, giving the autumn scenery a peaceful, unchanging look.

The Hooded Crow restaurant was small and there was a parking lot in the front yard but the sign was easy to spot from the road. The bird on the sign looked more like a black pigeon than a crow. There was an ashy band slanting down its shoulder. When I mentioned to Peder that I’d never seen the bird in Japan, he explained that it was common locally.

The entire mountain behind the restaurant was painted in pure yellow from the autumn grape leaves.

Peder told me that they served homemade wine at his restaurant, adding in a quiet voice, “And it’s tastier than Jamek. That’s what my son says so it must be true.”

Suddenly, I felt hungry. All I’d eaten that day was ham sandwiched in an Austrian bread roll, a *semmel*, that I’d gotten on the train.

There were a few customers in the restaurant. They looked to me like people who’d dropped in on their way to Melk. It was a family style place with only five tables covered in white tablecloths. Each table was decorated with a vase of flowers resting on a yellow grape leaf. The smell of fresh bread and melting cheese was wonderful.

Peder introduced a skinny young man, wearing a chef’s apron.

“This is my son.”

A strange expression came over the young man’s face, as if he were squinting against the sunshine, trying to see some far away point through a glaze of heat.

“Have you met the woman on the wall?” he asked me.

“Yes, I also heard that the woman’s stronger than the vase. And that she’s his wife.” I wanted to see what his reaction would be but he only gave me a bland smile.

The young chef’s big eyes and glossy hair were as black as an Arab’s. He not only didn’t look at all like Peder, he didn’t even look Austrian. I felt another twinge of doubt about Peder but I dismissed it. There seemed to me to be a close bond of forgiveness and trust between the two men. I decided that it was probably true, at least, that Peder owned the restaurant.

The main course of the lunch we were served was a flavorful trout meuniere with a white wine sauce. The wine, the herbs and the acidic green apples grown only in the area around Krems were nicely blended in the sauce. It added a rich taste to the clean, white meat of the fish.

Peder poured grape oil on his trout and recommended I do the same. I declined. I’d heard that the oil, made from pressing grape seeds, was a little bitter. The bread was homemade. The crust was firm but inside it was so moist that, the more I chewed, the more flavor filled my mouth. Peder told me that the young chef cooked everything himself.

“He’s a wonderful cook,” I said. “But I have to tell you, he doesn’t look like you at all. Maybe he looks more like the woman on the wall?”

“Coco.” The old man’s eyes warmed.

“Your wife?”

“Red gowned Coco.”

“The woman in the fresco? Or your wife?”

Maybe the chef overheard our conversation. His work had quieted down and he brought over a small, framed photo of a woman and placed it on the table.

“This is his wife,” he said.

The woman in the photo wasn’t in red. She looked like an ordinary country woman wearing Tyrolean folk dress. The chef had used the words ‘his wife’ – a strange way to refer to one’s mother.

He isn’t Peder’s son after all, I thought.

When Peder stood up to go to the bathroom, I called the chef over. “Is he really your father?”

He only shrugged. “He’ll probably want to take you to the vineyard. Please go with him and listen to his story. You can think of it as payment for the lunch. Peder was the chef here for a long time. I took it on after he lost his wife. She was as wonderful as he is. They ran the Hooded Crow for a long time. In fact, I believe she’s the one who gave the restaurant its name.”

“So she came from inside a wall and then went back into it?”

“It caused a big scandal at the abbey.” The expression on the young man’s face was playful but, at the same time, I saw deep compassion in his eyes.

When Peder came back, the chef excused himself and left the table.

The old man and I left the restaurant and went walking in the vineyard that spread behind the restaurant. From a distance, the sloping hills had appeared all yellow but I realized that the hue was subtly different depending on the type of grape vines. Each section was a different shade.

The vines that still had some green leaves mixed in with the yellow were a little taller than the others and, when I looked closely, I saw clumps of blue grapes on them. The fruit didn’t seem immature but its skin looked hard and firm. On the left side of the field, there was a section of much shorter vines. Their harvest was completed and, although there were still some leaves attached to them, they were on the edge of withering and falling. Parts of the yellow leaves still on the vines had turned deep red.

Peder walked slowly, leaning on his cane. I adjusted to his pace. He explained that the leaves of vines that bear red grapes also have traces of red and told me about the varieties of grapes and also about the taste of the wine made from each.

“The grapes from this vine become the house wine we had at lunch. You see? It’s very strong so it requires the least care. When the cold wind that will soon come over the hill blows through the leaves, you’ll see how strong and flexible the branches are.

“When will the vines lose all their leaves?”

“Another month maybe. They’ll loop their branches together and try to hold out against the cold wind. I wish my wife had been that strong but...” He fell silent.

The narrow path branched into many as it climbed up the slope. Its meanderings gave the illusion that we were losing ourselves in a yellow forest. The farm roads I supposed the trucks used during the harvest were empty and silent. At a crossroad was a small shrine with a peaked roof covering a statue of the crucifixion. It didn't fit with the yellow forest. Its color was flaked by the wind and rain but the blood that oozed from under the crown of thorns on Jesus' head had been protected by the roof. It was still a vivid red.

Even though the paths were winding, the grape vines were planted in straight rows. Between them, green strips of grass stretched into the distance. The harvesters probably traveled along them, I thought.

It was all beautiful. In the wanton afternoon light, both the vines that still bore fruit and the vines that had been harvested seemed to be lost in a golden dream.

Suddenly, it struck me that this golden land was *too* beautiful. Too much beauty is frightening. The golden church at Melk was frightening. The golden paint on the spines of the books that had filled the library for so many hundreds of years was frightening. And the old man with the cane walking slowly through this golden vineyard was also ...

My feet slowed. Is his leg really bad? I wondered. Does he really need that cane?

The trout I'd just eaten seemed to swim in my belly and I wondered how far he was taking me. He hadn't spoken for several minutes, only walking on toward our unknown destination.

The leaves on the vines spreading around us were tinged with red. The vines themselves were very different from any I'd seen before. Peder veered off the path and led me in among them. The grass under our feet was soft but not so soft that it was hard for us to walk.

"How far are we going?" I tried to keep my voice light but I knew I sounded tense.

Peder just kept walking.

The red and yellow walls of vines continued on our right and left. In the far distance, they dead ended in a stone wall. It would be difficult to walk that far.

The trout in my stomach jerked. It was nice of him to have given me lunch but sometimes what you get for free winds up costing you the most.

I searched desperately for an excuse to turn back.

The back of Peder's neck was shining with sweat. Suddenly, he stopped. The vines just around him had been cleared so that a long bench could be placed there. He sat down on it, resting his cane between his knees and then sighed as if he were finally tired out.

I sat down leaving a space between us. So this is the destination, I thought. And this is where I'll probably have to pay for my lunch.

Among the vines, under their red and yellow leaves, I saw bunches of black fruit. The grapes were rotting, filling the air with their sweetness. I hadn't noticed it while we were walking, but that sweetness made it hard for me to breathe. I couldn't tell if the thick odor was from decay or from ripeness but it mixed with the smells of the grass and the soil and twined around my body, pressing against my face.

"Are the grapes rotten?" I asked.

"First, a fungus attacks them then they rot and dry. See the white on their skins? After a while, the red of the grape will change to a deep grayish red. That's when they're sweetest and when that time comes, we harvest them."

Oh, I thought, it's the *la pourriture noble*, the noble decay. "So if they don't rot, they don't turn sweet?"

I wondered if Peder sensed that I was nervous. He fiddled with his cane instead of answering.

"Do you always invite people from the library to come out here?" I asked him.

"Only women. Especially those standing by that window...like Coco was."

"After she slipped out of the picture?"

Suddenly, he rammed his cane into the soft ground so hard that it stuck. His cheeks flushed and his eyes were bloodshot. I had the overwhelming impression that his mind was swinging and jabbing at something far away. It was like when I first met him in the library. His focus seemed to have escaped the golden vineyard and stabbed its way into the empty sky.

"No one believed me. Even worse, they insisted that the person behind the vase was a man. That's what everyone in the Abbey said and their eyes, when they looked at me, were as harsh as if I were under the Inquisition."

I spoke quietly. "So you..."

"I was a monk. That window taught me about a new world. That window, you see ... that window, over hundreds of years, led us monks secretly to the outside world. Can you imagine how many of us were seduced by the woman that Rosenthal painted? Fire was forbidden in the library. There wasn't any heat, not even from a candle. Everyone reading the books had to rely on the long, narrow light coming through the window. None of the books could leave the library so the transcriptions were also done by that window. Most of us died young from the cold and from tuberculosis. I was also near death and then the woman came down from inside the wall and stood by the window. Coco. She was dressed in red then. I was saved. She came to save me!"

The cold heavy air of the abbey library came back to me.

Suddenly, I *am* Coco, standing by the window. In front of me stands a pale, young man, nothing but skin and bones. His eyes are unutterably exhausted from his training and filled with desperation as if he's searching for some human warmth to cling to. They are the eyes of a man falling in love at the very edge of his life.

His long black robe is tied by a cord at his waist. He wears a stiff, white collar and, on his chest, a cross. This Benedictine monk gazes at my body and is fearful of the strange feelings rising in his own.

My mouth was dry. "What happened next?"

"Nothing then," he said. "But Coco and I have been together ever since."

"And when she died, she hid behind the vase on that wall again."

"Yes but her *body* is resting here," he said.

"Where?"

He pointed down at the earth under the bench. "Here."

A breeze blew across the ground. I was almost fainting from the smell of the sweetly rotting grapes.

It can't be, I thought but then I realized that what he'd said just might be true. The vines around the bench were an especially beautiful deep red and their grapes were so far

advanced in the rotting process, it seemed as if they were about to melt and drip onto the ground.

“Interesting story.” My voice was hoarse. I imagined that Coco, lying underground, could hear the pounding of my heart.

A black shadow passed over my head then dropped into a vine a little way from us, causing its leaves to swing back and forth. The old man made a sound in his throat and a bird with a long black beak, the size of a pigeon, appeared from between the leaves, then dropped onto the grass. It approached us cautiously. Around its neck, it seemed to wear a gray sash. Peder plucked a grape from a vine next to us and threw it toward the bird. The hooded crow hopped toward it, then grabbed it in his beak and flew off.

“The fruit of this vine is particularly sweet. Would you like to try it too?” He reached up to the vine again and plucked off a bunch of grapes. They looked strange, shrunken, almost half dry, and their color had dimmed to a purplish gray.

“This is the smell we want.” He brought the grapes close to my nose. “See?”

The smell seemed to come not from the fruit but rather from a living thing that had its own quiet purpose. It was like the breath of some strange creature. The aggressively seductive aroma clung softly to my face. Peder’s own white face was very close.

And between us hung the breathing thing.

I inhaled the aroma of the fruit then plucked a single ash-colored grape from the bunch. It wasn’t covered in fungus so I put it in my mouth. Then I took another, one that was almost completely wrinkled, to see what it would taste like. It left a keen tingling on the tip of my tongue. It wasn’t exactly sweetness but rather it tasted like the grape had fermented on the vine.

“That was the color,” I said, looking at the dark skin of the grapes, “the color of the clothing of the woman in the fresco.” I remembered that it too was a deep shade that might be either red or black.

The old man’s eyes filled with tears.

Suddenly, I felt overwhelmed by all of it. I couldn’t stand any more.

“I’m glad we met.” I stood up. “And thank you for lunch. I hope everything goes well for you and Coco.”

I walked away. Peder didn’t move from the bench.

At the crossroad, I went past the statue in the shrine again. Jesus nailed to his cross seemed to be the guardian spirit of the vineyard. I wondered what he said when the ex-monk passed his shrine, the ex-monk who’d failed in his training and chosen a woman instead of him.

The young chef had told me that Peder and Coco had caused a big scandal at the monastery but the woman in the photo that he’d shown me didn’t look scandalous. She looked just like an ordinary country girl who, over the years, had grown old.

When I reached the restaurant, the chef was outside saying goodbye to some customers he apparently knew.

“Peder’s still in the vineyard with Coco,” I told him.

He nodded, seeming to understand everything. The middle-aged couple were about to leave and he asked them to give me a ride to Saint Polten.



Still feeling the sharp bite of the grape on the tip of my tongue, I got into their car.

## The Golden Fields of Melk

I visited Melk by car some years ago now. Then it was early spring and above the forests stretching like a palisade along the Danube shone a white, misty moon. As if reluctant to let dusk fall, the sky still wore a pale, navy hue while the moon slipped through a chink at its lower rim above the hills, to chase after our car.

“I’ll be back,” I told it.

True to my word, I took the train from Westbahnhof in Vienna. Unlike last time, though, it was now October and the air was clear. By now I was quite used to traveling on my own in Austria. The time before, another Japanese girl studying at Vienna University had driven us but, as I didn’t want to impose on her again, I took the train. All the station guards and conductors can speak English and, in fact, the German way of speaking it is easy to understand for us Japanese. In restaurants, hotels or taxis you can get by in English.

I got to St Pölten in forty minutes and while I waited for the local train, I made friends with an old woman with a dog. She boasted that Melk Abbey was the most beautiful in the world and even the dog shrilly barked its praises. The local train reached Melk station in under thirty minutes.

Sitting high on a hill, Melk Abbey is encircled by a cluster of crags and dark green forest, spreading its ochre-colored roofs to the sky. Below the roofs, the long yellow and white striped walls may look as sturdy as a fortress but the decorative green dome rising up in the middle, and particularly the two towers facing the town make it look exquisite. The two towers are dazzling in white, yellow and the greenish tinge of oxidized copper. Here and there are glints of old gold, as if it has been dripped in a line from the top of the bulging towers to the clock face below. This alone would make it seem more like a palace than a church or abbey, but, in addition, a myriad of colored marbles and gold is used on the interior of the church. Indeed, the whole design, down to the finest detail, is executed in such graceful lines that it fully deserves its reputation as the jewel of Austrian Baroque.

For the builders in the first half of the eighteenth century who rebuilt the church as it now stands, it must have been as though they were creating, by virtue of prodigious wealth and piety, a very heaven here on Earth, atop Melk’s hill. It certainly evinces the energy of obsessive devotion rather more than the passion of love or reverence. Previously, standing in the building overwhelmed by the gold color, I had realized that when humans are surrounded by it, their grasp on reality drains away and they are unable to sense even their own physical weight. Feeling that this has parallels with Buddhist theories of the Pure Land in Japan, I decided I wanted to experience once more the bodily effect of gold’s magnetism.

The history of this abbey, before it flourished as a baroque masterpiece, is said to have started around the tenth century, when a church was built in one of the fortresses where army forces were stationed. The fortresses were built to protect the border district, or marches, and were called Enns, Ybbs, Melk and Krems, after the names of the tributaries of the Danube, with the most important of them being the one at Melk. The area was governed at the time by the House of Babenburg, which patronized a meditative order of monks and founded the abbey, thus creating a centre of the Benedictine order.

Though local leaders changed with the times, the abbey has not only continued to maintain its status as a religious centre, but has also come to embody the pinnacle of the arts and learning, especially of theology.

Naturally, the abbey at Melk has been beset by its share of tribulations. One of these was the political and economic upheaval caused by the Reformation during which Melk allied itself with Vienna University. In fact, it led the movement to reform the monasteries, becoming the starting point of what is known as the Melk Reform. It is interesting that Melk Abbey chose to affiliate itself with the Council of Vienna and their humanist theories, rather than supporting the Holy Roman Emperor. This meant that relations with the Emperor worsened, while theory, and therefore academic learning, was given priority. In the modern age, science explains the truth for us but at that time the pursuit of truth was based on knowing the Word of God. In the spirit of that age, Melk Abbey managed to forge a new course for itself based on theory, putting itself at the forefront of academia and forming a circle of intellectuals similar to those of the present day.

Several times it suffered from fires. In cold regions, lighting a fire is the only way to keep warm but the wind blowing up from the river fanned the flames of the hilltop abbey. Being so high, water was never plentiful, so a small slip with fire became a disaster. One such fire destroyed the library at the end of the thirteenth century. Thanks to the efforts of the monks, early manuscripts of hymns, Easter plays and other treasured works escaped being burnt, but many of the miniatures and chronicles created in the Scriptorium at around that time were lost. Even more tragic was the Great Fire of 1736. The decorators, plasterers and sculptors who had been brought together by the master builder Jakob Prandtauer had managed to painstakingly complete their work. Just as the finishing touches were being made, the building was engulfed by fire and nearly all the roofs and decorated rooms were lost. Though the abbot at the time rose to the challenge of rebuilding, he died without seeing that achieved and the existing baroque treasure was finally brought about by the efforts of his successor. These two large fires wreaked their damage but it seems that several other, less destructive fires broke out, so that the whole abbey became abnormally frightened of fire. Perhaps the long habits and full sleeves worn by the priests and monks are for protection again the cold in a life without fires.

The region is one of the coldest areas in Europe and when I had come in spring the river there was still iced over. Now it was fall. Although remnants of summer sunlight still sparkled in the sky, the temperature had already dropped to around fifty fahrenheit, a presentiment of the long winter to come.

The restaurants in front of the town hall were open with cloth-covered tables and chairs set out in the cobbled street but, as yet, there was no sign of visitors. The only customers were some of the local old people quietly drinking tea. The scene was that of finding a moment's respite at the end of a season, or a year, or a life. The main street itself is narrow enough for the owners in the cafes and souvenir shops to chat without having to raise their voices. Looking down on the street are the two spires and green dome, so that the abbey dominates and supervises the life of the town. At the top of a gentle slope an oval arch crowned by a beautiful triangular roof greets you and ahead you can glimpse a similar arch. Access is forbidden to the monastery precincts, which are towards the back of the building but entrance to the church and certain designated areas is allowed.

At first, there was no other person in sight. Then, just as I passed under the first arch, from both sides of the central courtyard came a sound like a flock of birds taking flight, making me jump back. It wasn't birds, but children. All at once, several dozen children dashed out, ran through the arch and down the cobbled slope. Then, I was alone again. When I had finished watching the children go, I noticed a monk dressed in black with a white collar, who looked like a teacher. He smiled in greeting as he drew near. With an expression that acknowledged my amazement, he said with a twinkle in his eyes,

"We call them 'The Wind'."

“I can see why,” I replied, smiling back.

“They are students in the lower grades. On Sunday, dressed in their whites, they’re called ‘The Rabbit Wind’.”

I asked where the ‘non-white’ Rabbits had gone today, but without replying to my question the teacher said, “By the time they’re upper grade, they don’t run any more.” The eyes behind his glasses smiled again. It must be students chosen from their ranks who finally undergo the stricter training of a Benedictine monk and rise to the priesthood.

In the peace that followed in the wake of ‘The Wind’, I walked on to the next gate. It was so quiet. Apparently there are many hundreds of people, from students to monks, within the enormous building, with many of them staying in dormitories, but the air around was not tarnished with the breath of humanity, it felt fresh and clear.

Tranquility is prized in religious places, whether they be Christian or Buddhist, and it’s an atmosphere which I relish. What I love is the way this air seeps from your lungs into your soul like a draught of cold white wine. The interior of the church intoxicated me further by supplementing the white wine with the chilly touch of gold. The few, unmoving people in the pews were outnumbered several times over by the gilded statues. I sensed these looking down on me like citizens of heaven, which at first unnerved me but soon I calmed down.

The main altar in particular was covered with gold and marble. Above the sacramental casket, St Peter and St Paul clasp each other’s hands, grieving they must part. You can imagine that they are encouraging each other in the face of death, but their bodies are completely gold and the prophets from the Old Testament such as Daniel, Jeremiah, David and Isaiah who are crowding around them are gold too. The saints and angels painted from altar to ceiling are all sparkling with the same color, putting you on your guard as part of some plot to bewilder you with brilliance.

Peter and Paul were both executed on the same day. Peter was crucified upside down and Paul, as a citizen of Rome, beheaded. In the fresco above the main altar, there is a woman painted in a deep red cloak, wearing a crown of thorns and with instruments of torture spread at her feet. One supposes she has risen to these heights by enduring torture. In other words, beneath this layer of gold, streams a copious flow of blood. No matter how magnificent or dazzling, there is in Christianity that which punishes the body so as to train the spirit, so that throughout it is imbued with the wails of humans and their cries of suffering.

In the history of each region of Europe there are instances of a church revering the remains of a martyr as its patron saint and so, too, in Melk. In the eleventh century, the body of St Coloman, an Irish pilgrim who had been hung from an elder tree, was brought to the abbey in a well preserved state, and you can still see the Saint’s white bones, richly adorned, laid out in a glass case trimmed in gold. I felt slightly sorry for him as I passed by the case. As well as being hung from an elder tree, he still, one thousand years later, has to expose his white bones to the eyes of strangers.

Leaving the church, you walk down a long corridor where silver lights hang from the whitewashed ceiling. It can only have been recently in the history of Melk Abbey, that light bulbs were inserted and until then the lamplight or candlelight must have thrown up people’s shapes as blurred shadows.

Ascending a wide stone staircase signposted to the Imperial Rooms, I walked to the end of a corridor of exhibition rooms. In The Marble Hall was the first tourist I’d seen since entering the building. She was a young woman with a backpack, looking in turn at the guidebook in her hand and the pictures on the wall. We exchanged smiles as I passed and I

suddenly felt more relaxed. It is known as the Imperial Room, or the Marble Hall, and you can understand just how important the rulers of Austria, the Babenburg and Hapsburg families, considered Melk as a spiritual home. It was a place for prayer and devotion while, at the same time, being a fortress and also a palace. The Marble Hall was where the Emperor met the highest-ranking clergy and, perhaps, where the word of God was relayed to him.

Going further on, I felt a sudden breeze blowing up from the river. I had reached the apex of the A-shaped building. The town of Melk, its river and the grey trees that surrounded the area were shimmering in the overhead rays of the sun, which poured down like a white veil. If I looked carefully, I could see the surface of the river moving, without ceasing, in one direction.

After that, running in a different direction to the rooms for the Emperor, were those of the monastery where outsiders were only allowed access to the library. The library is even more magnificent than the gold-encrusted church. This library was also the very reason why I had wanted to return to Melk. Behind the heavy entrance doors lurks a stark, musty air, quite different from the sparkling gold church. The long, rectangular room is lined on both sides up to the ceiling with leather-bound books. All the lettering on their spines is inlaid with gold but a gold that, bearing the weight of several hundred years, has become dull and somber, creating a mountain of dead books. Mostly transcribed by hand, they bear witness to a torrent of human energy. When you think of it like that, rather than seeming dead they overflow with strength, representing the embodiment of voices, sighs and sweat. What was the sensation that had flowed over me before when I stood in the middle of that room? I wanted to experience it once again.

It doesn't sound like much of a reason. People do strange things, don't they?

Manuscripts of sermons since the ninth century are here, and tenth and eleventh century transcriptions of Virgil. In the twelfth century, the Commentaries of St Jerome were copied out here, so too the Rules of St Benedict, bibles, legal records, philosophical tracts and even the 'Life of Jesus' by Lady Ava, the earliest female writer in German literature. Apparently, two thirds of the manuscripts are from the fifteenth century but none of them have ever been opened. Only comparatively recently, in 1997, there was a storm when the researcher Christine Glassner discovered some stanzas of the fourteenth century epic poem 'Song of the Nibelungs', carefully bound in the Late Medieval section,. Apart from manuscripts, there are also many early printed books, 1700 books from the sixteenth century, 4,500 from the seventeenth and, with a huge increase, 18,000 eighteenth century ones. In total there are 100,000 books held in this library.

Only a fraction of them are on view, and someone like me who doesn't understand Latin or German is left to guess from the short explanations whether they are about theology, law, geography or astronomy. Even so, the beauty of the handwritten manuscripts laid open on display is enough to take one's breath away. Every crested letter is ornately written with loving care showing in each pen stroke. Though the sentence is incomprehensible, you can tell the text was valuable, that the letter itself was the object of worship. After all, Buddhism has the sutras, and the religious significance of those lies less in understanding them than in copying out the shapes. The monks who made these manuscripts struggled in this preposterous task so as to be closer to God. In which case, hundreds of years of monks' prayers are distilled in the 100,000 books shelved here.

It made me feel like something was trying to force itself into my skin or breathing. In this over-concentrated atmosphere my own existence felt as slight as a feather....

As I walked closer to a window, I sensed someone's presence behind me. Under cover of the oppressive aura exuded by the books, the presence of another person was boring into

the back of my neck. Buried though it was in the collected prayers, words and letters that had built up over hundreds of years, it was the unmistakable presence of a human form.

Looking around, there was someone just turning back after passing behind me. It was an old man in a brown sweater. I hadn't realized because the books filling the room had been so overwhelming, but there were also a monk with long robes tied at the waist and another woman in the room.

The old man slowly neared the window where I was and looked up above it. There were wrinkles etched in the round face and the skin sagged from his jaw, but it was the piercing, bloodshot eyes, looking so grief-stricken, that took me aback. Sensing my reaction, he smiled hesitantly.

As it was an old building, windows were few and they were long and narrow, letting in little light, so probably all the old man could see of me was my silhouette. From my position, I could see the separate lashes of his eyes, which he had screwed up against the glare. Looking again at the upper part of the window, the old man whispered something I couldn't understand. As I made to move on past the window, he then spoke to me in English.

"...That's my wife up there."

Pointing at the wall above the window, that was definitely what the old man said.

"Your wife?" I began to wonder if he was a bit crazy.

The monk approached and shook the old man's hand before passing on to another room. From the way he did it, I could see his affection for the old man. It seemed the two were friends or acquaintances of some sort. I stepped back from the window and cast my eyes up at the part of the wall he had been looking at.

A blurred picture, which could be taken for a vase or a geometrical design, was painted there. Not only was it badly faded by the centuries, but the light blocked my vision.

"But isn't that a vase?"

"Does it look like a vase?"

"Yes, it's a vase."

"Can't you see a woman dressed in red underneath?"

I screwed up my eyes. And a figure something like that of a person became visible.

"Yes, I can see the shape of a person."

"That's my wife." Something inside me said I really ought to get away from him, at once. "Everybody at the monastery says that it's one of the brothers, a scholar, painted by Rosenstahl. But if you look closely, you can see it's a woman. I took one look, knew it was a woman and fell in love with her, I did. But it's a long time ago now."

"But it's a vase!"

"The vase was painted in secco by Johann Bergl on top of the woman. He painted on top of her but my wife wasn't taking that and she's showing through from behind the vase."

"Secco? What's that?"

"Rosenstahl painted frescoes on wet plaster. Secco is when a picture is painted on a dry wall. But frescoes are stronger. As it ages, the fresco has started to appear from underneath the vase, which was painted on dry plaster, so that by now it's starting to push the vase off. In another hundred years, it'll have completely gone. Great, don't you think!"

Well, after all, she's a real person and not a thing. Trying to push her back in won't work at all.

"And that's your wife?"

"Yes, it is."

"I suppose you mean she's your ideal woman?"

"I married her. She came down from the picture and was standing looking out the window, just as you are now. Then there was only the vase left on the wall. She lived with me and died four years ago. And then she went back up there."

Come to think of it, the form of a person was becoming more distinct. Actually, it did look more like a woman in red than an academic.

"I run this restaurant," said the man, pulling a card from his pocket. On it was the name of a restaurant and a map. "Are you Japanese?"

"That's right."

"You've come out from Vienna, then?"

"On the train from Westbahnhof."

