



## The 2011 Kurodahan Press Translation Prize

Kurodahan Press is pleased to announce the 2011 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 the upcoming Kurodahan Press anthology *Speculative Japan Volume 3*, which is tentatively scheduled for publication in late 2012.

### 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/2011prize.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 a submission.

### 3. Source material

The story to be translated is

蝶の断片 by 加門七海      Roughly 6,000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 (伯爵の血族 紅ノ章), which is available at most bookstores, including Amazon Japan:

<http://www.amazon.co.jp/dp/4334742319/kurodahanpres-22>

If you are unable to purchase the book for some reason (such as not being in Japan), please contact me directly.

### 4. Application Deadline

Translations must be received no later than September 30, 2011. 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 (*Speculative Japan Volume 3*) 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 (or a pseudonym if desired) 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 a panel of three jurors, to be announced:



## Style Guide for Kurodahan Translation Contest Submissions

v1.2 of June 30, 2011

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 file format other than one of these, 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.

This will result in a pretty boring layout, but we do not want typographical games in the submissions... before the submissions are given to the judges, all formatting (font, font size, etc.) will be made uniform (italics will of course be preserved), and legible. Everyone will be using the same formatting, and judges will have to judge you on the merits of your translation, not your skill as a book designer.

#### 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.

Translator notes

If you wish to add notes about your translator you are of course welcome to. However, your translation will be judged on its merits as a finished translation. You will have to come up with appropriate answers for your questions, and write the story to reflect them. **With the exception of design and layout issues, what you write should be ready for publication.**

蝶の断片

加門七海



●『蝶の断片』 加門七海

意外と蟲愛する姫なのかもしれない。

加門七海は、儂<sup>はかな</sup>さと、なればこそその美しさを、そこに見つめているのかもしれない。アンデッド・テーマの『屍者の行進』（第6巻）に発表した「虫すだく」では、秋の虫たちが屍体怪談の歌を奏<sup>かな</sup>でくれた。今回登場するのは、吸血鬼テーマとは珍しい組み合わせともいえる『蝶』。とはいえ、この儂<sup>はかな</sup>げな生き物と死者との関係を言及すればホメロスの時代のギリシャにまで遡<sup>さかのぼ</sup>れる（詳しくは、拙著『夢魔の幻獣辞典』角川ホラー文庫、『ブシユケー』の頁を参照のこと）。

生と死。光と闇。本作は、光の美しさがことさら際立つ闇の物語である。

なお、本書と同時に、光文社からは加門七海の最新短篇集『美しい家』も刊行される。表題作は『異形コレクション』第33巻『オバケヤシキ』の参加作品であることからわかるように、異形短篇を一挙に収録した決定版。『女切り』（ハルキ・ホラー文庫）、『オワスレモノ』（光文社文庫）ともども、『異形』ファンにも必携の個人選集だ。

列車に揺られて、バスに乗り、緩やかな坂をしばし登って、ペンキが剥<sup>は</sup>けて錆<sup>さび</sup>びついたポストに入った葉書を引き出す。いくたびもの雨ですっかりと、文字は滲<sup>にじ</sup>んで汚れている。

佐枝は瞬<sup>またた</sup>きしたのちに、周囲に視線を巡らせた。

初夏の陽射<sup>ひざ</sup>しで色が飛び、景色は全体に平べったい。高い空で鳴いている雲雀<sup>ひばり</sup>の声のほうが生<sup>なま</sup>立的だ。

眩<sup>くら</sup>しさに涙を滲<sup>にじ</sup>ませて、少しの間、瞼<sup>まぶた</sup>を閉じた。軽快な雲雀の歌の狭間<sup>はざま</sup>に、名の知れない鳥の囀<sup>さえず</sup>りが、遠く、近くに疎<sup>まばら</sup>らに混ざった。風が柔らかな草だけを選んで、葉擦れの音を聞かせる。

湿度は決して低くない。日向の匂いを含んだ空気は、物憂いまでにねっとり重い。

突然、大きな羽唸<sup>うな</sup>りが、ぶん、と耳許を通り過ぎ、佐枝は閉じていた目を開けた。

暴力的な雑音を聞かせた虫の影はない。代わり、蝶々の姿が見える。

漸く光に慣れた目に、草の緑と緑の木、畑、電線が映し出された。長閑<sup>のどか</sup>だが、寂<sup>さび</sup>れた田舎の景色だ。

ひび割れの入った舗装道路は、時と草の根に負けつつあった。赤茶けた土を見せた畑は、打

ち棄てられていようだ。鳥除けのための銀のテープが輝きを失くして弛んだまま、傾いだ竹竿に絡まっている。

瘦せた向日葵は俯いていた。盛りの過ぎたドクダミと、我が物顔のヒメジオンの先、こもり茂った緑の奥を茶色い蝶が行き来していた。そこに可憐な花があるのか。

古い葉書を手に持ったまま、佐枝は後ろを振り向いた。葉書よりも朽ちかけた、木造平屋の家がある。

瘦せた板の隙間から漏れる空気が微臭い。初夏の真昼だからこそ、家は黒く、暗かった。

息を吐き、やや躊躇って、立てつけの悪い戸を開く。

広い土間に光が敷かれた。

上がり框の向こうの板間に、べたりと座り込んでいた姉が薄く微笑んだ。

「あら、来たの」

「返事も来ない」

佐枝は改めて息を漏らして、持った葉書を掲げて見せた。

「どれ、見ましようか」

「もういいわ」

靴を脱ぐのが面倒で、上がり框に腰掛ける。姉は不義理を謝しめせず、白い顔で笑うばかり

だ。

「葉書、何枚も書いたのよ。それは一体、どこまで見たの」

佐枝はジーンズの足を揺らした。

千鶴が行方知れずになったのは、四年ほど前のことになる。それを駆け落ちと知ったのは、

三年前の秋だった。

相手の男は誰とも知らない。知らない男なのだから、家族も反対しようがなかった。なのに、姉は駆け落ちし、仲の良かった妹に葉書だけを送って寄越した。

鉛筆で細く記された住所はまるで、でたらめだった。父と母は途方に暮れた。姉はそれでも折々に、でたらめの住所から便りを寄越した。

居場所を突き止めたのは、ほんの二月ほど前だ。なんのことはない、消印が綺麗に残っていたからだ。

佐枝は親に告げぬまま、そこから千鶴の家を探した。ひとりでいるのは知っていた。男には別に妻子があつて、そのうち、暴力的になり、金を持って逃げたのだ。

千鶴は恥じることもなく、葉書にすべてを書いてきていた。

——あの人はもう、おりません。

名前も顔も知らないうちに、姉の恋人は失せてしまった。

「帰る気はないの？」

「だって、今更」

姉の微笑はとても静かだ。まるで、見知らぬ女のようなだ。

束ねてない黒髪が、汗ばんだ項と鎖骨の辺りで波を描いて貼りついてた。白いブラウスの胸元が広い。そこから豊かに張り切ったふたつの乳房の谷間が見えた。

汗で、肌が光っている。

佐枝は葉書をしまつて、代わり、桃色のハンカチを取り出した。そして、やはり汗ばんで自分の首をそつとなぞつた。

「電話をちょうだいってね、私、何度も葉書に書いた。なのに、なんにも来ないから、自殺でもしたかと思つたわ」

「心配してくれたのね」

姉が手許を動かした。ざら、と乾いた音が聞こえた。見れば、枯れた花首だ。千鶴は板間にそれを広げて、些細な手仕事をしていたらしい。

「花を集めて、匂い袋を作ろうとしたの。だけど、だめ。この季節は湿気が強くて、乾ききる前に腐るのよ」

「姉さん、そんな趣味あつた」

「色々、臭うの。わからないかな」

姉は立ち上がる素振りを見せた。同時に、煤けた襖の陰から、か細い声が漏れてきた。

「あらあら」

生白い足の裏を見せ、影が奥に入っていく。

床の上に足跡が残った。そこだけ黒く光るのは、全体が薄い埃の層で覆われているからに違いない。

佐枝は散らかった花を見た。名前も知らない花々は、いずれも黒くちぢくれている。花の色の残らぬ事を、姉は腐ると言うのだろうか。

千鶴がねんねこにくるまれた赤ん坊を抱いてきた。

「私の赤ちゃん」

問う前に、笑みと共に答えが返つた。

佐枝は何も言えずに黙る。

姉は黒い花弁の上にレモン色のスカートを広げて、よしよし、ねえ、と子をあやし、ブラウスの貝釦を外した。

布地の白より眩しい乳房が、躊躇いもなく零れ出た。そこに子供を揺すり上げると、小さな口を精一杯開け、赤ん坊は乳首を含む。

うっとりとして、千鶴は赤子を見下ろした。佐枝は視線を外に背けた。引き戸の外はひたすら明るい。惹かれるように戸口に寄ると、再び強い光線が視界からすべての色を奪った。

背中に、人の立つ気配がする。

「姉さん。今日、泊まっていいい？」

振り向かないまま尋ねれば、「あなたさえ、よければ」と姉は答えた。  
乳臭いとでもいうのだろうか、有機的な臭いが鼻腔を掠める。佐枝は微かな吐き気を覚えて、そのまま外に出て行った。

雲雀はまだ鳴いている。

空の色はさつきより、幾分、薄くなったみたいだ。

その下を、道の奥へと進む。

枯れ枝の混ざった木の先に、濃い緑の里山がある。このまま緩やかに上っていけば、山に着くに違いない。

そこまで行く気はない。しかし、山からの風は心地良い。

ふと、鳥の声のすべてが途切れた。風も失せた。景色まで、時を止めたごとくに静かだ。

その静止画に動くものを見て、佐枝は視線を動かした。

草地の隙に溜まった水が、反射で黒く輝いていた。そこに薄茶の翅を持つ、蝶が十を超えて留まっていた。

まるで、誰かが活けたみたいだ。息するようにゆっくりと、蝶は翅を動かしていた。

姉が隣にそっと並んだ。子供が小さくおくびを漏らした。露になったままの乳房に、飲み損ねた乳が飛ぶ。

赤い。

赤い、乳だと見えた。

光の欠片が目に入り、佐枝はきつく瞼を閉じた。

「あれはタテハチヨウ。水を飲んだり、水に溶けた栄養分を吸い取るの。ほとんどが雄と聞いたわよ」

布団を並べて、姉は語った。

天井に点った豆電球が、余計に影を黒くしている。襖の染みが気になった。

「おかしいことに詳しいね」

「だって、あの子達は人にもたかる。汗やおしっこにもたかるのよ」

姉の声は少し湿っている。

柔らかく、布団を叩く音が聞こえてくる。添い寝をさせた赤ん坊を、姉があやしているのだろう。

佐枝は黙って、目を閉じた。規則正しい音に眠くなるのは、子供だけの特権ではない。うつらうつらする耳に、微かな女の声が届いた。

子守唄か。

違うらしい。女の声ではないらしい。

何かの羽唸りのようだった。それが音に高低をつけ、歌う声に似せている。闇の中を何かが過ぎった。

地味な蝶々。

思う間もなく、蝶は数を増やしてさざめき、床一面に黄色の勝った薄茶の翅をびんと立て、静かに閉じた。静かに開いた。

閉じれば、色は白んで淡く、開けば、黒の斑<sup>まだら</sup>が浮かんた。上を見やれば、電灯の細い紐にもびつりと、房となつて下がっていた。

目を開け、佐枝は体を起こした。

蝶の姿はどこにも見えない。

眠る間際に見た夢だ。

汗ばんだ額を撫でる。また、羽唸りが過ぎっていく。

こんな暗いにも拘<sup>かか</sup>わらず、どうやら蠅がいるようだった。

改めて布団の中に潜ると、微臭さが気になった。

水道水は鉄の味がした。

佐枝はまったく食欲がない。

おぎなりに顔を洗ったのち、玄関口に出て行くと、昨日の花が散らばったまま、一層、黒くちぢくれていた。

立てつけの悪い戸を引き開ければ、良い朝風が入ってくる。

無意識に、深呼吸をする。

姉が気にしていたとおり、家の中は独特の甘酸っぱい臭いで満ちていた。慣れれば嗅覚は鈍る。けど、外を知れば、また変わる。外には光も満ちていた。

佐枝は表に足を運んだ。肌についた臭いと暗みを、拭うような気持ちがあった。風のそよぎが心地良い。

畦道に繋がるドクダミの群れ。そこに蝶が止まっていた。昨晚の幻と同じ種類だ。群生地なのか、あるいは俄<sup>にわか</sup>に、ここに大量発生したのか。

佐枝は軽く眉を顰<sup>ひそ</sup>めて、それでも蝶の姿を追った。タテハチョウが昨日と同じ茂みの上を飛び交っている。

気づくと、姉が脇にいた。佐枝は前を見たまま、言った。

「誰も来ないわ」

「そうね」

「誰もいないの?」

「この道の奥にはもう、家がない。だから、滅多に人は来ない」

姉の胸には、また赤子がいた。子供は佐枝の知っている乳児の誰より大人しい。端切れを繋いで縫ったらしい、ねんねこの模様が派手だった。それに比べて、姉は服にも、顔色にもあまり色がない。

佐枝は視線で、蝶を迎った。ひとつ、ふたつと弧を描き、向こうの茂みに沈んでいく。

花があると思ったが、もしかしたら水かも知れない。でも、花なら見たいと、佐枝は思った。歩き始めると、呼び止められた。

「どこ行くの」

「あっち」

「行かないほうがいいと思う」

「なぜ」

「あそこにあるのは、水だけじゃない」

姉は黒い髪を揺らした。

「言っただけでしょう。蝶が水に集うのは、水分が欲しいだけじゃない。あの子らはそこに溶け込んだ栄養分を欲しがってる。だから、死体にもたかる」

もう一度、佐枝は茂みを見、姉の顔に視線を戻した。千鶴は茂みを見つめている。眼差しからは何もわからない。

「なんの死体？」

思わず、尋ねた。

「風向きで臭うの。不愉快よ」

佐枝は訊いた。

「この子のお父さんは、どこに行ったの」

「さあ」

愛しげに、姉は子供を見つめた。佐枝はもう一度、尋ねてみた。

「この子のお父さんは、どこに行ったの」

「知らないわ。二年も前にいなくなってしまったきりよ」

「じゃ、この赤ちゃんは」

「私の赤ちゃん」

千鶴が子供を抱き直す。揺り上げられて目を覚ましたか、赤ん坊は小さな手指で、姉の胸乳をまさぐった。

「よしよし。お腹が空いたのね」

貝釦を外しつつ、千鶴は家に戻っていく。追った声音が昂ぶった。

「姉さん。ねえ、大丈夫？」

「どうして、そんなこと言うの」

暗い家に、姉は入っていく。佐枝は戸口で踏み留まった。光に慣れた目は、闇に慣れない。地面の位置すら見失う中、外光の名残なごりが青白い人魂ひとたまの幻と  
なっている。