"In that case, you didn't come through Krems, but if you had, you would have noticed my place. There's a famous Austrian wine called Jamek. Well, it's the restaurant with the sign of a collared crow, right next to that winery." The card even showed a picture of a collared crow. The old man didn't seem to be making things up. I told him I'd been to Melk before by car.

He said, "This window is a very special one. If you're not in a hurry, come and eat lunch at my restaurant. It's only 20 minutes by car."

"But I'm not the girl who came down out of that picture!"

The two of us laughed together, which made me feel I could trust the old man. The fact that he had a walking stick made me feel safer, too.

We walked out to where the car was parked. He told me his name was Peter and he came to Melk every day by car to see his wife. The car park was in an open space up some steps. When I remarked that it must be difficult getting up and down steps with a stick, he said that since his wife had returned to Melk, he just had to put up with it.

His car was an expensive German make which had been converted for the disabled. In the gloom of the library, I had taken him for around seventy, but in the light of the car park he was obviously a lot older.

"What are you doing about the restaurant today?" I asked.

"I work when I feel like it. At the moment, my son is in charge. He was chief sommelier at Jamek, but since I got this bad leg, he's taken over from me." I began to feel more at ease with Peter.

Melk River flows into the Danube and then to the East. I recognized the road along the Danube with the trees lining it. Leaves were falling fast and fluttering across the road. Trees left with bare branches were filled with light from the surface of the river giving the impression of a gentle, eternally unchanging, autumnal season.

The Collared Crow was a cozy restaurant with a car park in front and, as he'd said, a prominent sign. It looked more like a black pigeon with a band of grey around its shoulders, than a crow. When I said I'd never seen one in Japan, he explained that they were very

common in that region. Behind the restaurant, the whole hill was flushed with bright yellow. It was the yellow of the vine leaves. I guessed Peter's restaurant must serve wine from its own vineyards, which he confirmed, adding in a low voice, "It's better than Jamek. My son told me, so it must be true."

I suddenly felt hungry. One ham roll on the train was all I'd eaten.

Inside the restaurant were several couples, all of whom were probably on their way to Melk. It was a homely-looking place, its five white-clothed tables decorated with fresh flowers, a yellow vine leaf placed under each vase. The sumptuous smell of cheese and fresh bread welcomed me in.

Peter introduced a young chef in an apron. He was a thin man with large eyes.

"This is my son."

Thus introduced, a strange emotion flitted across the face of the chef and his eyes narrowed in the sunlight, as if looking at something hazy, faraway.

"So, did you meet the woman on the wall?"

"Yes, and I heard how she was stronger than the vase. Apparently she was Peter's wife?" I wanted to see what reaction he would give, but his only answer was a resigned smile.

The young chef had dark, Arabian eyes and glossy hair and he looked too much like a foreigner to resemble Peter. I again felt a little more defensive towards Peter. But what difference did it make really, I thought. I sensed that Peter and the chef shared an intimacy in which they trusted each other enough to forgive such things. Surely, I could at least be certain that Peter owned the restaurant.

For our main course at lunch we were served trout meunière in an aromatic, white wine sauce. The white wine and herbs mixed perfectly with the sharp-tasting apples that are only found in the Krems area, adding a rich taste to the clean, white flesh of the trout. Peter drizzled grapeseed oil on his fish and he recommended I did too, but I refused, as I gather it can be quite bitter. The bread was homemade, crusty on the outside but soft inside with a taste that developed as you chewed it. Peter said it had all been made by the young chef.

"He is a wonderful chef. But he doesn't look anything like you, Peter. I guess he must take after the woman on the wall."

"Coco." The old man's eyes kindled.

"That's your wife's name?"

"Coco in the red dress."

"That's the woman in the picture? Or was your wife called Coco?"

The chef, whose work in the kitchen had eased off, had overheard our conversation and brought over a woman's photo in a small frame, setting it on the tablecloth.

Then he said, "That's his wife."

She looked like a pleasant, country woman wearing, not red, but a Tyrolean costume. The chef had said 'his wife', which must mean that he wasn't Peter's son. He didn't act like he was talking about his own mother's picture. When Peter left to use the toilet, I called the chef over and asked, "Are you really his son?" but he just shrugged his shoulders.

"Peter will take you to see the vineyard. Please listen to his story, as a way of thanking him for lunch. Peter was chef here for a long time. I joined after he had lost his wife, but



she was a wonderful woman and they managed The Collared Crow as man and wife for many years. Apparently, it was his wife who named it that.”

“He says she came out of the wall and then returned there again.”

“It was quite a scandal in the monastery.” The look in the chef’s eyes was both mischievous and sad. As Peter returned he moved away from the table.

Peter and I left the restaurant and went for a walk in the vineyards stretching out at the back. When seen from a distance, the slope looked all one color yellow but the different types of grape had subtly different shades and rows of vines gave off a different hue. In amongst the yellow leaves were green ones which grew a little higher and, if you looked closely, had bunches of green fruit on. They looked ripe but the skin was hard and tough. To one side of them, on the left, were some rows of shorter vines, which had been harvested and the leaves were ready to wither and drop. Some of the remaining yellow leaves had turned red.

I fell in step with Peter who walked slowly, leaning on his stick. According to him, it was the leaves of the purple types of grape that turned red. He pointed out the different varieties, explaining what difference they make to the taste of the wine.

“This one gives grapes for a table wine to drink at lunch. It’s a hardy stock and easy to grow. Soon, when the cold wind starts to blow from over the brow of the hill, that’ll blow off the leaves so you can see how strong and supple the vines are.

“When do all the leaves fall off?”

“Maybe within a month. When it snows, the black branches woven together withstand the cold wind. Would that my wife had been so strong.”

The narrow lane wound up the slope, dividing into several lanes along the way and losing itself in a maze of yellow trees. The roads, which must be used by the machines during harvest time, were lying quiet. At a fork in the road, a small shrine with a triangular-shaped roof housed a crucifix. It looked oddly out of place with the yellow woods. It was faded by wind and rain but under cover of the roof, the blood dripping from the crown of thorns on Christ’s brow was still vivid. Though the lanes were winding, the vines were planted in straight rows and between them bands of bright green grass ran into the distance. No doubt the harvesting machines went along these.

It was such a beautiful afternoon. In that over-abundant afternoon sunlight, both the vines with fruit and those already harvested lay dreaming their golden dreams. But it was too beautiful. Such beauty frightened me, just as the gold of Melk Church and the gold-inlaid covers of the books filling the library for hundreds of years frightened me. Just as the old man walking slowly through the golden vineyard frightened me.

My footsteps slowed. Was this old man really lame? His stick really just a stick? I could feel the trout I’d just eaten churning in my stomach. How far were we going to walk, anyway? He hadn’t talked for several minutes. He had only continued walking purposefully ahead.

Now we were amongst vines of quite a different sort to the ones before. These vines were tinged with red. Peter turned off the graveled path towards the middle of the vineyard. The ground underfoot was soft, but not enough for our shoes to sink in.

“Where are we going?” My voice sounded bright and shrill. But he continued walking. The wall of yellow and red closed in on left, right and straight ahead. I could see the path ended in a stone wall ahead. Surely it was too far for us to go?

The trout in my stomach twisted again. It was nice to be given lunch but you don't get something for nothing. I'd need some sort of excuse to turn back now. Desperately, I cast around for one.

The back of Peter's head glistened with sweat. He stopped.

A long bench had been placed where some vines had been cleared away. Putting his stick between his legs, Peter lowered himself on to it, with a deep sigh of weariness. I sat down too, leaving a space between us.

So this was the place. This was where I would have to repay the lunch.

On the vines around me, black grapes peeped out from under the yellow and red leaves. They gave off the sweet smell of overripe fruit. Though it hadn't bothered me while we were walking, now it was stifling. The heavy smell, which somehow seemed to me both ripe and rotten, joined with those of the grass and earth and settled on my body and face.

"The grapes are overripe, aren't they?" I ventured.

"Bacteria starts to rot them and they begin to dry out. See, there's a white bloom on them. Very soon the red will turn to grey. That's when they're sweetest. When they've got there, we'll harvest them."

Realizing these went to make the sweet dessert wine, I commented, "So, unless they rot, they won't get sweet."

Did he sense my nervousness, as he sat twiddling his stick in both hands?

I asked, "Do you always pick someone up in the library and bring them here?"

"Only women. And only those who stand by that window....as Coco once did."

"After falling out of that picture."

"Nobody believed me. Worse, they said the figure under the vase was a man. Everybody in the monastery said so. And then they turned against me as if they would try me as a heretic."

He jabbed the stick he was holding into the ground and it sank in. His cheeks burned red and his eyes blazed. It seemed like he was giving vent to the feelings he had had so long ago when they had met in the library. His gaze moved from the golden vineyard up to pierce the high, empty sky.

"Do you mean...?" I asked in a low voice.

"I was a monk. At that window I learned of a new world. For hundreds of years that window has been secretly beckoning monks to the outside world. Can you imagine how tempting that woman painted by Rosenstahl was for the monks? It's forbidden to use fire in the library. There's no heating and no candlesticks so everyone used the light coming in at the narrow windows to read by. Books can't be taken out, either, so copying was done next to the windows too. Many of them died young of the cold and tuberculosis. I also nearly died. That's when the woman came down from the wall to stand at the window. She came down to save me."

The heavy, chill atmosphere of the monastery library came back to me. I was Coco, standing by the window, and in front of me was the pale face of a thin young man. His eyes were drained by the effort of his devotions. They were eyes on the brink of death, eyes fervently in need of human warmth to cling to, eyes which loved. I could see the young man's long black clothes tied with a rope at the waist, the white stiff collar, the cross on his

breast. This Benedictine monk, inspired by my body, was quaking with fear of the forbidden love excited within him.

“So, then what happened?”

He opened his mouth very slowly, as if to stop his throat from getting dry. “Nothing in particular happened. I lived here with Coco from then on.”

“Then, when she died she was hidden on that wall behind the vase again.”

“But her body lies here.”

“Where?”

“Here” he said, pointing under the bench.

A wind blew up from the surface of the ground. My body swayed from the fetid smell of sweetly rotting grapes. Was it all a lie? Or was it really true? The crimson color of the vines at each end of the bench was especially brilliant, the grapes just about to drop off, the ‘noble rot’ well advanced.

“What an interesting story.” My voice sounded cracked. The beat of my heart thumped loud enough even for Coco underground to hear. A black shape passed overhead. Its shadow settled in the vines a little way away, rustling several of the leaves. The old man made a chuckling sound in his throat, at which a long-beaked black bird about the size of a pigeon appeared from the leaves and fluttered to the grass below. It came cautiously towards us. Around its neck was a collar of grey. The old man plucked a grape from a nearby vine and threw it. The collared crow hopped over, pecked it up and flew off.

“These grapes are particularly sweet. Do you want to try one?” He tore off another bunch. They looked strange, half their juiciness gone and shriveled by a grayish purple tinge.

“This is where the smell comes from. Try it,” he said, pushing them under my nose. It looked less like fruit than like some growth with a quiet, hidden mind of its own. It exhaled the reek of living breath. The distilled essence of an offensively seductive vapor rose to my face. Peter’s white face was close to mine. Between his face and mine hung this creature. I sniffed, picked one grape that wasn’t covered in the grey bloom and put it in my mouth. Then, as one wasn’t enough, I tried one that had started to shrivel. A sharp taste was left tingling on my tongue, not so sweet but as if it had started to ferment while still on the vine.

“It was just this color, wasn’t it” I said, checking the color, “that the woman in the picture was wearing. It was this color, right?” I remembered it was a deep color, somewhere between black and red. Tears were welling up in the old man’s eyes. “Thank you for the lunch. I’m glad I met you. You’re a wonderful couple.”

This was as much as I could take. I stood and started to walk off. He stayed sitting on the bench. At the junction of the path, I looked again at the crucifix. The body nailed to the cross now looked at home as the guardian deity of the fields. When the ex-monk, who broken by his devotions had put his trust in a woman, passed by this place, how did Christ look on him? The young chef said it had been the scandal of the monastery, but the Coco in the picture hadn’t looked at all the type of person to cause a scandal. She had the appearance of an ordinary, country girl, grown old.

I got back to the restaurant just as the chef was seeing off some customers he knew. When I said, “Peter is with Coco in the vineyard” he nodded, in complete understanding, and asked the middle-aged couple who were getting into their car if they would give me a lift to St Pölten.

As I got in the car, I could still feel that sharp taste, rolling over my tongue.

Once long ago, I visited Melk by car. Back then it was early spring, and the hazy moon hung white in the sky, high above the forest that ran along the Danube River like a fortress.

The sky was still faintly filled with traces of dark-blue, as if the sun was hesitating to set. Where the sky met the ground at the faint tips of the mountains, the moon chased after the car as if it was gliding along.

I'll come again, I said to the moon.

To fulfill that promise, I got on a train at Vienna West Station. This time the season was different from my previous visit. It was November and the air was clear.

I was used to travelling alone in Austria.

On my trip before, a Japanese woman who was attending the University of Vienna drove me to Melk, but I was too uncomfortable to ask her again, so I decided to take the train. It also helped that all of the station attendants and staff on the train speak English, and native German speakers always have English that is easy to understand. In restaurants, hotels, taxis and the like, I can always manage to get by with just English.

I arrived at St. Pölten in forty minutes. While changing to a local train there, I became friends with an old woman who was with her dog. She proudly told me that the Melk monastery is the most beautiful sight in the world. Even the dog gave a shrill bark of approval.

The local train arrived at Melk station in a little under thirty minutes.

The Melk monastery was high on a hill, with rocks and lush greenery surrounding it like clouds. Its terracotta-colored roofs spread out high in the sky.

The long walls under the roofs were painted in a striped pattern of yellow and white. Even though it looked solid like a fortress, the lush green dome that stood in the center, and the two towers that stood nearby the Melk River were all just for decoration. They were all so gorgeous.

The subdued green of the white and yellow copper rust on the two towers was brilliant, and it tinged the round slope that flowed down from the peaks. Lines of that color drooped down to the face of the clock here and there shone a golden color.

Just looking at this one section only, it gave more of an impression of a palace than a church or monastery, and there was plenty more multicolored marble and gold still inside the sanctuary as well.

And not just that, but the molding was carved with soft, detailed curves, which have even been called a national treasure among Austria's baroque architecture before.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the architects who remodeled this church into its current form must have just brought vast amounts of gold and religious piety with them to the top of the hill in Melk, and then and there decided to create Heaven on Earth. It's obvious that it was not love or longing, but rather obsessive energy that they had plenty of.

When I stood inside the church last time, I was overwhelmed by the golden color inside. Whenever people are surrounded by the color of gold, they lose their sense of reality. Even I felt like I lost the ability to sense my own weight. This must be the same as the Pure Land Buddhists' way of thinking, with their temples full of gold as well, I thought to myself back then. I wanted to feel that magic of the color of gold again.

The history of this monastery goes back to around the tenth century, long before it shone as a spectacle of baroque architecture. Originally, troops were stationed in the center, and the sanctuary was built around them. Fortresses that were built to protect the frontier land of Malk took the names of the branches of the Danube river. They were called Ens, Ibbs, Melk, and Krem among others. The most important of the fortresses was Melk.

The Babenberg family that ruled this land at the time built the monastery to protect the meditative monks, and it later became a base for the Order of St. Benedict.

After that, even with the change of rulers and the passing of eras, the monastery not only continued to protect its status as a religious focal point, but also continued to exist as a high authority on art and scholarship based on theology.

Of course, the Melk monastery underwent its fair share of ordeals. One of them was the political and economical unrest caused by the Protestant Reformation. Back then Melk joined with Vienna University, took the lead in the revolution, and started what was called the "Melk Revolution" for the monastic reforms.

What is interesting is that at that time, the Melk monastery followed the religious theories of the Ecumenical Council at Vienna University rather than the pope in Rome. Its relationship with the pope deteriorated because of it, but it was necessary so that priority could be given to the study of theories, that is to say, scholarship.

Nowadays we have science to explain things to us, but at that time the pursuit of truth was the same as knowing the thoughts of God. In that spirit of thinking, the most advanced institution was the Melk monastery where new policies based on the study of theories were set forth. It was a place where modern-like intellects could gather.

It was also struck many times by fires.

In cold regions, building fires in the winter was the only choice to survive. The winds that blew from the river fanned the flames in the monastery on the top of the hill. Since it was so high up, there wasn't a lot of water either. Small, accidental fires quickly turned into serious problems.

The library room was destroyed by a fire at the end of the thirteenth century. It was thanks to monks who sacrificed themselves in the fire that treasured works such as Melk's early hymns, Easter dramas, and much more managed to escape being lost in the fire. Ever since then there has been an art and writing room inside the monastery where miniature figures, chronological records and more were vigorously created, but it is said that many of them have been lost over time.

What was even more tragic was the great fire of 1736. With the greatest architect of the time Jakob Prandtauer leading them, designers and plasterers, sculptors and others all displayed their incredible talent, and had finished almost all of their work. Just as they were one step away from completion, the monastery was struck by fire. Almost all of the roofs and ornamental rooms were lost. Even though Berthold Dietmayr, the abbot at the time, began reconstruction, he died in despair, and it was through the vice-abbot's efforts that gave birth to the monastery's current baroque motifs.

These two large scale fires brought about many casualties, but it was actually because of the insignificant fires which occurred so often that the whole monastery feared fire so much.

Perhaps the reason that the priests and monks wear clothes with long hems and flowing sleeves is to keep warm without using fire.

The Melk region is considered especially cold even within Europe. When spring comes there is still ice on the Melk river. Now, in autumn, remnants of the summer light were still

sparkling and beautiful, but the temperature had fallen to around fifty degrees. It made you think about the long winter still to come.

Along the stone-paved road in front of the town hall, restaurants with lined-up chairs and tables with tablecloths were open for business, but customers were few. Inside one of them, a local old man was comfortably drinking tea.

He had the air of taking a short break after finishing a summer, a year, or a lifetime of work.

Even the main street was so narrow that the people on opposite sides of the road in the café and souvenir shop could carry on a conversation without having to raise their voices.

The two monastery steeples and the lush-green dome overlooked the street. In this town everything in life was watched over by them; everything was surveyed by them.

When I walked up the gentle slope, I was greeted by a beautiful arc-shaped gate with a triangle roof on top. I could see more of the same kind of gates ahead. In the inner sanctuary of the monastery, the spiritual training sections were off limits, but one set part of the inner church was open to visitors. Although, aside from myself, there was not a single person there.

As soon as I passed through the first gate, there was a sound like a large flock of birds flying away on both sides of the courtyard. I instinctively took a step back and saw that it wasn't birds, but children. All at once several dozen children came running by and through the gate, and then down the stone-paved road going down the hill. Once again, I was alone.

After seeing the children go by, a teacher-looking monk who was dressed in black clothes with a white collar happened by.

He came over and greeted me with a smile. With an expression that felt like he was asking if they surprised me he said,

"We call them 'The Wind,'" narrowing his eyes.

I gave him a smile back.

"They're the underclassmen in the Gymnasium. When they wear their white ceremonial clothes, we call them 'The Rabbit's Wind.'"

And where were the normal-clothed rabbits off to? I asked. The teacher didn't respond to my question and instead said,

"When they graduate to upperclassmen, they won't run anymore."

The eyes behind his glasses gave another smile.

Before long, students chosen from among them will start their rigorous training as a monk of the Order of St. Benedict, and then begin their climb to the top of becoming a priest.

I left the area which had become quiet now that The Wind had passed and walked to the next gate.

It was silent. Inside the huge building there were a lot of people, from Gymnasium students to monks. I heard that many of them lived in the dormitories. The air wasn't polluted with them sucking up all the air; it was nice and clear.

At all religious places, whether Christian or Buddhist, silence is valued highly. I like silent air like that. Like a chilled white wine, it soaks its way into you, through your lungs to your soul.

In the worship hall within the church, the cool feeling the gold color gave me was added to the white wine, and it intoxicated me.

Inside there were the shapes of some unmoving worshippers, but there were several times more statues decorated with donation boxes. They warmly and comfortably watched over me like residents of Heaven. At first they stirred about, but they quieted down soon after.

The main altar was especially buried in marble and gold. Peter and Paul were clasping each other's hands above the tabernacle, reluctant to part. It seemed like they were preparing for death and comforting one another. Their bodies were the color of gold all over, and the prophets arranged around them, Daniel, Jeremiah, David, Isaiah and all of the others who appeared in the old testament were gold all over too. The saints and angels who were put above the altar close to the ceiling were shining the same color as well. This is quite the way to dazzle people with sheer brilliance, I thought to myself, recovering from the impact it had.

Peter and Paul were sentenced to death on the same day. Peter was given a reverse crucifixion; Paul was decapitated as a Roman citizen. The woman wearing a deep crimson mantle in the fresco painting above the main altar had instruments of torture scattered at her feet. She probably had to endure torture to rise to such a high level, which is why those things under the color of gold had blood all over them.

No matter how gorgeous or dazzling though, in Christianity people always went through physical pain to test their souls, and their cries and agony hung in the air.

Martyrs become saints, and churches worship fragments of saints' corpses or remains as their guardian saint. This act is recorded in the histories of many places all over Europe, and even Melk, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, took in the not yet fully decayed corpse of St. Coloman, a pilgrim from Ireland who was sentenced to hanging on an elderberry tree. Even now the saint had his white bones displayed as decoration, lying down inside a glass case fringed with gold.

As I passed by in front of it, I felt a little bad for him. Not only did he have to be hung from an elderberry tree, but a thousand years later he had to have his bones put on display for people to see.

I left the worship hall and walked down a long hallway with metal lights hanging from the white ceiling.

Having lightbulbs in the metal lights must be a relatively new thing within the history of the Melk monastery. It seemed that now the light from the oil lamps and candles only dimly made the shadows dance.

I went up a wide stone staircase and entered further into the hallway to the exhibit called the Emperor's Room. I saw my first other tourist in the marble chamber there. She was a young woman with a backpack who was comparing what looked to be some pamphlets in her hand with the pictures on the wall.

When I passed by we exchanged smiles. It was nice.

The sovereigns of Austria valued Melk as a spiritual base, not just because of the Emperor's Room, but because of the marble chamber, the Babenberg family, the House of Habsburg, and more. It was simultaneously a fortress and a place of worship and study. It was a palace even.

The marble chamber was where the emperor met with his high clergymen, and it might have been where they received messages from God.

When I went further in, a sudden breeze from the river blew by.

I had arrived at the peak of the building that was shaped like the letter A.

The town of Melk and the Melk river that I had climbed above, and the ash-green trees that surrounded them, they all wore the illuminated sky like a white veil, slowly swaying in



the breeze. I looked closely, and I saw that the surface of the river was continually flowing in one direction.

Beyond this one area, that is, aside from the rooms prepared for the emperor, the library room was the only other monastery-like area which outsiders were allowed to enter. The library room was fascinating, even more so than the shining, golden worship hall. The reason I wanted to visit Melk again was to go to the library room.

When I opened the heavy doors and went in, a damp, solemn air lingered, completely different from the shining gold in the worship hall.

Except for the open windows on the walls, the deep, long, rectangular room was densely packed with leather-bound books all the way up to the ceiling. On all of the leather-bindings there were designs and letters written in gold paint, but the gold color was dull and dark, and they carried the load of several hundred years worth of time gone by. It was a mountain of book corpses.

But almost all of them were copied by hand, so they were actually bursting with human energy. Imagining it that way, far from being corpses, they were overflowing with energy. I began to see them as lumps of human voices, sighs and sweat.

What exactly was that feeling that came over me the last time I stood in this room? I wanted to savor it again.

There is just no way to put it into words.

Humans can do some pretty amazing things.

There was a 9<sup>th</sup> century handwritten "Book of Admonitions," a 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century Virgil manuscript copy, and so much more. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century a manual by Hieronymus was copied here. There were commentaries on St. Benedict religious precepts, bibles, books on law, theology, and even "The Life of Jesus," the oldest work of literature written by a woman, Sister Ava. Out of all of the manuscripts, two-thirds were from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and their pages had not been open since back then. Just recently, in 1997, Professor Christine Glassner opened up a handwritten manuscript from the late middle ages, discovered that parts of the manuscript for the epic poem "The Song of the Nibelungs" from the 1300's were being carefully kept within it, and caused an uproar because of it.

Apart from hand-copied manuscripts, there were also first edition printed books called "old woodblock prints." There were 1,700 from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, 4,500 from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and a huge increase to 10,800 from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In total there were 100,000 books stowed away in this library room.

A small bit was all I could verify with my own eyes. I don't know Latin or German, so all I could do was look at the modest descriptions that were written down and make a guess to try and distinguish the theology, law, geology, astronomy and other books from each other.

Still, there was a suffocatingly strong appeal in the handwritten books put out on the display shelves. Each and every letter, even the pen marks, was lovingly written down like an emblem. Even I, who couldn't understand the contents of the books, was still affected by how precious the letters were. The letters themselves were the objects of monks' prayers.

Come to think of it, there are hand-copied sutras in Buddhism as well. Their meaning isn't as important as the religious exercise itself of copying them over character by character.

The monks who produced hand-written manuscripts also engaged in such incredible work in order to get closer to God. If you think about it that way, then the tens of thousands of books here are all condensed with the prayers of the monks who wrote them.

Something was trying to force its way into my skin and my breath. Inside this dense air, my existence and everything else was as helpless as a feather.

When I walked over close to the window, I felt the presence of people.

Covered up by the intense feeling from the books, the feeling of human presence pushed on the back of my neck. It was covered in hundreds of years of piled up letters, words and prayers, but it was without a doubt the presence of a living person.

When I turned around, he slowly passed behind me and was about to come back around. He was an old man wearing a tea-brown sweater. The presence of the books that filled the room was so thick I didn't realize it, but there was another woman, and a monk with his long hem rolled up to around his waist in the room too.

The old man slowly made his way over to where I was by the window, and he looked up at the top part of it.

There were wrinkles carved into his round face, and the skin sagged down from his chin to his neck. His eyes were bloodshot and sharp. Sadness slowly flowed out of them. I was taken aback.

He must have realized how I felt, and he smiled modestly.

Since it was an old building there were few windows, and they were vertically very long. The amount of sunlight that came in from them was small, and the old man probably only saw me as a silhouette. When I turned around though, I could even see his eyes that were squinted from the brightness, and each of his long eyebrows.

Looking up again at the high-up top part of the window, the old man murmured something that I didn't understand. I moved away from the window and he spoke to me again, this time in English.

"My wife is up there."

As strange as it seems, that is certainly what the old man said, pointing to the section of the wall above the window.

"Your wife?"

The old man might have been a bit soft in the head.

A monk came by and shook the old man's hand, then left to a room in the back. From how he looked, I could sense he had a deep affection for the old man. They looked as if they were friends, or as if they knew each other from some where....

I moved away from the window and looked at the part of the wall that the old man was gazing up at.

It was an unclear painted picture that I could tell was some sort of a flower vase with a design on it. After several hundred years, it had severely deteriorated, and the backlight got in the way of seeing it as well.

"That's a flower vase right?"

"Does it look like a flower vase?"

"Yes, it is a flower vase."

"Can you see the woman wearing red clothes further in?"

I strained my eyes to see, and a figure that looked like a human appeared.

"Yeah, it does look like a person."

"She's my wife."

Just as I thought, I should probably get away from this old man.

"All the people in the monastery say that it's a religious scholar painted by Rosenstal. But if you look closely you can see that it's a woman. I knew it was a woman with just one look, and I fell in love with her. That was a long time ago."

"But it's a flower vase."

"That flower vase, it was painted on top of the woman by Johan Berger using secco. Even though he painted over her, my wife couldn't stand such treatment, and she came out from within the vase."

"...what is secco?"

"Rosenstal painted fresco on damp walls. Secco are murals that are painted on dry walls. However fresco is much stronger. After the painting dried, as time passed the fresco painting appeared from underneath the secco flower vase he painted, and now it's pushed its way through the vase on the surface. After a hundred more years it will completely come through. That will be nice. And that's why she is more of a living human being than a painting. Even if you try pushing her into the wall, it won't do anything."

"And so she is your wife?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"So does that mean she is your Madonna?"

"I married her. She came down from the wall and looked outside the window, standing there like you are now. After she came down only the flower vase could be seen. We lived together and she died four years ago. It was then that, again, she returned *there*."

After he told me this, the painting of the person became clearer. It was definitely not a male scholar; it was a woman wearing red clothes.

"I'm the owner," he said, taking out a business card from his pocket.

There was the name of a restaurant and a map on the card.

"Are you Japanese?"

"Yes."

"Did you come from Vienna?"

"I took a train from West Station."

"So then you didn't go through Krems. If you came by going through Krems, then my restaurant should have caught your eye. We have a famous Austrian wine called Jamek. It's the restaurant right near the winery, the one with a billboard for the Collared Crow."

There was even a picture of the Collared Crow on the business card. It seemed that he wasn't such an unreliable old man after all.

I said that I had come to Melk before taking that road by car.

"This window is special you know. If you're not in a hurry, please come and have lunch at my restaurant. It's twenty minutes by car."

"But I'm not the woman that came down from the wall you know."

We both laughed. I decided to trust the old man. Him using a cane also put me at ease.

We walked to the parking lot. His name was Peter, and he drove to Melk every day to see his wife.

The parking lot was built on an open space that we had to climb up stairs to get to. The old man said that going up and down the stairs using a cane was difficult, but since his wife had returned to Melk, he had no other choice.

His car was a luxury German make, and it was remodeled to accommodate its handicapped driver.

In the dark library room he had looked around seventy years old, but in the bright parking lot, it was obvious that he was older than that.

"So what's up at your restaurant today?"

"I work only when I want to. I've handed over the store to my son now. I used to be the head wine steward at Jamek, but then my leg gave out, so I've passed the baton onto my son."

Hearing that I felt even more relaxed around Peter.

The Melk river joins with the Danube river and then flows away heading east. I had a recollection about the roads that follow along the Danube and the rows of trees on the side of the roads. The plentiful leaves were right in the middle of falling off of the trees right now, and the leaves that had already fallen were dancing on the roads. The bare spaces in the trees were filled by the light from the surface of the river, and the gentle, never-changing autumn scenery moved me.

The Collared Crow restaurant was tiny and had its parking lot in the front yard, but the collared crows on the billboard certainly did stick out. More than crows, they looked like black pigeons, and they had a slanted ash-grey band that ran around their shoulders. When I told him I had never seen them before in Japan, he said that those birds were everywhere around here.

In the background of the restaurant, all of the mountains were dyed a golden yellow, like the yellow leaves on grapes, just like the ones that Peter uses to make his homemade wine at his restaurant.

"And my wine," added Peter in a small voice, "it tastes even better than Jamek wine. That's what my son says so I know it's true."

I suddenly felt hungry. I hadn't eaten since I was on the train and had a Kaiser roll and ham sandwich.

There were a good number of customers in the restaurant, but it seemed as though everyone was just on their way driving to Melk. The restaurant was family-style, with only five tables. They were decorated with white tablecloths and a flower vase on top of each one, and there were grape-leaf yellow leaves under each vase. The fragrance of bread and the smell of cheese gave me a homely feeling.

Peter introduced me to a young chef in an apron. He was a thin man with large eyes.

"This is my son."

When he introduced me, an odd expression crept up on the chef's face, as if he was squinting his eyes at a bright light, or looking at a far away shimmer of hot air.

"...did you meet the woman in the wall?"

"Yes, I heard the story about the woman overpowering the vase. Peter said that she is his wife?"

I wanted to see what kind of reaction the chef would give, but he only put away his tired, small smile and didn't respond to my question.

The young chef's eyes were Arabian black, and his hair was glossy too. Not only did he not resemble Peter at all, but he looked like he was from a different country.

I kind of felt wary about Peter, but that type of blood relationship stuff doesn't really matter. There was a sense of closeness between them of acknowledgement and trust. And above all Peter certainly was the owner of the restaurant.

The main course for lunch that we ordered was a fragrant dish of brook trout meunière with a white wine sauce. The white wine, herbs, and the powerfully sour apples that you can only get in Krems came together deliciously, giving the clean, white trout a rich flavor.

Peter put grape seed oil on his trout. He recommended I do it too, but I declined. Apparently the oil was made from squeezed grape seeds, and it was a little bitter. Even the bread was homemade. It had a hard exterior, but the inside was kept soft and moist. The more you bit into it the more flavor came out of it. Peter told me that everything was made by the young chef.

"He is a wonderful chef, but he doesn't look like you at all Peter. He looks much more like the woman in the wall, doesn't he?"

"Coco."

The old man's eyes relaxed.

"Is that your wife's name?"

"Coco in the red clothes."

"Is that the name of the woman in the picture? Or is your wife's name Coco?"

Having listened in on our conversation, the chef took a break and brought over a framed picture of a woman. He put it on the tablecloth and said,

"This is his wife."

She wasn't wearing red clothes, but she was instead a plain, country-looking woman wearing a Tryol-style outfit. The chef said that she was Peter's wife. So he wasn't Peter's son after all. He wasn't acting as if he was showing a picture of his own mother.

When Peter went to the restroom, I called the chef over and asked him.

"Are you really Peter's son?"

The chef just shrugged his shoulders.

"Peter is probably going to take you to the vineyard. Just think of it as a way of thanking him for lunch. Just hang out with him and listen to his stories. For a long time, Peter was the chef here, though after he lost his wife I took over. His wife was a wonderful woman too, and for a long time the two of them ran the Collared Crow as a couple. It was his wife who gave the restaurant the name the Collared Crow in the first place."

"So she came out of the wall, and then returned back into it?"

"It was a big scandal at the monastery."

As he said that, the chef's eyes filled with an air of mischievousness and pity.

Peter came back soon afterward, and the chef went away.

Peter and I left the restaurant and went out for a walk to the vineyard in the back.

From far away, it looked like a slope of nothing but yellow, but the subtle shades of the different varieties of grapes were very diverse. Each section showed off different hues.

There was green mixed in with the yellow leaves, but rather than it being due to different varieties of grapes, it was because some vines grew a little taller, and if you looked closely you saw that they had green bunches of fruit. They didn't seem ripe yet, but their skin was tight and they were growing well. The shorter trellis on the left side was already completely harvested, and the ones that had leaves were just about to wither and fall. The yellow on the other remaining leaves was changing to crimson as well.

Peter walked slowly with his cane, and I kept along with his slow pace.

According to Peter's explanation, the crimson color mixes in with the leaves on the red grapes. He explained all the different types to me, even the different kinds of wines that could be made using them.

"And this vine here, it'll be made into the house wine that you had for lunch. It's a sturdy variety, so it requires the least amount of upkeep. When an icy wind comes head-on from the other side of that hill and blows the leaves off the vines, then you'll see the real strength and flexibility of its branches."

"When will all of its leaves fall off?"

"Probably in about a month. They bear the cold wind by wrapping their branches around themselves in the snow. I wish my wife was as sturdy as they are."

The narrow paths divided often and sloped uphill. The meandering path gave off the feeling of being lost in a yellow forest. Even the paths that were used as farm roads during harvest season and should have specialized carts passing by on it were completely silent. At the forks in the paths, there were small shrines set up with crucifixes inside of them. They seemed out of place in the yellow forest. Their color had been peeled away by wind and rain, but thanks to the roof the red blood stain under Christ's crown of thorns was kept fresh.

Even as the paths turned and bent, the grape vines grew in a straight line. Lush belts of grass stretched out as far as the eye could see between them. Harvesting machines must go along on top of those belts.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Under such ample afternoon sunlight, both the grapevines that had not yet born fruit and the ones that were already harvested dreamed golden dreams.

It was almost too beautiful, and things that are too beautiful can be scary. The golden color in Melk's worship hall was scary, and the golden paint on the binding of the books that were buried for over one hundred years in the library room was scary as well.

Even the old man walking slowly with a cane in this golden colored vineyard....

I slowed myself down.

Were the old man's legs really bad? Was that just a normal cane?

The trout that I had just eaten felt like it was swimming in the bottom inside my stomach.

Where were we walking to? He hadn't opened his mouth for several minutes. He was just walking toward his destination.

A vine whose leaves were wrapped with a tinge of red that was obviously a different type of grapevine from the ones I saw before continued ahead.

Peter went into that field off of the paved path. It was grassy and soft, but not so much that your shoes sunk into the ground.

"How far are we going?"

My voice was stiffly cheerful.

He just kept walking.

On the left and right, a red and yellow wall of vines continued straight on. At the end there was a stone wall, but it was so far away and would probably be tough to get to. The trout moved around mushily inside my stomach. I was glad for the meal, but it's true that nothing is as expensive as something that is free. I'd need a reason to head back at this point. I searched frantically for a reason. The sweat shone on the back of Peter's head.

He stopped walking.

Only in the spot he stopped were the grape vines cut away, and there was a long bench set up.

When he put his cane between his legs and sat down, he let out a deep sigh, just as you would expect from a tired old man.

I made a space for myself too, and I sat down. So this is where he was heading this whole time. So coming here was how I had to repay him for lunch.

I could see black fruit under the red and yellow leaves on the grapevines around us. They were rotting and filling the air with a sweet smell. I didn't realize it while we were walking, but it was an oppressively strong scent. The air that was thick with a smell that I couldn't decide to be ripe or rotten, which had fused with the grass and dirt and wrapped itself around my body and face.

"The grapes, they're rotting aren't they?"

"...they have a bacteria on them so that as they rot, they dry up. See, there's some white ones over there. After a little bit longer, the red color will turn to an ash-grey. That's when they are the sweetest. That's when we harvest them."

Ah, I see, so they will be turned into wine made with noble rot grapes.

"It wouldn't turn out as sweet if they didn't rot, right?"

He must have seen through my nervousness and just played with the cane with his hands.

"...do you always invite out people from that library room and then bring them here?"

"Only women. Even Coco... standing in the window... was one of them."

"She came out of the picture?"

"No one believed me. Far from it, they said that the person drawn within the vase was a man. All of the monks in the monastery said so. They gave me stern looks as if they were going to put me on trial for heresy."

He thrust the cane in his hand into the ground with a bang. The cane sank into the earth. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes were bloodshot. With his mind elsewhere, he wielded an intensity like when I first met him in the library room. My field of vision jumped away from the golden-colored fields and pierced the high-up empty sky.

"You don't mean..."

"I was a monk. That window showed me a new world. That window, it secretly lured monks to the outside world for hundreds of years. Can you imagine how many monks the woman that Rosenstal drew tempted? You can't use fire in the library room, and there was no heating or candlesticks. So everyone depended on the long and narrow light that came in

from the window to read books. You couldn't take out books from the library room, so even copying was done by the window. Many monks died from cold and tuberculosis while they were still young. Even I almost died. When I was on the verge of death a woman came down from inside the wall and stood by the window. It was Coco. She was wearing red clothes. Ah, I was saved; she had come to save me."

The chilly, heavy air in the monastery's library room was revived around us. I was Coco standing in the window, and in front of my eyes there stood a skeleton of a young man with a pale face. His eyes were exhausted from training, urgently seeking human warmth, and at the verge of death, fell in love.

The youth's long black clothes were tied with a string at the hips. He had a stiff, white collar, and he had a cross on his chest. This monk from the Order of Benedict was stirred by every inch of my body, and he was shaking in fear from the unusual event taking place inside of him.

"And then, what did you do after?"

To cover up my dry throat I deliberately opened my mouth slowly.

"I didn't do anything. I've always been with Coco."

"She died, and then hid behind the flower vase in the wall again?"

"Yes but her body sleeps here."

"Where?"

"Here," he said, pointing to the ground beneath the bench.

It came blowing up from the depths of the earth. My body trembled at the smell of the sweetly rotting, perfectly mature grapes.

I was being tricked by him. No, the story was definitely true. The crimson color on the grapevines around the bench was especially beautiful, and the fruits ran down them leading the royal rot.

"That's an interesting story."

My voice was hoarse. My heart was beating so loud even Coco buried in the ground could probably hear it.

A black shadow passed over my head. The shadow fell inside a nearby grapevine and shook some of the leaves.

When the old man cleared his throat, the shape of a black, long-beaked bird the size of a pigeon appeared between the leaves, and it nimbly popped down on top of the grass. Remaining cautious, it came over to us. It had an ash-grey collar around its neck.

The old man picked off a grape from a nearby vine and threw it. The collared crow ran over swiftly, put it in its mouth, and bounced away.

"The fruit from these vines are especially sweet. Do you want to try some?"

He plucked off another bunch. Half of them had lost their moisture and had withered into an ashy violet color. They were strange things.

"...this smell, see?" he said, bringing them close to my nose.

More than just fruit, it was a living thing with a hidden, quiet determination. It had the smell of the air that living creatures spew out. Enticing, aggressive lumps of air gently rode along on my face.



Peter's pale face was right nearby. The living creature was hanging between mine and Peter's faces.

I checked out the smell with my nose, took one without any ash-grey rotting bacteria on it, and put it in my mouth. Just that one was not enough, and I ate another crumbling one. Far more than just a flavor of sweetness, it left a sharp numbness on the tip of your tongue, making you feel like it fermented right on the vine.

"It was this color, wasn't it?" I confirmed.

"The clothes that the woman was wearing in that picture was certainly this color...."

I remembered it being a deep color that was both red and black. Tears appeared in the eyes of the old man.

"Thank you for the meal. I'm glad to have met you. You two are a wonderful couple."

I couldn't take any more. I stood up and walked away.

He stayed seated on the bench, unmoving.

At the juncture in the path we came on, I ran into the crucifix statue again. It was put on that cross as if a guardian deity of the fields.

Every time a monk gets tired of training, picks out a woman and passes through here, I wonder what Christ says? The young chef said there was a big scandal at the monastery, but in the pictures of Coco there wasn't anything close to what could be called scandalous. She just had the appearance of a country girl you'd find anywhere who grew up into an old woman.

When I returned to the restaurant, the chef was in the middle of seeing off some customers he knew.

"Peter's together with Coco in the vineyard," I said, and he nodded, understanding everything. He asked the couple getting into their car if they could bring me as far as Sankt Pölten.

Savoring the sharp feeling on my tongue, I got in their car.

## **The Golden Fields of Melk**

By Takagi Nobuko

I had visited Melk once before, by car, a long time ago.

That time, it was early spring. The forest trees lined the Danube like fortifications, and hanging above them was a hazy white moon.

The sky, as though hesitating to darken, remained dimmed to a pale navy blue. Low down, just a little distance from the tips of the mountains, the moon slid along, following our car.

I'll come again, I said to the moon.

Now, intending to fulfil that promise, I had caught a train from Vienna West Station. This time the season was different: it was October, and the air was crisp.

I was used to travelling Austria on my own.

The last time I visited Melk, I went with another Japanese woman, who was studying at the University of Vienna. She drove. This time, however, I was reluctant to ask her again and had chosen to catch the train. The staff at the stations and on the trains can speak English, and most importantly, German speakers' English is easy to understand. I can get by with English in restaurants, hotels, and taxis.

I arrived in Sankt Pölten in forty minutes. While I waited to change to a local train, I made friends with an elderly lady and her dog. The lady proudly told me that Melk's Abbey was the most beautiful in the world, and even her dog joined in with a high-pitched bark.

I reached Melk station after less than half an hour on the local train. Melk Abbey sits on a tall hill, with stone and deep green clinging to it like clouds, its brown roof stretched out high in the sky.

The long walls beneath the roof are painted in stripes of white and yellow, making the building look like a solid fortress, but the green dome that rises from the centre and the two towers nearer to the river are decorative and incredibly ornate.

The two towers are vivid in white, yellow, and the dull green of oxidised copper. The curving lines that flow from the tips of the towers down towards the clock faces glitter all over with gold. The exterior alone looks more like a castle than a church or an abbey, and then the inside of the church, as well, is lavishly constructed with multicoloured marble and gold. On top of that, the moulding, right down to the fine details, performs gentle curves; it's not for nothing that this place is known as the crown jewel of Austrian Baroque.

The architects who reconstructed this building into its current shape in the first half of the eighteenth century, with great faith and masses of gold, must have decided to make a heaven on earth on that hill in Melk. It is easy to tell that it was not produced from love and lofty aspirations, but from the energy born of obsession.

The last time I stood within this church the golden colouring overwhelmed me. It occurred to me that when humans are surrounded by gold they can lose all sense of reality, even the sense of the weight of their own bodies. At that time I felt that this might make

sense to the Japanese Pure Land Buddhist way of thought, and I realised that I wanted to relive this bodily experience of the enchantment of the colour gold.

The abbey's history, before it came to shine with the beauty of the Baroque movement, began in around the tenth century in the fortress era. It seems that firstly a chapel for the soldiers stationed in the area was built within the centre of their fortifications. The fortresses that guarded the border region then known as Mölk took their names from tributaries of the Danube: Enns, Ybbs, Melk, Krems, and so on. The most important of these was Melk. The Babenbergs, who ruled the area at the time, gave their protection to the contemplative monks, founded the abbey, and made it the stronghold of the Benedictine Order. From then on, though rulers changed and eras passed, the abbey managed not only to maintain its central position within the church, but also came to lead the way in theological arts and scholarship.

Of course, Melk Abbey suffered a number of trials. One of those was the political and economic unrest that was brought on by religious reform. However, the abbey joined forces with the University of Vienna and in fact took the lead, initiating the monastic revolution that came to be known as the Melk Reform.

What is interesting is that at this time, Melk Abbey chose the doctrine of the University of Vienna Council over the Pope in Rome. This caused their relationship with the Pope to sour, but they made doctrine—in other words, scholarship—their priority. Today truth is explained by science, but at that time to seek truth was to seek to know the mind of God. Within this context, Melk Abbey, able to work at new ways of developing their doctrine, was the gathering place for what we might now call intellectuals.

The abbey has also suffered a countless number of fires.

In such a cold area, the only way to stay warm in winter was to light fires. The wind of the river fanned the fires in the abbey on the top of the hill. Because it was in a high place there was not enough water, and small accidental fires became disasters.

The fire at the end of the thirteenth century destroyed the library. During that blaze, some of the hymns and Easter plays from Melk Abbey's early years and other valuable manuscripts were saved from the flames through the sacrifices of some monks. Around this time there had been a scriptorium at the abbey, where the monks were ardently producing portrait miniatures and annals, but it seems that most of these have been lost.

Even more tragic was the Great Fire of 1736. A group of interior designers, plaster artists and sculptors, centred on the foremost architect of the time, Jakob Prandtauer, were giving full play to their skills. When most of the work was done and they were only a step or so from completion, they were beset on by fire and lost most of the roofing and the dormer rooms that decorated it. The abbot at the time, Berthold Dietmayr, rose to the challenge of starting reconstruction, but died still amidst his bitter disappointment, and it was the prior's efforts that brought forth the flower of Baroque that exists today.

These two fire disasters incurred huge damages, but it seems there were also a number of less noteworthy fires, and everyone in the abbey fears fire to a level bordering on the paranoid. Maybe the priests and the monks wear such long robes and full sleeves in order to fend off the cold in their day-to-day activities without having to use fire.

This region is particularly cold even for Europe, and when I came in spring Melk River still had ice over it. This time, it was autumn, and although the sky was still shining beautifully with the remnants of summer, the temperature had dropped to around ten degrees Celsius, foreshadowing the long winter ahead.

Along the stone-paved street in front of the town hall, the restaurants were open with their tables, tablecloths and chairs set out, but there was no sign of customers at the moment,

and elderly locals were taking leisurely cups of tea. They had the feel of people pausing for a breath in their yearly routines after finishing the summer's work.

The main street was so narrow that the staff in the cafes and the souvenir stores on either side could converse without raising their voices. Looking down over the street were the abbey's two towers and green dome. The abbey watched over and monitored all of the life of this town.

When I walked up the gentle slope, I was greeted by a beautiful gate, a round arch topped with a triangular roof. I could see another of these gates further ahead. The monastery really is an inner sanctum: visitors cannot go inside, although they are permitted to see inside the church and other fixed areas. Wherever visitors may be allowed, though, there was not another soul in sight right now.

As I went to pass through the first gate, I heard the sound of a big flock of birds taking flight from either side of the courtyard within. I instinctively drew back, but it turned out to be children and not birds. Some dozens of children dashed through the gates at once and ran down the slope of the stone-paved street, and then I was alone again.

After I had watched the children go on their way, a teacherly-looking monk in a black robe and white collar appeared. He came towards me, and smiled a greeting. With an expression that seemed to acknowledge my surprise, he told me, with an affectionate grimace,

"We call them 'the winds'."

"That's a good name." I replied with an answering smile.

"They're the lower students in the secondary school. When they wear their white formal uniform, we call them 'the rabbit winds'."

I wondered where the rabbits-out-of-uniform had gone. Without answering my question, the teacher told me,

"They stop running when they become seniors."

Once again, behind his glasses there was laughter in his eyes.

I supposed that a chosen few among them would eventually undergo much stricter training as monks in the Benedictine order, and rise up to priesthood.

In the silence after the winds had blown through, I walked towards the next gate. It was quiet. I had heard that inside the huge buildings, there were a great number of people, from students to monks, and that most of them lived in the dormitories. But the air around me felt clear, as if unsullied by human breath.

In any religious place, whether Christian or Buddhist, there is a high value placed on silence. I like this atmosphere. Like cold white wine, it soaks through my lungs and into my soul.

The chapel within this church, that white wine atmosphere, was enhanced by the crisp sensation brought on by the colour of gold, and it intoxicated me.

There were a few stationary churchgoers in there. They were greatly outnumbered by the figures bedecked in gold leaf, who gazed down on me with the benevolent serenity of those living in heaven. At first I felt flustered, excited, but I soon sank into calm.

The prominent high altar was covered with marble and gold. On top of the tabernacle, Peter and Paul, hand in hand, were lamenting their parting. It looked as though they had acknowledged the certainty of death and were giving each other strength, yet their entire bodies were golden, and the prophets arranged around them, Daniel, Jeremiah, David, Isaiah,

and the other figures from the Old Testament were also completely golden. Every one of the saints and angels that were stuck all over the altar sparkled with that same colour. I felt that this was a deliberate scheme to use splendour to bewitch people, and that put me on my guard.

Peter and Paul were executed on the same day. Peter was crucified upside down, and Paul, as a Roman citizen, was beheaded. The woman in the deep red cloak, painted on the fresco on the high altar, had a crown of thorns on her head, and there were instruments of torture scattered at her feet. She must have been able to ascend to such heights because she endured torture. Which meant that underneath this mass of gold flowed tremendous quantities of blood.

No matter how magnificent, how splendid it may be, one aspect of Christianity is about testing the spirit through the suffering of the flesh, so that the whole religion is pervaded with screams and agony.

The process whereby martyrs are sainted and a church takes some part of that saint's flesh or remains and worships them as its patron, has a history in many different parts of Europe. However, the body of Saint Coloman, the pilgrim who was hanged from an Elder tree, was brought in to Melk before it had even decomposed. Even now he is laid out in a gold-trimmed glass case, his skeleton decked out with ornamentation.

When I walked past that case I felt a little sorry for him. Not only was he hanged from an Elder tree; on top of that, his bare white bones were still exposed to watching eyes, a thousand years later.

On leaving the chapel, I walked down a long hall with iron lights hanging from the whitewashed ceiling. The electric bulbs in these iron lights were probably a relatively recent addition to Melk Abbey. I supposed that before that, the light of oil lamps and candles would have revealed only vague human shadows.

I walked up the wide stone staircase, and went further into the exhibition area, where a sign indicated the Imperial Rooms. In the Marble Hall was the first sightseer I had encountered since I came into the building. It was a young woman shouldering a backpack, comparing the pictures on the wall with some kind of pamphlet that she held in her hand. When I walked past her we exchanged smiles, and I felt relieved to see her.

Whether it be the Imperial Rooms, the Marble Hall, or some other part, it was clear that the Babenbergs and the Habsburgs, the ruling houses of Austria, valued Melk as a spiritual centre. For them it was a place of worship, a seminary, a fortress and a palace.

The Marble Hall was where the emperor met with the prelates, and must have been given messages from God. When I continued on, a wind suddenly blew up from the river; I had just emerged from the furthestmost tip of the A-shaped building.

The town and river of Melk, from where I had walked up earlier, and the surrounding greenish gray trees flickered, wearing the midday sunlight like a white veil. When I looked closely I saw that the river was moving ceaselessly in one direction.

Closer to me than this scene, and separate from the row of Imperial Rooms, was an area that was much more abbey-like. This was where people from the outside were allowed to enter the library. The library was even more appealing than the shining gold chapel. I had visited Melk for a second time to see this library again.

I opened the thick doors and stepped into an atmosphere completely different from the splendid golden chapel. The library was muffled in a stern, heavy silence.

Apart from the narrow window openings on the side walls, the long rectangular room is stuffed to the ceilings with leather-bound books. All of these leather-bound volumes have

designs and lettering inscribed on them in gold, but the gold is dulled and dark, and they bear the weight of hundreds of years. It is a mountain of dead books.

Most of these were copied out by hand, so a huge amount of human effort has been concentrated into this room. When I imagined it like that, what I had thought of as corpses of books seemed now to be brimming with power, accumulations of voices and sighs and perspiration.

What was the sensation that had come upon me the last time I stood in the centre of this room? I wanted to feel it again.

When I tried to put it into words it didn't sound particularly special.

I felt amazed by people, and the things they will do.

The volume of handwritten homilies from the ninth century, as well as tenth and eleventh century hand-copied Virgil manuscripts are held here. In the twelfth century, Jerome's commentaries were copied here. There is *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, bibles, legal documents, theological texts, even the *Life of Jesus* by Frau Ava, who is said to be the earliest female writer in the German language. About two thirds of all the copied manuscripts are apparently from the fifteenth century, but not all of the pages have yet been turned. More recently, that is to say in 1997, there was a great excitement when Dr Christine Glassner opened a late medieval text and discovered a hand-copied fragment of *The Song of the Nibelungs* from the 1300s placed carefully between its pages.

Apart from hand-copied manuscripts, the library contains what are known as old editions, which are early printed books: there are 1700 pieces from sixteenth century, 4500 from the seventeenth century, and the numbers increased sharply to 18000 items in the eighteenth century. In total, 100000 volumes are held in this library.

What I was able to ascertain with my own eyes was only a small fraction of that great number of books. Because I cannot read Latin or German, I could only guess at which volumes were theological, or legal texts, earth sciences, or works on astronomy and so on, by checking the unspecific explanations that were written about the books.

Even so, the one beautiful text that was shown in the display case had such an impact it took my breath away. Every single letter was lovingly and beautifully penned, as though each one was an emblem. I could not understand the meanings of the words but I understood that the writing itself was precious. I wondered if people had prayed to these letters themselves.

Actually, there were also hand-copied sutras in the Buddhist tradition. It seems as though copying something out letter by letter, without questioning its meaning, is a religious act. The monks who copied the texts also pursued these gargantuan tasks in order to get closer to God. Which meant that some hundreds of years of monks' prayers were compressed into these in these 10000 volumes.