きし、と、軋こもむ音がした。上がり口に、姉が座ったようだ。

「昨日、お乳が血に見えたから」

光の幻はまだ失せない。佐枝は何度も瞬きをした。

「馬鹿ね。同じよ」

声が聞こえた。

「お乳はね、お母さんの血からできるのよ」

青白かった光点が明度を落として、赤に変じた。視野に点々と散る赤は、輝くからこそ血に  
近い。

「だから、この子も血を飲んでるの。すべての赤ちゃんは血を飲んでるの」

佐枝は瞬きを繰り返す。漸おそく瞳孔が開いてきた。

昨日と同じ場で、同じ姿で、姉はお乳をやっていた。食る子の手が小さく動く。そうしてや  
がて、乳首を放す。

口から母乳が滴った。やはり赤いと見えるのは、まだ目が慣れないためなのか。  
佐枝はそろりと近づいた。

「吸血鬼みたい」

聞いて、姉は微かに笑んだ。

ねんねこの模様がゆらいで見える。その裾から、蝶が飛ぶ。

静まった闇に羽ばたいて、タテハチョウは弧を描き、佐枝の脇を抜けていく。  
とうに、気づいていたことがある。

佐枝は子の顔を見ていない。おむつを換えるところも見ない。彼女は訊いた。

「その子、男の子なんでしょう」

「そうよ」

再び、姉は笑った。

「きつと、蝶は血も飲むのよね」

声が微かに震えてしまった。佐枝はなおも近づいて、赤ん坊に指を伸ばした。  
欠片が剥がれた。

飛び立った。

子が手を動かし、そのまま崩れた。

静かに呼吸するように、薄茶の翅が開く。閉じる。

花房のように集った蝶は黒くて細い触角を振り、光沢のある小さな瞳に、各々佐枝の姿を映  
した。

はらはらと、その花房もが崩れて飛んだ。そうして惑って、ほとんどは明るい外に逃げ去った。だが、屋内の暗がり、せわしく羽ばたくものもある。

片乳房を露にしたまま、姉は黙って座っていた。水鳥の首みたいに曲げられた腕の形は、まだそこに、赤子を抱いているようだ。

白い肌に血が滲んでいる。

佐枝は走って、外に出た。

緩んだ鳥除けのテープを超えて、乾いた畑の跡を踏む。ヒメジオンの群れに近づいたなら、胸の悪くなるような甘い臭いが立ちのぼる。

唇を強く噛み締めて、佐枝は奥の茂みを分けた。

タテハチョウが集まっていた。水があった。自然になった窪地の中に、色のわからない水が溜まっている。蠅もいる。蟻もある。

佐枝は家に駆けて戻った。

息苦しくて、喉が渴いた。姉の前に立ってなお、呼吸はひどく荒かった。

千鶴の胸にはまた、ふたつ三つ、タテハチョウが戻ってきていた。変わらず、姉は愛おしうに、それらを抱く手つきをしている。

「姉さん。帰ろう」

無理に、佐枝は微笑んだ。

「一緒に帰ろう」

姉は佐枝を見なかった。もう一度、佐枝は微笑んだ。

「ごめん。なじってばかりで。手紙に馬鹿とか書いてばかりで」

「本当なもの」

俯いた姉が、<sup>つば</sup>呟いた。靴を履いたまま上がり、佐枝は姉の手を取った。

「もう、いい。ごめん」

冷たい手だった。

「許してくれるの」

「うん、帰ろう」

胸から蝶が逃げていく。姉はゆっくり頭を上げた。

黒い瞳が明瞭に笑む。

「ありがとう。私、寂しかった」

握った手の感触が失せ、掌を何かがくすぐった。見れば、蝶が少し。その中の少しは手に傷ついて、翅を折って潰れていた。

<sup>す</sup>鱧えた臭いが鼻を突く。

姉は最早、影もない。

目の前にある塊は、飽きるほど見た昆虫だった。

視界が鱗粉の色に染まった。硬くて軽い翅が、顔を、手を、いくつも叩いて過ぎていく。

佐枝にまわり、家の中を回遊し、草が風に鳴るような音を聞かせて、幾百のそれらは戸口から外へ、光の方向を目指していった。

埃の積もった板間には、佐枝の足跡しか見当たらなかった。ただ、黒く萎びた花首は散らした形のままだに残った。

そのひとつをポケットに入れ、佐枝は家を後にした。

茂みを見ると、またそこでタテハチョウが遊んでいる。

あの向こう、水漬いた髪は長かった。

むくんだ指はまだしっかりと、銀色の凶器を握っていた。

棄てられて、自死した女の内になにかが宿っていたのかどうか。確かめる気は起こらない。けど、胸からは沢山の血が、赤い乳が溢れただろう。萎れた花は何も生まない。だけど、腐敗し、溶けた体は、色々な貴重な養分で、蝶達や草や土を養う。

鳥の声は変わらず長閑だ。

佐枝は道を下っていった。

家を出たときからずっと、蝶々が一羽、まわっている。それに歩調を合わせつつ、佐枝は山から里を目指した。

痛いほど明るい日向から、杉の小さな林に入る。空気が急にそこだけ冷えた。それを抜けると、もう一度、初夏の陽射しが顔を焙った。

誰の姿も見えないのに、人の気配があるのがわかる。家の屋根がいくつも見えた。古い雑貨屋のガラス戸の、前に積んだ段ボール箱に菓子パンと猫が入っていた。

少し坂がきつくなり、舗装道路が広くなる。

佐枝はバス停のある道に出た。

薄く汗を掻いていた。その水分を慕ったように、蝶は彼女の腕に留まった。

車が前を過ぎていく。風が変わった。蝶が飛ぶ。

白い軽トラックが走ってきて、煽られた蝶を巻き込んだ。

タテハチョウの姿が失せた。

少し間を空けて、アスファルトの脇、翅の欠片が落ちてきた。

佐枝はそれを拾い上げ、ティッシュペーパーの中に包んだ。

やがて、バスがやってくる。

バスに乗り、列車に揺られて、家に戻って、ティッシュを広げる。

残った欠片は粉と砕けて、形を留めていなかった。

ただ、ポケットに入っていた萎びた花はそのままだった。

## 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 Tom 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!

Butterfly Pieces, by Nanami Kamon

Swaying on the train car—stepping onto the bus—climbing a gentle hill—pulling postcards out of a mailbox with peeling paint. After days of rain, the writing had run, thoroughly smeared.

Sae blinked, then looked around.

The colors fled in the early summer sunshine, and the scenery around her looked completely flat; the voices of the larks calling in the sky high above seemed more solid.

Her eyes began to water from the brightness, and for a moment she closed them. During a pause in the larks' airy song, she heard the cry of a bird she did not know, sporadically, first from far away then from nearby. The wind blew, but only the tenderest stalks moved, rubbing their leaves together softly.

The humidity was so thick the air itself seemed listless, full of the scent of sunflowers, heavy and sticky.

Suddenly, there was a great sound of wings passing near her ear with a buzz, and Sae opened her eyes.

She couldn't see any insects that would have made such a violent racket. Instead, all she saw was a butterfly.

Finally, her eyes adjusted to the bright light, and she could see the power lines, stark against the green of the grass and the trees. It was a tranquil countryside, but completely deserted.

The asphalt road was cracking, slowly losing to time and the sprouting grass. The fields, with their red soil showing through, seemed abandoned. The silver tape that was meant to scare off birds hung slack, its shine gone, tangled in the skinny bamboo poles it was tied to.

The scraggly sunflowers were bent low. Past the drooping chameleon plants and the self-important daisies, a brown butterfly was flitting in and out of the thick-growing grasses.

Sae wondered if there were pretty flowers in there.

Carrying the old postcards, she turned away. Behind her, there was a wooden house that was even more weathered than the postcards she held.

The air seeping out between the thin boards smelled of mildew. The house was blackened, and looked even darker for the early summer noonday sun that shone on it.

Sae took a breath and, after a brief pause, opened the poorly fitting door.

Light spread across a wide dirt floor.

Further inside, there was a step up to a wooden floor, and there she saw her older sister, Chizu, lounging with a thin smile.

“Oh, you came.”

“You never wrote back,” Sae said, letting out a breath and brandishing the postcards she held.

“What’s that? Let me see.”

“Never mind.”

Too tired to take off her shoes, Sae sat on the step up to the wooden floor. Without apologizing for her rudeness, her sister just smiled, face pale.

“I sent lots of postcards. How many did you even read?” Sae shook out the leg of her jeans.

It was almost four years ago now that Chizu had gone missing. They had found out that she had eloped the autumn after that.

Nobody knew the man she ran off with. It was only natural that the family wouldn’t approve of someone they didn’t even know. Even so, Chizu had eloped, sending just a postcard to Sae, who she had always been close to.

The address, written in pencil, had been complete nonsense. Her mother and father were at a loss. Still, Chizu sometimes sent letters from her made-up address.

Sae had only figured out where Chizu was about two months ago. She could have known all along: it turned out the postmark was still clearly stamped on the letters.

Without telling her parents, Sae had searched for Chizu’s house. She already knew Chizu would be alone. The man had had a wife and kids, and after a while he became violent, taking his money and running.

Chizu had wrote it all shamelessly on her last postcard.

—“That man, he’s gone.”

Before Sae ever heard his name or saw his face, her sister’s lover had vanished.

“Don’t you want to come home?”

“I can’t, not now.”

Chizu’s smile was so peaceful. Like a completely different woman.

Her black hair fell like waves, unbound over her sweat-slicked neck and shoulders. Her white blouse was opened wide at her chest, exposing the valley between her pert, voluptuous breasts.

Chizu’s sweat made her skin glow.

Sae put away the postcards, and instead took out her pink handkerchief to rub at her own sweaty neck.

“Even though I wrote over and over in my postcards asking you to call, you never did; I thought you’d committed suicide or something.”

“You were worried about me, weren’t you?”

Chizu began to move her hands. There was a rough, dry sound. When she looked over, Sae saw a bunch of dead flowers. Chizu spread them out on the wood floor and seemed to be arranging them carefully.

“I was thinking of collecting flowers to make some potpourri. But I can’t. The humidity is so bad this season, they wilt before I can dry them.”

“I didn’t know you liked that kind of thing.”

“It really smells in here. I guess you can’t tell.”

Chizu made to stand. At the same time, a thin wail crept out from behind the sliding paper screen.

“Oh, dear, dear.”

The white soles of her feet flashing, Chizu disappeared deeper into the house like a shadow.

Footprints were left behind on the floor. Those spots alone shone darkly—the rest was clearly covered in a thin layer of dust.

Sae looked at the scattered flowers. All flowers she did not know, all curled and blackened. Perhaps her sister thought they were withered because they had no color left.

Chizu returned, carrying a baby wrapped in a blanket.

“This is my baby,” she said with a smile, before Sae could ask.

Sae sat quietly, saying nothing.

Chizu spread her lemon-yellow skirt out over the blackened petals and murmured soothing words as she cradled the child, then opened the buttons of her shirt.

Her breasts, whiter even than her blouse, overflowed eagerly from her shirt. When she raised the baby to them, it opened its tiny mouth enthusiastically and latched onto the nipple.

Chizu gazed down at the baby, enraptured. Sae turned her gaze outside. Beyond the door, it was determinedly bright. She went to the door, as if drawn there, and again the light stole all the color from her vision.

She felt someone standing behind her.

“Can I stay here tonight?” Sae asked without turning, and heard her sister answer: “If you like.”

Sae smelled something, like milk perhaps, an organic smell that swept into her nostrils. She felt a faint nausea and went outside without another word.

The larks were still singing.

The color of the sky looked somehow thinner than before.

Beneath its vastness she started further down the road.

Past trees with tangled, dead branches, there was a deeply green wooded hill. If she kept on at her gentle pace, she could surely reach the top.

She did not feel like going that far. But the wind off the hill felt nice.

Suddenly, all the bird sounds ceased. The wind, too, vanished. It was so quiet, even the landscape seemed frozen in time.

Against that still-frame, Sae saw a movement and followed it with her eyes.

In a little meadow, water had collected and reflected the light with a dark sheen. There, a dozen butterflies with light brown wings had landed.

They looked almost like they had been arranged there by someone. The butterflies moved their wings slowly, as if they were breathing.

Chizu came up softly beside her. The child let out a little burp. Unfinished milk dripped from her exposed breasts.

It was red.

The milk looked red.

A shard of sunlight flashed in her eyes, and Sae slammed her eyelids shut.

\*\*blank line

“Those butterflies were nymphalids,” Chizu said from the futon next to her Sae’s.  
“When they drink, they absorb nutrients from the water. I heard most of them are male.”

To Sae, the nightlight hanging from the ceiling made the shadows seem even darker. The stains on the sliding doors bothered her.

“You know an awful lot of strange things, don’t you?”

“They can swarm people, too, you know. If you sweat, or pee.”

Her sister’s voice was a little wet.

Sae began to hear a light thumping against the futon. Maybe it was her sister, lulling the baby to sleep in their shared bed.

Silently, Sae closed her eyes. The baby was not the only one lucky enough to be put to sleep by the regular thumping sound.

Faintly, a woman’s voice reached her drowsy ears.

A lullaby.

Something was wrong. It wasn’t a woman’s voice.

It was the rustle of wings. The sound rose and fell, making it sound like a song.

Something was moving in the darkness.

More of those plain-looking butterflies.

Before Sae could even think, the butterflies multiplied, grew louder, then landed and covered the floor, their yellowy-brown wings standing straight, closed, and silent. Then silently, they opened.

Closed, their color was pale, thin; open, black spots appeared. Looking up, Sae could see more hanging in a tightly-packed bunch from the light’s thin pull-chord.

Sae opened her eyes and sat up.

There were no butterflies to be seen.

Just a dream, on the verge of sleep.

She wiped sweat from her forehead. Again, a rustle of wings passed her.

Even in the dark, it seemed there were still flies around.

Burrowing back into her futon, she noticed the smell of mildew.

\*\*blank line

The tap water tasted metallic.

Sae found she had no appetite.

When she went to the front door after perfunctorily washing her hands, the flowers from yesterday were still scattered on the floor, more curled, and blacker than before.

Pulling open the ill-fitted door, she felt a lovely morning breeze.

Without meaning to, she took a deep breath.

Her sister must have noticed the peculiar bittersweet smell that filled the house. After a while, her sense of smell had dulled to it. But back outside, it changed again. The outside was filled with light.

Sae walked out to the front of the house. She felt as if she were stripping the stench and darkness from her skin. The breath of the wind felt lovely.

There was a clump of chameleon plants hanging off one of the paths in the field. Butterflies had landed there. The same kind as she had seen in her dream last night. She wondered if they bred there, or if they had just suddenly started multiplying.

With a small furrow in her brow, Sae followed after the butterflies. The little nymphalids were flitting around the same bush as they had been yesterday.

She realized her sister was beside her. Still looking straight ahead, Sae said:

“Nobody’s coming.”

“No, they’re not.”

“Is there even anyone here?”

“There aren’t any houses down this road anymore. So, people rarely come here.”

Chizu had the baby at her breast again. It was much quieter than any infant Sae knew. Its blanket was eye-catching, and looked like it was sewn from scraps of cloth. Compared to that, her sister’s clothes, even her face, barely had any color.

Sae’s gaze followed after the butterflies. They would fly in one, two little arcs, then sink down into the bush.

She had thought there were flowers there, but maybe it was water. But, Sae thought: if it was flowers, she’d like to see them. When she began walking, her sister called out, stopping her.

“Where are you going?”

“Over there.”

“I don’t think you should.”

“Why?”

“There’s more than just water over there.”

Her sister shook out her black hair.

“I told you, didn’t I? They don’t go to water just to drink. They want the nutrients. So they swarm corpses, too.”

Sae looked over at the bushes again, then brought her gaze back to her sister’s face. Chizu was gazing at the bushes. Sae couldn’t decipher her expression.

“What kind of corpse?” she asked without thinking.

“You can smell it on the wind. It’s unpleasant.”

“That child’s father,” Sae asked. “Where did he go?”

Chizu looked down at the baby lovingly. Sae asked one more time.

“Where did that child’s father go?”

“I don’t know. He’s been gone more than two years.”

“Then, that baby...”

“It’s my baby.”

Chizu held the child close. Perhaps wakened by the movement, the baby’s small hands began groping at Chizu’s breasts.

“There, there. You must be hungry.”