Something overbearing was trying to force itself into my skin and my breath. In the dense atmosphere of this room, my existence had no more weight or meaning than a feather's...

When I walked closer to the window, I sensed the presence of another person behind me.

I was reeling in the overbearing presence of the books, yet I also felt someone's eyes on me. Overwhelmed by the hundreds of years of letters and words and prayers piled up on one another, I could nevertheless feel, unmistakably, the living, breathing presence of another human.

When I turned around, he was in the act of passing slowly by me and then turning back. It was an old man wearing a brown sweater. The feeling of the books that buried the room

was so strong that I hadn't noticed, but in the room with us there was also another woman as well as a monk, his robes gathered around his waist.

The old man came slowly over to the window where I was standing and stood looking up at the panel above it. His round face was lined with wrinkles and the skin from his jaw to his neck was drooping, but I was taken aback by his eyes which, bloodshot and sharp, were awash with a gentle sorrow.

He noticed that I was there and smiled hesitantly.

Being an old building, there were few windows, and those that did exist were tall and narrow. Facing towards the little sunlight that made its way in, the old man could probably only see my silhouette. With my back to the window, I could make out the individual lashes on his eyes narrowed against the sun.

The man gazed back up at the panel above the high window and muttered something I couldn't understand. When I made to move away from the window he said something to me, this time in English.

"—my wife is in there."

I was sure that was what he said. He was pointing to the wall above the window.

"Your wife?" He was probably just a slightly strange old man.

The monk approached us, shook hands with the old man, and disappeared into an inner room. He exuded an air of great affection for the old man. As though they knew each other, were friends...

I also walked away from the window and looked up to the wall the old man was gazing at. There was an indistinct picture painted there. It could have been of a vase or just a pattern - it had deteriorated over the some hundreds of years, and on top of that the light was shining in my eyes.

"That's a vase, isn't it?"

"Does it look like a vase?"

"Yes, it's a vase."

"Can't you see, within that, the woman wearing red?"

When I looked harder, I could make out the figure of a person.

"Yes, it does look like a person."

"That's my wife."

That settled it, I needed to get away from this old man.

"All the monks here say that that's a portrait by Rosenstahl of a scholar of the church, but if you look carefully you can tell that it's a woman. I knew as soon as I saw it, and I fell in love with her. This was quite a long time ago, though."

"It's a vase."

"The vase is another layer that was painted over the woman by Johann Bergl, in secco. He painted it over her, but my wife refused to put up with that treatment, and she came forward from behind the vase."

"What's secco?"

"Rosenstahl painted the fresco on wet plaster. Secco is painted on a dry wall. But the fresco was stronger. Over the years, it came out from underneath the vase that was painted

over the dry wall, and now the fresco looks about to push out the painting that's on the surface. After another hundred years they will have changed places completely. It's wonderful. Of course living people win over objects. There is no way the fresco can be pushed back into the wall".

"And that is your wife?"

"Yes, that's right."

"You mean, she is your Madonna?"

"We married. She came down from the wall there, and was looking outside the window from just where you are standing now. At that time, only the vase was left on the wall. We lived together, and she died four years ago. After that, she went back *there*."

As I listened to his story, the figure began to seem clearer to me. Admittedly it did look like a woman in red clothing and not a male scholar.

"I am the owner of this place," he said, pulling a business card out of his pocket.

The card had the name of a restaurant and a map on it.

"Are you Japanese?"

"Yes."

"Did you come here from Vienna?"

"Yes, on the train from the Vienna West Station."

"That means you didn't come via Krems. If you had driven here through Krems, you would have seen my restaurant. There is Jamek, the famous Austrian wine. The restaurant is right near the winery, with a sign of a hooded crow."

There was also a picture of the hooded crow on his business card. He didn't seem to be a creepy old man.

I told him that I had driven along the road to Melk another time.

"This window is special, you know. If you're not in a hurry please come and have lunch at my restaurant. It's only twenty minutes in the car."

"But you know I'm not a lady who has come out of the wall?"

We both smiled. I decided to trust him. The fact that he had a walking stick made me feel safer.

We walked to the car park. I learned that his name was Peter and that he drove to Melk every day to meet his wife. The car park had been built in the large square at the base of the stairs. I asked Peter if it wasn't difficult to go up and down the stairs with his walking stick, but he told me his wife had returned to the Melk so there was nothing to be done about it.

His car was an expensive German model, refitted for someone with a disability. In the dark library he had looked around seventy years old, but in the brightly lit car park it became obvious that he was older than that.

"How is the restaurant running without you today?"

"I only work when I want to. I have transferred the ownership to my son now. He was the head sommelier at Jamek, but my leg went bad so I handed the baton over to him."

I felt even safer with Peter after hearing this.



Melk River joins the Danube and flows eastwards. I remembered the road that ran alongside the river, and the trees that lined the sides of the road. Right now the trees were dropping their leaves enthusiastically, and the scattered leaves were dancing about on the road. The gaps between the bare branches of the trees were filled by the radiance of the water's surface, and I felt that this tranquil scene was the eternal image of autumn.

The restaurant, *The Hooded Crow*, had a car park in the front garden. It was a homely little place but the sign of the hooded crow was certainly eye-catching. It looked more like a black pigeon than a crow, with a belt of grey running at an angle around its shoulders. I said that I had never seen this kind of bird in Japan, and Peter replied that they were very common in this area.

In the backdrop to the restaurant, all of the mountains were dyed a bright yellow. It was the yellow of the leaves of the grapevines. At Peter's restaurant they served their own homemade wine. And, Peter added in a small voice,

"It's tastier than the Jamek wine. My son says so, so it must be true."

I suddenly realised I was hungry. I hadn't eaten since the train, and all I had then was semmel stuffed with ham.

There were a number of groups of customers at the restaurant, but it seemed as though everyone was stopping on their drive to Melk. There were only five tables in a cosy room, with bunches of flowers set on the white tablecloths. The vases sat on top of arrangements of yellow grape leaves. The scents of bread and cheese filled me with a feeling of well-being.

Peter introduced me to the young chef in an apron, who was a thin, wide-eyed man. "This is my son."

When Peter said that, the chef squinted his eyes against the sunlight with a strange expression of deep emotion on his face, as though he was staring into shimmering waves of heat in the distance.

"Did you meet the woman in the wall?"

"Yes, and I heard about how she is stronger than the vase. Peter says that she is his wife."

I wanted to see how the chef would react, but his face just returned to a practised smile, and he did not respond to my question.

The young chef had dark, Arabic eyes, and his hair was glossy. He was entirely unlike Peter, as though he was from a different country. That made me a little dubious of Peter's words, but it didn't really bother me. There was a feeling of closeness between these two, as though they tolerated and trusted each other. I wondered if Peter really was the owner of the restaurant.

The main course of the lunch they brought me was a river trout in a fragrant white wine meuniere sauce. The white wine and herbs went wonderfully with sour apples that could only be found in Krems, and brought a rich flavour to the clean white flesh of the trout.

Peter added grape seed oil to his trout, and offered some to me, but I declined. Apparently it was an oil pressed from the grape seeds, with a slightly bitter flavour. The bread was also home made, with a hard crust but still moist on the inside, and it was more flavoursome with every bite. I heard that the young chef had made all of this.

"He really is an excellent chef, but Peter, he doesn't look like you at all, does he? I suppose he takes after the woman in the wall?"

"Coco."

The old man's eyes softened.

"Was that your wife's name?"

"Coco, wearing red."

"You mean the lady in the picture? Or was your wife's name Coco?"

I'm not sure if he heard our conversation, but the chef, whose work had quietened down, brought out a framed photograph of a woman, set it on the table cloth and said,

"This is his wife."

She wasn't wearing red clothes, but was dressed in the Tyrolean style; she looked like an ordinary country woman. The chef had said that this was Peter's wife: it seemed that, just as I thought, he wasn't Peter's son. He didn't act as though he was sharing a photograph of his own mother.

When Peter went to the bathroom, I called the chef over and asked,

"Are you really their son?"

The chef just ducked his head.

"Peter will want to take you to the vineyards. Please just think of it as a thank you for the lunch, and spend a little time with him and be a good listener. Peter was the chef of this restaurant for a long time – I took over after he lost his wife. She was a wonderful woman, and they were able to run *The Hooded Crow* together for many years. I hear she was the one who named the place too."

"What does he mean, she came out of the wall and now she has gone back in there?"

"It was a huge scandal at the abbey" he said, and in his eyes mischief mingled with pity.

Peter had returned, so the chef walked away from the table.

Peter and I left the restaurant, and set off for the vineyards that stretched out behind the house. When you looked from a distance, the slope appeared to be all the same colour of yellow, but actually each type of grape was a subtly different shade, so that each block was a different hue. The vines that had green leaves still mixed in between the yellow were slightly taller than the other types, and when I looked closely I could see bunches of greener grapes attached to them. Apparently they weren't unripe: their skins were hard and strong. The trellis on the left side of that was lower, and had been harvested. The leaves were still attached but on the verge of drying up and dropping off. These remaining leaves were yellow, changing to red in some parts.

Peter moved slowly, using his walking stick, and I matched my pace to his.

According to his explanation, the leaves of red grapes had some red in them. He told me about the different varieties and about the flavours of the different wines that they produced.

"This vine makes the house wine that you drank at lunch. It's tough, which makes it the easiest to grow. Soon, when the cold winds blow from beyond that hill and scatter the leaves everywhere, it will be easy to see how strong and supple the vines are."

"When do all of the leaves fall off?"

"In about a month from now, I think. They twist their black tendrils up in the snow and endure the cold winds. I wish my wife had been as strong as they are."

The narrow road, splitting off into different tracks, continued diagonally across the slope. Its zigzag path gave me the illusion of being lost in a yellow forest.

It was harvest season, so you would expect farming vehicles to pass by on these dirt roads, but they were hushed and still. At the crossroads a small triangular shrine had been erected, with a crucifix statue inside it. It didn't fit in with the yellow forest around us. The colours were peeling from exposure to the elements, but thanks to the roof, the blood seeping from under the crown of thorns on Christ's head remained fresh and vivid.

Even as the road twisted and turned, the grape vines were set out in straight lines. In between them, belts of fresh green grass stretched off into the distance. I supposed they were for the machines to pass between the trellises for harvesting.

It was a beautiful afternoon. In the overflowing afternoon light, the grapevines—the ones that had been harvested, and the ones with grapes still hanging on them—were dreaming of gold together.

Yet there was too much beauty. Its overabundance was frightening. Frightening like the golden colour of the altar at Melk. Frightening like the gold-embossed spines of the books that had filled the abbey library for some hundreds of years.

Like the elderly man who walked slowly, stick in hand, through these golden fields...

My steps slowed.

I wondered if his leg really was bad. Was his walking stick only a stick?

I felt as though the river trout I had just eaten was swimming about in the depths of my stomach. How far was he going? He hadn't said anything for some minutes now. He simply walked on towards his destination.

Extending ahead were grapevines decked with reddish leaves, clearly different from the other plants I had seen so far. Peter left the dirt road and walked in amongst the trellises. It was soft underfoot, but not so much that my shoes sank into the earth.

"How far are you going?"

My voice was bright and brittle.

He simply walked on.

On either side, the walls of yellow and red continued on in straight lines, dead-ended by a stone wall. It looked so far away and difficult to reach. The river trout in my stomach squirmed. I was pleased they had given it to me, but there's no such thing as a free lunch. If I was going to turn back at this point, I needed a reason. I tried desperately to come up with one. The back of Peter's head was glistening with sweat.

He halted, standing.

The vines had been pruned back in one place, and a long stone bench was set there. Peter put his cane between his knees and sat down then sighed deeply, tired, not surprisingly.

I left the space of a person between us and sat down with him. So this was our destination. It seemed that this was where I was supposed to repay his kindness in giving me lunch. On the vines around us, I could see black fruits beneath the red and yellow leaves. They gave off a sweet rotting smell. I hadn't noticed it while we were walking, but it was quite stifling. I couldn't distinguish between ripe and rotten in the thick, heavy air, which merged with the smells of earth and grass and clung to my face and my body.

"The grapes are rotten, aren't they?"

"—Bacteria attach to them, and they dry out as they start to rot. Look, you can see something white on them. In a little while, the red colour will turn grey, and that is when they are at their sweetest. When they reach that point, we harvest them."

I saw now that these grapes would make noble rot wine.

“So, if they don’t rot, they don’t sweeten, right?”

I’m not sure if he had perceived my nervousness, but he simply held his cane in both hands, playing around with it.

“—Do you always invite people in that library and bring them out here?”

“Only women, and only the ones standing at that window...just like Coco was...”

“When she came out from the painting?”

“No one believed me. Far from it, they all told me that it was a man in that painting. Every single person at the abbey said that. They all began looking at me so harshly, as though they were going to call in the inquisition or something.”

He banged the cane in his hands onto the ground with a thud. It stabbed into the earth. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes were bloodshot. He had the same force as when I met him in the library, giving the impression of someone whose thoughts were a long way off. His gaze flew up from the golden fields and pierced the emptiness far above.

“...is it possible you...?” I said in a low voice.

“Yes, I was a monk. That window introduced me to a new world. That window, you know, has been secretly taking monks to the outside world for hundreds of years. Can you imagine how much the monks have been tempted by that woman that Rosenstahl painted? You are not allowed to light a fire in the library—there is no heating, not even candlesticks. That is why everyone makes use of that long, thin shaft of sunlight that comes in through the window. You are not allowed to take books out, so that’s where everyone did their copying as well. Most of them died young of tuberculosis. I came close to dying too. That’s when the woman came down out of the wall and stood by the window. It was Coco. She was wearing red then. Oh, she really helped me, she came out of the wall to save me.”

The cool heavy air of the abbey library came back to me, vividly. I became Coco, standing by the window, and standing in front of me was a skinny pale-faced young man. In his eyes I saw he was completely tired of the abbey, that he wanted desperately to cling to the warmth of another human being, that his life was hanging by a thread; I saw that he had fallen in love.

The youth’s long dark robes were tied around his waist with a cord. His collar was stiff and white and a crucifix hung on his chest. This Benedictine monk was affected by all of my body, and he shivered with fear at the strange transformation it caused inside him...

“What did you do after that?”

I opened my mouth deliberately slowly, trying to cover my dry voice.

“I didn’t do anything. I stayed together with Coco for the whole time.”

“Then she passed away, and was hidden back behind the vase in that painting on the wall?”

“Yes, but this is where her body rests.”

“Where?”

“Here,” he said, pointing to the earth underneath the bench.

A wind blew up from under the earth. My body swayed at the moist, heavy aroma of the ripened grapes that rotted and sweetened.

A trick was being played on me. Or no, it was probably true. The vines around this bench had an especially beautiful red in their leaves. The noble rot was working over the grapes; they bulged, on the brink of shrivelling up.

“It’s an interesting story.”

My voice was cracked. I felt as though my heartbeat was so loud even Coco could hear it from under the ground.

A black shadow passed over my head. It fell onto the grapevines a little distance away, and shook a few leaves. The old man made a sound in his throat and a long-beaked black bird, about the size of a pigeon, appeared from between the leaves and hopped down onto the grass. It approached us cautiously. On its neck was a grey hood.

The old man pulled a grape off a nearby vine and tossed it out. The hooded crow ran swiftly to nip it up and then fled.

“The fruits on this vine are especially sweet. Would you like to try them too?”

He plucked another bunch from the vine. They were strange half dried things, withered into a dull grayish purple.

“See, this is what they smell like,” he said, putting the grapes up to my nose.

They seemed less like fruit and more like living creatures, with some quiet hidden will of their own. I could smell the breath of a living thing. A lush, offensive pocket of air puffed at my face.

Peter’s white face was close to mine. Between our faces hung that living creature.

I sniffed at it, and then picked off one grape without bacteria decaying it. When that wasn’t enough, I ate another that was losing its shape. It didn’t taste sweet, but left a sharp numbness on the tip of my tongue, as though the grapes had fermented right there on the vine.

“This was the colour—” I checked again,

“—yes, this was the colour the woman in the painting was wearing.”

I recalled the deep shade that you might call red or black. There were tears welling in the old man’s eyes.

“Thank you so much for lunch. I am so glad we met. Your wife sounds wonderful.”

I couldn’t stand it any longer. I stood up and walked away.

He stayed seated on the bench, unmoving.

When I returned to the crossroads, I came across the crucifix again. Christ was perched on the cross as though he was the patron god of these fields.

I wondered what this Christ said to the man when he passed by, to the ex-monk who had broken his vows and chosen a woman instead. The young chef said that it had been a huge scandal at the abbey, but scandalous didn’t seem to be the right word to describe the Coco in the photograph. She looked like an elderly woman, who had once been a young country girl such as you might see anywhere.

When I returned to the restaurant, the chef had come outside to see off some acquaintances.

“Peter is in the vineyards with Coco” I told him. He nodded as if he understood everything, and asked the middle-aged couple getting into their car if they would give me a lift to Sankt Pölten.

Tasting the sharp sensation on the tip of my tongue, I climbed into the car.

The Golden Fields of Melk

By Takagi Nobuko

(75)

I had visited Melk by car once, long ago. It was in the beginning of a mild spring, and a misty moon hung white in the sky over the forest that stretched on like a fortress along the Danube River.

The navy blue tinged sky still had misgivings about setting. Along the horizon, the moon slid across the mountaintops as if following our car.

“I’ll return someday,” I told the moon.

I boarded a train from Vienna West station to make good of my word. The season was different than last time, the October air crisp.

I had grown accustomed to traveling alone through Austria.

Previously, I had a Japanese women studying at The University of Vienna act as my driver, but hesitant to impose on her a second time, I decided to take the train. The station workers and train staff speak English. German speakers have wonderfully intelligible English.

(76)

I could also get by at restaurants, hotels, and taxis in English.

Forty minutes later, I arrived in Sankt Pölten. There I changed over to a local train where I became friends with an old women and her dog. She boasted, “The Melk Abby is the most beautiful in the world.” She and her dog shared the same piercing yap.

The local train arrived at Melk in less than thirty minutes.

Melk Abby was seated atop a tall hill, its amber roof spread high across the sky presiding over the rocks and greenery like a cloud.

The long wall under the roof was painted with crisp white and yellow lines. It looked as solid as a fortress, yet also ostentatious, adorned with a green dome standing in the center in addition to two towers close to the Melk River.

The two towers were dazzling in their whites, yellows, and tarnished coppers.

Beams of light streamed from their peaks and fell scattered across their round clock faces, shining golden.

This view alone was enough to give the impression of a palace rather than a church or abbey, yet the inside of the church was even more lavishly decorated with prismatic marble and gold.

A gentle curve ran through every facet of its architecture, down to the smallest details. One would expect nothing less from the crown jewel of Austrian Baroque.

(77)

The architects who reconstructed this church in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century carried massive sums of money and faith to the top of Melk Hill in their attempt to create heaven on earth. You can tell that it wasn’t built on passionate love and longing, but on a strength that approached obsession.

When I last stood within these halls, I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of gold. There it occurred to me that being surrounded by gold robs one of their sense of reality, insofar as that the body is made to feel weightless. I think that this applies to the philosophies of Jodo Buddhism as well. I knew that I needed to experience the terrible power of gold once more.

Before it shone as a Baroque Beauty, the abbey began its history sometime in the 10<sup>th</sup> century during the Fortress Age. Armies stationed in centralized areas had temples built around them. These fortresses that protected the remote Melk region, including Enns, Ybbs, Melk, and Krems, were named after tributaries of the Danube River. The most important of these fortresses was Melk.

The House of Babenberg, ruler of the region at the time, created abbeys to protect the contemplative monks, and made them into strongholds for the Benedict sect.

Henceforth, even as leaders and eras changed, the abbey not only continued to protect its position as a center of religion, but also its standing as the pinnacle of theologically focused academics and arts.

(78)

Melk Abbey was also assailed with its fair share of hardships, one being the political and economic upheaval caused by religious reforms. Melk allied itself with the University of Vienna and in an uncharacteristic move lead the charge, becoming the starting point for a series of monastery reforms known as the Melk Reforms.

Interestingly, this was also the time that Melk Abbey sided with the University of Vienna over the Roman Pope at the Council of Constance. While this worsened their relationship with the Roman Pope, it shifted the emphasis to theory, or rather, to academics.

We now have science to explain the truth to us, but at that time, to pursue the truth meant to know the mind of God. With the ability to proclaim new policies based on theorem, Melk Abbey was on the cutting edge of academics and would come to accumulate something akin to modern intellect.

They were also beset by multiple fires.

They could only stoke kindle for warmth during the cold winters. The wind, which blew up from the river, fanned the flames in the hilltop monastery. The high elevation made water scare. Even a single stray ember could be disastrous.

The library was destroyed in the great fire at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. The monks sacrificed themselves to save valuable works, such as Melk's first odes and Easter play, from the flames. At that time there was also a scriptorium filled with meticulously crafted miniature books and annals, but many such priceless pieces were also lost.

(79)

Even more tragic was the great fire of 1736. With the greatest builder of the day, Jakob Prandtauer, as the backbone, gilders, plaster masons, and sculptors put their skills on display and nearly completed their work decorating the abbey. Mere steps before completion, the abbey was assailed by flames that took nearly the entire roof along with the ornamented rooms.

The Abbot at the time, Berthold Dietmayr, rose up to rebuild, but after his unexpected passing, it was the efforts of the Vice Abbot that cultivated the Baroque flower we know today.



The two great fires brought extensive damage. There were reportedly multiple inconsequential fires as well. The abbey itself was terrified of flame.

Perhaps the priests and monks wear their long gowns and robes with heavy sleeves to ward off the cold in a life without fire.

The area is in a particularly cold region, even for Europe. When I had visited in the spring, the Melk River was still iced over. Now, come fall, though the last traces of summer shining in the sky are beautiful, the temperature has already fallen to around ten degrees, conjuring thoughts of the long winter ahead.

Along the cobbled road in front of the city square, restaurants with cross-adorned tables and neatly lined chairs are open for business, but there's no customers to be seen, only the elderly locals idly drinking tea.

(80)

It was a scene of people taking a breather, having finished their life work for the summer.

Even the main street is so narrow that people in cafes on one side can converse with those in souvenir shops on the other side without raising their voices.

Overlooking the avenue were the two towers of the abbey and its green dome. Every facet of town life was watched over, monitored, by the abbey.

Going up the gentle hill, I was greeted by a beautiful gate with a triangular roof over its round arch. I could see similar gates up ahead. The abbey is the building farthest back. While none may enter its ascetic training grounds, visitors are allowed access to the church chapel and designated areas. It's no surprise that, save for myself, there's not a soul to be seen.

Moving to pass under the first gate, there rose a clamor from the left and right sides of the inner garden of what sounded like a large flock of birds taking off. I unconsciously pulled myself back, only to see that they were not birds, but children. Dozens of children broke into a run in unison and passed under the gate, galloping down the hill's cobbled road. Again, I was alone.

After I watched the children go, a teacherly monk in a black robe with a white collar appeared.

He came close and greeted me with a smile. His expression seemed to say, "You look surprised."

"We call them The Wind."

(81)

He narrowed his eyes.

"Very fitting."

I returned his smile.

"They're juniors from the gymnasium. When they wear their white robes, we call them Rabbit Wind."

Where could the plain-clothes rabbits have gone off to? Without answering my question, the teacher said,

"When they become seniors, they no longer run."

His eyes, set deep behind his glasses, laughed again.

I imagine that select students from among them go on to receive even stricter training as Benedict monks, eventually rising up to priesthood.

Amongst the still silence of the dissipated wind, I walk towards the next gate.

It was quiet. I was told that many people, from gymnasium students to monks, live in the dorms inside this massive building, but the air was crisp as if it hadn't been sullied by the breath of man.

In a place of worship, be it Christian or Buddhist, silence is paramount. I like this atmosphere. Like chilled white wine, it creeps from your lungs and into your senses.

The church chapel added a crisp gold to the white wine, intoxicating me.

(82)

There were several unmoving worshipers and many times their number of figures gilded in gold, which gazed down on me with lax benevolence as if they were denizens of Heaven. There were murmurs at first, but they soon sunk into silence.

The altar was buried in marble and gold. Atop the tabernacle, Peter and Paul took each other's hands, lamenting their parting. They looked like they were emboldening one another, resigned to death. Their bodies were golden, as were the disciples Daniel, Jeremiah, David, Isaiah, and the other characters from the Old Testament placed around them.

The saints and angels hung close to the ceiling over the altar shone with the same color. I braced myself against their secret plot to dazzle me with their luster.

Peter and Paul were executed on the same day. Peter was hung upside-down; Paul was allowed a quick death as a Roman citizen and beheaded. Painted on the fresco above the main altar, a woman in a crimson mantle wore a crown of thorns, implements of torture scattered around her feet. She had risen to this height by enduring her torture. Under the golden exteriors, there flowed terrible rivers of blood.

The opulence and glitz couldn't conceal the part of Christianity that tests one's spirituality through physical pain. Human screams and suffering filled the air.

(83)

Martyrs become Saints, and the church worships the Saint's corpse or a part of their body as their patron saint. This pattern can be seen historically in all parts of Europe. The body of Saint Coloman, an Irish pilgrim who was hung from a barren elder tree in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, was carried into Melk before it had time to decompose. The decorated bleached bones of the saint still lie to this day in a gold bordered glass case.

Walking past the case, I felt pity for him. Not only was he hung from an elder tree, his restless bones are still on display a thousand years later for all to see.

Leaving the chapel, I walk along a long hallway with steel lighting hanging from its plastered ceiling.

The lights bulbs in the steel lighting are a recent addition to the abbey. I get the impression that the flames from lanterns and candles had afforded little more than washed out shadows.

Climbing up wide stone stairs, I travel deeper into an exhibition hall marked as the Emperor's Room. It is in the Marble Hall that I find my first visitor since entering the building. A young woman with a backpack was comparing the pictures on the wall with a pamphlet of some sort.

We exchanged smiles as we passed. What a relief. Judging from the Emperor's Room and the Marble Hall, I could see why the Babenberg and Habsburg Dynasties, along with the rulers of Austria, cherished Melk as their spiritual epicenter.

(84)

A place of worship and ascetic training, it was simultaneously both a fortress and a palace.

I could visualize the Emperor meeting the high priests in the Marble Hall to receive the word of God. Moving further still, I caught a sudden wind from the river.

I had come to the tip of the massive building's A-shaped structure.

The Town of Melk and the Melk River rose in the distance. They and the reseda colored trees surrounding the vicinity wore the sunlight shining nearly overhead like a veil, shimmering. Upon a closer inspection, the surface of the river was moving tirelessly in one direction.

Up ahead, in a separate area connected to the Emperor's room, was what appeared to be another part of the abbey that allowed outsiders access, but only to its library. This library held more fascination than the chapel shining gold. It was precisely the reason that I had wanted to visit Melk once more.

Entering past its thick doors, the room was pervaded with a heavy air, wet and austere, something entirely different than the chapel glowing golden.

The long rectangular room was buried in leather bound tomes stacked to the ceiling, save for its symmetrical, tall, narrow windows. The illustrations and lettering of the leather bound tomes were chrysographed, but their gold was dull and dark, having born the weight of a hundred year's time.

(85)

Here is a mountain made from the corpses of books.

Most of them were copied by hand, containing within a terrible amount of human energy. Imagining the monks scrawling feverishly transforms the books from corpses to a bundle of voices and sighs and sweat, each overflowing with power.

What was that sensation that came over me last time I stood in the center of this room? I wanted to taste it again.

Words don't do it justice.

The human hand is capable of such fantastic things.

There is also the 9<sup>th</sup> Century manuscript, "The Book of Commandments," as well as an 11<sup>th</sup> Century handwritten copy of the "Vergilius." Saint Jerome's Vulgate was hand-copied here in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. The Rule of Saint Benedict, Bibles, works on jurisprudence and theology, and least I forget, "Life of Christ" by Ava, the oldest work of female literature in the German language, are also stored here. Two-thirds of the manuscripts are said to be from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, yet all of the volumes have yet to be examined. Just recently, that is to say in 1998, Christine Glassner, Ph.D. began opening manuscripts from the late middle ages and discovered a fragment of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century "The Nibelungen Saga" that had been tucked away with great care. It caused quite the commotion.

Aside from handwritten manuscripts, there are also early printed books called incunabula: Seventeen hundred volumes from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, forty-five hundred volumes

from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, and a sharp increase in number with eighteen thousand volumes from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

(86)

The library holds one hundred thousand books in total.

My eyes could only confirm a small fraction of them. The books were separated into theology, jurisprudence, geography, astrology and others, but not being able to speak Latin or German, I have to formulate guesses based on the scant explanations provided.

Even so, the beautiful manuscript placed on the display stand is powerful enough to take your breath away. Each and every letter is penned lovingly with lavish strokes like an emblem. I can't understand the sentences, but it makes me realize that letters could be precious things. Perhaps these letters were also the subject of prayer.

I am reminded of Buddhism's hand-written sutras. One does not seek meaning in the words, but rather copying the characters becomes a religious act in itself.

The monks who created these manuscripts also applied themselves to this tremendous work to be closer to God. Hundreds of years of monks' prayers are condensed into these thousands of books.

Something is trying to force its way into my skin and breath. Amidst this concentrated space, my life is billowy as a feather.

(87)

Walking towards the window, I felt a human presence at my back.

The presence, lurking beneath the wave of oppression given off by the books, pushed up against my neck. Though shrouded by the letters and words and prayers accumulated over hundreds of years, it was the unmistakable heat of another human being.

The presence passed slowly behind me. I turned around just as it was rebounding back. An old man in a brown sweater. There was also a woman and a monk wearing a long robe tied around his waist who I had failed to notice, their presence suffocated by the books that filled the room.

The old man slowly came over to the window side I was at and looked up at the top of the window.

Wrinkles lined his round face and his jowls drooped onto his neck. I was jolted by his sharp, bloodshot eyes which slowly overflowed with sorrow.

He noticed my expression and smiled hesitantly.

The old building allowed few windows, which stood tall and narrow. They offered little light. I must have appeared as a silhouette to the old man. Turning to face him, I could see every single hair of his eyebrows, his eyes squinting against the brightness.

The old man muttered with his gaze returned to the top of the window. I couldn't make out his words. As I went to move away from the window he spoke to me again, this time in English.

(88)

"My wife is in there."

He said unmistakably, pointing at the wall atop the window.

"Your wife?"

This old man could be a few cards short of a full deck.

A monk approached the old man and shook hands with him, then ventured off to the recesses of the room. I could feel a sense of affection in their exchange. The two appeared to be friends or acquaintances.

I also moved away from the window and turned my eyes upwards to the wall the old man was looking at.

There was a painting faded into ambiguity of what could be either a vase or a design of some sort. Hundreds of years of deterioration had taken their toll, and the backlight provided more hinder than help.

“It’s a vase, right?”

“Does it look like a vase?”

“To me it does.”

“Look harder. Can you see the women wearing a red dress?”

I strained my eyes. A human shape came into focus.

“Yes, I can see a person.”

“That’s my wife.”

(89)

This proved my suspicion. I need to get away, now.

“All the people in the abbey say that Rosenthal painted a church scholar. But if you take a good look, you can tell it’s a woman. The first time I laid my eyes on the painting, I saw her and immediately fell in love. But that’s all ancient history now.”

“I see a vase.”

“A vase, you say. Well, Johann Bergl painted a secco over the top of that woman. They tried to paint her out of the picture, but my wife wouldn’t stand for that sort of treatment. She made herself seen from behind the vase.”

I asked hesitantly, “What’s a secco?”

“Rosenthal painted his fresco onto a damp wall. A secco is a mural painted onto a dry wall. It turned out that the fresco was stronger. After the painting dried, over time the fresco began to appear from under the vase. It looks ready to push the vase out of the frame any day now. The reversal will be complete in another hundred years. Funny, isn’t it. People win over objects. Even if you try to push them into a wall, they push back.”

“Is that your wife?”

“It certainly is.”

(90)

“Something like your Madonna?”

“We were married. She descended from the wall and was gazing out the window, just as you were. Only the vase remained when she left the wall. She lived with me and died four years ago. Then she went back into *there*.”

After hearing his story, the human figure appeared more clearly. It wasn’t a male scholar—It was unmistakably a woman in red.

“I’m the proprietor here.” The man said, taking a business card from his pocket.

It included the name of his restaurant and a map.

“Are you Japanese?”

“Yes.”

“Did you come from Vienna?”

“On a train from the West Station.”

“Then you didn’t pass through Krems. If you had taken a car, you would have gone through Krems and seen my restaurant. There’s a famous Austrian wine called Jamek. My restaurant is right by their winery—It has a Hooded Crow on its sign.”

(91)

There was a drawing of a Hooded Crow on the card as well. The old man no longer seemed as dubious.

I told him that I had driven down that road on my last trip to Melk.

“It’s special, this window here. If you’re not in a hurry, please have lunch at my restaurant. It’s twenty minutes by car.”

“But I’m not the woman who came down from the wall.”

We smiled at each other. I decided to trust the old man. The cane he was leaning on bolstered my decision.

We walked to the parking lot. I learned that his name was Peter, and that he drove to Melk every day in order to see his wife.

The parking lot was in a plaza atop the stairs. I commented that it must be difficult to go up and down with a cane, to which he replied, “I don’t have a choice. My wife’s returned to Melk.”

He drove a German luxury car specially fitted for his handicap.

In the dark library he appeared to be somewhere around seventy, but in the bright parking lot he was clearly older.

“Who is looking after the restaurant today?”

(92)

“I work as I like. Right now I’ve left my son in charge. I used to be the head sommelier specializing in Jamek wine, but having fouled up my leg, I passed the torch to my son.”

My trust in Peter grew further still.

The Melk River joined the Danube River, flowing towards the East. I remembered having seen these trees lining the path along the Danube River and roadside once before. The trees were in the process of shedding their thick foliage, and scattered leaves danced across the road. The gaps in their naked branches were filled by light from the river’s surface, giving the impression of a tranquil fall, one that stood still for all of eternity.

His restaurant, The Hooded Crow, was cozy, its front garden equipped with a parking lot. It was certainly hard to miss the Hooded Crow on its sign. It was more like a black dove than a crow, an ashen band running vertically around its shoulder. I told him that I had never seen one in Japan, and he explained that the bird was common in the area.

Behind the restaurant, the entire mountainside was dyed in gold—the golden leaves of grapes, the ones Peter used for his restaurant’s house wine. He added in a small voice,

“What we make tastes better than Jamek wine. That’s what my son says, so it must be true.”

I suddenly felt hungry. I hadn’t eaten anything since the one semmel stuffed with ham on the train.

(93)

There were a few pairs of customers in the restaurant, who, I imagine, were in the middle of their drive to Melk. The homely restaurant had only five tables, each adorned with flowers atop their white tablecloths. The vases rested upon coasters of golden grape leaves. The aroma of bread and scent of cheese put me in a jovial mood.

Peter introduced a young chef in an apron. He was a thin man with large eyes.

“This is my son.”

The introduction brought an odd expression to the chef’s face, as if he was squinting his eyes in the sunshine, scrutinizing a heat haze in the distance.

“Did you meet the woman in the wall?” He said eventually.

“Yes, I also heard that the woman’s stronger than the vase. She’s Peter’s wife, you know.”

I wanted to see how the chef would react. Instead, he returned to his familiar smile without responding to my comment.

The young chef’s eyes were black of Arab descent, his hair, glossy. He didn’t look anything like Peter, much like someone from Austria.

I grew slightly suspicious of Peter. But what did it matter? The chef and Peter had an air of intimacy between them, one that said they absolved and trusted one another.

(94)

I have to wonder if Peter is really the proprietor at all.

The lunch’s main course was a fragrant dish of river trout meunier in a white wine sauce. The white wine, herbs, and extra-sour apples particular to the Krems complemented each other nicely, giving the clean white flesh of the river trout a robust flavor.

Peter put grape oil over his river trout. He offered some to me, but I declined. I had heard that it was bitter, made from squeezing grape seeds. The bread was also homemade, its surface hard while the inside still moist. Each chew released more flavor. He said that it was all prepared by the young chef.

“What a fantastic chef. But he doesn’t resemble you, Peter. I think he’s closer to the women in the wall.”

“Coco.”

The old man’s eyes went soft.

“Is that the name of your wife?”

“Coco in the Red.”

“Do you mean the women in the picture? Or is your wife Coco?”

As if he had overheard our conversation, during a lull in business the chef brought over a framed picture of a woman and placed it on the table. He said,

“This is his wife.”

She was wearing not a red dress but a Tyrolian outfit, a plain country girl. He didn't act like someone who was presenting a picture of their mother.

When Peter got up to go to the bathroom, I called the chef over and asked him,

"Are you really his son?"

He simply pulled in his chin in response.

"Peter will likely take you to the vineyard. Please humor him and his stories. Think of it as saying thanks for lunch. Peter was a chef at this restaurant for a long time. I took over after he lost his wife. She was a wonderful woman, and the two of them kept the restaurant going as husband and wife for many, many years. Apparently, naming it The Hooded Crow was his wife's idea."

"The one that came out of the wall, then went back in?"

"It was a great scandal at the abbey."

He said with eyes full of mischief and pity.

(96)

Peter returned, so the chef moved away from the table.

Peter and I left the restaurant and began walking towards the vineyard that spread out behind the building.

Viewed from a distance, it looked like a uniformly colored golden slope, but each variety of grape was of a different shade, and each plot had its own hue.

Mingled amidst the golden leaves was something green and slightly taller than the other varieties. Looking closer, it had green fruit on its vines. They didn't appear unripe, yet their skin was hard and firm. The vines trellises in the left hand row were shorter, their harvest complete, leaves still attached but on the verge of withering off. The remaining golden leaves had turned crimson in places.

Peter walked slowly with his cane, and I adjusted my pace to match his.

By his explanation, the crimson from the red grapes bleeds into the leafs. He details the different breeds, and the flavor of wine made by each.

"This tree here, it grows the house wine we drank at lunch. It's a hearty variety so it takes the least amount of care. Very soon cold winds will come in from over that hill, and when they blow the leaves around, you get a good idea of the strength and suppleness of the branches."

"When do the last leafs fall?"

"After another month, perhaps. They endure the cold winds by bundling up their black branches against the snow. If only my wife had been as hardy."

(97)

The precariously narrow road split off as it climbed up the slope. The winding paths created the illusion of being lost in a forest of gold.

The paths, which had been used by farming vehicles during the harvest, now stood silent. At a crossroad we came across a small shrine with a triangular roof, which housed a statue of the crucifixion. It felt out of place in the golden forest. Its color was faded by the elements, but the roof kept the blood pooling under the crown of thorns atop Christ's head looking fresh.



Even as the road twisted and turned, the grape trees remained planted in a straight line. Between them, lush belts of grass rolled into the distance. Machines must travel on top of these belts for the harvest.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Bathed in the rich afternoon light, both the grape trees bearing fruit and those who had theirs harvested dreamt in gold, together. Yet the scene was too beautiful. Anything this beautiful becomes unsettling. The Melk chapel had been unsettling. The spines writ in gold that had buried the library over the hundreds of years were unsettling.

As was the old man walking slowly with his cane through the golden vineyard.

My pace slowed.

(98)

Did the old man really have a bum leg? Was his cane really just a cane?

I could feel the river trout I had just eaten swimming in my stomach.

Where was this walk leading? He hadn't said a word in the past few minutes. We walk in silence towards our destination.

Ahead of us stretched a variety of grape tree clearly different from the ones I had seen so far, ones with red-tinged leaves.

Peter moved off the paved road and into the field. The grass was soft to the step, not quite covering the top of our feet.

"How far are we going?"

My voice was noticeably stiff.

He simply continued walking.

The red and yellow walls continued straight on either side. The path dead-ended into a stone wall so distant it seemed like an eternity away.

The river trout did a back flip in my stomach. I was thankful for him treating me to lunch, but that which is free commands the highest price. If I were to back out now I would need a reason. I racked my brain for a good one.

The back of Peter's head glistened with sweat.

He came to a stop.

(99)

The grape trees had been trimmed and cleared away where he stood, making room for a long bench.

He placed the cane between his knees and sat, exhaling the long sigh of a man fatigued.

I sat down as well, leaving a person's width between us. This had been his destination. Here was where I would have to repay him for my free lunch.

I could see black fruit under the red and yellow leaves of the surrounding grape trees. They were rotten, and gave off a sweet odor. I hadn't noticed it while walking, but now it was practically suffocating. The air, thick with an indiscernible odor that was between ripe and rotten, joined the smell of grass and earth, coiling around my body and face.

"The grapes are rotting."

“They’ll dry out as the bacteria rot them. You see that patch of white there? Give it a little while and the grapes will turn from red to ashen. That’s when they taste the best. Once they reach that point, it’s harvest time.”

Ah, I see, they’ll be used to make Botrytis wine.

“So they won’t sweeten unless they rot.”

Perhaps detecting my nervousness, he merely fiddled with the cane in his hands.

“Do you always invite people from the library and take them here?”

(100)

“Only women. And only if they’re standing by that window. The same way Coco did.” His voice faded over the last words.

“After coming out of the picture?”

“No one believed me. On the contrary, they say that it’s a *man* drawn deep within the vase! Every person in the abbey said so. They began to scrutinize me as if I was on trial for heresy.”

He stabbed his cane into the ground with a thud. The cane twisted into the earth. His cheeks flushed, eyes bloodshot. He had the same ferocity as when I had first met him in the library, mind reeling in some distant place. His gaze flew over the golden fields, piercing the vast void.

“Wait, you mean to say,” I began in a hushed tone.

“I was a monk. That window taught me a new world. You see, for hundreds of years, it was the window that secretly brought monks to the outside world. Can you imagine how that woman drawn by Rosenthal tempted the monks? There was no using fire in the library. No heat or candlesticks. All people had to rely on for reading was the long, narrow light cast from that window. Books were not to be removed, so all transcriptions were also done at the window side. Many died while they were still young from the cold or tuberculosis. I almost died myself. That’s when the woman came down from the painting and stood at the window side.

(101)

It was Coco. Coco was wearing her red dress. I was saved, she had come for me!”

The oppressive, chilly air of the abbey’s library came rushing back. I am Coco standing by the window side, and in front of me is a pale-faced gaunt young man.

His eyes are exhausted from his training, eyes desperately seeking the warmth of another for support, having found love at death’s door.

The young man’s long black robe is tied around his waist, starched collar white, cross on chest. The Benedictine monk is moved by my flesh, fearful of the changes occurring within his own body.

“So what did you do after that?”

I deliberately spoke slowly to hide my hoarseness.

“I didn’t do anything. I’ve been with Coco the whole time.”

“After she passed away, she went back into the wall and hid behind the vase.”

“Yet her body rests here.”

“Where?”

“Right here.”

He said and pointed at the earth beneath the bench.

(102)

Wind blew up from the depths of the earth. My body swayed in the ambrosial aroma of overripe grapes rotting sweetly.

I was being taken for a ride. No, on second thought, I’m sure his story is true. The grape trees beside the bench were striking in their crimsons, beautiful, their fruit ready to come tumbling down from their noble rot.

“That’s an interesting story.”

My voice cracked. The pounding of my heart was loud enough to reach even Coco in the ground.

A black shadow passed overhead. The shadow fell on a grape tree slightly removed from me, shaking a number of branches.

When the old man cleared his throat, a bird as large as a dove with a long black beak appeared from between the leaves and hopped down onto the grass. It cautiously approached our way. There was an ashen scarf around its neck.

The old man plucked a grape off a nearby tree and tossed it. The Hooded Crow ran up nimbly, then retreated, grape in its beak.

“This tree’s fruit is especially sweet. Would you like to try one?” He plucked another grape. It was a strange thing, having lost most of its water, withered to a bruised ashen color.

(103)

“Here, it has a special aroma,” he said and moved the grape under my nose.

More than a piece of fruit, it seemed like a sentient being masking its silent will. I could smell the breath of a living creature. A puff of raw, offensive air wafted in my face.

Peter’s white face was right next to mine. The life form was the only thing between us, held dangling.

I sniffed it once to confirm the scent, then plucked a grape without any ashen bacteria for myself and popped it into my mouth. That wasn’t enough, so I also tried one that was half-burst. It tasted like it had fermented on the vine, and left a dull numbness on the tip of my tongue, rather than a sweetness.

“I know this color.”

I confirmed my suspicion.

“The woman in the painting, her dress was this color. I’m positive.”

I remember it being a deep color, somewhere between red and black. Tears welled up in the old man’s eyes.

“Thank you for lunch. I’m happy to have met you. You make a wonderful couple.”

This is all I could take. I stood up and began walking.

(104)

He remained on the bench, unmoving.

Returning to the crossroad, I again came across the statue of the crucifixion. Christ was affixed to the cross like a guardian angel of the fields.

I wonder what Christ has to say to the ex-monk who, bested by his training, chose a woman, when he passes through. The young chef said it was the abbey's greatest scandal, but Coco's photograph could hardly be called scandal material. Her appearance was that of a run-of-the-mill country girl, aged to an old woman.

When I returned to the restaurant, the chef had just come out to send off a pair of customers he was acquainted with.

"Peter's in the vineyard together with Coco."

He nodded in complete understanding. Then he asked the middle-aged couple getting into their car to give me a ride to Sankt Pölten.

I got into the car, rolling the numb sensation on the tip of my tongue around the inside my mouth.

## The golden fields of Melk

A long time ago I went for a ride to visit the city of Melk in Austria. At that time it was still in early spring and the perfectly white moon, overhung with mist, floated above the trees that stood like sentries over the Danube River. As if the moon was trying to escape its eventual fate of setting, it was painting the sky with a navy blue light. From its low point in the sky it slid along just above the brow of the mountains as if it was following the car. I promised that moon I would someday come to this place again.

In order to fulfill that promise, I just boarded a train from a station in western Vienna. This time I am coming to Melk at a completely different time of the year. I will be greeted by the cold October wind.

I have gotten used to traveling around Austria by myself. Last time I came to Melk another Japanese person who attends Vienna University gave me a ride. I didn't want to ask her again so I decided to go by train. The people that work at the station and the people that work in the trains were all able to speak English very well. The English spoken by people that live in this area of the world is very easy to understand for a non-native English speaker like myself. I had a feeling of pride because I was able to communicate with people in restaurants, hotels and taxis using what little English I knew.

I arrived at Sankt Polten in about 40 minutes. As I was waiting to change trains I had a friendly talk with an old couple that was walking their dog. The old lady kept saying that the abbey at Melk was the most beautiful in the world. Their dog even yipped at me as if it were agreeing with its masters.

It took just under 30 minutes to arrive at Melk station. The abbey at Melk stands on top of a large hill surrounded by boulders and deep green foliage. It looks almost seems like a castle in the sky surrounded by large green clouds. A lot of the skyline of Melk is covered over by the brown of the abbey's roof.

Under the roof the walls are painted with alternating stripes of yellow and white. They look as strong as a castle's walls, but the central green dome and the two towers are so beautiful that they almost look like decorations on a cake. The two towers seemed to shine with an almost ethereal light that is a mix of white, yellow, and the green of rusted copper. The lines, which seemed to flow from the top of the towers, sparkle with a gold light as they reach the round clocks set in the tower wall.

When I saw those towers for the first time I did not have the impression that this building was a church or an abbey, but it seemed to feel more like a palace. The inside of the church is also built out of gold and many different colors of marble. More than that, even the smallest details of the walls were made with soft curving lines. It is no wonder that this place is called a great treasure of Austrian Baroque architecture.

The architects that rebuilt the abbey in the early part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century must have wanted to create a heaven on the top of that hill in Melk. They were able to make their heaven out of gold and the devotion of the people that live there. I put some thought into the building of this abbey and came to the conclusion that they didn't build it out of love or admiration, but more out of sense of obsession with the religious experience.

The first time I stepped into the abbey the light from all the shining gold overwhelmed me. I had a feeling that when a human is surrounded by this much gold their senses of reality gets distorted. If they stay around the gold too long it gets to the point where they can no longer sense things like their own weight. That feeling was almost like the feelings described

for the Buddhist Promised Land. It was almost like a drug and I longed to experience that feeling again.

The abbey had a long history before it was transformed into the beautifully sparkling piece of Baroque architecture we can see today. The history probably goes all the way back to the 10th century when armies started building fortresses in this area. This temple was probably built for those armies. The names of the forts that were built to protect the frontier region that was also called Melk were taken from the names of the tributaries of the Danube River. These include Enns, Ybbs, Melk, Krems and many others. The most important of these forts was the one located at Melk.

The house of Babenberg, which controlled the area of Melk at that time, sheltered the monks of the area and built an abbey for them. This became a foothold for the Benedictine order in this area.

After those humble beginnings, even if the ruler of the lands the abbey stands on changed, it was protected not only because it was the center of religion in that area, but also because it represented the ivory tower of theology and theological practices in that area. Of course, the abbey at Melk went through many ordeals. For example, because of religious reforms in the past it went through much economic and political unrest. In the end Melk joined together with the University of Vienna and took the initiative to start their own religious reforms, which were later known as the Melk reforms.

The interesting thing is that at that time the people that lived and worked in the abbey chose to follow the commands of the people from university at Vienna over those of the pope himself. Of course, the relationship between the abbey and the pope worsened, but the people at the abbey wanted to continue on with their scholarly works.

In this day and age the laws of physics explain all the processes that go on in our physical world. This is all part of science and reason. On the other hand, at that time the pursuit of scientific truths was a way that man could learn what was going on within the mind of God himself. The abbey at Melk, which was able to adopt a new policy in that type of political atmosphere, became the forefront of scholarship and was able to gather a lot of intellectual people.

There have been many fires at Melk. The winters have always been cold in this part of the world and in the middle ages the only way to stay warm was to build a fire. The winds, which blow harshly from the river, fan all of the fires that were used to warm people within the abbey. More importantly, the abbey is located very high up so there was no easy access to water. Even a tiny accidental fire could lead to a huge blaze that could take human life.

A fire that occurred at the end of the 13th century destroyed the abbey's famous library. Only though the valiant efforts and unfortunate deaths of several monks did such valuable works as the Song in Praise of Melk and The Easter Play escape the fate of being destroyed in the fire. At that time, and even until today, there is a room for writing and creating works of art. So many records of daily life were produced with so much care in that room, but sadly most of them were lost in the fires.

The most tragic fire was probably the one that occurred in 1736. The head architect at the time, Jakob Prandtauer, along with his artists, plaster works, and carvers were almost done their work on the reform of that time when a fire broke out. That fire destroyed almost all of the roof and the interior they were working on. The abbot at that time, Berthold Dietmayr, ordered it to be reconstructed, but he died before the process was complete. Thankfully, the second in command at the time rebuilt the abbey in the baroque style that we know today. The process was almost like the blooming of a beautiful baroque flower.

Those two great fires caused so much damage, but there were also many other small fires that never ended up spreading. As a result of all of the fires the people that live in the abbey are all deathly afraid of fire. The priests and the monks that live in the abbey all wear heavy robes with long sleeves so they can live through the long winter without using fire as a source of heat.

Melk is in an area of Europe that is especially cold. Even when spring arrives in other places in Europe the river that runs through Melk is still frozen over. It is now fall in Melk. Even though the day is as bright as a normal summer day the temperature is already around 10 degrees Celsius. I shudder when I imagine how long the winters are in this part of the world.

In front of the city hall there are tables with tablecloths and chairs put out on the cobblestone road by the restaurants in the area. At this time in the day there are not many paying customers, but there are many old men and women that are residents of Melk drinking tea and relaxing in small groups. It is almost like they are relaxing after finally finishing all the work that they had to do during the summer.

Even this street, Melk's main street, it is so narrow that the people that work at the café on one side of the street can talk with the people that work on the other side of the street without even raising their voices. The only things that are looking down onto these streets now are the towers of the abbey with their green domes. It is almost like the abbey is protecting, as well as inspecting, the entire city.

At the top of a gentle slope I am greeted by a gate made out of an arch with a triangle shaped roof over it. I can see more of the same type of gates up ahead. The abbey is an inner sanctuary for the monks so people are not allowed to visit the places where the monks get trained, but people are allowed to go into the church itself and into a small number of other places.

Now that I look around it seems to me that there is no one here beside myself. Just as I was about to go under the first gate I heard the sound of what I thought was a huge flock of birds taking off from both sides of the central courtyard. I was so surprised to see that it was not a flock of birds but a group of school children running toward me that I involuntarily took a step back. Many kids started running down the slope, their feet hitting hard on the stone road as they passed under the gate nearest me. After the echo of their feet died out I was again alone.

A teacher wearing a black shirt with a white collar suddenly appeared. He probably came out from the abbey to say goodbye to the kids that just went running off. He walked up to me and gave me a small smile as a greeting.

"We call them the wind," he said with a look on his face that said he could tell how surprised I was.

"I can see why they have that nickname," I said with a smile.

"They are the youngest kids that we teach in this gymnasium, or what you would call primary school. When they are wearing their white school uniforms we call them the wind of the rabbit."

I wondered where all those kids were going, but before I could ask the teacher went on.

"When they get older they stop running around like that," he said with smiling eyes that could be seen on the other side of his thick glasses.

The chosen among those students will go through training to become Benedictine monks and eventually become priests.

In the quiet that came after the wind I walked on to the next gate. It was almost too quiet. I heard that many people, from monks to the kids that are learning at the gymnasium, live their lives in the huge buildings around the abbey, but the air in this area is so clean and cold that it feels like another person has never breathed it in.

Silence is very important for all religious places, weather they are Christian, Buddhist or any religion in between. I love this feeling and this absolute silence. It almost has the same effect on me as drinking a fine white wine. I am drinking in the spiritual energy though my lungs and letting it soak into my soul. Walking into the chapel, it feels almost like a light the same color as that white wine surrounds me. It makes me feel intoxicated on religion.

As soon as I entered the chapel, I noticed that there were many people kneeling in prayer. I also noticed that there are many more of golden statues than people. Nothing, neither the statues nor the people at prayer, made a move as I entered. A statue of a saint looks down on me with relaxed eyes. When I locked eyes with that statue I had the feeling that there was a great movement all around me that could not be seen with the naked eye, but now everything seems to have sunk back into absolute silence.

The area around the alter was made out of an abundance marble and gold. A depiction of saints Peter and Paul is painted above the tabernacle. The two saints are holding hands and looking like they desperately want to stay together. I think they are mentally preparing for the death that awaits them. The prophets Daniel, Jeremiah, David and Isaiah as well as other people that appear in the Old Testament surround them and everyone is clothed in robes of gold. The saints and the angles that appear on the ceiling above the tabernacle all shine with that same golden color. I am starting to feel that I am being bewitched by the gold.