Undoing her buttons, Chizu went back to the house. Sae’s voice rose as she followed.

“Chizu. Hey, are you all right?”

“Why would you ask that?”

Chizu went into the dark house. Sae stopped in the doorway.

Coming in from the brightness, her eyes had not adjusted to the dark. She could not see what was in front of her, and the remnants of the sunlight looked like pale ghost-visions.

There was a creaking noise. It seemed her sister had sat down at the entrance.

“Yesterday, your breast milk looked like blood.”

The light-apparitions would not fade. Sae blinked her eyes over and over.

“They’re the same, silly,” she heard a voice say.

“Breast milk comes from mother’s blood, you know.”

The pale spots lost their brightness, turning red. The red spots filling her vision sparkled, looking just like blood.

“So, this child is drinking blood. All babies drink blood.”

Sae blinked again. Finally, her pupils dilated.

In the same place, the same pose as yesterday, her sister breastfed the baby. The hungry child's hands moved minutely. Then, it released the nipple.

Breast milk dripped from its mouth. Maybe it just looked red because her eyes were still adjusting.

Sae slowly came closer.

"It's like a vampire."

Hearing that, Chizu smiled faintly.

The pattern of the baby's blanket looked like it was trembling. From the hem, a butterfly took flight.

In the quiet darkness, the little nymphalid made an arc, then flew out past Sae.

She had already figured it out.

Sae had not seen the baby's face. She hadn't seen her sister change its diaper.

"That child," she asked. "It's a boy, right?"

"That's right."

Chizu smiled again.

"I bet butterflies drink blood, too, don't they?"

Her voice shook, just a little. Sae came closer still, and stretched a hand out to the baby.

Pieces fell from it.

The pieces flew.

The baby moved its hand, then came apart.

Like taking a quiet breath, light brown wings opened. Closed.

Gathered like a bundle of flowers, the butterflies waved their slim, black antennae, and Sae saw herself reflected in each of their tiny glittering eyes.

With a flutter, the bundle burst, and flew apart.

Confused, most of them flew away towards the brightness outside. But there were still a few flitting around in the dark room.

With one breast still exposed, Chizu sat in silence. Her arms, like the long necks of water birds, were bent as if she still held a baby there.

Blood dripped down her white skin.

Sae ran outside.

Past the loosened bird-scare tape, into the remains of a dried out field. As she closed in on the flock of daisies, that unsettling sweet smell rose up again.

Biting down hard on her lip, Sae parted the bushes.

Those nymphalids were everywhere. There was water. Strange-colored water that had collected in a natural hollow. And there were flies. And ants. And human hair.

Sae ran back to the house.

Her breathing was harsh, her throat dry. Now, standing in front of her sister, her breaths came even more roughly.

On Chizu's breast, two or three nymphalids remained. She was still gazing at them adoringly, holding her arms as if to embrace them.

"Chizu. Let's go home."

Sae forced herself to smile.

"Let's go back together."

Chizu would not look at her. Sae smiled one more time.

"I'm sorry. For always scolding you. For calling you stupid in my letters."

"It's true," Chizu whispered, head hanging. Still in her shoes, Sae stepped up into the house and took her sister's hand.

"It's okay. I'm sorry."

Chizu's hand was cold.

"You'll forgive me?"

"Yeah. Let's go home."

The butterflies fled from her breast. Chizu slowly raised her head.

She smiled, her dark eyes clear.

"Thank you. I was lonely."

The feel of the hand Sae held faded, and something tickled her palm. She looked, and saw a handful of butterflies. A few of them had been injured by her hand, their wings bent and broken.

A sour smell pricked at her nose.

Already, her sister did not even have a shadow.

The ghost before her had been made up of those insects—she was sick of looking at them.

Her vision was dyed with powdery butterfly scales. Countless stiff, delicate wings struck her face, her hands, as they passed. They coiled around her, spinning through the house, making a sound like wind through the grass as hundreds of them went out through the door, aiming themselves towards the light.

On the dusty wooden floor, there was no trace of Sae's footprints. But the black and wilted flowers were still spread out there.

Taking one and tucking it in her pocket, Sae put the house behind her.

When she looked towards the bushes, she could still see the nymphalids frolicking there.

The wet hair she had seen on the other side had been very long.

The swollen fingers had still been tightly clasped around a silver weapon.

Sae wondered if something had been there, in the abandoned dead woman's belly. She did not have the heart to check. But perhaps her chest had flowed with red milk like blood. Withered flowers produce nothing. But a decaying, crumbling body can give precious nutrients to butterflies, to the grass.

The birds still called peacefully.

Sae stepped onto the road.

Ever since leaving the house, a single butterfly had been following after her. She matched her pace to its flight, and turned from the hills toward the fields.

Moving away from the painfully bright sunflowers, Sae entered into a little cedar grove. The air there suddenly became cooler. When she came out the other side, the early-summer sun warmed her face again.

Though she couldn't see anyone, she felt like someone was there. She could see the roofs of many houses. In the glass window of an old general store, there were cardboard boxes of sweet buns, and stray cats.

The hill became a bit steeper, and the paved road wider.

Sae came to a road with a bus stop.

She was covered in a thin layer of sweat. As if searching for moisture, the butterfly landed on her arm.

A car passed in front of her. The wind changed. The butterfly flew up.

A white truck drove by, and the butterfly was caught up in its passing.

The image of the nymphalid disappeared.

After a moment, a piece of its wing fell beside the asphalt.

Sae picked it up and wrapped it in a tissue.

Finally, the bus arrived.

Riding the bus—swaying on the train car—returning home—spreading open her tissue.

The wing-piece had crumbled to powder, losing its shape.

However, the wilted flower in her pocket was exactly the same.

「蝶の断片」 加門七海

“A Butterfly Piece”

by

Kamon Nanami

A train jostling, a bus boarding, and a gentle climb up a hill brought her to the mailbox, rust setting in and paint flaking off; she found a postcard inside, its letters completely blurred and runny from many a recent rainshower.

Sae blinked and ran her eyes over her surroundings.

The colors stood out through the rays of early summer sun, yet the view on the whole seemed flat. Far more three-dimensional was the stereo sound of a skylark chirping high overhead.

The brightness of it all made her eyes water and soon she let her eyelids slide closed. The warbling notes of unidentifiable bird – at times close by and at other times far away – sporadically filled in the gaps of song left by that buoyant skylark. In selecting only the pliant weeds, the wind was audible moving through the rustling stalks.

The humidity was quite high. The air, which bore the smell of sunshine, had such a sticky heaviness that it made one weary.

Suddenly Sae felt a great humming sound of wings, a *buzz* in her inner ear such that she opened her eyes, which until now had remained closed.

There was not a trace of the insect that had made the violent noise; instead, she caught sight of a butterfly.

As her eyes finally adjusted to the light, they took in the power lines, the rice fields, the weeds' green color, and the green trees. It was peaceful, but this was a country landscape gone to rust.

The street pavement, laced with cracks, was in a losing battle against both time and the roots of the weeds. The rice field showed its red-tempered soil and seemed to have been abandoned long ago. A length of sagging, faded silver tape, put there to fend off birds, was entangled on an off-kilter bamboo pole.

An emaciated sunflower stood drooping its head. A brown butterfly went back and forth through a deep, densely-overgrown patch of greenery and then over the tips of white daisies, who acted like they owned the place, as well as some fishwort plants that were past their prime.

Perhaps the butterfly was after the sweet flowers there?

With the old postcard in hand, Sae turned to look behind her. There stood a wooden one-story house that was far more weather-beaten than her postcard.

The air coming from the spaces between the thin boards had a moldy smell. Because the early-summer sun was high overhead, the house hung in a shadow and was dark inside.

She took a breath and, after a short pause, opened the poorly-fitted door.

Light spread out over the wide earthen floor of the foyer.

Plopped down on the floorboards a bit back from the raised entry step of the house, her older sister made a slight smile.

“Ah! You came?”

“Not one reply from you.”

Sae again let out a deep breath and showed her the postcard she was holding.

“Well, let us see that.”

“No need to now.”

Since it was a nuisance to take off her shoes, Sae sat down on the raised entry step. Her sister simply laughed, neither blushing nor making the least apology for her lack of responsibility.

“You know, I wrote a ton of these postcards. What the hell, what was the last one you saw?”

Sae rocked her blue-jeaned legs left and right.

It was now about four years ago since Chizu had gone missing. It was three years ago, in the fall, when Sae realized Chizu had left because she eloped.

No one knew the man in question. Because no one knew him, the family of course had no choice but to oppose the marriage. Her older sister ran off with him anyway and only sent postcards to the younger sister with whom she had been on such good terms before.

Although written in pencil in her sister’s fine hand, her address seemed like utter nonsense. Her mother and father were at a complete loss. Nonetheless, her older sister would from time to time send out tidings from the nonsensical address.

Sae had nailed down Chizu’s actual address some two months prior. It wasn’t that hard, given how legible the postmark remained.

Without mentioning it to her parents, Sae searched for Chizu’s house working from the postmark. Sae knew that Chizu was living alone. The man already had a wife and kids; in time, he became threatening and walked out on Chizu, taking her money.

Chizu, without being ashamed in the least, began to write about everything in her postcards to Sae.

--He’s no longer here, that man.

Without Sae’s ever knowing his name or face, her sister’s lover completely vanished.

“You don’t think he’ll come back?”

“Even if he did...it’s too late.”

Her sister’s smile was so gentle. She was like a complete stranger.

Her loose, freed hair was plastered in waves rippling from her sweaty neck to the bank of her collarbone. The bustline of her white blouse was bursting. Sae could see Chizu's cleavage spilling out of her overly-full blouse.

Her skin was glowing with sweat.

Sae put away the postcard and replaced it with a peach-colored handkerchief, which she used to softly dab the places of sweat breaking out now on her own neck.

“‘Give me a call’, I must have written that a million times in my postcards. Yet I got nothing from you, so I thought you might have even killed yourself.”

“So you really did worry about me.”

Her sister's fingers were fiddling with something. Sae could hear a crisp rustling; she looked to the sound and found dried flower stems. Having spread them out on the floorboards, Chizu seemed to be doing some kind of pointless handiwork.

“I've tried gathering flowers and making potpourri sachets. But it's no good. The humidity we have this year is too high, so they end up spoiling before they get fully dry.”

“You like that kind of thing, Sis.”

“I have all kinds of hobbies – the ones where you use your nose. I just don't know what to do with these flowers though.”

Her sister acted like she was going to stand up. At the same time, a tiny cry slipped out from the darkness behind the sooty *fusuma* doors.

“Tsk, tsk.”

Her sister showed Sae the bare white soles of her feet as her silhouette went deep into the house's inner rooms.

Her footprints left a trail on the floor. The dark glow radiating in those spots alone must be a result of how the floor as a whole was covered in a thin layer of dust.

Sae looked at the blossoms that were still on their stems. These flowers, whose names she did not know, had all shriveled up black. Her sister had said the flowers “spoiled”, but was she talking about the way that the color of the flowers didn't last?

Chizu came in holding a baby who was wrapped up in an old-fashioned swaddling blanket.

“My baby,” Chizu said with a smile even before Sae could ask.

Sae was unable to say a word so she kept silent.

Her sister spread out her skirt, which was lemon-colored and had a black floral pattern, and soothed the child by saying, “There, there now. Hm?” She undid the shell-shaped button of her blouse.

More blindingly white than the color of the swaddling cloth, her breast plopped out without a moment's pause. When she eased the child up to it, the baby strained with all its might to open its little mouth and fastened onto the nipple.

Chizu looked down upon her baby as if she were in a spell. Sae looked away. The light outside the sliding door was simply intense. As if she were being pulled in, she approached the doorway and it was then that the fierce rays of the sun stole all of the color from her sight like before.

She had the feeling someone was standing at her back.

“Sis, would it be okay if I stayed over tonight?” She asked without turning around.

Her sister replied, “As long as it’s all right with *you*.”

A whiff of something organic – perhaps one could call it the smell of mother’s milk – jabbed at her sinuses. It gave Sae a twinge of nausea, so she went outside with it.

The skylark was still chirping.

The color of the sky seemed considerably fainter than before.

She passed under the sky and toward a winding path.

Tangled and withered tree branches gave way to a verdant green wood beyond the village. If she climbed up the gentle slope like this, certainly she would reach the top of the hill.

She had no intention of going that far. Yet, the wind up on the hill would be pleasant.

Suddenly, the cries of all the birds ceased. The wind too let up. The whole landscape was hushed as if time were ground to a halt. Sae first looked upon the living things in this still life painting and then surveyed the scene.

Water, which was pooled into one part of the meadow, glimmered darkly as it reflected the light above. Butterflies with light brown wings – Sae counted over ten of them – came to rest there at the water.

It seemed like someone was being kept alive. The butterflies slowly flexed their wings as if they were breathing.

Her sister moved quietly next to her. The baby let out a tiny burp. Unswallowed milk dashed against her sister’s still exposed breast.

Red.

Red...milk. It looked that way.

Bits of the sun got into her eyes and Sae tightly closed her eyes.

\*\*blank line

“That’s a standing-wing butterfly. They drink water and take dissolved nutrients from the water. I’ve heard most of them are males.”

Her sister explained this as she was lining up their bedding on the floor.

The miniature light bulb burning on the ceiling made things look too black. The stains on the *fusuma* door worried Sae.

“You know a lot about weird things.”

“Fine, but those little ones feed even on people. They even feed on sweat and on pee, you know.”

Her sister’s voice had slightly taken a dark turn.

Sae began to hear a sound of something softly beating on the bedding. It was probably her sister soothing the baby whom she had laid down to sleep next to her.

Sae fell silent and closed her eyes. It’s not the sole privilege of children to drift into increasing drowsiness at such a rhythmic sound.

In her mind, as she sank into sleep, she could hear the faint voice of a woman.

A lullaby?

It seemed different. It seemed so unlike the voice of a woman.

It was like the humming sound of something with wings. It made rising and falling sounds. It resembled the voice of someone singing.

Something passed by her through the darkness.

A plain butterfly.

Before she knew it, one butterfly became a numerous many and they were making a commotion; spread all over the floor, these butterflies, more yellow than light-brown in color, would silently close their wings by pinning them back, or rather, by standing them up. Then, they would silently open them.

When they closed their wings, the color looked white and faint; when they spread them open, black splotches appeared. When she glanced up, she realized that they were hanging together in a thick bunch on the thin cord of the ceiling light.

Sae opened her eyes and sat herself up.

The butterflies were nowhere in sight.

It was just a dream she was having right as she was nodding off.

She stroked her sweaty forehead. Again, that sound of humming wings went passing by.

Even in the dark like this, somehow there must have been a fly in the room.

As she sank down into her bedding again, a moldy smell worried her.

\*\*blank line

The faucet water tasted like steel.

Sae was not at all hungry.

She splashed some water on her face. Then, once she reached the foyer, she noticed the flowers that were left scattered on the floor since yesterday. They had all turned black and shriveled.

When she pulled open the poorly fitted door, a fine morning breeze blew inside.

Unconsciously, she took a deep breath.

As her sister feared, the whole inside of the house was filled with a certain bittersweet smell. If she grew used to it, her sense of smell would deaden; however, once she tasted the air outside, her senses would return again. Here in the outside world, it was light that permeated all.

Sae walked out in front of the house. The light felt to her like something that wiped clean both the darkness and the smell that had clung to her skin. The blowing wind felt good.

Clumps of fishwort linked the rice-paddy ridges: it was there that a butterfly had landed. It was the same kind as the phantoms from the night before. Was it because this place was one that spurred plant growth, or perhaps here they were simply in the midst of a sudden, large outbreak of butterflies?