Saints Peter and Paul were both executed on the same day. Saint Peter was hung up by his ankles and Paul was beheaded by Roman citizens. A woman wearing a deep red cloak, who is depicted in a fresco painted over the tabernacle, is depicted wearing a crown of thorns and torture devices around her legs. She must have been able to withstand the pain from those devices for a long time in order to get to this church. This just drives the point home that a lot of blood was spilled behind the church's golden exterior. No matter how gorgeous and grand Christianity may seem there is also the undercurrent of faith being tested though physical pain. Even in this day and age you can still hear the screams of pain from the Christian people.

Martyrs become saints and the saint's bodies, or parts of their bodies, are worshipped as the protectors of a church. That is how is worked in many parts of Europe in the past and that is also what happened in Melk. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century an Irish pilgrim named Coloman was named a saint after he was put to death by hanging from an elderberry tree. The reason he was named a saint was because after this death his body did not decay. His body was brought to the abbey at Melk where his bones can still be seen today laid out in a glass case with a border of gold. I can't help but feeling sorry for him when I see that glass case. Not only was he hung to death, but also for almost 1000 years his bones have been exposed for all to see.

Walking out of the chapel, I entered a long hallway with old steel lamps hanging down from a pure white ceiling. The lamps may be old, but in the grand history of the Melk abbey it has only been a short time since those lamps were powered by electricity. Before the advent of electricity in this abbey people had to live in the pale light, and many shadows, caused by candles and oil lamps.

I made my way up a set of wide stone stairs and walked past a room that was labeled as the Kaiser's room. I went though the Marble Hall and entered a different building. It was at that point that I finally saw another person. It was a young woman who was wearing a



backpack and comparing a picture on the wall with a pamphlet that she had in her right hand. When I walked past her we shared a smile and a nod. It somehow made me feel a little better.

I can tell that the rulers of Austria in the past; including the houses of Babenberg and Hapsburg, all thought that Melk was important as a center for spiritual activity. Culturally important rooms like the Marble Hall and the Kaiser's room would not be located in the abbey if that were not true. This is a place for worship and spiritual training, but at the same time it is also a fort and a palace. The Marble Hall might have been where the Kaiser met with people high up in the church. I can only imagine what kind of sacred messages were passed in those times.

As I moved on I was buffeted by a wind that was so cold it must have come directly from the river. I came out at the top of the building, which was sort of shaped like the capital letter A. From the top of the building both the river and the village that lies along it are both visible. I can also see the dark green forest that surrounds the village. A bright white light from the sun, which lies directly above my head, illuminates everything in my field of vision. It is almost like a slightly fluttering almost translucent white handkerchief covers everything I can see. When I squint I can even almost make out the direction in which the river is flowing.

Further down the hallway is a place that is very different from the Marble Hall and the Kaiser's room that I left behind me. It is truly like one would expect an abbey to look and feel. The only place an outsider is allowed enter in this area is the library. I think that the library is more appealing than the chapel, even though the chapel sparkles of gold. The reason that I came back to Melk for the second time was because I wanted to visit the library.

When I lean forward to open the thick doors at the front of the library I am greeted by humid air the smells of old books. This is quite the opposite of the atmosphere in the shining gold chapel. The library itself is rectangular and filled with books. With the exception of in front of the narrow windows, the shelves along the walls are wall filled with leather-bound tomes.

All of these tomes were illuminated with a gold paint, but the reflected light from this gold is very dull and feels old. It is almost like the weight of hundreds of years was too much for these books to bear. Almost all of these books were copied by hand. I cannot even imagine all of the time and energy that went into copying all of these books. When I start thinking about all the life force that went into these books I forget that they look old and tired and start seeing them as powerful entities.

The last time I came to this room I felt something that was very mysterious. I came here one more time because I wanted to experience that sensation again. It is truly a sensation that I cannot put into words.

Humans can do many amazing things. Copying and writing these books is just one of them. There are many good examples of the works of the monks that live in this abbey. There was a handwritten copy of the Book of Admonitions from the 9<sup>th</sup> century as well as copies of Publius Vergilius Maro's works from the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. A book by Saint Jerome was even copied in this very library. There are books on topics ranging from the religious precepts of the Benedictine to bibles, books about the law and books on theology. There is even a book from the oldest female German author, Frau Ava, called "The life of Jesus."

I heard that two thirds of all of the books in the library are from the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It is also true that not all of those books are even catalogued. Even as late as 1997 a professor named Christine Glassner found a book that was copied around 1300. That would not normally be big news but that book had a portion of the famous epic poem Nibelungenlied. Everyone was so surprised when they heard of her discovery.

Other than hand written book there are also have some book that were produced with the early form of printing. There are 1700 such books from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and 4500 from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The number of books copied increased dramatically in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with over 18000 books from the time period. The total number of books in the library is over one hundred thousand books. The books that are on display are only a small portion of the total number of books located within the library. I cannot read Latin or German so I don't even know if the books are about theology, law, earth science or even astronomy. All I can do is look at the short English explanations about the books and guess what information is contained within their pages.

Walking across the library floor I came across a hand copied book that was so beautiful that it almost took my breath away. Each of the letters was like an emblem. I could see all the love and care that was put into every one of the strokes of the copier's pen. I have no idea what is written down on that page but I have a feeling that the meaning is very important for the person who wrote it down.

Writing down the words must have been a form of prayer for that person. Now that I think about it, there is something like that in my own religion, Buddhism, as well. It was not important to understand what was written on the page, the important thing was putting all of your energy into copying the symbols.

The monks that copied the books chose an extraordinary way to get closer to God. The one hundred thousand books that are within the walls of this library are all physical manifestations of the prayers of hundreds of years of monks. It almost feels like the air around me is a concentration of the prayers of those monks. I just know that those prayers are trying to make their way into my very soul. My life feels as fragile as the old paper those books are written on.

As my walk through the library took me past the window I started to get the feeling that there were other people in the room. It's almost as if they pressure that I sensed from the books covered up the presence of the other people in the room. The presence of the people in the room is mixed with the power of books that represent hundreds of years of words, sentences, and even prayers, but the feeling of another human near me is unmistakable.

Turning around I can see a person walking around behind me. He is an old man that is wearing a brown sweater. I guess I didn't notice him because of the energy of all the books that surround us. There is also a young woman and a monk wearing the traditional long hemmed brown robes tied together at the waist with a piece of rope.

The old man slowly walks towards the window where I stand while keeping his eyes locked on the wall above the window.

The old man's face is round, but marked with deep wrinkles. The skin under his jaw and around his neck hangs loosely. His eyes are slightly bloodshot, but seem very sharp and full of life. I was a little surprised when I looked him in the eyes and suddenly felt a deep feeling of sadness for him. He noticed that I was looking at him and gave me a slight smile.

This building is very old so the number of these long narrow windows is few and far between. The amount of light that can shine through the windows is very sparse, but from the old man's perspective my face is probably a silhouette against the light from the window. On the other hand, I can see the smallest details of his face.

The old man started looking at the wall at the top of the window again while mumbling something to himself. I couldn't understand a thing that he said. As I was about to leave the window, he looked directly at me and addressed me in English.

"My wife is there."

I cannot be sure, but I think that is what he said to me as he was pointing to the area above the window.

“Your wife?”

I had to ask him that to make sure that he wasn't just a crazy old man.

A monk came out from behind a stack of books and walked up to the old man. They exchanged friendly greetings before the monk went back to work. I could tell from the meeting that those two are old friends who know each other well.

I took a couple of steps away from the window. I had to look above the window to see what the old man was talking about. Above the window is a design that looked like a vase, but it is not very clear. Not only are there hundreds of years of natural degradation, but also it is also hard to see because of the bright light from the window.

“Isn't that a vase?” I asked him.

“Does it look like a vase to you?” he replied back to me without even missing a beat.

“It looks like a vase to me,” was the only thing I could think to reply.

“Can't you see the woman in the red dress behind the vase?” he asked me quietly.

I can't believe my eyes. I just thought I could see the shadow of a person appear behind the vase.

“Yes, I guess I can see something,” I had to admit to him.

“That's my wife,” he said with pride in his eyes.

I have a feeling I should get away from this old man. He feels somehow dangerous.

“The monks here all say that the person in the fresco is some religious scholar, but if you look closely you can see she is a female. I personally knew that it was a woman. The first time I saw the fresco I fell in love. That was a long time ago,” he said almost sadly.

“It's a vase,” I almost snapped at him.

“The vase is actually a secco fresco by another artist. That artist may have painted the vase over my wife, but she did not like that. She forced her way out from behind the vase,” he said like that would explain everything.

“What is a secco fresco?” I asked still very confused.

“A fresco is something that is painted on wet plaster, but a secco fresco is something that is painted onto a plaster after it is already dry. It turns out that the original fresco is always stronger than the secco that is painted over it. The original fresco slowly appears behind the vase over time. It has reached the point where the original is almost as powerful as the secco now. In 100 more years it will probably be more obvious than the secco painting. Doesn't it make you feel good? A painting of something that is alive is much more pleasant to look at than a painting of a mere object. Even the wall does not want to deal with such a painting,” he calmly explained to me.

“So, that's your wife?” I had to ask him again.

“Yes, she is,” was what he answered almost automatically.

“Is she your true love?” I asked him because I wanted to find out what he truly felt towards this fresco.

“I married her. She came down from that painting and stood in front of the window, like you were standing before. She was looking at the outside world through that window. At that

time, only the vase was visible above the window. She lived a long life as my wife and died 4 years ago. After she died she returned to that painting,” he said sadly.

Now that I am looking closely I can see the person in the painting better. I can see that it is not some male scholar, but a woman that is wearing red. As I examined the painting the man reached into his pocket and pulled out a name card, handing it to me.

“I am the owner of this restaurant,” he said with pride.

The name card was simple; it just had the name of the restaurant and a map.

“Are you Japanese?” he asked me.

“Yes, I am,” I answered after a little hesitation.

“Did you come here from Vienna?” he stepped closer and asked me.

“I came here by train from Western Vienna Station,” I answered after what seemed to be a long time.

“If that’s the case, that means you didn’t go though Krems. If you came here by car I know that you would have seen my restaurant because it is located in Krems. We have a type of wine called Jamek that is very famous in this country. My restaurant is very close to that winery. You will know it because it has a sign with an crow hanging out front,” he explain to me in a very slow and steady voice.

There is also a picture of the crow on the name card he gave me. I guess this old man is someone that can be trusted. I told the old man that I have used that road to go to Melk once before.

“This window is very special. If you are not in a hurry, please come eat lunch at my restaurant. It is only 20 minuets from here by car,” he said with a smile.

“You do know that I am not the woman in that fresco, right?” I asked with a smile.

We both had a good laugh at that question. I decided that I could believe what the old man was saying. Though, I have to say I felt move safe when I noticed that he had to use a cane to walk.

We walked out to the parking lot together. He told me that his name is Peter. He also told me that he makes the drive out to Melk every day to see his wife. The parking lot was located in an area at the top of a long set of stairs. When I told him that it must be a lot of work climbing those stairs every day with a cane he smiled at me and said that he had no choice. He had to drive here every day because his wife decided to come back to Melk.

His car was a high class German car that was slightly remodeled to allow him ease in driving.

In the dark library the old man looked to be about 70 years old, but in the bight light outside I could see that he was actually much older than that.

“Why aren’t you are your restaurant today?” I asked him to make a little light conversation.

“I work at the restaurant when I want to. I actually handed over the reigns to my son. He was the Jamek sommelier, but now he runs the restaurant,” he said with a slight smile.

I think I am starting to warm up to Peter.

The Melk River flows into the Danube River and continues to flow to the east. The sight of this road along the Danube River and the trees along the road brings back a lot of memories. The leaves are now falling from the trees, dancing in the wind before falling into

the road. I can see the light reflecting from the river though the now bare branches of the trees. I got the feeling that this view is something that could be seen since before the abbey was built in Melk.

The restaurant has a small parking lot located in the front. The restaurant itself looks very cozy. The sign with the crow is noticeable from the road. Though, the bird looks like a crow, it is not a crow. It is a type of black dove with a gray stripe above its shoulders. It is a bird that I have never seen in Japan, but according to Peter it is a common bird here.

The mountains behind the restaurant are all dyed in a deep yellow. It is the yellow of the leaves of the grape vines. Peter told me that they served homemade wine at his restaurant.

"It is even more tasty than Jamek. That is what my son says so it has to be true," he leaned in and whispered to me as if it were an important secret.

As soon as I entered the restaurant I started to feel hungry. The only thing that I have had to eat today was a ham sandwich on a thick roll. There were a couple of people in the restaurant. They are all probably going for a drive to Melk. There are 5 tables in the restaurant, all with white tablecloths and flowers in vases, giving the room a really homey feeling. Below each vase is a yellow grape leave. The smell of homemade bread and cheese gives me a feeling of happiness and wellbeing.

Peter introduced me to a young chef who was wearing a bright white apron. He chef was a little on the thin side, but he had plenty of mussel mass.

"This is my son," he said with pride.

With that introduction the man turned and looked at me as he if were looking at a far away shimmer of hot air on a summer's day. His face reveled some sort of deeply running emotion that I could not decipher.

"Did you meet the woman on the wall?" he asked with tired eyes.

"Yes, I did. I also heard why she is stronger than the vase painted above her. He even joked and said that she was his wife," I answered with a smile.

I wanted to see how the chef would react to that last statement. He just gave me a smile and didn't say anything else. It's almost like he was used to this happening to him.

The chef had brown eyes, like someone from the Middle East, and his hair is very glossy black. He does not really resemble Peter; in fact it is almost like he is from a totally different country. I started to become wary about Peter again. On the other hand it seems as if there is a very close and trusting relationship between the Peter and the chef. I think I can even believe that Peter actually owns this restaurant.

The main course for lunch was brook trout meuniere served with a white wine sauce. The white wine is mixed with herbs and a sour apple that can only be harvested in Krems. The sauce gives the white meat of the fish a rich taste.

Peter poured a little grape seed oil onto his trout before he started eating. He said that I should try some, but I did not want eat any. I heard that the oil is a little bitter so I did not want to use it.

The bread is also homemade. The crust is a little hard, but the center is very soft and moist. The more that you chew the bread, the better the taste gets. It seems as if the Chef made all of this food by himself.

"The chef is great, but he doesn't look anything like you Peter. He must look more like his mother, the painting on the wall," I said with a wry smile.

“Coco,” he said back bluntly.

The old man’s eyes relaxed ever so slightly.

“Is that your wife’s name?” I asked getting confused.

“Coco in the red dress,” was all he said in reply.

“The woman in the painting? Or, are you talking about your wife?” I asked again getting more and more confused.

The chef, who finished most of his work, must have heard the conversation because he came over with a small picture in a frame and placed it on top of the tablecloth.

“This is his wife,” he said simply.

The woman in the picture was not wearing red. She was just a normal girl wearing rustic clothes that looked to be from the area of Austria known as Tyrol. The chef said that the picture was Peter’s wife. It looks like the chef is not Peter’s son after all. The way he set out the picture was not the way one sets out a picture of ones own mother.

I called the chef over to the table again when Peter got up to go to the bathroom.

“Are you really his son?” I asked him directly.

The chef only shook his head.

“Peter will probably ask to take you to the vineyard. Just think of it as a way to pay him back for the meal. Go with him and listen to what he has to say. Peter was the chef of this restaurant for a long time, but after his wife died I had to take up the post. His wife was a wonderful person and they both kept this restaurant running for a long time. His wife was even the person that named this restaurant after that crow,” he said giving me the first straight answer of the day.

“He told me his wife came out of that painting and has since gone back in,” I confessed to him.

“That was the biggest scandal in that abbey’s history,” the chef said with eyes that showed both signs of mischief and pity.

Peter started to make his way back to the table so the chef promptly left.

Peter and I left the restaurant and started walking towards the vineyards located in the back mountains. From far away the vineyards all looked to be the same yellow color, but the shade of yellow changed ever so slightly for each different type of grape. Each part of the field had a slightly different color than the sections of field surrounding it. In amongst the yellow leaves there are some leaves that are still green. That type of grape vine grows taller than the vines that surround it. There are still bunches of grapes in tact on those types of vines. It does not look like these grapes are unripe. The skin on the grapes seems very firm.

To the left of those grape vines is a row of smaller vines. The grapes from the smaller row have been harvested and the leaves are starting to fall. The rest of the leaves are partially red as well as well as the normal yellow.

Peter is slowly walking though the vineyard using his cane for support. I slowed my pace so that I could walk next to him. According to what Peter says, if the leaves of the grape plant have a little red in them then the grapes on the vine are purple grapes. He also tells me a little about the different types of grapes. He even goes into the different tastes of the wines produced by the different types of grapes.

“The grapes on this vine are the ones that were used to produce the wine that you drank for lunch. The grapes are very robust so they take almost no trouble to grow. Soon a cold wind will start blowing over that hill and it will blow all of these leaves away. That is when you can actually see how strong these grapes really are,” he took the time to explain to me.

“When will the leaves finish falling?” I asked him.

“In another month or so. The blacked vines will curl together under the snow of winter so they can protect themselves from the cold wind. I wish my wife was as strong as these vines are,” he said sadly.

We started walking up the slope using narrow paths that branched off quite frequently. The winding path through the vineyard made me feel like I was getting lost in the middle of a great yellow forest. The paths, which are probably used for small vehicles that help in the grape harvests, are all but silent during this time of the year.

At one branch in the path there lies a small shrine with a statue that depicts the crucifixion of Christ. This beautiful yellow forest did not seem like an appropriate place for the statue. The colors of the most of the statue are washed away by the wind in rain of many years, but because of the roof of the shrine the blood of Christ’s crown of thorns remains a deep realistic red.

The path that we were walking on was long and winding but the grape vines are all planted in straight rows. Between the rows of grape vines there are belts of green grass. That is probably where the large harvesting vehicles drive during the harvests.

The day was very beautiful. It is almost like all the grape vines, the ones that have been harvested already and the ones that have yet to be harvested, are sharing the same golden dream in the leftover afternoon warmth and light. It is too beautiful. It has become so beautiful that it has become scary. The gold in the chapel at Melk and the gold illuminations on the old books in the library were also scary. This old man, who is walking ever so slowly through the vineyard, is also scary.

I slowed my walking pace down. I wonder if his legs really are in bad shape. Is his cane really just a cane? Could it be used as a weapon?

I could suddenly feel butterflies in my stomach, almost like the trout that I ate came back to life. I wonder how long he is going to have me walk. He hasn't said anything for the past few minutes. He just keeps his head down and walks slowly toward his destination. Peter stepped off from the paved path and started to walk deeper into the vineyard. The grass is thick in this area, but not so thick that it goes well above my shoes.

“How far are you planning on walking?” I asked him with a voice that was bright, but very stiff.

He just keeps walking onward.

The vines made a yellow and red wall to both sides of us. I can barely see a stone fence at the far end of the row. The fence itself is very far away. It would take a lot of time to walk the far. I could feel the trout in my stomach move yet again. When I was at the restaurant I was happy that I could eat for free, but now I know that there is nothing so expensive in this world as something that is free. I need to think of a reason to get away from this man. I started to think hard so I could come up with a good reason. I could see the sweat streaming down the back of Peter’s head.

He stopped in the middle of the path. The grape vines were cut back a little more in that area and a bench was set up. He sat on the bench with his cane standing between his two knees. He let out a long sigh. Somehow it relieved me to see how tired he really was.

I sat down on the bench as well, leaving enough room for another person between us. Is this what we walked all this way for? Am I supposed to do something here to pay him back for the meal?

Looking around at the grape vines around us I can see grapes that are so dark purple they are almost black amongst the red and yellow leaves. Those grapes are moldy and giving off a smell that is almost too sweet. I didn't notice the smell while I was walking, but now that I am sitting down the smell is too strong. I can't tell if it is the smell of ripening grapes or rotting grapes. The smell of the grapes and the smell of the grass and soil of the fields combine to make a unique smell that wraps itself around my head and traps me.

"Your grapes are rotting," was all I could think to say to Peter.

"The bacteria gets to the grapes and they start to rot while they go through the process of drying. Can you see the grapes that have the white powder on them? Soon the red part of the grape will turn grey. That is when the grape is at its most sweet. That is when we will harvest these grapes," he carefully explained to me.

Oh, I heard about this. It is known as noble rot. They make wine out of the grapes that have the noble rot.

"If you don't let them rot they will never make a sweet wine," he continued.

I guess he could see how nervous I was because he didn't say anything after that. He just sat there and played with his cane.

"Do you always invite the people that you meet in the library out here?" I asked him to break the silence.

"I only bring back woman who stand at that window, like Coco did," he slowly answered me.

"Like someone that came out of that fresco," I added.

"No one believed me about her. More than that, they say that the person that is painted under the vase is a man. Everyone in the abbey says that. It got so bad that people started to look at me like I was a heretic," he said starting to get agitated.

He rapped the tip of his cane into the ground with enough force that the cane sunk deep into the ground. His face became flush and his eyes seemed to get a little redder. I thought when I met Peter in the library, and I can see now, that he is he is actually very powerful. Unfortunately it seems that almost all of his energy is going towards some invisible cause that I still don't understand. He suddenly raised his eyes from the yellow of the fallen leaves, his gaze piercing the cold empty air.

"Could it be that..." I started to say.

"I was a monk. That window was my portal to a world I could never know in the abbey. That window has been a portal that for so many monks in the past few hundred years. Can you even imagine how many monks were lured to the window by the temptations of the woman in that fresco?

"No one can use any kind of fire in the library. We couldn't even use heaters or candles. That is why everyone needed the light from that window in order to read the books. We couldn't take books out of the library so we also had to copy the books by the window as well.

"At that time a lot of the monks died at an early age from either the cold or TB. I almost died in that way as well. When I was very sick I know I saw a woman come down from that fresco and stand in front of the window. That was Coco. At that time she was wearing red



clothes. I felt I was saved from my sickness. I know she came down from the fresco to save my life," he said with a sigh, almost seeming relieved to get that off from his chest.

I could almost feel the cold and damp air of the library on my flesh one more time. I felt I was Coco standing by the window and looking down at a sick boy who was almost too thin for his own good. Those boy's eyes told me he was too tired to continue his training and also that he is longing for the warmth of another's touch. Even though the sickness I can see the love in his eyes. The boy is wearing long black robes that are tied together at his waist. A stiff white ring supports his collar and he has the mark of cross on his chest. He looks up at me, still wearing all of the trappings of a Benedictine monk, and I can tell he is falling in love. His body is shaking in fear at the changes in his emotional state.

"So, what happened after that?" I asked though dry lips.

"Nothing special. I just lived the rest of my life out with Coco," he said simply.

"And her fresco stayed hidden under the fresco of the vase until she died," I said finishing off this train of thought.

"That may be true, but her body is sleeping right here," he said in a slow even tone.

"Where?" I asked confused again.

"Here," he said pointing to the ground underneath the bench.

Suddenly a wind blew up, almost like from under the ground itself. The smell of the over-ripe grapes surrounded me making me want to run away. I know that he is probably just playing with my head, but this is too weird not to be true. The grapes on the vines closest to the bench are all a beautiful red color, in the midst of having the noble rot.

"That's an interesting story you have there," I said not wanting to believe a thing he said.

My voice cracked dryly. I have a feeling that even the long departed Coco could hear my heart beating in my chest.

A shadow passed though the air above my head. That shadow landed amongst the vines not far from the bench, causing a few of the leaves to fall to the earth. The old man gave a whistle and from between some leaves hopped out a black bird with a long beak. It was about the size of a dove. It flew down onto the grass in front of the bench where it slowly and cautiously made its way towards us. There is a gray band of feathers around its neck.

The old man plucked a grape from a nearby vine and threw it to the crow. The bird ran up and grabbed the grape. It flew off before I could even blink.

"The grapes from this vine are especially sweet. Would you like to eat some?" he asked softly asked me.

He plucked a bunch of grapes from the vine. More than half the grapes have already changed a grayish purple color. They are also starting to shrink because they have started to dry out.

"Can you smell that smell?" He asked, moving the grapes closer to my nose.

Those grapes seemed to be more than just fruit. They seemed to me to be some sort of small animal that was trying to keep itself hidden from the humans. The smell of the fruit was the same smell as a small animal's breath. That smell, which was settling around my face, was almost bewitching.

I was surprised to suddenly find myself face to face with Peter. He lowered the grapes, that secretly living animal, between our faces. I made sure they smelled all right before plucking a grape that was not covered with the noble rot and popping it into my mouth. That

was not enough to satisfy me so I took a grape that was falling apart and ate that as well. I don't think you could call the grapes sweet. It is almost like they started the fermentation process on the vine. The very tip of my tongue felt like it was going numb.

"It was this color, wasn't it?" I asked him to make sure.

"The clothes that that woman in the fresco was wearing were this color, weren't they?" I asked him again.

It was a very deep color, the combination of red and black. Tears started flowing down the old man's cheeks.

"Thanks for the meal. I am happy that we could meet in the way we did. I know you two made a wonderful couple," I said with finality.

I couldn't take this any more. I stood up and walked away. He didn't move. He just continued to sit on the bench.

As I walked back down the path I came upon the shrine with the statue depicting the crucifixion of Christ. It seems to me that this might represent the protector spirit of this vineyard. I wonder what Peter, a former monk who chose a woman over his religious training, had to say to this statue every time he saw it.

The chef said that what happened to Peter was the biggest scandal in the history of the abbey, but from what I could gather from Coco's picture this was not something that would be called a scandal in this day and age. It was just some girl from the country that grew old together with a former monk.

When I got back to the restaurant the young chef was outside seeing off his friends and customers.

"Peter is in the vineyard with Coco," I said simply to him.

He nodded when I told him that.

Just as the middle-aged couple was about to get into their car I asked them if they could give me a ride as far as Sankt Polten.

I still did not have any feeling in the tip of my tongue as I climbed into the car that drove me away from that old man I met in Melk. I have a feeling I will never forget this trip or the taste of those grapes.

## The Golden Field of Melk

By Takagi Nobuko

I had visited Melk many years earlier, by car. It was early spring, and the vaporous moon hung over the forests that ran like a fortress above the Danube.

The sky was still a pale dark blue, as if hesitating to fall into darkness, and in its lower reaches, the moon seemed to glide as it chased the car, peeking out from behind the mountains.

I'll come again, I had told the moon.

In fulfillment of that promise, I boarded the train at Vienna West Station. This time it was October, and the sky was clear.

I was used to traveling alone in Austria.

On my previous visit, a Japanese girl studying at the University of Vienna had driven me there, but I was reluctant to ask her again, and decided to go by train. The station and train personnel spoke English, and in any case the English spoken by people from German-speaking regions is easy to understand. I could get by using English in the restaurants, hotels, and taxis.

It took about 40 minutes to reach Sankt Pölten station. While I was waiting for the local train, I made friends with an elderly couple with a dog. The woman boasted that Melk was the most beautiful abbey in the world. Even the dog gave a shrill bark.

The local train arrived at Melk in a little less than 30 minutes.

Melk Abbey sits atop a tall hill, like a cloud following the boulders and deep greenery, with a long ochre-colored roof reaching into the sky.

The long walls under the roof are painted in an alternating stucco pattern of gold and white, giving it the air of a fortress, but the green cupola standing at the center and the two towers rising over the Melk River are brightly ornamented, almost too beautiful.