Sae slightly knitted her brows in thought, yet she still went after the butterfly. It fluttered over the same area of bushes like the standing-wing butterflies from yesterday.

She then realized that her sister was standing at her side. Sae spoke to her while looking straight ahead.

“Nobody comes here.”

“You’re right.”

“Because no one lives here?”

“Back here, away from the road, there are no longer any houses. So, it’s rare to have people come.”

The baby again was at her sister’s breast. It was more peaceful than any infant Sae had ever known. The pattern of the swaddling blanket, which looked as if it had been stitched and hooked together with scrap clothes, was gaudy. By comparison, her sister’s clothes and complexion were fairly lacking in color.

Sae kept the butterfly in her sight. It traced one arc, then another, before going deep into the bushes over there.

Sae thought that place had flowers, but it is possible there was water. But if there are flowers I would like to see them, Sae thought.

Once she started to walk, she was called back.

“Where are you going?”

“Over there.”

“I think you better not go.”

“Why?”

“What’s over there isn’t just water.”

Her sister tossed her black hair.

“I thought I told you. Butterflies come to the water, but it’s not because they are thirsty. Those little ones seem to crave the dissolved nutrients in there. You see, they feed on dead bodies.”

Once more Sae looked at the bushes and then returned her gaze to her sister’s face. Chizu was staring at the bushes. Her sister’s look told her nothing.

“The dead bodies of what?”

She asked without thinking.

“When the wind blows it smells. It’s unpleasant.”

Sae asked, “Where did the baby’s father go?”

“Well...”

With adoration, she stared at her child. Sae tried asking one more time.

“Where did the baby’s father go?”

“I don’t know. It’s been at least two years since he’s been gone.”

“Well, how about the baby?”

“My baby.”

Chizu readjusted her hold on the child. Waking up perhaps because it started being rocked by her, the baby with its little fingers groped for her sister’s breast.

“Yes, yes. Your stomach’s all empty, isn’t it?”

While Chizu was unfastening the shell button, she started to head back to the house. The cries Sae heard reached a high pitch.

“Hey Sis, everything okay?”

“What on earth would make you say that?”

Her sister went inside the dark house. Sae hesitated before stepping past the door.

Her eyes, adjusted as they were to the light, would not adjust to the dark. As she was losing sight of even her feet on the ground, beams of outside light were becoming visions of pale specters.

*Kreeek*. Something did make a creaking sound. It seemed as though her sister had sat down on the raised entryway.

“I asked because yesterday, your milk looked like blood.”

The visions of light still would not disappear. Sae blinked repeatedly.

“Ridiculous. It’s the same.”

Sae heard a cry.

“You see, a mother’s milk, well...it comes from her blood.”

The pale spots of light lost their brightness and turned red. Dancing as little spots in her eyes, that red color, because it glittered so, looked a lot like blood.

“So you see, even this child drinks blood. All babies drink blood.”

Sae continued to blink. Gradually her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

In the exact same place and with the exact same posture, her sister was feeding the baby milk. The greedy child’s hand made small groping motions. Soon enough, it would let go of the nipple.

Breast milk dripped from its mouth. Sae of course knew that her seeing red had to be because her eyes still had not adjusted to the dark.

Sae gently approached them.

“Little bloodsucker!”

Her sister slightly grinned hearing her sister say that.

The swaddling blanket’s pattern seemed to shift. From its edge, a butterfly took flight.

Beating its wings in the hushed darkness, the standing-wing butterfly cut an arc and escaped past Sae’s side.

She had the feeling she had long been aware of it.

Sae stood there neither looking at the child’s face nor watching it when her sister changed its diaper. She asked:

“That child, it’s a boy I suppose.”

“That’s right.”

Her sister smiled for the second time.

“I’m sure the butterfly had some blood, too.”

Her voice ended up slightly wavering. Sae approached them a bit more and reached out her finger to touch the baby.

A flake came off.

It flew away.

The child was groping with his hands, and just like that, it crumbled.

Clear-brown insect wings spread open like they were quietly drawing a breath. They closed.

Butterflies, grouped together like a bunch of flowers, twitched their thin black antennae. All of their tiny and shiny pupils took in Sae.

Like the soft sound of petals falling, so too did this bunch break up and fly away.

Then, lost in confusion, most of them fled outside where it was bright. Yet there was one that remained in the room’s darkness beating its wings furiously.

With her breast hanging out, her sister sat there in silence. The shape of her naked arm, bent like the neck of a waterfowl, made it seem like she was still holding the baby to her breast.

Blood was oozing down her white skin.

Sae fled outside running.

Crossing over the sagging tape used to ward off the birds, she stepped through the dried ruts in the field. Provided she could make it to that mass of daisies, that sweet and suffocating smell would be lifted from her.

Biting down hard on her lip, Sae parted the deep bushes.

Standing-wing butterflies were gathered there. They did have water. The water had a color she never knew water could have and it collected into a naturally formed pit. There were flies. Ants, too. And there was also human hair.

Sae bolted back to the house.

Gasping for breath, her throat had gone dry. Standing now before her sister, Sae’s breathing was still terribly labored.

Two or three of the standing-wing butterflies had again returned to Chizu’s breast. Unfazed, her sister moved her hands to lovingly hold them.

“Let’s go home, Sis!”

Sae forced herself to smile.

“Let’s go back together!”

Her sister did not look at Sae. Sae smiled once more.

“I’m sorry! For all the scolding! For all the times I called you an idiot in my letters!”

“I wish it was real,” her sister whispered with her head hung low. Keeping her shoes on, Sae stepped up into the house and took her sister’s hand.

“Okay, stop it. I’m sorry.”

It was a cold hand.

“Will you forgive me?”

“Yes, let’s go home!”

A butterfly fled from her sister’s breast. Her sister slowly raised up her face.

Her black pupils twinkled with light.

“Thanks. I was...so lonely.”

Sae lost the feeling in her grip and something tickled the palm of her hand. She looked down and saw: bits of a butterfly. Among the bits, its little wing had hurt itself on her hand, had broken off, and it lay there crushed.

A rotten smell filled her nose.

Now there was no trace at all of her sister.

The lump there before her eyes was an insect she had grown tired of seeing.

The world she saw was covered in iridescent scales. A countless number of insect wings, at once both hard and delicate, went by her, beating against her hands – and her face.

They followed Sae, taking a grand tour of the inside of the house and to Sae they made a sound like the wind sighing in the grass; in their uncountable numbers they went outside through the entrance, setting their course for the light.

Nothing else was to be seen in the dust-covered floors of the house except for Sae’s footprints. Yet the black wilted flowers remained scattered about just as they were before.

Sae took one, put it in her pocket, and then left the house behind her.

When she reached the bushes, she saw the standing-wing butterfly playing there again.

At the opposite bank and steeped in its water: the hair. Long hair.

Swollen fingers still tightly gripped a lethal silver weapon.

Could it be that something had lodged inside the body of the woman who, once she was abandoned, met her death by her own hand? Sae did not feel compelled to check. However, so much blood, so much milk must have poured from her breast. The wilted flowers now would yield no more life. Yet this putrefied and dissolved body would nourish the soil, the weeds, and the butterflies and the like with all kinds of vital nutrients.

The cries of the birds were as peaceful as ever.

Sae left going down the road.

For a long time after she had departed the house, one butterfly had been following her. She, in turn, keeping step with it, headed out of the hills and made her way for the village.

The sun was so bright it made her eyes hurt, so she left it to enter a small forest of cedars. It was only then that the air suddenly became cool. Once she passed through the woods, early summer sunshine warmed her face again.

Although there no sign of anyone around, she knew that people were there. A great number of roofs came into view. There was an old knick-knack shop. There were some stacks of cardboard boxes in front of the shop's glass doors. A cat sat inside one of boxes next to some sweet buns.

The hill became a bit steep and the paved road widened out.

Sae got onto the road where there was a bus stop.

She stood there breaking into a slight sweat. The butterfly came to rest on her arm as if it was sad to part with her moisture.

Cars drove past her. The wind shifted. The butterfly took flight.

A small white truck came speeding by and sucked up the wind-buffed butterfly in its wake.

The standing-wing butterfly vanished.

A flake of its wing came falling down to the side of the asphalt with only a minor gap separating it from Sae.

Sae picked it up and wrapped it inside a piece of tissue.

Soon the bus came.

She boarded the bus, was jostled by train, and returned to her house, where she spread open the tissue.

The remaining flake had crumbled into powder and it retained nothing of its original shape.

Yet the wilted flowers, which she had put in her pocket, were just as they were before.

Shaken by the train, transferred to a bus, carried in short bursts over rolling hills, and dropped at the rust-and-paint-chip postbox, only to pick her own postcard out of it. The ciphers she'd written there, rained on so many times, had all been smudged away at this point.

Sae blinked a few times and then swept her gaze over her surroundings.

Colors were swept away in the early-summer sun, flattening the scenery. Only the voices of the skylarks high above gave the world a third dimension.

Sae's eyes watered from the brightness, and she closed them briefly. Here and there – in between the rhythmic songs of the skylarks – she could hear the chirps of birds whose names she did not know (but which might have known hers<sup>1</sup>). The wind found the soft grass and sent it rustling. Humidity was anything but low that day. The air, taking on the smell of whatever the sun touched, was heavy to the point of sapping all of her energy.

A sudden rush of wings next to her ear forced Sae's eyes open.

There was no sign of the insect that had made the violent, jarring sound. Instead what she saw was a butterfly.

Her eyes, finally accustomed to the light, took in the green of the grass, the green trees, and the fields, shot through with the shadows of power lines. The whole thing was quite serene, but it was unmistakably the lonely middle of nowhere.

The cracks in the paved road were starting to succumb to the grass. The cropland, with its reddish, discolored soil, looked abandoned. The silver tape meant to keep birds off had lost its sheen and gone slack, sinking down and wrapping itself around its bamboo pole. Sickly-thin sunflowers hung their heads. And there, where the long-past-its-prime heartleaf grew thick and green with the fleabane that acted like it owned the place, the brown butterfly was flying into the underbrush and returning, over and over. There must have been some poor, pathetic flower left in there.

Sae turned around to face a wooden, bungalow-style house that was more dilapidated than the old postcard still in her hand. She let out a held breath. With some hesitation she reached for the door, which was barely on its hinges, and opened it.

Light flooded the wide, dirt-covered floor. Across from the entryway was a row of planks, and on the wood sat Sae's sister, a faint smile playing about her lips. "Oh," she said. "Look who's here."

"When I didn't hear from you..." Sae let out her breath again and then proffered the postcard.

"Well, you want me to take a look at it now?"

"Forget it," Sae said. Getting her shoes off was costing her more effort than it should, and she sat on the front step. Her sister made no apology, merely sat there with that smile on her white face. "I wrote you so many postcards. Did you get through many of those?"

Sae shook out the leg of her jeans. It was around four years ago that Chizu had left without saying where she was going. Three years ago, in the autumn, she'd eloped. Sae didn't know

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<sup>1</sup> This is from what I took to be the author's intentional use of the word *saezuri* for the sounds of the birds, because of its proximity to the main character's name.

who the man was. Since he was a stranger, the family hadn't had any objections to him. Even so her sister had eloped, only sending the occasional postcard to the younger sister with whom she'd been so close.

The address was always thinly scrawled in pencil, almost like someone had faked it. Her mother and father had been at a loss. It wouldn't have been the first time her sister had sent something from a false address.

It had been maybe two months since Sae had finally tracked down where her sister was staying. It had been so easy, too: the postmark had been clearly visible. And so, without a word to her parents, Sae had gone off in search of Chizu's house. She had known that her sister would be alone. As soon as the man got himself another wife and kid he turned violent, and then at some point had just taken the money and fled.

Chizu, evidently unashamed, had put the whole thing down in one of her postcards. ...*That man isn't around anymore.* Before Sae had ever known his name or seen his face, her sister's lover had gone.

"So do you want to come home?"

"It's a little late now, isn't it?"

Her sister's smile was so quiet. It was like Sae had never seen this woman in her life. Her undone hair drew waves where it stuck to the sweaty nape of her neck and collarbone. The top of her white blouse was broad, opening on the valley of her ample breasts. Her skin glowed with sweat.

Sae put away the postcard and took out her pale pink handkerchief. With it, she softly wiped the sweat from her own neck. "I asked you so many times to call me, in the cards. When I didn't hear from you, I thought maybe you'd killed yourself or something."

"You were really worried about me, huh?" Her sister's hands moved and Sae heard a dry sound, like parchment. When she looked, there was a pile of desiccated flower petals on the floor. Chizu spread them out in front of her, as if she were doing piecework. "I gathered some flowers to make a scented cachet," she explained. "But I don't think it's going to work. It's too humid this time of year, so they just rot before they can dry out."

"You always were into that kind of thing, Chi."

"It's just, you know, scents and stuff. I don't know." Chizu stood, letting Sae see a little of her former bearing. Just as she did so, a pinched cry drifted in from the other side of the stained screen. "Now now," she said and turned toward the sound. Sae watched her sister's pale heel disappear into the shadows.

Chizu's footprints remained on the floor. They glowed black, no doubt because everything else was covered in a fine layer of dust. Sae looked down at the scattered flowers. Each of them had withered down to a blackened husk. That not one of them retained its color must have been because they had rotted, as Chizu had said.

Chizu came back in, carrying in her arms an infant swaddled in a sling. "My baby," she explained with a smile before the question could even be asked.

Sae was struck dumb.

Spreading her pale, lemon-colored skirt over the black petals, Chizu began cooing and making soothing noises at the child while undoing the mother-of-pearl buttons of her blouse. Without any help, her breasts came spilling out, brighter than the white fabric that had held them in. She cradled the child up to them, and the baby opened its little mouth as wide as it could and engulfed the nipple.

Chizu looked down at the infant, entranced. Sae looked away demurely. Outside the door was nothing but blazing light. She moved to the door as if drawn there, and once more the powerful sunbeams stole all color from the world.

Suddenly Sae felt a sense that someone was standing behind her. “Hey, Chi, you mind if I stay over tonight?” she asked without turning around.

“As long as *you’re* alright with it,” her sister said. An organic smell – was it milk? – filled Sae’s nose. She felt like she might vomit, so she went outside.

The skylarks were crying again. Under a sky that seemed to be a somewhat paler color than it had been before, Sae walked toward the end of the road. At the end of a row of withered branches from various trees was a deep green wood on the side of a mountain, untouched by the people living in that town. If she were to continue wending her way down that path she would surely reach it.

Sae had no desire to go that far, though the breeze off the mountain was comforting.

All of a sudden the cries of the birds were cut off. The wind died down. The scene was as quiet as if time had just stopped. Sae glanced around, looking for anything moving in that still frame.

The water in a gap in the meadow reflected back blackly. More than a dozen butterflies with light brown wings had gathered there. It looked as if someone had arranged them. The soft movements of their wings were like respiration.

Chizu came to stand quietly next to her little sister. The baby gave a small hiccup. Some of the offending milk was thrown across her breasts, which were still bare.

Red. The milk, it looked red.

Slivers of light pierced Sae’s eyes, and she shut her lids tightly against it all.

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“They’re from the family *Nymphalidae*. When they drink water, they get nutrients from anything that’s dissolved into it. I’ve heard the majority of the species is male.” Chizu spoke as she aligned her futon. On the ceiling, the string of tiny lights she’d lit cast too many black shadows and accentuated the stains on the screen.

“You’re pretty knowledgeable about some weird stuff, you know that?”

“The little darlings can also feed off of humans. Off their sweat and urine.” Chizu’s voice had a hint of wistfulness in it. There was a soft sound of a futon being beaten. She must have been cosseting the baby, which she’d brought in to sleep with her.

Sae stopped talking and shut her eyes – babies weren’t the only ones who got sleepy listening to rhythmic sounds. At length, the faint voice of a woman reached her ears. Was

that a lullaby? No, it wasn't. That wasn't even a woman's voice. It sounded like the fluttering of wings. Its rise and fall was like singing.

Something was traversing the darkness. A plain butterfly.

In an instant, the butterfly multiplied, became a hoard, and the yellow of the floor was overwhelmed by a sea of light brown wings. They landed lightly and stood. Quietly the wings closed. Quietly they opened.

When the wings closed they lightened, became pale. When they opened, black speckles floated to the surface. If Sae had looked up she would have found them packed together on the thin string of the lights, would have seen them alight on the floor to join their brethren.

Sae opened her eyes and raised herself up. There was no sign of a butterfly to be found. It had been a dream that had come to her on the edge of sleep. She wiped her brow, which was covered in sweat. In spite of the dark, a fly had come in. Burrowing back into the futon, she was bothered by the smell of mildew.

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The tap water tasted like iron. Sae had absolutely no appetite. She washed her face perfunctorily and then moved for the front door, where the flower petals still lay scattered from the day before, now all the more shriveled and blackened. She opened the unstable door, letting in a nice morning breeze. Unconsciously, she took a deep breath.

The house was full of a peculiar bittersweet stench. Chizu had been worried about that. Sae had gotten used to it after a while; it had just dulled her sense of smell. But now, letting the outside in again, she reverted back and was once more aware of it. Outside was full of so much light.

Sae dragged her feet across the mat. She meant to wipe off the smell and the darkness. The rustling of the wind just felt so good.

The paths between the rice fields were knotted with thick clumps of heartleaf, where butterflies gathered. They were the same kind as the previous night's phantoms. Were they really a product of the environment, or had they spontaneously constituted here in a large gathering? Sae knitted her brows slightly, but she still found herself chasing after the butterflies. Like yesterday, the *nymphalidae* (she remembered they were called) were flying back and forth above the same thicket.

Sae realized her sister was standing beside her. Keeping her gaze fixedly forward she said, "No one comes here, do they?"

"No," Chizu replied.

"Is there even anyone around?"

"Down this path there aren't any houses anymore. So people seldom come." The baby was back at Chizu's breast. It was the quietest infant Sae had ever known. Its sling had a gaudy pattern – it looked to have been sewn together from disparate rags and threads. Compared to it, Chizu's clothing and face seemed to have no color at all.

Sae followed the butterflies with her gaze. One after another they drew arcs in the air, sinking themselves into the thicket in front of them. She had assumed there was a flower in

there, but perhaps it was just water. *If it's a flower, though, I'd love to see it*, she thought. But when she began to walk toward it, she was stopped with a word.

“Where are you going?”

“Just over there.”

“That’s not a good idea.”

“Why?”

“It’s not just water over there.” Chizu shook her black hair. “I told you, didn’t I? The reason the butterflies are attracted to water is because they’re after more than just moisture. The little guys want the nutrients that have dissolved into it. They’ll also flock to corpses.”

Sae looked again at the thicket, and then returned her gaze to her sister’s face. Chizu was staring intently at the thicket. She couldn’t read anything in her eyes. “A corpse?” she asked without thinking.

“I smell it on the wind. It’s unpleasant.”

Then Sae asked, “What happened to the kid’s father?”

“Huh.” Chizu was looking adoringly at her baby.

Sae asked again, “What happened to the kid’s father?”

“I dunno. I just know that one day, two years ago, he was gone, OK?”

“The kid?”

“The baby’s mine.” Chizu held the child closer. Perhaps awakened by being lifted, the baby began seeking out its mother’s breast with one tiny finger. “Yes, it’s OK, I know, you’re hungry, aren’t you?” She turned toward home, undoing her mother-of-pearl buttons. A tense voice called after her.

“Chizu, are you alright?”

“What? Why do you ask?” She entered the dark house. Sae stayed just outside the door. Her eyes were used to the light; she couldn’t see a thing in the darkness. She could barely see the spot on the ground where she stood – the remnants of the light from outside filled the space with pale phantom fires.

Sae heard the creak of something bending. Her sister must have been sitting in the entrance. “It’s just, yesterday, your milk looked like blood.” The light-phantoms would not go away. Sae blinked over and over.

“It’s the same thing, dummy,” Chizu’s voice answered from the darkness. “Mother’s milk is made from the mother’s blood.”

The pale spots began to lose their brightness, turned to red. The red splattered all over Sae’s field of view shined so similarly to blood. “So this baby is drinking blood? *All* babies are just drinking blood all the time?” Sae kept blinking. At long last her pupils opened up.

In the same spot and same position as yesterday, Chizu sat, nursing. The child's hands made tiny movements while it gorged. After a time it released the nipple.

Milk dripped from its mouth. The redness there could have been another function of Sae's still-unaccustomed eyes. She took a halting step toward it. "It looks like a vampire."

Chizu must have heard, because a faint smile appeared on her face.

The pattern on the sling seemed to bend and shift. A butterfly flew out of its hem. Flapping its wings in the still darkness, the *nymphalid* inscribed an arc in the air, and slipped out of Sae's periphery.

A realization dawned on Sae. She had yet to see the baby's face. She had yet to see its diaper changed. So she asked, "That is a boy, isn't it?"

"Yes." Once again her sister smiled.

"Those butterflies would totally drink blood, wouldn't they." Sae wasn't asking, but her voice wavered slightly. She took another step closer, and then she reached her finger out to the baby.

Something shattered into fragments.

Took flight.

The "child" that had been there, with its hand reaching out for her, had just crumbled.

*Quietly, like respiration, the light brown wings opened. Closed.*

The butterflies, which were gathered together like the calyx of a flower, put forth their slender, black antennae, and every tiny, lustrous eye reflected back the shape of Sae. Then with a rush of wings, the calyx, too, shattered.

In a confusion they fled for the brightness outside. However, there were still plenty of things flapping desperately in the darkness of the house.

Chizu sat in silence, her breasts still wet from the feeding, her arm still bent in the shape of the baby, like the neck of some waterfowl. Blood ran over her white skin.

And then Sae was running, down and outside. Out past the dangling silver bird tape, trampling on the dried remains of crops. When she neared the cluster of fleabane, a sickly sweet odor rose up and seemed to harm her lungs. Clamping her lips shut, Sae forced her way into the thicket.

The *nymphalidae* had gathered there. There was the water. In the hollow that had formed in the earth there, water of an unknowable color had accumulated. There were flies there, too. And ants. And hair.

Sae raced back to the house. Her breath came in painful gasps, and her throat was parched. Taking up a position in front of her sister, she drew in a ragged breath.

Two or three nymphalids had returned to Chizu's breast. Her hands were held out lovingly to them, in her accustomed way.

“Chizu, come home.” Insane as it was, Sae was laughing. “Come home with me.” Chizu did not look at Sae. Again, Sae laughed. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry all I did was nag you. I’m sorry I only ever wrote you stupid, pointless letters.”

“You got that right,” her sister murmured, her head bowed.

Sae took her sister’s hand. Her shoes were still on her feet. “Let’s forget it, OK? I’m sorry.” The hand she held was so cold. “Forgive me?”

“Yeah, OK, let’s go home,” Chizu said. A butterfly flew off of her chest. Slowly, she raised her head. There was a smile of clarity in her black eyes. “Thank you. I... I was so lonely.”

Sae lost sensation in her outstretched hand, except for a slight tickle in her palm. When she looked down, there was part of a butterfly. It had left a wound on her hand where its wings had been crushed. A sour smell penetrated her nose.

There was no sign of her sister. The lump in front of her was nothing but a bunch of insects that she was tired of looking at. Her whole view was stained with the colors of butterfly scales. The light, hard wings buffeted her hands and face as they made their way past. Circling around Sae, with a sound like wind through the grass, they seemed to be taking in a tour of the house before sweeping out the door and heading into the light.

Then there was nothing left on the dust-covered floor but Sae’s footprints and the withered black flower petals, still scattered about in the same pattern as before. Putting one in her pocket, Sae left the house behind.

She glanced once more at the thicket. The nymphalidae were wheeling about and playing in front of it again. Across from it was a long stretch of waterlogged hair. The swollen hand still clutched the deadly silver weapon. The woman, having been abandoned, had killed herself, possibly while still pregnant. Sae had no desire to verify this for herself. But, was that a stream of red milk pouring from her breast? The withered flowers there did not reproduce. However, the body, breaking down and decaying, was providing innumerable precious nutrients to the butterflies, as well as to the grass and soil.

The voices of the birds remained tranquil. Sae set off back along the road. A butterfly, which had been winding its way around her since she’d left the house, continued to accompany her. Matching its pace, Sae started down from the mountain toward the forest.

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To get out from under the painfully bright sunlight, Sae ducked into a small copse of cedars. Right away the air felt cooler. The moment she stepped out of it again, the early summer sun resumed burning her face.

Though she could not see anyone, Sae felt the touch of civilization. She could see the roofs of houses. There was an old general store with a stack of cardboard boxes outside its glass door. Inside them were baked goods, and a cat.

The hills got closer together, the paved road widened out. And then Sae came out onto the road with the bus stop.

She was covered in a thin layer of sweat. As if drawn to the moisture, the butterfly landed on her arm. Then a car passed and the wind changed, and the butterfly flew off. A white

mini-truck came speeding by and dragged the airborne insect under. The nymphalid vanished.

A moment later, the shards of its wings came to rest on the side of the asphalt. Sae gathered them up and wrapped them in some tissue paper.

Before long the bus came. Sae boarded, and soon transferred, to be shaken by the train all the way back home. Once there, she opened the tissue. The shards had turned to dust – they retained nothing of their former shape. Only the wilted flower petal in her pocket was as it had been.

She sat swaying on the train, then got on a bus, then walked up a gently sloping hill for a short while, and there she pulled a postcard from a faded, rusty mailbox. It was stained, the writing blurred by countless rains. Sae blinked and turned her gaze on her surroundings.

The land was flat and vivid in the early summer sunlight. The chirps of the sparrows that sang high in the sky encircled her. The brightness filled her eyes with tears, and after a moment she closed them. Occasionally, the trill of a bird whose name she didn't know broke into the lilting sparrow song – sometimes near, sometimes far. A soft wind rustled through the grass.

It was nothing if not humid. The air was sticky and oppressive, almost languid, pregnant with the fragrance of a sunny field. Suddenly a loud, angry rush of wings passed by her ear. Sae opened her eyes. There was no trace of whatever insect had buzzed past so violently. There were only butterflies.

The green of grass and green trees, fields, and power lines met her eyes when they finally grew accustomed to the light – a tranquil but desolate country landscape. The paved road was cracked, and slowly being overrun with grass. The fields, patchy with reddened dirt, appeared abandoned. The lengths of silver tape used to frighten away birds hung slack and tarnished on their bamboo poles. Thin sunflowers drooped their heads. Brown butterflies flitted in and out of the overgrown greenery that lay behind chameleon plants past their bloom and boisterous daisies. Perhaps there were lovely flowers there.

Sae turned around, the old postcard in hand. Behind her was a large, one-story house, even more decayed than the postcard she held. The air that leaked out between its shrunken boards stunk of mold. It was dark and black against the early summer mid-afternoon. She sighed, hesitated a short moment, and then slid open the ill-fitting door.

Light spilled over the wide dirt floor. Her sister sat heavily on the wooden floor on the other side of the door frame, smiling.

“Oh, look who's here!”

“You never wrote back.” Sae sighed again and held the postcard out.

“Which should I look at?”

“Never mind.” She sat in the entryway, without bothering to take off her shoes.

Her sister didn't apologize, just sat with that smile on her white face.

“I don't know how many postcards I wrote. How many of them did you even read?” Sae swung her legs. Her sister, Chizu, had gone missing four long years ago. Three years back, in the fall, they found out she had eloped. They didn't even know who her lover was. Not knowing of him, of course the family made no attempt to oppose, but even so the older sister Sae had been so close to eloped, only sending back word by postcard.

The address on the postcard, written delicately in pencil, was illegible. Her parents were at wit's end. Still, Chizu occasionally sent news from her illegible address.

Sae had found out where her sister was just two months earlier. It wasn't difficult – the mystery was solved by an unmarred postmark. Sae had used it in her search, without a word to their parents. She knew Chizu would be alone. Her man had another woman and child on the side. At some point he grew violent and had run off with all of the money. Chizu had written all of it on a postcard, without embarrassment: *He isn't around anymore.*

Her sister's lover had vanished before Sae had even known his name or seen his face.

“You don't want to come back?”

“It's too late for that.” Her sister's laugh was very quiet. She was like a stranger. Her black hair was untied and stuck to the sweaty nape of her neck and around her collarbones in waves. The valley of her full, heavy breasts was visible from the wide neck of the white blouse she wore. Her skin shone with sweat.

Sae put away the postcard and pulled out a pink handkerchief. She ran it gently along her own sweat-covered neck. “I asked you to give me a call, you know, on all of the postcards I sent. And when you still didn't call, I thought you might have killed yourself or something.”

“Thanks for worrying about me.” Chizu moved her wrist with a dry, scraping sound. Dried flowers. She idly spread them out across the wooden floor. “I tried to collect some flowers to put into a sachet. But it was no use. The humidity is so high this season, they rot before they dry.”

“I didn't know you had that kind of hobby.”

“A lot of things stink. I guess you might not get it.” Chizu began to stand. As she did, a thin voice rose from the shade of the stained sliding door. “My, my!” Her shadow disappeared inside, the pale undersides of her feet flashing. Her footprints remained on the floor. It was because they were surrounded by the thin veil of dust that covered all else that they shone so darkly.

Sae stared at the scattered flowers. Every single nameless one was black and curled. Perhaps it was because the flowers had lost their color that her sister called them 'rotten'.

Chizu returned holding a baby swaddled in a coat, the short kind worn by mothers when they carry their children on their back. “This is my baby,” she said before Sae asked. She smiled.

Sae said nothing.

Her sister spread her lemon yellow skirt over the blackened petals and soothed the baby – “There we go, it's OK” – as she undid the shell buttons of her blouse. Her breasts, whiter than linen, spilled free. When the child was lifted up it eagerly opened its small mouth and took her nipple.

Chizu stared down, rapt. Sae turned her gaze outside. Outside the sliding door it was glaringly bright. She drew nearer to the door, as if entranced, and the strong rays of light once again robbed everything in her field of vision of its color.

She realized there was someone behind her. “Can I stay the night?” she asked, without turning around, and her sister answered: “You can if you want.”

An organic fragrance – the smell of milk - swept past Sae's nose. Feeling slightly nauseous, she stepped outside.

The sparrows were still singing. The sky had faded somewhat. She walked up the path that lay beneath it. There was a deep-green woodland beyond a tree with dying branches. If she just made her way up the path, she would reach the mountain. She had no intention of doing so. But the breeze from that way was nice.

The birds suddenly stopped chirping. The wind disappeared as well. The landscape was quiet, as if time had stopped. Seeing something move in this still frame, Sae shifted her gaze.

The water that had gathered in the grass sparkled darkly. More than a dozen butterflies with pale brown wings rested there, as if arranged. They moved their wings gently as breath.

Chizu came silently to her side. The child gave a small burp. A drop of milk fell from her naked breasts.

Red. The milk looked *red*.

A splinter of light flashed into her eyes, and Sae pressed her eyelids tightly shut.

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“That's a brush-footed butterfly. They drink water and suck up all the nutrients in it. I heard they're mostly male, you know,” her sister had told her as she laid out a futon.