The two towers are decorated brightly in white, gold, and the dark green of rusted copper, and the lines that fall downward from the top onto the round faces of the clocks shine, in places, in gold.

Seeing them, one gets the impression not so much of an abbey or church as of a palace; even inside the church there are huge amounts of multicolored marble and gold.

Moreover, the details of the structures are all defined in smooth lines, making the appellation of the apex of Austrian baroque an apt one.

The architects who rebuilt the church in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century into the form that it has today came to the summit of the hill of Melk with enormous gold and faith, and there is no doubt they tried to build a heaven on earth. It is easy to see that they brought not passions such as love or admiration, but rather an energy that seemed close to obsession.

The first time I stood in the hall, I was overwhelmed by the golden color, and it struck me that when human beings are surrounded by gold, they lose their sense of reality, and even the ability to feel the weight of their own bodies. This seemed familiar to the Japanese philosophy of Pure Land, and I decided at that time that I wanted to feel, once more, the enchantment of gold.

Before acquiring its baroque beauty, the abbey had been established as a fort around the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Soldiers were stationed at the center of the complex, and a chapel was built. The forts built to defend the frontier regions known as marches were named after tributaries of the Danube, such as the Enns, Ybbs, Melk, and Krems. Melk was the most important of these fortresses.

The Babenbergs, who ruled the region at the time, gave refuge to the contemplative monks, and established it as a Benedictine abbey.

In later years, even as the rulers and times changed, the abbey not only retained its position as a religious site, but continued to be a center of learning and arts, mainly in the field of theology.

Needless to say, the Melk abbey experienced its share of hardships. One was the economic and political changes that accompanied religious reform. The abbey joined the University of Vienna in the forefront of religious reform, and was the focal point of the monastic reform called the Melk Reform.

What is interesting is that at that time, Melk Abbey chose the humanists at the University of Vienna over the Pope. As a result, their relations with the papacy deteriorated, because they placed priority on logic, or academia.

Today, it is taken for granted that science explains the truth to us, but at the time, the pursuit of the truth involved determining the thinking of god. And Melk Abbey, which was able to set out a new direction at that time, based on logic, was at the frontline of “academia,” and brought together a “knowledge” close to that which we possess today.

The abbey also suffered a number of fires.

In this cold area, the only way to get warmth in the winter was by building fires. The wind that blew up from the river would fan the flames in the abbey on top of the hill. Because it was on high ground, there was insufficient water. Thus, even small fires became catastrophes.

The library was destroyed by a fire in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. Monks sacrificed themselves to save a number of important works from the early Melk Abbey, including hymnals and Easter plays. From that time there was a scriptorium in the library, where miniatures and chronicles were produced, but many of these works were lost.

The most tragic was the fire of 1736, which took place just as Jakob Prandtauer, a master builder of the time, along with designers, masons and sculptors, had nearly completed their work, and destroyed nearly all the roofs and decorated rooms. Berthold Dietmayr, the abbot at the time, resolved to continue the work, but died in despair before its completion, and it was thanks to the efforts of the deputy abbot that the repairs were completed.

These two major fires caused major destruction, but there were also smaller ones that didn't do much damage, and the abbey as a whole had a tremendous fear of fire.

The reason that priests and monks wear long robes with thick sleeves is to protect themselves from the cold without using fires.

It is a cold area even by European standards, and the Melk River had still been frozen over when I visited in the spring. This time it was autumn, and the sky was beautiful with the afterglow of summer, but the temperature had already fallen to about 10 degrees centigrade, giving me a glimpse of the long winter that would soon come.

Restaurants lined with clothed tables and chairs were open for business along the paved street in front of the town hall, but in this season there were no customers, and elderly local people sat leisurely drinking tea. It seemed that they were taking a rest after the work of the summer, of a day, or of a lifetime.

Even this main street was so narrow that the clerks of cafes and souvenir shops on opposite sides of the street could converse without raising their voices.

The street was overlooked by the twin towers and cupola of the abbey, giving the appearance that all life in the town was watched over and monitored by the abbey.

Walking up the gentle hill, I approached a beautiful gate with a rounded arch topped by a triangular roof. Further ahead, I saw a similar gate. The abbey was truly the inner core of the complex, and although visitors cannot enter the training area, they are allowed into the church and certain other zones. In any case, there was not another soul in sight.

As I passed through the first gate, I heard a noise like a flock of birds taking flight coming from the both the left and right of the inner garden, and as I involuntarily recoiled from the noise, I saw that it was not birds but children. Several dozen children ran together out of the gate and down the paved street. Again, I found myself alone.

As the children vanished, a monk with the demeanor of a teacher appeared, clothed in black clothes and a white collar.

He approached me, and greeted me with a smile. He answered in a way that failed to hide his surprise.

“We call that the wind,” he said, squinting.

“I can see why,” I answered, smiling in return.

“They are younger students from the secondary school. When they are wearing their white uniforms, we call them a wind of rabbits.”

I asked where the rabbits in their everyday clothes had gone. Without answering my question, the teacher said, “When they reach the upper grades, they no longer run.” Again, his eyes smiled behind his glasses.

I imagined that the chosen among the children would eventually go on to more rigorous training as monks of the Benedictine abbey, and be elevated to the priesthood.

In the deep silence that followed the wind, I walked toward the next gate.

It was quiet. I knew that many people were inside the large buildings, including students and monks, with many of them living there, but the air that hit my face was good and clear, devoid of the foulness of human breath.

In religious places, whether Christian or Buddhist, silence is treasured. It is this atmosphere that I like so much. Like cooled white wine, it spreads from the lungs into the spirit.

With the addition of gold color to this white wine, the chapel of the church intoxicated me.

There were a number of unmoving worshipers, but there were dozens more statues covered with gold leaf, who seemed like inhabitants of heaven looking down serenely upon me. At first I was agitated, but quickly became calm.

The main altar was marble covered with gold leaf, and above the sacred sarcophagus, Peter and Paul held hands, bidding farewell to one another. It is normal to imagine them encouraging one another in the awareness of approaching death, but their bodies were covered with gold, and the figures from the Old Testament surrounding them – the prophet Daniel, Jeremiah, David, Isaiah, and others – were all covered with gold as well. The human figures and angels decorating the wall over the altar to the ceiling were all shining in the same color, and I braced myself, feeling that this was a scheme to deceive people with splendor.

Peter and Paul were executed on the same day. Peter was crucified upside down, but Paul, being a citizen of Rome, was beheaded. The woman in the deep red cloak in the fresco above the main altar wore a crown of thorns, and instruments of torture lay at her feet. It must have been that she attained these heights by enduring torture. In other words, under the gold color, rivers of blood must have been flowing.

No matter how gorgeous and splendid it may be, Christianity involves pain to the flesh and testing of the spirit, and human tragedy and suffering can be found wherever one looks.

It was common in European history for martyrs to become saints, and for their remains or parts of their bodies to become the protector saints of churches. In Melk, the body of St. Coloman, a pilgrim from Ireland who was hanged from an elderberry tree in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, was brought uncorrupted to the abbey, and today lies as a dressed up skeleton inside a glass case with a gold frame.

As I passed in front of the display, I felt a tinge of sympathy. After being hanged from an elderberry tree, he had to endure being displayed in front of people as a skeleton more than a thousand years later.

I left the chapel, and walked along a long hallway with iron lamps hanging from a white walled ceiling.

It was only recently in the history of Melk Abbey that electric bulbs had been placed into those lamps. I feel that with oil lamps or candles, the figures of people must have seemed to faintly float.

I climbed a wide stone staircase, and proceeded further into the hallway leading to the exhibition space in the imperial rooms. In the marble chamber, I saw the first visitor in the entire complex. It was a young woman wearing a backpack, and she was looking at a picture on the wall, comparing it to a document she was holding.

As I walked past her, she smiled at me. I was relieved. Whether from the imperial rooms or the marble chamber, one sees clearly that the Babenburgs and the Hapsburgs who ruled Austria treasured Melk as an important spiritual place. At the same time that it was a place of

worship and training, it was both a fort and a palace.

It may be in the marble room that the emperor met the highest religious leader to hear the word of god.

As I proceeded further, I suddenly felt a breeze from the river.

I had reached the core of the enormous complex, which was shaped like a letter A.

As I climbed, I saw the Melk and the Melk River below and the gray trees, colored in gray, enveloped in a white veil from the sun's rays that came directly from above. Looking carefully, I could see the surface of the river moving together in a single direction.

Beyond the wing connected to the imperial rooms, there was another wing, that seemed more like what an abbey should be like, where visitors were only allowed to enter the library. The library was a far more attractive place than the chapel shimmering in gold. It was to see the library that I wanted to visit Melk again.

Entering through the thick doors, I found myself within a heavy and somber atmosphere that was completely different from the glittering of the gold in the chapel.

With the exception of the open narrow windows on the left and right side, the long square chamber was buried, to the ceiling, in leather-bound books. All the leather-bound books had designs and titles in gold, but the color had become dull and dark, and they formed a mountain of book corpses, dulled by the weight of several centuries.

Nearly all had been copied by hand, so they formed an incredible repository of human energy. Imagining this, it seemed not like a dead body but like a mass of voices, sighs, and sweat, full of power.

What was that feeling that poured down on me last time as I had stood in the center of the room? I wanted to feel it once again.

Put into words, it seems like very little at all.

But what incredible things people will do.

There were handwritten instructions from the ninth century, as well as transcriptions of Virgil from the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the teachings of Hieronymus were copied here. The library also holds rules of the Benedictine order, bibles, legal treatises, as well as the *Life of Jesus* by Frau Ava, said to be the earliest work of literature by a woman in German. Two thirds of the copied works are said to be from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but most have never been opened. Just recently, actually in 1997, Professor Christine Glassner opened a book from the late medieval period and discovered a fragment of *The Song of the Nibelungs* from about 1300. It was a major event.

In addition to the transcriptions, there are early printed books known as incunabula, 1,700 from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, 4,500 from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and as many as 18,000 from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The library has a total of 100,000 volumes.

I was only able to see a portion of the books with my own eyes, and as I don't read Latin or German, I could only understand if they were works dealing with theology, law, geography or astronomy from the explanations written on the shelves. . .

Still, the beauty of the books displayed on the exhibit shelves took my breath away. Each letter was written like an emblem, with the pen's marks inscribed with love. I couldn't understand the meaning of the words. But still, the letters themselves were this important. It seemed that the letters themselves were the focus of prayers.

Thinking about it, in Buddhism there is also a tradition of Sutra copying. It seems that in religion, it is not understanding the words, but rather copying each character, that matters.

The monks who made the transcriptions carried out this ceaseless work in order to become closer to God. If this is so, the hundred thousand words held here are a concentration of the prayers of monks over hundreds of years.

Something was trying to push itself into my skin and my breathing. Within this concentrated atmosphere, my life seemed fickle, like a feather.

As I walked near the window, I felt a human presence behind me.

Perhaps I was distracted by the oppressive feeling of the books, but the presence pressed against the nape of my neck. I was distracted by the letters, words, and prayers accumulated over the centuries, but it was unquestionably the presence of a living human being.

As I turned around, he had passed by me once and was coming back. It was an elderly man wearing a brown sweater. Though their presences were not sufficient to take my mind off the books that filled the room, I noticed that there was also a woman and a monk, wearing a long robe tied around his hips. The old man walked slowly toward the window that was near me, and looked up at the top of the window.

His round face was deeply wrinkled, and the skin hung from his jaw and neck, but his eyes were bloodshot and piercing, and I was taken aback by the sadness that seemed to slowly flow from them.

He noticed my presence, and smiled reticently.

As it was an old building, there were few windows, and they were tall and thin. Little sunlight entered, and it seemed that the old man could only see my silhouette. As I turned around, I could see his eyes, narrowing in the brightness, and could make out each hair of his eyebrow.

The old man looked back up at the top of the window, and muttered something. I couldn't understand. As I tried to move away from the window and walk past him, he spoke to me, this time in English.

"My wife is over there. . ."

This is what he said, unmistakably, as he pointed to the wall above the window.

"Your wife?"

I thought he might be insane.

The monk approached, shook the old man's hand, and disappeared into the back room. In the gesture, I felt amicableness toward the old man. The two seemed to be friends or acquaintances. . .

I also moved away from the window and gazed at the wall where the man was looking.



There was an indistinct picture, which might be perceived as a flower vase or a pattern. Not only had it faded over several hundred years, but the back light made it difficult to see.

“Is that a flower vase?” I asked.

“Does it look like a flower vase?”

“Yes, it does.”

“In the background, can you see a woman wearing red?”

I strained my eyes. And yes, a human-like figure seemed to appear.

“Yes, it looks like a person.”

“That’s my wife.”

I need to get away from him, I thought.

“... Everybody in the abbey says that it is a scholar of the order who was painted by Rosenthal. But if you look closely, it's clearly a woman. I realized at a glance that it was a woman, and I fell in love with her. But that was a long time ago.”

“It's a flower vase.”

“The flower vase was painted in secco above it, by Johann Bergl. It was painted on top of the woman, but my wife couldn't stand for that treatment, and came out from under the flower vase.

“Secco?”

“Rosenthal painted frescoes on damp walls. Secco means drawing paintings on dry walls. But frescoes are stronger. With time, the fresco surfaced from under the flower vase painted on the dry wall, and now it appears to be ready to displace the flower vase. In another hundred years, it will have completely overtaken it. Isn't it a delightful thought? Living people are more important than things. They cannot be kept inside of walls.

“Is that your wife?”

“Yes, it is.”

“You mean she is your Madonna?”

“No, I married her. She came out of the wall, and was looking out of the window, standing just where you are now. At that time, only the flower vase remained in the wall. She lived with me, and died four years ago. Then she returned to that place.”

As I listened, the human figure became clearer. It did indeed seem to be not a male scholar, but a woman in red.

“I am the owner of this place,” he said as he pulled out a business card from his pocket.

The card gave the name of a restaurant and a map.

“Are you Japanese?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“You came here from Vienna?”

“I took the train from Vienna West station.”

“Then you didn't go through Krems. If you had come by car through Krems, you would have noticed my restaurant. In Austria we have a famous wine called Jamek. The restaurant is near the winery, and has a sign hanging with the name The Jackdaw.

The card also had a picture of the restaurant. So I needn't be fearful, after all.

I told him that I had driven along the road before on my way to Melk.

“This is a special window,” he said. “If you are not in a hurry, why don't you have lunch at my restaurant? It's about a 20-minute drive.”

“But I'm not the woman who came out of the wall,” I said. We smiled at each other. I made up my mind to trust him. The fact that he used a cane helped to put me at ease.

We walked to the parking lot. His name was Peter, and he told me that he drove to Melk every day to visit his wife.

The parking lot had been built in a square up a flight of stairs. When I remarked that it must be difficult going up and down the stairs with a cane, he said that it couldn't be helped, as his wife had returned to Melk.

He had a luxury German car. It had been modified for the disabled.

In the darkness of the library he had looked around 70, but in the bright parking lot, I could see that he was clearly older.

“What are you doing with the restaurant today,” I asked.

“I work when I want to work. Today I left it in my son's hands. He was the head sommelier at Jamek, but after my legs went bad, he took over for me.”

This put me even further at ease.

The Melk River runs into the Danube, and begins flowing to the east. I had recollections of the road following the Danube and the trees lining the road. This time, the trees were in the midst of losing their foliage, and scattered leaves danced on the road surface. The spaces between the trees, which had been reduced to mere branches, were filled by the light from the surface of the river. The soft and forever unchanging landscape of the autumn left a deep impression on me.

The Jackdaw was an unassuming place with a parking lot in front, but the crow on the sign certainly stood out. It looked more like a black pigeon than a crow, and had a diagonal grey stripe at the level of its shoulder. I told the old man I had never seen such a bird in Japan, and he explained that it was common in the area.

Behind the restaurant, the mountains were fully draped in yellow. The color came from yellow grape leaves. Peter told me that the restaurant served its own wine. And then he added something in a quiet voice.

“It is more delicious than the Jamek wine. My son says so, so it must be true.”

I suddenly felt hungry. The last thing I'd eaten was a single *semmel* roll with ham on the train.

There were a couple of groups at the restaurant, but they all seemed like people on their way to Melk. There were only five tables, and it was a homey restaurant with white tablecloths decorated with flowers. The flower vases were set on yellow grape leaves. The aroma of the bread and the smell of the cheese put me into a happy mood.

Peter introduced me to the young chef, who was wearing an apron. He was a thin man, with large eyes.

"This is my son."

As he was introduced this way, the chef made a strange expression, as if he were squinting in the sunlight to look at the faraway haze of the sun.

"Did you see the woman in the wall?" he asked me.

"Yes, and I heard about how the woman is stronger than the flower vase. Peter told me it was his wife."

I wanted to see how the chef would react. But his previous smile returned, and he didn't answer the question.

The young chef's black eyes looked like those of an Arab, and his hair was also glossy. Not only did he not resemble Peter; he looked like a man from a different country.

Something put me on my guard toward Peter. But that didn't really matter. There was a familiarity between the chef and Peter, as if they confided in and trusted one another.

First, I wondered if Peter really was the owner.

The lunch's main course was a spicy dish of trout meunière with a white wine sauce. The white wine, herbs, and tart apples that are only found in the area near Krems were nicely mixed, giving a rich taste to the simple white fish.

Peter put grapeseed oil on the trout. He recommended that I do the same, but I declined. It is a slightly bitter oil, made by pressing grape seeds. The bread was homemade, with a hard crust but moist inside. The harder I bit, the more flavor came out. Peter told me the chef made everything himself.

"He's a wonderful chef," I ventured. "But he doesn't look like you. I suppose he took after the woman in the wall."

"Coco."

The old man's eyes softened.

"That was your wife's name?"

"Coco dressed in red."

"The woman in the picture? Or your wife is Coco?"

Perhaps hearing those words, the chef, who seemed to have finished some task, approached our table with a photograph of a woman in a small frame, and put it on the

tablecloth. And then he said,

“This is his wife.”

It was an average looking woman from the countryside, dressed not in red but in typical Tyrolian dress. The chef said it was Peter's wife. He didn't seem, after all, to be Peter's son. That isn't the way one would present the picture of one's own mother.

When Peter went to the bathroom, I called the chef over and asked him.

“Are you really his son?”

He just shrugged.

“Peter will surely take you to the vineyards. Think of it as gratitude for the lunch, and just go for a little while and listen to what he has to say. Peter was long the chef of this restaurant. After he lost his wife, he passed it on to me. His wife was a wonderful woman, and for many years they ran the Jackdaw together. I hear it was his wife who named the restaurant.”

“She came out of the wall, and then went back into the wall?”

“It was a major scandal at the abbey.”

The chef's words seemed to contain a combination of mischief and pity.

Peter was coming back, so the chef walked away from the table.

Peter and I left the restaurant and took a walk into the vineyards behind it.

From a distance it seems as if the slope was covered with uniform yellow, but there were slight differences in the tones depending on the type of grape, and there were different colors depending on the zone.

The varieties that still had a bit of green among the yellow leaves were taller than the others, and if one looked carefully, had clusters of blue grapes. They didn't seem unripe, but the skin was tough. To the left were the shortest trellises. The harvest had been completed there, and the leaves that remained seemed ready to drop. Some of the remaining leaves were changing in color from yellow to red.

Peter walked slowly, using his cane, and I adjusted my speed to him.

He explained that the leaves of red grapes had crimson color mixed in. He told me about the different strains. He also spoke about the tastes of the wines made from different grapes.

“This vine,” he said, “is used for the house wine that we drank with lunch. It's a hardy strain, and requires little care. A cool wind will soon blow from beyond that hill, scattering the leaves, and when it comes you'll see how strong and flexible the stems are.”

“When will all the leaves be gone?”

“Another month, I suppose. Even when the snow comes, the black stems wind around one another and endure the cold. I wish my wife had been as strong as them.”

The thin path ran up the hill, breaking into several branches along the way. The meandering created the illusion that we had stumbled into the yellow colored forest.

The road, which must have been for the passage of special trucks during the harvest season, was quiet as well. A small shed with a triangular roof stood at the intersection, and inside it was a crucifix. Somehow it didn't seem to fit in the yellow forest. The colors had been peeled off by the wind and rain, but the blood dripping from the crown of thorns on Christ's head was still vivid, thanks to the protection of the roof.

Though the path meandered, the rose vines were planted in straight rows. Between them stretched, into the distance, belts of blue grass. The belts must have been for the harvesting machines to pass through.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Under the overflowing afternoon light, both the vines that still had grapes and those that had been harvested were in the midst of a yellow dream.

But it was too beautiful. That which is too beautiful is frightening. The gold color of the chapel at Melk was frightening, and the backs of the books that for centuries had filled the library, with their gold paint, were frightening.

As was the old man walking slowly using his cane in the field of grapes, with its yellow gold color. . .

My pace slowed.

I wondered if his legs were really so bad. Was the cane really just a cane?

The trout that I had just eaten seemed to be swimming at the bottom of my stomach.

How far would we walk? He hadn't spoken for the last few minutes. He was simply walking toward our destination.

We were now in the middle of a different type of vine, with reddish leaves.

Peter left the path and advanced into the vineyard. The ground was soft, but not enough to cover my shoes.

"How far will we go?"

My voice was bright and stiff.

He simply kept walking.

On both sides, the walls of red and yellow continued in a straight line. At the end of a path, I could see a stone wall. It was far in the distance, though, and it would take a long time to reach it. The trout in my stomach stirred again. There is nothing as expensive, they say, as something given for free. I would need some pretext to turn back. I desperately sought a reason. The back of Peter's head was glistening with sweat.

Then he stopped.

In this single spot, the vines had been cleared, and there was a long bench.

He placed the cane between his knees, and sat down. He sighed deeply, as if he were truly tired.

I cleared my own spot on the bench, and sat down. So this was our destination. I wondered if I would now have to pay him back for the lunch.

There were black grapes under the red and yellow leaves of the surrounding vines. They were rotting, and gave out a sweet smell. I hadn't noticed as we were walking, but the smell was suffocating. The thick air, which I couldn't tell was one of ripeness or rottenness, mixed with the odor of the grass and soil, and clung to my body and face.

"The grapes are rotting, aren't they."

"... the bacteria cover them, and they dry even as they rot. There, can you see that white substance? Soon, the reddish color will change to gray. That's when they are sweetest. Once they are gray, they can be harvested.

So they were to be made into wine.

"If they don't rot, they don't become sweet."

As if he had understood my nervousness, he started playing with the cane, using both hands.

"... Do you often invite people from the library to this place?"

"Only women. And only women who are standing near that window, as Coco did."

"Who come out of the picture?"

"Nobody believed it. Not only that, but they said the figure above the flower vase in the picture was a man. Everybody in the abbey said so. And they looked at me as if they were going to subject me to the inquisition.

He struck the ground hard with his cane. The cane sunk into the soil. His cheeks flushed, and his eyes were bloodshot. He had that overpowering presence that had seemed to shake me when we met in the library. He looked up from the yellow field, his eyes seeming to pierce the sky overhead.

"What if. . ." I wondered in a soft voice.

"I was once a monk," he said. "That window taught me about a new world. During the centuries, that window gave monks passage to the outside world. Can you imagine how many monks were tempted by the woman painted by Rosenthal? They couldn't use flames in the library. They couldn't use heaters or candle stands. They had no choice but to rely on the narrow rays of light coming in through the window to read. Books cannot be removed from the library, so they did transcriptions near the windows. Many of them died young from the cold and from tuberculosis. I was close to death myself. And then the woman came out of the wall and stood near the window. It was Coco. Coco was wearing red at that time. I was saved; she came to save me."

The heavy air of the abbey's library returned. I was Coco standing by the window, and a thin youth with a pale face stood before me. He had eyes that seemed exhausted from training, sincere eyes that had loved at the very edge of life, that clung while seeking the warmth of people.

The long black clothes of the youth were tied around his waist, and he had a stiff white collar and a cross on the chest. This Benedictine monk moved my entire being, and I was terrified by what was happening in my own body.

“And then what happened?” I asked.

As if to nurse his dry throat, he opened his mouth particularly slowly.

“Nothing special. I was with Coco for a long time.”

“When she died, she hid again in that wall, behind the flower vase?”

“Yes, but her body lies here.”

“Where?”

“Here.” And he pointed to the ground under the bench.

A wind blew up from the depths of the land. My body shook from the mellow smell that fully ripe grapes emit as they rot in that sweet way.

I was being deceived. No, no, the story was true. The grape vines around the bench had a particularly beautiful red color, and the noble rot was proceeding in those fruits alone.

“What an interesting story.”

My voice broke. The beating of my heart was such that even Coco in the ground might have been able to hear it.

A black shadow passed over our heads. The shadow alighted onto a grape vine a little distance away, and shook a number of leaves.

The old man purred, and from behind the leaves a black bird with a long beak, about the size of a pigeon appeared, and suddenly landed on the top of the grass. The bird approached us cautiously. It had a gray stripe on its neck.

The old man picked a single grape from a nearby vine, and tossed it. The jackdaw rushed forward, grabbed it and ran away.

“The grapes from this vine are particularly sweet. Why don't you try one?”

He picked another bunch. They were strange grapes, with most of their liquid gone, and with a gray purple color.

“This is the smell. . .” And he brought it to my nose.

More than a fruit, it was a creature with its own quiet will. The odor was like the breath of a living creature. The fleshy and aggressive mass of air clung to my face.

Peter's white face was so close. The creature hung between our faces.

I checked the odor with my nose, chose a grape without gray mold, and placed it into my mouth. It didn't satisfy me, so I picked up another which was in the process of decay. It left a sharp numbing on my tongue, making it seem not sweet, but rather as if it had fermented while still on the vine.

“So this was the color.”

I was trying to make sure.

“The woman in the picture was surely wearing clothes of that color.”

I remembered that it was a deep color, that could be seen either as red or black. Tears were swelling up in the old man's eyes.

“Thank you for lunch. I am happy to have met you. You were a wonderful couple.”

I couldn't stand it any longer. I stood up and began to walk away.

He remained sitting on the bench, unmoving.

At the intersection of the paths, I saw the crucifix again. I had been stopped by that cross that seemed to be a protector god of the field.

When monks who had tired of their training and chosen a woman passed by, what did Christ say to them? The chef had told me this had been a major scandal for the abbey, but Coco's picture didn't seem like one that could invite a scandal. It was just the picture of a country girl who had gotten older, and become an old woman.

When I returned to the restaurant, the chef was standing outside, sending off some customers that he knew.

I told him, “Peter is alone in the vineyard with Coco.”

He nodded, as if he understood everything. And then he asked the middle-aged couple, who were about to get into their car, to drive me to Sankt Pölten.

I got into the car, rolling the sharp sensation on the tip of my tongue.



## “The Golden Fields of Melk”

By Nobuko Takagi

A long time ago, I took a car to Melk. It was early spring then, with a faint white moon shining above the forests that lined the banks of the Danube River like a fortress.

As if hesitant to darken, the sky remained a pale, smoky blue. Low on the skyline, at the edge of the mountains, the moon seemed to glide across the cars.

*I'll be back*, I told the moon.

Keeping my promise, I now rode a train from Vienna's West Station. It was fall, a completely different season. The October air was clear.

I had grown quite accustomed to traveling alone in Austria. I took the train this time because I didn't want to impose again on the Japanese student at Vienna University who drove me to Melk the last time. Station employees and train staff can all speak English, and thankfully, the English spoken by Germans is easy to understand. I can also get by with English in restaurants, hotels and taxis.