The light in the ceiling made the shadows excessively black. A spot on the naked bulb bothered her. “You know the weirdest things.”

“But those little guys hang around people, too. They gather around stuff like sweat and even piss!” Chizu's voice was choked.

Sae heard the sound of someone beating softly on a futon. Her sister must have been trying to soothe the baby that slept beside her. Sae closed her eyes, quiet. Children are not the only ones who grow sleepy listening to repetitive noises.

The faint voice of a woman reached her drowsy ears.

A lullaby? No, it didn't seem to be a woman's voice after all. It was the sound of wings, rising and falling, so they sounded like a singing voice.

Something passed in the darkness. Plain little butterflies. Before she could think they had grown in number, noisy, covering the floor with their yellow-brown wings. The wings silently closed, silently opened – grey and pale when closed, and speckled with black when open. She looked up and they were crowded on the thin string that hung from the light bulb, dangling in a bunch.

Sae opened her eyes and sat up. The butterflies were nowhere to be seen. It was a dream she'd had on the brink of sleep. She wiped her sweat-covered face. Again, the sound of wings passed by. Despite the dark she could tell it was a fly.

She slid herself back into the futon. The smell of mold bothered her.

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The tap water tasted like metal.

Sae had no appetite. After a cursory rinse of her face she went to the entry doorway, where the scattered flowers from yesterday remained, ever more black and curled. A cool morning breeze swept in once she opened the crooked door. She took a deep breath, without thinking.

Just as her sister had worried, the house was filled with a peculiar bittersweet smell. She grew used to it and her sense of smell was dulled. But now that she'd been reacquainted with the outdoors, her nose had changed again. The world outside was filled with light. Sae placed her foot on the ground. She felt as if the stink and darkness stuck to her skin was being swept away. The flutter of the wind was refreshing.

Butterflies - the same kind as those in her vision last night - had stopped at the chameleon plants beside the footpath. Did they live there, or had they suddenly appeared there en masse?

Sae followed the butterflies, her brows gently furrowed. Like the brush-footed butterflies of yesterday, they flitted together above the thicket.

Her sister was suddenly beside her.

“Nobody's come,” Sae said, staring ahead.

“I know.”

“Isn't there anyone here?”

“There aren't any houses at the end of this path anymore. People hardly ever come.” The baby was

still at Chizu's breast. The child was more quiet than any infant Sae had ever known. Her sister's clothes, her face, were colorless compared to the gaudy pattern on the patchwork coat.

Sae followed a butterfly with her eyes. It drew one, two arcs in the air, before sinking into the thicket on the other side. She'd thought that there might be flowers there, but maybe it was water. If they were flowers, she wanted to see them. She began to walk, but her sister's voice stopped her.

"Where are you going?"

"Over there."

"I think you'd better not."

"Why?"

"There's not just water over there." Her sister shook her black hair. "I told you, didn't I? They don't gather around water just because they want water. They want the nutrients in it. So they'll hang around dead bodies, too."

Sae looked once more at the thicket, and then back to her sister's face. Chizu was staring at the thicket. Sae could understand nothing in her gaze. "What kind of dead body?" she asked, without thinking.

"You can smell it in the wind. Disgusting."

"Where did the baby's father go?" Sae asked.

"Well..." Her sister stared lovingly at her child.

She tried to ask once more: "Where did the baby's father go?"

"I don't know, other than that he completely disappeared two years ago."

"Then, this baby..."

"It's my baby." Chizu shifted the child in her arms. Waking, perhaps due to the shifting, the baby groped at her sister's breasts with its tiny fingers. "There, there. You're hungry, aren't you!" Chizu returned to the house, slowly undoing the shell buttons. Her excited voice trailed behind.

"Chizu. Hey, are you OK?"

"Why do you ask?" Her sister stepped into her dark house. Sae stopped in the doorway. Her eyes, grown used to the light, were unused to the dark. Even the floor was invisible to her. The traces of light from outside became blue phantoms of will-o-wisp.

Something creaked. Her sister must have sat in the entryway.

"Because your breast milk looked like blood the other day." The phantom light remained. Sae blinked countless times.

A voice rang out: "It's the same thing, stupid. Breast milk comes from a mother's blood."

The blue points of light grew dim and red. The red, falling here and there within her field of vision, looked even more like blood for its glittering.

"That means this child is drinking blood. All babies drink blood."

Sae began blinking again. At last her pupils dilated.

In the same place as yesterday, in the same position, her sister was feeding the baby. The greedy child's hands moved faintly. After a long while it released her breast. Breast milk dribbled from its mouth. Perhaps it only looked red because Sae's eyes hadn't grown used to the darkness yet.

She drew slowly closer. "It's like a vampire."

Hearing this, her sister laughed faintly.

The pattern on the coat seemed to be moving. A butterfly flew from its hem. Beating its wings in the quiet darkness, it drew an arc in the air and flew past Sae. She had realized something long ago. She hadn't seen the child's face. She hadn't seen Chizu change its diaper. She asked: "It's a boy, isn't it?"

"That's right." Her sister laughed once more.

"I guess butterflies must drink blood, too." Sae's voice trembled slightly. She drew closer still, and stretched her fingers toward the baby.

A fragment peeled free. It flew into the air. The child moved its hand and crumbled.

Pale brown wings opened, shut, as silently as breath. The butterflies, clustered like a bunch of flowers, waved their fine, black antennae – Sae was reflected in each of their small, shining eyes. With a flutter, that cluster of flowers crumbled as well, and flew away.

In the confusion most had fled into the bright outdoors, but something remained in the darkness indoors, frantically beating its wings.

Her sister sat silently, both breasts naked. She held her arm bent, like the neck of a swan, as if she still held her child. Her white skin was smeared with blood.

Sae ran outside. She passed the slack metal ribbons used to scare away birds, and ran through the withered remains of farm fields. A stifling bittersweet smell rose as she drew closer to the chameleon plants. Biting her lips, Sae parted the thicket.

There were brush-footed butterflies gathered there. There was water, strange-colored water, collected in a natural depression in the earth. And there were flies. And there were ants. And there was hair.

Sae ran back to the house. It was hard to breathe – her throat was parched. Her breathing was ragged as she stood before her sister. There were still one or two butterflies returning to Chizu's breasts. She held her hands lovingly around them, unchanged.

"Chizu. Let's go home." Sae forced a faint laugh. "Let's go back together."

Her sister wasn't looking at her.

Sae laughed dimly again. "I'm sorry for always telling you off. For calling you stupid in all those letters."

"It's true, though," she murmured, hanging her head.

Sae stepped into the house, still in her shoes, and grabbed her hand. "That's enough. I'm sorry."

Chizu's hand was cold. "Do you forgive me?"

"Yes. Let's go."

The butterflies flew from her sister's breasts. She slowly lifted her head. Her black eyes smiled, unclouded. "Thank you. I was so lonely."

The sensation of the hand Sae held disappeared – there was only a tickle on her palm. It was a butterfly. It had been crushed, its wings broken, by her hand. A sour smell assaulted her nose.

There was not even a shadow of her sister left anymore. The cluster in front of her was made up of that insect she'd seen too much of. Her vision was stained with the color of fish scales. Hard but light wings passed her, beating countless times over face and hands. Hundreds of them wrapped around her, flying through the house with a sound like grass whipping in the wind, following her from the entryway to outside, toward the light.

Nothing but Sae's own footprints could be found in the dust on the floorboards. Still, the blackened and wilted flower petals remained as they had been scattered there. Putting one in her pocket, Sae left the house.

The butterflies were still playing around the thicket when she got there. And just past them – long, water-soaked hair. Swollen fingers still tightly gripped a silver weapon. Was there something inside this abandoned, suicidal woman? Sae felt no urge to find out. But so much blood, so much red milk must have flown from her chest. Withered flowers provide nothing. But this rotting body would raise butterflies and flowers and earth with all of its nutrients.

The birdsong was as tranquil as ever.

Sae walked down the path. A single butterfly had fluttered around her since she had left the house. Matching her pace with it, she left the mountain for town.

She stepped out of the almost painful sun and entered a small cedar forest. The air there was suddenly cool. Once she had passed through it, the sun of early summer once again scorched her face. She didn't see anyone, but she felt the presence of people. She saw countless roofs. Cats and sweet bread sat in the cardboard boxes stacked outside the glass doors of an old general store.

The hill became a little steeper, and the paved road grew wider.

Sae came out on a road with a bus stop. She'd worked up a light sweat. The butterfly landed on her arm, as if yearning for the water there.

A car passed in front of her. The wind changed. The butterfly flew away. A small white work truck drove by, and caught the agitated butterfly up.

The brush-footed butterfly disappeared.

After a short moment, fragments of its wings began to fall down beside the asphalt. Sae picked them up and folded a piece of tissue paper around them. She got on the bus, sat swaying on the train, and went home, where she opened the tissue.

The fragments had gone shapeless, crushed to a powder. Only the withered flowers in her pocket remained as they had been.

## Butterfly Pieces

by: Kamon Nanami

She took a train, rode a bus, strolled up a gentle slope, and withdrew postcards from a paint-flaked and rusted postbox. The characters written on the postcards were badly blurred and smudged after being exposed to rain any number of times. After blinking her eyes, Sae scanned her surroundings.

Airborne colors rode the early-summer sunlight. The landscape was completely flat—the song of a skylark high in the sky, however, was stereophonic. The glare of the sun caused tears to well up in her eyes, so Sae closed them for a while. From near and far, the peppered chirping of birds (whose names she didn't know) came mingling in the interludes of the light-hearted skylark song. The wind chose a soft grass, and rustled its leaves for her to hear. The humidity was far from low. The air, charged with the smell of sunshine, was weighty and sticky with languor.

Out of the blue, a loud flapping sound swooshed passed her ears, and Sae opened her eyes. There were no traces of any insects that could have made such a violent noise. What she saw instead were butterflies.

Her eyes were filled with the greens of grass and trees, fields, and telephone wires as her sight gradually grew accustomed to the light. Tranquil though it was, it was the view of a desolate countryside. The pavement was cracked and had continued to be ravaged by the roots of time and turf. The farmlands seemed to have been abandoned, and exposed a reddish-brown soil. Some silver tape used as a bird repellent (which had lost its shimmer) was left hanging slack, wound around a slanted bamboo pole. Some wilted sunflowers were facing downwards. A brown butterfly came and went deep in the thickly wooded verdure beyond the overgrown lizard's tails and overweening daisy fleabane. Perhaps there were some pretty little flowers there.

Sae looked over her shoulder, the old postcards still in hand. There was a one-story cabin, which had fallen into even more decay than those postcards had. Musty air leaked through the cracks of the worn-out boards. As one would expect to find at midday in early summer, the house was dark and unlit. Sae exhaled, hesitated slightly, and then opened the poorly-fitted door.

Rays of light spread out on the open, earthen floor. Planted on the wooden floor on the other side of the threshold, Sae's elder sister sat smiling thinly.

"Oh wow, you came?"

"You didn't reply."

Sae let out another sigh, raised up the postcards she was holding and showed them to her sister.

"Hmm, should I look at them?"

"Don't bother."

Sae couldn't be bothered with taking off her shoes, so she took a seat right there on the threshold. Her white-faced elder sister merely laughed, failing to apologize for

neglecting to fulfill her social obligations (such as returning letters, or greeting guests at the door).

“What the hell, sis? I wrote several postcards. When did you stop reading them?”

Sae loosened the legs of her jeans.

It was nearly four years ago that Chizuru’s whereabouts became unknown. And it was three autumns ago when it was learned that she had ran away with her lover. No one knew who her male companion was. And since he was unknown, the family had no basis for objecting to their relationship. In spite of that, Chizuru eloped and only sent forwarded postcards to her younger sister, Sae, whom she was on good terms with. It turned out that the return address, inscribed in detail in pencil, was an outright fabrication. Her mother and father didn’t know where to turn. Nevertheless, every now and then Chizuru sent tidings from the fabricated address. It was only about two months ago when Chizuru’s actual whereabouts were uncovered. Unremarkably, it was because the postmarked location had been neatly preserved on the postcard. From there, Sae searched for Chizuru’s home (leaving her parents uninformed). She knew Chizuru was living at the address alone. Her husband had had a second wife and child, became violent over time, and ran away one day with their money in hand. Chizuru had shamelessly written it all on a postcard—that person was no longer around. Before knowing his face (or so much as his name), Sae’s brother-in-law had disappeared.

“You have no interest in leaving?”

“It’s been such a long time, after all.”

Chizuru’s smile was overly despondent—it seemed as if her own sister was nothing more than some woman of unknown acquaintance. Her black hair (that hadn’t been cut, much less styled) clung around her sweat-dampened nape and collarbone like an airbrushed ocean wave. Her white blouse was wide in the front, stretched to the brink of tearing, and revealed the cleavage of two ample breasts. Her skin glistened with sweat.

Sae put away the postcards and took out a peach-colored handkerchief in their place. She then gently rubbed her own neck, which was dampened with sweat in a similar fashion.

“I said for you to give me a call. Well, at least I wrote it, many times, in the postcards. And yet no calls came. So, I thought maybe you’d committed suicide, or something.”

“Thanks for the concern.”

Chizuru changed the position of her hands, and (as could be expected) Sae heard a dry rubbing-sound. Sae looked over and saw withered flower stems in her sister’s hands. Chizuru spread them out on the wooden floor, and seemed to perform some handiwork which was of no concern to Sae.

“I collected flowers and was going to make a sachet. But it’s useless. This season is intensely humid, and the flowers decay before they can dry.”

“I never knew you had such interests, big sis.”

“I have various interests...in fragrances. But you probably wouldn’t understand.”

Chizuru rose to her feet in a sign of displeasure. In the same instant, a feeble voice escaped from the other side of the soot-covered, sliding fusuma doors.

“Good gracious!”

Chizuru bared the white soles of her feet as she, and her shadow, stretched deep into the inner room. She left footprints on top of the floor. There was no mistaking why they alone had glimmered black—the entire floor was covered in a thin layer of dust. Sae looked at the flowers scattered about the floor. All of the flowers (none of which names she knew) were shriveled black. Her sister would likely say decay was what deprived the flowers of their color.

Chizuru came out of the inner room in a babywearer’s hanten, cuddling a baby.

“My baby,” Chizuru replied with a smile (before the question could be asked).

Sae was bereft of speech.

Chizuru spread a lemon-colored skirt on top of the black petals.

“There-there, sweetheart,” she pacified the child and undid the buttons on her blouse.

Without a second thought, she flopped out her breast (which was more radiant than the white fabric of the blouse itself). After wriggling the child higher up to it, the baby opened its small mouth with all its might and cleaved onto a nipple. Chizuru gazed down at the baby with rapt attention. Sae directed her attention outside. It was totally bright outside the sliding door. As if impelled by curiosity, she drew near to the doorway, and the bright light robbed all color from sight once again. She sensed someone standing behind her back.

“Hey sis, can I stay tonight?” Sae asked without turning around.

“If you’re okay with it,” Chizuru answered.

An organic smell (one could probably call it “milky”) skirted Sae’s nasal cavity. She experienced a faint nausea, and went straight outside just like that.

The skylark was still chirping. The color of the sky seemed to be a certain amount paler than before, and Sae made her way further down the road beneath it. A lush, socio-ecological satoyama was just beyond a tree covered with dead branches. After gradually ascending the hillside, Sae was certain that she could arrive at the peak if she kept on going. She had no interest in going that far. However, the wind from the peak was pleasant.

Without warning, all of the birds’ songs broke off. The wind disappeared as well. Even the landscape had grown quiet as if time itself had stopped moving. But something was animated in that picture of stillness, and Sae shifted her attention towards it.

A grassland crevice had collected water and glistened black with reflection. And ten or more butterflies, boasting tea-green wings, were settled therein. It appeared as though they had been perfectly arranged by someone. The butterflies moved their wings, slowly as if breathing.

Chizuru quietly queued up beside Sae. The child let out a small burp. Sour milk (spoiled by suckling) flew onto the still-exposed breast. Red. The milk looked red. A glint of light entered her eyes, and Sae clenched her eyelids shut.

“Those were nymphalidae—brush-footed butterflies. They drink water and swallow up nutrients dissolved in water. I heard the majority of them are male,” Chizuru said and laid out the futons.

The miniature bulbs hanging lit on the ceiling made the shadows all the blacker. Sae was bothered by the stains on the sliding doors.

“You are knowledgeable in unusual things.”

“Well, those youngsters swarm to people, too. They even swarm to sweat and urine, I tell you.” Chizuru’s voice had dampened a little.

The sound of a futon being patted gently became audible. Chizuru was probably pacifying the baby she had put to bed. Sae closed her eyes and fell silent. Children are not the only ones with the privilege of being lulled by sounds made at regular intervals. The muted voice of a woman was within earshot of slumbering ears. Was it a lullaby? It didn’t sound right. It didn’t sound a woman’s voice. It sounded like some kind of wings beating, only the tone was modulated to imitate a singing voice.

Something crossed the darkness.

Plain butterflies. No sooner had Sae seen the butterflies than they multiplied uproariously; the tea-green wings, standing erect over the whole surface of the floor, closed silently. Opened silently. When closed, their color was white and pale; when opened, black speckles floated on the surface. Had one glanced up they would’ve seen that even the rope that was supporting the electric lamp overhead was jam-packed with butterflies—they were hanging down in clusters. Sae opened her eyes and got to her feet.

The butterflies were nowhere in sight.

It was a dream on the verge of sleep. Sae rubbed her forehead. It was covered with sweat. The sound of wings beating went passing through the room once again. She felt that flies were in the room somehow—in defiance of that sound. After she got back under the covers, she became all too aware of a musty odor.

The tap water tasted of iron. Sae had absolutely no appetite. After routinely washing her face, she went to go out the front door and saw that the flowers from the day before were still scattered about the floor and had shriveled even blacker. Sae slid open the poorly-fitted door, and a nice morning breeze entered the room. She drew a deep, involuntary breath. Just as Chizuru had feared, the inside of the house was replete with a peculiar, sour-sweet odor. Once one’s sense of smell got used to the odor, it lost its robustness. However, once aware of the fresh air outside, that all changed again. The outside was brim with light as well.

Sae took herself out front. She felt as if the smell and darkness that was attached to her skin had been expunged. And the rustling of the wind was to her liking. A patch of lizard's tails lead to a raised ridge between the rice fields. Butterflies had come to rest there. It was the same species as last night's apparition. Was there a colony there, or had a plague of butterflies suddenly broken out? Sae raised her eyebrows slightly, but her eyes still followed the butterflies—the brush-footed butterfly was fluttering above the same thicket as the night before.

“No one's coming.”

“Nope.”

“Is no one there?”

“Further down this road now, there are no houses. So, people seldom come.”

The baby was there again—on Chizuru's breast—better behaved than any infant Sae had ever known. The design of the babywearer's hanten was gaudy and apparently sewn together from scraps of cloth. By comparison, Chizuru's clothes and complexion didn't have much color. Sae followed the butterflies with her gaze. One or two drew an arc and went sinking into the thicket beyond. Perhaps flowers were there, she thought. But it might have been water. If there were flowers, though, then she wanted to see them. She began to walk, but was called back instantly.

“Where are you going?”

“Over there.”

“I think you'd better not go.”

“Why not?”

“What's over there, it's not only water.” Chizuru shook her black hair. “I told you, didn't I? What gathers butterflies to water, it's not just out of want for water. Those youngsters are hungering for the dissolved nutrients in there. For that reason, they also swarm to corpses.”

Sae looked at the thicket once more, and then returned her gaze to Chizuru's face. Chizuru kept her eyes fixed on the thicket. Sae couldn't make anything out of her look.

“What corpses?” Sae asked as a reflex.

“I can smell it with the direction the wind is blowing. It's not pleasant, I tell you.”

Sae questioned: “Where did the child's father go?”

“Beats me.” Chizuru fixed her eyes on her child amorously.

Sae tried asking one more time: “Where did the child's father go?”

“I dunno. He went away two years ago already, and never came back.”

“If that’s so, then what about the baby?”

“It’s my baby.” Chizuru adjusted her embrace on the child. The baby, having been disturbed, woke up and groped for Chizuru’s breast with its tiny fingers. “There-there. You’re hungry, are you?”

Chizuru headed off back towards the house, undoing her buttons as she went and leaving a trail of smug vocalizations behind her.

“Big sis. Hey, you okay?”

“Why do you ask?” Chizuru went into the unlit house.

Sae stopped short of the doorway. Her eyes, still accustomed to the light, hadn’t adjusted to the darkness inside. While she still couldn’t even see the ground in front of her, the trace amounts of natural light inside the room began to metamorphose. The light formed a small, bluish-white ball of fire—a hitodama phantom. There was a squeaking sound. Chizuru appeared to be sitting at the main entrance.

“The milk looked like blood yesterday.”

The light of the hitodama phantom hadn’t extinguished yet. Sae blinked ad nauseam.

“That’s stupid. They’re the same.” A voice was heard. “Milk, you see, is made from mother’s blood.”

The bluish-white ball of fire lost luminosity and turned red. The red hue, scattered as spots in Sae’s field of vision, was akin to blood precisely in the way it glistened.

“Therefore, this child is also suckling blood. All babies suckle blood.”

Sae blinked continually. Little by little her pupils started to dilate. Chizuru breastfed the baby in the same spot, with the same mien, as the day before. The gluttonous child’s hands moved slightly, then before long they let go of the mother’s nipple. Breast milk dribbled from its mouth. Did it only look red on account of her eyes not yet being accustomed to the dark? Sae drew nearer, slowly and quietly.

“Just like a vampire.”

Chizuru overheard and smiled slightly. It looked like the design on her babywearer’s hanten was wavering. A butterfly flew from the sleeve. Flapping its wings in the calm darkness, the brush-footed butterfly drew an arc and came out of Sae’s side.

Sae had realized something quite some time before. She hadn’t looked at the child’s face. She also hadn’t seen the baby’s diaper get changed.

Sae asked: “That child is a boy, isn’t it?”

“That’s right,” Chizuru laughed again. “Butterflies drink blood as well. I can guarantee you that.” Her voice trembled slightly.

Sae drew closer still, and extended her finger towards the baby. A chunk peeled off. Sae leapt. The child moved its hand, and fell to pieces just like that.

As if breathing quietly, the tea-green wings opened. Closed. Clustered into a corolla-like formation, the butterflies flicked their thin, black antennae, with Sae's appearance reflected in each of their tiny, glossy pupils. Falling by ones and twos, the corolla-like formation crumbled. Confused as they were, most of the butterflies got out into the bright outdoors. But there was still something flapping hectically in the dimly lit interior.

Chizuru sat silently with one breast left exposed. The shape of her arm was bent like the neck of a waterfowl—as if she were still cuddling the baby. Blood was flecked on her white skin.

Sae went running outside. She ran passed the loosened bird-repellant tape, and trampled over the vestiges of a dried-up field. When she drew close to the patch of daisy fleabane, a sickening sweet smell rose up. She bit down on her lip hard, and Sae split down the middle of the secluded thicket. Brush-footed butterflies had gathered. There was water. Water of an undefined color had accumulated in the middle of a naturally formed basin. Flies were there, too. And ants. And there was hair.

Sae dashed back to the house. Her throat was parched and she struggled for air. She breathed heavily, standing in front of Chizuru. Two or three brush-footed butterflies came back to rest on Chizuru's chest once again. Her hands were sustained in a pathetic-looking cuddling motion.

“Big sis. Let's go home.” Sae forced a smile. “Let's go back together.”

Chizuru didn't look at Sae. Sae smiled again.

“I'm sorry. I've done nothing but criticize you. I've written nothing but foolishness in all my letters.”

“Because it's true,” Chizuru grumbled with her eyes downward.

Sae entered the house with her shoes on and took her elder sister's hand.

“It's all right. Sorry.”

Her hand was cold.

“You're going to forgive me?”

“Yeah, let's go.”

The butterflies flew from Chizuru's chest. She slowly lifted her head. Her black eyes smiled markedly.

“Thank you. I...was lonesome.”

Something tickled the palm of Sae's hand, and she lost the sensation of holding her sister's hand. When she looked, there were some butterflies in her palm. A few of them had scratched her hand, and were crushed with broken wings. An acrid smell pierced her nose.

Chizuru was gone without a trace. The spirit in front of her eyes was an insect she had tired of seeing. Her vision was dyed with the color of butterfly scales. Their stiff, light

wings passed by her face and hands, swatting them many times. They wreathed about Sae and coursed through the house, while the grass outside sounded as if it was humming in the wind, and then hundreds of those butterflies went through the doorway and headed in the direction of the light outside.

Nothing could be found on the dust-covered wide floor except for Sae's footprints. Apart from those, the shriveled black flower stems remained scattered about the floor. Sae stuffed one of them into her pocket, and put that house behind her.

She came to the thicket and saw that the butterflies were still playing there. On the other side of the thicket, the black hair (submerged in water) was of a considerable length. The deadly silver-colored weapon was still clenched tightly in her swollen fingers. The woman's body had been discarded, whether something existed within the suicide victim woman or not. And Sae had no intention of confirming which it was. Nevertheless, she presumed that a lot of the blood from her chest was saturated with red milk. Wilted flowers can bear nothing; but a decomposed and liquefied body can sustain butterflies, and grasses and soils through various essential nutrients.

The birds' songs had an invariable tranquility. Sae went down the road. Ever since the moment she left the house, the butterflies had attached themselves to Sae and fluttered around her non-stop. She adjusted her pace to them, and aimed for the village from the mountains.

After being out in the painfully bright sun for some time, Sae entered into a small cedar grove. The air grew cold in an instant. She came out of the grove and the sunlight of early summer warmed her face once again. Although she didn't see anyone, she could feel the presence of human life. She saw the rooftops of several houses. There was a heap of cardboard boxes in front of the glass door of an old general store. They were filled with sweet rolls and tomcats. The slope steepened a little, and the paved road widened.

Sae came out onto a main road with a bus stop. She was sweating lightly. A butterfly perched on her arm as if out of thirst for the moisture. A car went passing by ahead. The wind changed. The butterfly flew. A white, lightweight truck came driving through and enveloped the unsettled butterfly. The brush-footed butterfly had disappeared. Given a few moments, pieces of the wings began to fall on the side of the asphalt. Sae picked them up and wrapped them in tissue paper. The bus came before long.

She rode the bus, took a train, and returned home—where she then unrolled the tissue. The remaining butterfly pieces had lost their shape and crumbled to dust, yet the shriveled flower in her pocket had remained intact.

## A Butterfly Fragment

by Kamon Nanami

Jostled by the train, then the ride on a bus and a long spell climbing up the gradual slope... just to take some postcards out of a letterbox, rusty with peeling paint. They were stained, the writing completely smudged by repeated dousings with rain.

Sae blinked and cast her gaze around her.

In the early summer sunbeams, colours drifted, making the scenery entirely flat. The sound of a lark singing high in the sky was more three-dimensional.

The glare made her eyes smart and run, and she closed them for a moment. In between the light melodies of the lark, the song of a bird she couldn't name mingled from time to time, now far, now near. The wind, selecting only the soft grasses, gave her the sound of whispering leaves. The humidity was far from low and the sun-scented air was heavy and sticky to the point of being languid.

Suddenly, a great hum of wings passed close by her ear, thrummmm, and Sae opened her eyes again. There was no trace of the insect which had caused the alarming noise. In its place, a butterfly could be seen.

At last her eyes became used to the sun, and the green of the grass and the green trees, fields, power lines were all revealed. It was tranquil, but it was a desolate rural landscape. The cracked, paved road was giving in to time and grass roots. The fields, displaying soil that had turned a reddish-brown, looked as though they were being abandoned. Silver tape to scare away the birds had lost its sparkle and was left sagging and twisting itself around tilted bamboo poles. Straggly sunflowers drooped their heads. A brown butterfly was coming and going deep in the dense, rampant green growth where spikes of daisy fleabane lorded it over the foul-smelling heartleaf, now past its best. She wondered if there were any pretty flowers in among it all.

Still holding the old postcards, Sae turned back around. There stood a single-storey wooden house. It was in an even worse state of decay than the postcards. The air escaping through gaps in the shrunken boards smelled mouldy. Even though it was midday in early summer, the house was dark and gloomy.

She breathed out and, rather tentatively, opened the ill-fitting door. The light spread across a spacious earthen-floor hall. On the wooden floor up beyond the deep raised entrance sill, Sae's elder sister was sitting, her legs tucked in beside her. She gave a weak smile.

"Ah, you came."

"You never even replied." Sae let out another sigh and held up the postcards to show her.

"Which one? Shall we have a look?"

"Oh, never mind."

It was too much trouble to take off her shoes, so Sae sat down on the edge of the entrance sill. Her sister, not even apologising for failing to do the right thing, continued to smile, white-faced.

“I wrote you so many postcards. But now I’ve seen where they got to, haven’t I?” Sae swung her jean-clad legs.

It was about four years since Chizu had gone off without telling anyone her whereabouts. Sae found out it was an elopement three years ago, in the autumn. Nobody knew the man involved and, because the man was unidentified, the family couldn’t even try to oppose the match. Anyway, Chizu eloped and the only contact was some postcards she sent to her little sister, who she was close to. The address, written faintly in pencil, was completely made up. Her father and mother were perplexed. Nevertheless, at odd times, Chizu sent messages from this spurious address.

Sae had traced her whereabouts only about two months earlier. It wasn’t a big thing, just that there had been a clear postmark. Using this, Sae searched for Chizu’s house without saying anything to her parents. She knew her sister was alone. The man had a wife and child elsewhere and, before long, things got violent and he ran off with the money. Chizu wasn’t even ashamed and had written all about it on a postcard: ‘That person is no more.’ Her sister’s lover had completely disappeared before she even knew his name or his face.

“Don’t you want to come home?”

“It’s too late for that, after all this time.”

Chizu’s slight smile was very serene. It was like that of a complete stranger. Her unbound black hair clung to her skin with sweat, making wave patterns around her nape and collarbone. The white blouse she wore was very low-cut. It showed the hollow between two ample breasts, taut against the fabric. Her skin was glowing with sweat.

Sae put the postcards away and took out a pink handkerchief. Then she gently traced around her own neck, which was also moist with perspiration.

“Ring me, I said, didn’t I? I wrote that on so many postcards. And when there was still no word, I wondered if you’d committed suicide or something.”

“You were worried about me, I see that.”

Chizu moved closer. Scrrrr... there was a dry, rustling sound. When Sae looked, she saw it was dried flower heads. It seemed Chizu had spread them out on the wooden floor and was doing some kind of trivial handiwork.

“I gathered the flowers and I thought I’d make some little scented bags. But it was no good. At this time of year the humidity is so great, they perish before they finish drying, you see.”

“I didn’t know you had such a hobby.”

“I do all sorts... Can you smell something bad? I don’t really know what it is.”

Chizu made as if to stand up. At the same time, a feeble cry escaped from behind the smoke-stained sliding screen door.