It took forty minutes to get to Sankt Pölten. After transferring to the local train I got to know an elderly couple who brought along a dog. The woman boasted that Melk was the most beautiful abbey in the world. Even the dog howled in assent.

We arrived at Melk Station in a little less than thirty minutes.

The abbey at Melk sits atop a hill, trailing like a cloud above the rocks and deep greenery, its brown roof spread out under the tall sky. The long fortress-like wall below the roof is painted with yellow and white stripes. Above it, in the center, sits a green dome. Two spires, gorgeously decorated, face the Melk River. The vivid colors—white, yellow and the dull green of copper rust—seem to flow down from the tops of the spires and wrap around them like ribbons, finally descending to the faces of two clocks, themselves shining golden yellow.

By itself, the building gave the impression of a palace rather than a church or monastery, although multicolored marble and gilding were also used in abundance in the inner parts of the church. Plus, the entire structure, down to every detail, is made with smooth curves, and is the only piece of architecture that can be called a great treasure of the Austrian Baroque.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the architects who constructed the church into its present form tried to create heaven in this world atop Melk's hill by using their faith and a vast amount of gold. It was clear that their passion was not borne from devotion or yearning, but rather from a kind of obsessive energy.

Standing in the abbey's hall during my previous visit, I was overwhelmed by the color of gold. A human being, surrounded by such color, can lose touch with reality, even a sense of the weight of one's own body. I sensed that this was a message of the Buddhist Pure Land faith as well, and now I wanted to again experience the golden color's lure.

Before this abbey sparkled with baroque beauty, it was a fortress, constructed in the tenth century. A shrine was built in its center where the troops were stationed. The forts that

protected this remote region called Mark took their names from tributaries of the Danube River: Enns, Ybbs, Melk, Krems. The most important fort was called Melk.

At that time, Melk's land was governed by the Babenberg family, who erected the abbey in order to protect the contemplative monks who went on to form the Benedictine Order.

Even when the political leaders subsequently changed, the abbey's lands were protected as a religious center, and the abbey remained the pinnacle of theological learning and the arts.

Of course a number of ordeals beset Melk's abbey, one of which was the political and economic disturbance caused by religious reforms. Melk joined forces with Vienna University, or rather, launched what is now known as the Melk Reform.

Interestingly, at that time, Melk Abbey chose the theoretical teachings of the Vienna University Ecumenical Council over those of the pope in Rome. Relations with the pope subsequently deteriorated, but theory—that is to say, learning—was made into a priority.

Today, science explains truth, but back then, truth was pursued by attempting to know the mind of God. Within this pursuit, Melk was able to hammer out new principles, along with theory, and the abbey was at the apex of learning and intellectualism.

Melk was constantly patrolled for dangerous fires. In its cold climate, fire was the only source of heat in winter, but winds blowing up from the river would fan the flames in the hilltop abbey. Moreover, there was insufficient water since the complex was situated on high ground. A small accidental fire could quickly become a disaster.

Fire destroyed the library at the end of the thirteenth century. One monk sacrificed himself trying to save precious works created when the abbey was in its infancy, such as hymns and Easter plays. From that time on there was a literary writing room in the abbey, where works such as miniature paintings and chronicles were energetically created, but most of its items have been lost.

The biggest tragedy occurred in the great fire of 1736, when nearly all of the work completed by head architect Jakob Prandtauer, along with that of numerous decorators, plasterers and sculptors, was destroyed just as they neared completion. Most of the roof and decorative rooms were lost. The head of the abbey at that time, Bertholdus Dietmayr, initiated reconstruction but he soon died, broken-hearted. Through the efforts of his second-in-command, the flourishing baroque that can be seen today was born.

These two great fires claimed many victims, but over the years there have been numerous less dramatic ones, and naturally, the entire abbey is extraordinarily fearful of fire.

The priests and monks wear long robes with ample sleeves. I wondered if this was done to protect them from the cold as they lived day-to-day without fire.

The region has an especially cold climate in Europe; when spring arrives the Melk River is still frozen. Now, in autumn, the vestiges of summer light in the sky were beautiful, but the temperature had already dropped to about ten degrees Celsius: it was a stark reminder of the long winter that was about to come.

The restaurants, with their tables covered in cloth and their chairs lined along the paved road in front of the town hall, were open but without any customers. A local elderly couple

leisurely sipped tea, as if taking a break from the work of their summer, or their year, or their lives.

Despite being a main thoroughfare, the road was so narrow that that people in opposite cafes or souvenir shops could have spoken to one another without raising their voices.

The entire life of the town is guarded and watched by the abbey with its green dome and two spires, visible down this road.

As I walked up the road's gentle slope, I was greeted by a beautiful gate with a triangular roof set in a rounded arch. A similar gate was visible further on. Visitors cannot go into the abbey's inner cloister, which was used for religious training, but they are allowed to visit the main hall and other parts of the church. Other than myself, however, there was not a soul around.

When I passed through the first gate, I heard sounds coming from all around the inner garden, like a flock of noisy birds. Instinctively, I turned around, and saw not birds, but children. All at once a number of them ran through the gate down the paved slope. And then I was alone again.

As I watched them run off, a monk who seemed to be their teacher appeared, wearing a black robe with a white collar.

Coming toward me, he greeted me with a smile that seemed to say, *They startled you, didn't they?*

"We call them the *Wind*," he said.

"Indeed," I replied, smiling back.

"They're underclassmen at the gymnasium. When they wear their formal white clothes, we call them the *Rabbit Wind*."

I wondered where those rabbits, now in plain clothes, had run off to. The teacher didn't answer my question, but instead added, "When they become upperclassmen, they stop running." His eyes smiled once again behind his glasses.

I also wondered if, among those students, some would be chosen to become priests and undergo the strict monastic training of the Benedictine Order.

In the quiet that returned after the Wind ran off, I walked toward the next gate.

It was silent in the sanctuary. There were many people—from gymnasium students to monks— inside the expansive structure, and I had heard that many of them lived in dormitories. Nevertheless, the air around me was pristine, as if untouched by human respiration.

Stillness is important in religious places, be they Christian or Buddhist, and what I liked most here was the air. It flowed like chilled white wine from my lungs to my heart. The coolness of the gold in the church's sanctuary added to the intoxicating effect.

There were a number of unhurried and unmoving pilgrims there. Numerous statues decorated in gold leaf gazed benevolently down, like citizens of heaven. There was some murmuring, but soon everything was silent.

The main altar was covered in marble and gold. On top of the high altar was a statue of Peter and Paul holding hands, lamenting their parting. Conscious of their impending deaths, they comforted one another. Their bodies were entirely covered with gold; around them stood the prophets Daniel, Jeremiah, David, Isaiah, and others from the Old Testament, also in gold. On the altar, holy figures and angels radiated the same color. To me, all the lustrous artwork seemed like part of a secret conspiracy to seduce its viewers.

Peter and Paul were executed on the same day. Peter was crucified upside down and Paul, a citizen of Rome, was beheaded. The fresco above the altar depicted a woman wearing a deep crimson cloak and placing crowns of thorns atop their heads, while instruments of torture lay scattered at their feet. Tolerating such torture, they reached great heights. Or to put it another way, a profuse amount of blood flowed beneath these golden colors.

No matter how splendid and gorgeous Christianity can be, the anguish and screams of humanity drift about it everywhere, as the physical body is injured to test the spirit.

Martyrs become saints, and the church worships a patron saint's corpse or pieces of flesh. This practice took root in every region in Europe, and in Melk as well, when an Irish pilgrim named St. Coleman was hanged from an elderberry bush in the tenth century. His body was brought to Melk in a state of non-decay, and even now the white bones of this saint lie decoratively in a glass case rimmed with gold.

Truth be told, I felt a little sorry for him when I passed by, for not only was he hanged from an elderberry bush, but now, one thousand years later, his white bones were exposed to everyone's gaze.

Leaving the sanctuary, I walked through a long hallway with white walls illuminated by iron light fixtures descending from the ceiling.

Considering Melk's long history, the electric bulbs used in the iron fixtures were extremely recent additions. Firelight created by oil or candles would have only burned bright enough to cast faint shadows on the walls.

I climbed the wide stone staircase and entered the exhibition gallery that displayed the Emperors' Hall. Amid the marble, I saw tourists for the first time since entering the buildings. A young woman wearing a backpack looked at the paintings on the wall, comparing them to materials she held in her hands. We exchanged smiles as I passed by. I was relieved by her presence.

In the Emperor's Hall and the Marble Chamber, one can see how Austria's hereditary rulers—such as the Babenbergs and Hapsburgs—cherished Melk as a spiritual center. It was a palace and a fortress as well as a place of worship and spiritual training.

Emperors used the Marble Chamber to meet with high ranking clergy, where they perhaps were given messages from God.

As I continued on, a wind suddenly blew up from the river.

I ascended to the very top of the enormous A-frame structure.

The gray-green trees surrounding the town and the Melk River swayed back and forth, veiled in the light of the overhead sun. Looking closely, I could see the surface of the river moving ceaselessly in one direction.

Further ahead was the library, which was even more enchanting than the golden sanctuary. The library was the reason why I wanted to visit Melk one more time.

The still air behind its massive doors was heavy and moist, and entirely different from that of the sanctuary.

The long four-cornered room was completely crowded to the ceiling with leather-bound books, save for the narrow open windows to the left and right. The writing and patterns of every book were done in gold ink. Of course, their brilliance had diminished with the passage of hundreds of years. What remained now was a mountain of the corpses of books.

For the most part these books were written by hand, and they reflected the energy of innumerable people. Rather than corpses, one could perhaps imagine them as a chorus of voices, collective breaths, and sweat, all brimming with power.

When I stood in the middle of this room, I tried to imagine the feeling that had overwhelmed me on my previous visit. Whatever it was, I wanted to experience it again.

It wasn't something I could put into words.

But what amazing things human beings could accomplish.

The hand-copied books dated from the ninth century and included sermon collections and tenth- and eleventh-century copies of Virgil. A twelfth-century copy of Hieronymus's commentaries was also completed here. There were explications on the Benedictine canon, scripture, law materials, theological writings, and *The Life of Jesus*—a work written by the poet Ava, the first female writer of the German language. Two-thirds of all the manuscripts dated from the fifteenth century, but they had not yet all been examined. Just recently, in 1997, a scholar named Christine Glassner caused quite a stir when she discovered a fragment of the epic poem *Das Nibelungenlied* dating from around 1300, which was carefully inserted into a late medieval manuscript.

Besides manuscripts, there were 1700 early printed texts dating from the sixteenth century, called "old editions." In the seventeenth century, books numbered about 4500. In the eighteenth century they dramatically increased to 18,000. All together, the library held 100,000 volumes.

I could only see an extremely small portion of the books, and because I understand neither Latin nor German, I could only glean their different topics—theology, law, geography, astronomy, and so on—from the brief written explanations.

Even so, there was one manuscript laid out on the exhibition table whose beauty and power took my breath away. Each letter was an emblem, the leavings of the pen gorgeous and imbued with affection. I couldn't comprehend the language but I understood how precious letters could be. They were themselves objects of prayer, I thought.

They also reminded me of Buddhist sutra manuscripts. The act of writing itself often seems to be a religious activity, regardless of what that writing means.

The monks who created these manuscripts engaged in their extraordinary work in order to grow closer to God. Hundreds of years of prayer were now condensed into these 100,000 volumes.

Something forced itself into my skin and lungs. In this concentrated space, my life seemed insubstantial, like a feather.

As I walked closer to the window, I felt the presence of someone behind me.

I first felt it on nape of my neck. It was ironic: here I was, mingling with piles of prayers and words, and distracted by their gravity, but what I felt was the unmistakable presence of a human of flesh and blood weighing upon me.

I turned around. An old man in a brown sweater walked slowly behind me and then started to turn back. The room, buried in so many books, was swathed in darkness, so until then I hadn't noticed other people. Now I also saw one other woman and a monk wearing a long robe tied around the waist.

The old man approached me slowly and then looked up at the wall above the window. His round face was etched with wrinkles; the skin under his jaw and around his neck sagged. His bloodshot eyes were piercing, and I was unnerved by the sadness and uncertainty that emanated from them.

Conscious of my presence, he gave me a diffident smile.

Because the building was so old, there were only a few long and narrow windows. They provided a very small amount of light, and the old man could probably only see my silhouette. From where I was standing, however, I could see every lash on his squinting eyes.

Looking up again to the wall above the ceiling, the old man muttered something I couldn't understand. As I started to leave he spoke to me in English.

"My wife is up there," he said, pointing to the upper wall.

I was certain that that was what he said.

"Your wife?" I asked.

Perhaps he suffered from dementia.

A monk came by then and shook hands with the old man before entering an inner room. The monk's affection for him was apparent in his demeanor. I wondered if they were friends or acquaintances.

Stepping back from the window, I looked up at the wall where the old man gazed.

On it was an indistinct painting with a flower vase and some script. It was difficult to see, not only because it had deteriorated severely from the passage of time, but also because the light from the window was so bright.

"Isn't that a vase?" I said.

"Does it look like a vase to you?"

"Yes. It's a vase."

"Can't you see the woman inside, wearing red clothes?"

I looked more closely. A figure, somewhat human looking, gradually appeared.

"Oh, yes. I see a person."

"That's my wife."

Clearly this old man *was* demented. I thought I'd better leave.

"Everyone in this abbey thinks it's a religious scholar painted by Rosenthal. But if you look closely you'll see that it is obviously a woman. When I first saw her, I fell in love. That was a long time ago, of course."

"But it's only a vase," I protested.

"Actually, the vase was painted over the woman by Johann Bergel, who used a technique called *secco*. He painted over her, but she couldn't abide such treatment, so she appeared as a figure *in* the vase."

"What is *secco*?" I asked.

"Rosenthal painted a fresco on the wet wall. *Secco* is a method of painting on a dry wall. But frescoes are more durable. After the painting of the vase had dried, and over time, the fresco began to appear, beginning at the bottom of the vase. Now it's as if the fresco is pushing through the upper layer. In another hundred years, the two paintings will be completely reversed. It's funny, isn't it? She's not an object, she's a living being. And it would be impossible to push her back now."

"And...she's your wife?"

"Indeed."

"Like the Madonna?"

"She and I were married. She came down from the wall and peered out the window, standing right where you stand now. And of course, all that was left on the wall was the vase. We lived together but four years ago she passed away. And so she returned *there*."

As he said this, the human figure became more discernible. And indeed, it was a woman in red clothes, not a male scholar.

"I am a businessman here," the old man said, handing me a card from his pocket. The card had the name of a restaurant on it, as well as a map.

"Are you from Japan?" he asked me.

"Yes," I replied.

"You came from Vienna?"

"Yes, on the train, from West Station."

"Then you didn't pass through Krems. If you had driven, you would have seen my restaurant. Krems has a very famous Austrian wine called *Jamek*. My restaurant is very close to the winery. It has a large sign. The Hooded Crow. That's its name."

The card also had a picture of a Hooded Crow on it. The old man seemed believable.

I told him that I had been to Melk once before, by car.

"That is a very special window. Say, if you're not busy, would you like to come to my restaurant for lunch? It's only a twenty minute drive."

"But just so you know," I said, "I did not come down from the wall."

We laughed. I decided to trust him. Plus, he used a cane, and that put me at ease.

We walked to the parking lot. His name was Peter, and he drove his car to Melk every day to visit his wife.

The parking lot was built at the top of a set of stairs. Peter struggled to climb them, leaning on his cane. It must have been difficult, but considering that his wife had returned to Melk, he didn't really have a choice.

His high-end German car was handicap-customized.

In the darkness of the library he had looked about seventy years old, but now, in the bright light of the parking lot, it was clear that he was much older.

"Who's taking care of your restaurant today?" I asked.

"I only work when I want to. My son is there when I'm not around. He used to be the sommelier at the Jamek Vineyard, but when I hurt my leg, I turned the restaurant over to him."

Once again, I felt at ease with Peter.

The Melk River joins the Danube and flows east. I remember seeing the trees lining the road that runs along the Danube. Now the trees were energetically dropping their leaves, which scattered and danced on the road. The trees, now mere branches, were completely occluded by the brightness of the river's surface.

The Hooded Crow was small and compact, with a parking lot in front of the restaurant. The most striking thing about the place was the sign. To me, the bird looked like more like a black pigeon with a gray slanted band around its neck. It wasn't a bird I had ever seen in Japan. When I mentioned this to Peter, he explained that it was a common species here.

The mountain behind the restaurant was entirely colored by deep yellow grape leaves. Apparently Peter's restaurant also made homemade wine.

"And I'll tell you," he added in a whisper, "It's better than Jamek's. That's what my son says, and he's never wrong about these things."

I suddenly realized that I was hungry. On the train I had only eaten one sandwich—ham on Austrian semmel bread.

There were a few customers at the restaurant, who looked like they were taking a break on their drives to Melk. It was a family-style place, with just five tables and a flower in a vase atop each white tablecloth. Under each vase lay a golden yellow grape leaf. The aromas of bread and cheese gave me a feeling of contentment.

Peter introduced me to the young chef. He was a very thin man with large eyes and he wore an apron.

"This is my son," Peter said.

Introduced as such, a strange look emerged on the chef's face, like he was squinting in the sunshine or staring at faraway haze.



"Did you meet the lady in the wall?" he asked.

"I did," I replied, "and I also heard about how she is much stronger than the flower vase. We're talking about Peter's wife, right?"

I wanted to see how the chef would react to my question. But he didn't respond; instead he returned a practiced smile.

With his black eyes and lustrous black hair, he looked like he could have been of Arab descent. Not only did he not resemble Peter, he looked like a foreigner.

I braced myself for a confrontation with Peter. But then I decided that it really didn't matter if they were related or not. I could sense the closeness—the mutual trust and acceptance—between them. But I did wonder if Peter really were the proprietor here, as he said.

The lunch's main course was river trout à la meuniere with a white wine sauce. The white wine and fragrant herbs were skillfully mixed together with very tart apples found only in the Krems area, and gave a very rich flavor to the clean white flesh of the fish.

Peter poured grape oil on his trout. He offered some to me, but I declined because I have heard that the oil, squeezed from the seeds of grapes, has a bitter taste. The bread was homemade, with a hardness on the outside that protected the moistness of the middle, and the flavor emerged more with each bite. Peter said that the young chef had made everything.

"He's a wonderful cook," I said, "but he doesn't look like you at all. He must resemble the woman in the wall more."

"Coco." The old man's eyes relaxed.

"Was that your wife's name?"

"Coco in the red dress."

"You mean the woman in the painting, or your wife?"

The chef, perhaps overhearing our conversation, stopped what he was doing and brought over a framed photograph of a woman and placed it on the table. "This is his wife," he said.

She wore Tyrolean clothes, not a red dress. She looked ordinary, somewhat countrified. But the chef had said that this was Peter's wife. It was quite unlikely that he was Peter's son; his manner was not one of a son showing a picture of his mother.

When Peter stood up to go to the restroom, I called the chef over and asked him,

"Are you really Peter's son?"

He just shrugged his shoulders. "Peter will probably take you to the vineyard. Go with him, if only as a gesture of thanks for this lunch. Listen to what he has to say. Peter was the chef here for a long time. After he lost his wife, I took over the job. His wife was a magnificent woman; together they managed The Hooded Crow for many years. She's the one who named it."

"Does Peter really mean that she came out of the wall, and then went back into it?" I said.

"It caused quite a scandal at the abbey," he replied, his eyes registering a mixture of mischief and pity.

Peter returned, and the chef left.

We took a walk to the sprawling vineyard behind the restaurant.

From far away, the sloping fields looked completely golden, but in fact there were subtle differences in the colors of each kind of grape leaf, and each section displayed a different hue. Green peeked out between the yellow leaves. Some species of vines were taller than others, and if you looked very closely you could see purple bunches of fruit. The grapes looked unripe, their skin firm and taut. To the left, the harvesting was complete, and although leaves still clung to the vines, they were about to wither and fall. The remaining yellow leaves were turning red.

Peter walked slowly, leaning on his cane. I kept his pace.

He explained that the crimson color was associated with the leaves of red grapes. He told me about all the different varietals, and about the flavor of the wine each one produced.

"The grapes of this vine here are used to make the wine we drank at lunch. It's a robust species, and thus the easiest to grow. Pretty soon, cold winds will come up from those hills over there and blow the leaves completely off. That's when you can really appreciate the strength and resilience of these vines."

"When will they shed all their leaves?" I asked.

"In about a month, I'd say. The vines entwine themselves around the black branches to withstand the snow and cold winds. Ah, if only my wife could have been as strong..."

Narrow roads branched off in all directions as we climbed the slope. I imagined getting lost in this yellow forest. During harvest time the roads were used by farmers with special vehicles, but now they were empty. At one crossroads stood a small shrine with a triangular roof, housing a crucifix inside. The structure seemed incongruous with the yellow trees. Wind and rain had eroded much of its color but thanks to the roof, the crown of thorns on Christ's head remained vivid.

The roads were winding but the grapevines had been planted in a straight line. Between each field, belts of green grass continued far into the distance. I wondered if machines were used along the belts to harvest the grapes.

It was a beautiful afternoon, a golden-colored dream. But the light, shining down on both the vines that had been harvested and on those to which grapes still clung, seemed almost too brilliant.

And too beautiful. Things that are too beautiful often become frightening. The golden color in Melk's chapel, the gold-painted bindings of books buried in the library for hundreds of years—those things were frightening, too.

And this old man, walking slowly with his cane through this gold-colored vineyard...

My pace slowed.

I wondered if the old man's legs were really bad, and if his cane was just a cane.

I felt as if the river trout I had just eaten was swimming in the bottom of my stomach.

I wondered where we were going. For several minutes, Peter said nothing, but I guessed that we were walking toward some destination.

The grapevines continued, their leaves swathed in red. But now it was clearly a species different from those I had seen until then.

Peter walked from the paved road into the vineyard. The ground below our feet was soft but not muddy.

"Where are we going?" I asked, my voice intentionally bright.

But Peter just kept walking.

A straight wall of red and yellow continued on both sides of the path. A stone wall stood at a dead end. Wherever we were going, it was too far away and too difficult to reach. The river trout in my stomach moved limply. I was grateful for the lunch, but it's true, I thought: there is no such thing as a free lunch. After coming this far, I needed some kind of excuse to turn back, and I tried desperately to think of one. Sweat glistened on the back of Peter's neck.

Finally, he stopped.

It was the only place free of grapevines. On it sat a long bench.

Peter put the cane between his knees, sat down, and let out a deep sigh. I supposed he was quite tired.

I sat down too, a few feet away from him. So this was our destination. I wondered if this was where I had to return his favor.

Black fruit was visible at the bottom of the red and yellow vines surrounding us. It was rotten, and a sweet smell filled the air. I hadn't noticed it while we were walking, but now the scent was so overpowering that I could hardly breathe. The rich air brimmed with ripeness and rottenness—it was impossible to discern between the two—and mixed with the smell of earth and grass, winding around my head and body.

"Those grapes are rotten, aren't they?" I said.

"Fungus on the vine dries the fruit while it rots," Peter replied. "Look, it's the white stuff there. In a little while, the red will turn gray. Then the grapes will be their sweetest. When they get to that point they'll be harvested."

Ah, I thought. So this was the grape used to make botrytized wine.

"If they don't rot they don't become sweet," he added.

Perhaps detecting my tenseness, he fiddled with his cane with both hands.

"Do you always invite someone from the library to come here?" I asked.

"Only women. And only those who stand by that window...the way Coco did."

"When she emerged from the painting?"

"Nobody believed me. Everyone at the abbey said that the person painted in the vase was a man. Their stern looks alone were like a heretical investigation."

He held his cane and thrust it into the ground. It sank into the earth. His eyes were inflamed and his cheeks flushed. They possessed the same kind of intensity as when we meet, like he was projecting his soul somewhere far away. His gaze drifted from the yellow vineyard to the tall, empty sky.

"So you were a..." My voice trailed off.

"I was a monk. And that window exposed me to a brand new world. That window, you see, secretly took monks away to another place. Can you imagine how many monks have been seduced by Rosenthal's woman? They couldn't use flames in the library. There was no heating, there were no candles. So to read their books, they relied on the thin, long light coming through those windows. They couldn't take the books out of the library, so they also copied them near the window. Many of them died young, from the cold or tuberculosis. I too was close to death. But then a woman came down from the wall. It was Coco. She wore a red dress then. *Ahh, I am saved, I thought. This woman has come to save me.*"

I recalled the chilly, heavy air in the abbey's library. I imagined standing where Coco stood while a young man stood before me, his face pale, his body emaciated. His eyes were weary from religious training, craving human warmth. On the verge of death, he stared at the window and fell in love.

He was a young man in a long black robe with a rope tied around the waist, a stiff white collar, and a cross on his chest. This Benedictine monk stirred something in my entire being, it made me shudder with unusual fear.

"So what did you do?" I intentionally asked the question slowly, as if concealing a dryness in my throat.

"I didn't do anything. I've been with Coco all this time."

I reiterated his story. "She died, and is once again hidden under the vase in that wall."

"But her body rests here," he said.

"Where?"

"*Here.*" He pointed to the ground beneath his feet.

Wind blew up from the ground and I was suddenly overcome by the moist smell of sweet, rotting grapes.

I was being deceived. Or was he telling the truth? The red vines around the bench were especially beautiful, their essence flowing downward to perpetuate the noble rot.

"What an interesting story," I said. My voice cracked. My heart beat so loudly that perhaps Coco herself, deep in the ground, heard it.

A black shadow passed over my head. A short distance away, it dropped into the vines and shook the leaves.

When the old man cleared his throat, a black bird about the size of a pigeon with a long beak appeared from within the leaves and jumped down onto the grass. Cautiously, it

approached me. Around its neck was a gray band. The old man took a grape from a nearby vine and tossed it to the bird. It hopped up to it, took it in its mouth and quickly departed.

"This fruit of this vine is especially sweet. Do you want to try it?"

He plucked off another bunch of grapes. They were odd, an ash-purple color, withered and half dried up.

"Notice the smell," he said, raising it to my nose.

It wasn't fruit. It was a living being concealing a quiet will. It smelled like expired breath. The air around it, bewitching and offensive, wafted softly toward my face.

Peter's white face came close to mine and the living being was suspended between us.

I smelled the bunch, and then chose a grape not yet covered with rot. I put it my mouth. One was not enough and so I took another one.

What stayed in my mouth was not sweetness, but a penetrating numbness that made me think that the grape was still fermenting on the vine.

"It was this color."

I looked. "Yes," I said, "this is the exact same color as the woman's clothes in the painting."

I recalled that rich color, red with black. Tears welled up in the old man's eyes.

It was time for me to leave. "Thank you so much for the meal. I'm glad I met you. You two make a wonderful couple." I stood up and began to walk away.

He remained on the bench, motionless.

At the fork in the road, I saw the crucifix again. Perhaps it was regarded as the protective spirit of the vineyards. As I passed before it, I wondered what Christ would have said about a former monk whose austerities were sabotaged by a woman. The young chef had spoken of the scandal it caused at the abbey, but it seemed somehow unfitting to associate the Coco in the photograph with something "scandalous." She was an elderly woman, a country daughter, the kind you find anywhere.

When I returned to the restaurant, the young chef was saying goodbye to some familiar customers.

"Peter is the vineyard with Coco," I said.

He nodded, understanding everything. I asked a middle-aged couple just then about to drive off if they would take me to Sankt Pölten.

I got into the car, the penetrating sensation still lingering on my tongue.