“I’m coming, I’m coming.”

Revealing the pallid soles of her feet, Chizu slipped into the dark interior like a shadow. There were footprints left on the floor. Those places alone gleamed darkly, no doubt because everywhere was covered in layers of fine dust.

Sae looked at the scattered flowers. They were unidentifiable, every single flower was shrivelled and turning black. She supposed the absence of any remnants of colour was what her sister had called perishing.

Chizu came in holding a baby bundled up in a traditional *nen-neko* padded carrying jacket.

“My baby...”

Before Sae could ask, the answer to her question had come with a smile. She said nothing, unable to speak.

Her sister spread her lemon-coloured skirt out over the black petals and, coaxing the child with gentle sounds, unfastened the shell buttons of her blouse. Her breasts spilled out without restraint, more dazzlingly white than the fabric. She jiggled the child into position and, opening its tiny mouth as wide as it could, the baby suckled at her teat.

Chizu looked down at the child in rapture.

Sae turned her gaze away, to look out. It was intensely bright outside the front door. She went closer to the doorway as if drawn by it. Once again the strong sunlight stole all colour from the view. She sensed someone standing behind her.

“Chizu, is it OK if I stay tonight?” she asked, without turning around.

“If you like, as it’s you,” her sister replied.

An organic smell crept into Sae’s nose and she wondered if it was maybe the smell of breast milk. Feeling slightly sick, she went outside.

The lark was still singing. The colour of the sky seemed to have grown paler than before, somehow. She moved her attention down, to the far end of the road. Beyond trees interspersed with dead wood was the deep green of the local mountain. If you gently carried on up the road, you would surely reach the mountain. She had no desire to go that far. But the wind from the mountains felt good.

Suddenly all the birdsong broke off. The wind dropped, too. Even the scenery was calm, as though time had stopped. Sae caught sight of movement in the stillness of the view and sought it out. The water accumulated in the gaps between the grassy areas sparkled blackly with reflections. More than ten butterflies with light-brown wings were settled on it. It looked just as if someone had arranged them there nicely. The butterflies were moving their wings slowly, as though breathing.

Chizu quietly came to stand beside her. The child let out a small burp and some unswallowed milk streaked across her still-bare breasts.

Red.

The milk was red. That was how it looked.

A glint of light got in her eye and Sae shut her eyelids tight.

\*\*blank line

“They were *tatehachou*, the four-footed butterfly or nymphalid. They drink water and suck up the nutrients dissolved in it. I heard they’re almost all males.”

Chizu related this as they lay in *futon* bedding set out side by side. The miniature bulb alight on the ceiling served only to make the shadows darker. Sae was troubled by the stains on the sliding screen.

“You know a lot about some odd things, don’t you?”

“Well, those little creatures will sponge off people, too. You know, they’ll collect on sweat or even on pee.”

Chizu’s voice was getting a little misty and melancholy.

The sound of the *futon* being gently pummelled to soften it came to Sae’s ears. She supposed her sister was now cradling the baby she had earlier put to sleep beside her. Saying nothing, Sae closed her eyes. The trick of growing sleepy to a regular sound is not particular to children. A faint female voice reached her half-asleep ears.

Was it a lullaby? It seemed different. It seemed not to be a woman’s voice.

There was something like a hum of wings. With the rise and fall of the sound it was imitating a singing voice.

Something flitted by in the darkness.

A dull-coloured butterfly.

Before there was time to think, the butterflies increased in number, rippling out across the entire floor. Yellow was overwhelmed by light brown as wings pricked up, silently closing. Silently opening. When they closed, the colour paled to white; when they opened, black spots appeared. When she glanced up, they had even settled densely all the way down the narrow string of the light-pull.

Opening her eyes, Sae got up. She couldn’t see any sign of a butterfly anywhere. It was a dream from the verge of sleep. She rubbed her hand across her perspiring forehead. Again the hum of wings passed by. Apparently a fly was about, unconcerned by the darkness. Creeping back into the *futon* again, she noticed the smell of mould.

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The tap water tasted of iron.

Sae had no appetite at all.

After giving her face a perfunctory wash, she went out into the entrance hall and found yesterday’s flowers still scattered there. They had got even more black and shrivelled.

When she pulled open the ill-fitting door, a fresh morning breeze blew in. She automatically took a deep breath.

The interior of the house was, just as her sister had been fussing about, filled with a peculiar sweet-sour odour. She had grown used to it as her sense of smell dulled. But, when she got outside, the sense came back again. The outdoors was also brimming with light. Sae took herself out to the front. She had a feeling she wanted to clean away the darkness and smell from her skin. The sighing of the breeze felt so good.

Clumps of heartleaf were connected by the paths through the rice fields. Butterflies were settling on them. They were the same kind as in the previous night’s illusion. Was it a gathering spot? Or had they just burst into life in large numbers right there?

Sae frowned a little in concentration but still she followed the butterfly shapes. The *tatehachou* were flitting about over the bushes like yesterday. She noticed her sister was at her side. Sae carried on looking ahead and spoke.

“There’s nobody at all about.”

“No, that’s true.”

“Isn’t there anybody?”

“There aren’t really any more houses further up this road. So people rarely pass by.”

The baby was, once again, carried on her sister’s breast. The child seemed quieter than any infant she had ever known. The pattern on the *nen-neko* jacket was garish, it looked as though it had been sewn together from scraps. Not only her sister’s clothes but her complexion, too, had little colour to them by comparison.

Sae tracked the butterflies with her eyes. One, then two, described an arc and dipped down into the further bushes. She thought there must be flowers there but she didn’t know, it could be water they were after. ‘If there are flowers, I’d like to see them,’ Sae thought.

As she began walking, Chizu called after her.

“Where are you going?”

“Over there.”

“I don’t think you should.”

“Why not?”

“There’s only water over there, isn’t there?”

Chizu shook her black hair.

“I think I told you. The butterflies gather on water. It’s only that they want the moisture. They’re after the dissolved nutrients, you see. That’s why they gather on dead bodies, too.”

Sae looked at the bushes once more, then turned her gaze back to her sister’s face. Chizu was staring at the bushes. The look was one Sae didn’t understand at all.

“What dead bodies?” she asked, without thinking.

“The ones you smell in the wind. It’s a disgusting smell.”

Sae made an appeal.

“This child’s father... where did he go?”

“Well...”

Her sister gazed on the child with fondness. Sae tried asking again.

“This child’s father... where did he go?”

“I don’t know. Two years ago or more, he just went and disappeared off suddenly.”

“Well then, this baby...”

“Is my baby.”

Chizu adjusted her hold on the child. Perhaps the lifting up had wakened it, the baby groped for her sister's breast with its tiny fingers.

"There, there. You're hungry, aren't you?"

Undoing the shell buttons, Chizu went back to the house. The voice that followed her was agitated.

"Chizu. Wait. Are you all right?"

"Why do you ask such a thing?"

Chizu went into the dark house. Sae halted by the doorway. Eyes accustomed to the light could not adjust to the darkness. The vestiges of sunlight turned into visions of pale candles for the dead as she lost track of the very ground she stood on. There was a rasping sound - kssh. Her sister appeared to have sat down on the entrance sill.

"It's just that, yesterday, your milk looked like blood."

Sae couldn't shake off the visions of the light. She blinked again and again.

"Silly. It's the same thing," she heard Chizu say. "You see, breast milk is made from the mother's blood."

What had been pale points of light lost their brightness and changed to red. The red, scattered in spots across her vision, was akin to blood even in its glistening.

"So, this child is drinking blood, too. All babies drink blood."

Sae blinked again. At long last her pupils had opened up. It was the same place as yesterday and her sister presented the same figure as yesterday, she was breast-feeding. The voracious child's hand made small movements and then, presently, released the nipple. Mother's milk dripped from its mouth. It still looked like blood, but perhaps it was because her eyes were not fully adjusted.

Sae gradually drew near.

"It looks like a vampire."

Hearing this, Chizu smiled faintly.

Sae saw the origin of the pattern on the *nen-neko* jacket. Butterflies flew from its hem. In the still, silent darkness, wings fluttered, a *tatehachou* circled and passed right by her.

There was something she had been aware of for some time. Sae wasn't looking at the child's face. She hadn't seen when the nappy was changed, either. She formed the question.

"That child... I suppose it's a boy, isn't it?"

"That's right."

Again, Chizu smiled.

"For sure, because butterflies drink blood too, you know."

Her voice had gone a little shaky. Sae drew closer still and stretched a finger out towards the baby.

A piece peeled off.

It flew away.

The child moved its hand and it simply crumbled away.

As though quietly breathing, the pale brown wings opened. And closed.

Waving their slender black antennae, the butterflies gathered round, like the corolla of a flower. Each one of their small, shiny eyes reflected the image of Sae.

That corolla, too, crumbled as they flew off in a flurry. And then, bewildered, most of them escaped off to the bright outdoors. But there were some in the gloom of the interior, as well, restlessly flapping their wings.

Chizu was sitting, saying nothing, one breast still bare. The shape of her curved arm looked like the neck of a water bird, she seemed still to be cradling the infant there. Blood was permeating her white skin.

Sae ran. She went outside.

She crossed the slackened bird-scaring tape and stepped onto the remains of the dry field. As she drew close to the clump of daisy fleabane a sweet, nauseating smell rose up. Clamping her lips firmly shut, Sae parted the centre of the bush.

*Tatehachou* were gathered there. There was water. In a natural hollow strange-coloured water had collected. There were flies. And ants. And there was hair.

Sae rushed back to the house. She was suffocating, her throat was dry. Desperately gasping for breath she again stood before her sister.

On Chizu's breast were two or three *tatehachou* that had come back again. As before, Chizu seemed to be trying to love them, nursing them carefully.

"Chizu. Let's go home," Sae forced a smile. "Let's go back together."

Chizu didn't look at Sae. Once more, Sae smiled.

"I'm sorry. I did nothing but blame you. I only wrote stupid things in my letters."

"That's true enough," Chizu, who had bowed low, mumbled.

Sae went up onto the sill without removing her shoes and took her sister's hand.

"It's all right now. I'm sorry."

The hand was cold.

"Will you forgive me?"

"Yes, let's go home."

A butterfly escaped from Chizu's chest. She slowly raised her head. Her dark eyes smiled out bright and clear.

"Thank you. I... I have been so lonely."

The touch of the hand Sae held fell away and something tickled her palm. When she looked, it was a few butterflies. One of them was damaged, its wing broken, injured by her hand. A sour smell assailed her nose.

As for Chizu, she was no longer there, not even her shadow.

The assemblage before Sae's eyes was just insects, she was sick of the sight of them. Her vision was suffused with the colour of wing scales. So many hard, light wings

beat their way past her face, her hands. They circled around Sae, they cavorted around the inside of the house, making a sound like the wind in the grass, and then hundreds of them went out through the doorway, heading for the light.

On the dust-laden floor boards, only Sae's footprints could be found. But the scattered pattern of black withered flower heads was left as before. Slipping one of them in her pocket, Sae put the house behind her.

When she looked at the bushes, the *tatehachou* were still frolicking there. And beyond them, the water-soaked hair had been long hair. Swollen fingers were still tightly holding a silver weapon.

Sae wondered whether something had taken up residence in the abandoned woman who had committed suicide. She had no desire to know for sure. And yet, there had surely been a good deal of blood, of red milk, that had flowed from the breast. The withered flowers yielded nothing. But the rotting, decomposing body provided the earth, the grasses, the groups of butterflies, with all kinds of valuable nutrition.

The bird song was as tranquil as ever.

Sae went off down the road. Ever since the moment she left the house, one butterfly had been flying around her. It kept pace with her now, as Sae set off from the hill towards the village.

Out of daylight so bright it hurt, she entered a small wood of cedar trees. Only there was the air suddenly chill. When she came out, the rays of the early summer sun scorched her face once more. Even though she didn't see anyone, she knew there were people about. She could see the roofs of several houses. In front of the glass door of an old grocery shop, a pile of cardboard boxes contained sweet bread and a cat. The slope got a little steep and the paved road widened out.

Sae came out onto the road where the bus stop was. She was glistening with a light sweat. The butterfly settled on her arm, as if attracted by the moisture.

A car passed in front of her. The wind changed. The butterfly flew off. A small white truck came whizzing along, swatting and catching up the butterfly as it went. The *tatehachou* was lost.

After a brief pause, a piece of wing fell by the asphalt. Sae picked it up and wrapped it in tissue paper.

Presently the bus came along. She got on the bus, was jostled by the train, returned home and opened up the tissue.

What was left of the fragment was crushed to powder, retaining no shape at all.

Only the withered flower she had put in her pocket was just as before.

## Butterfly Fragments

She rode the train, swaying. She rode the bus. She walked briefly up a gentle slope. She pulled some postcards from the peeling and rusted mailbox. They were filthy, the words bleeding together from countless rainfalls.

Sae blinked and then ran her eyes over her surroundings. The early summer sun drained away all the color and the scene appeared entirely flat. The high-flying skylark's cries were more three-dimensional. Her eyes teared up from the glare and she shut them for a time. The chirps of some bird whose name she didn't know could be heard from both near and far. They mingled sparsely within the silences of the skylark's lilting song. The wind chose to blow only the more delicate grasses and the scraping of leaves could be heard. The temperature was anything but low. The air carried the scent of the sun and a saturated heaviness that could be called 'languid.'

Suddenly, a loud buzz of wings flew right past her ear and Sae opened her eyes. There was no sign of the bug that made the violent, jarring noise. Instead, she saw a butterfly.

Her eyes eventually adjusted to the light and the power lines came into focus against the green of the grass, trees, and fields. It was tranquil, yes, but it was still just a view of the deserted countryside. The paved road was cracked in places and losing the battle against the weeds. By the looks of their reddish-brown soil, the fields had been abandoned. The silver tape meant to keep birds away had lost its sparkle and loosened, tangling with some sagging bamboo poles. The thin sunflowers had wilted and were hanging their heads. Brown butterflies were flying to and fro among the dense green clumps of aging chameleon plants and lordly-looking daisy fleabane bushes. Perhaps there were pretty little flowers hidden among them.

Old postcards in hand, Sae turned. Behind her was a one story house which had been left to rot for far longer than the postcards. The wet air coming from the gaps between the thin boards stank of mold. The house looked all the darker for it being the broad daylight of an early summer afternoon.

She released a breath, hesitated a moment, then opened the badly-hung door. Daylight spread out over a wide dirt floor. Sitting with legs splayed on the floorboards beyond the entrance way step was her older sister, giving her a shadow of a smile. "You came."

"I got no response." Sae let out another breath and held up the postcards.

"Which ones are those? Let me see."

"It doesn't matter." It was too much effort to take off her shoes, so she just sat down on the step. Her sister didn't apologize for her lapse. Her pale face just smiled. Sae said, "I wrote a ton of postcards, you know. When did you stop reading them?" She jiggled her denim-covered legs.

It was coming on four years ago that Chizu had gone missing. It had been autumn three years past when they'd found out she had eloped. Nobody knew the man in question. It went without saying that their family would have objected to a marriage with an unknown man. Despite that, Chizu had run away with him and sent only postcards to her little sister, with whom she'd always been on good terms. The return address written thinly in pencil was little more than gibberish. Mom and Dad had been at a loss. But from time to time her sister had sent her some mail from that nonsensical address.

Sae had uncovered her whereabouts about two months ago. For some reason, that time the postmark had been neat and clear. Sae had said nothing to her parents and set out to find Chizu's house. She knew her sister was alone. The man had had a second family. At some point he turned violent, took all her sister's money, and run off. Chizu had written it all in her postcards, unashamed: *He is no longer here.*

Her sister's lover had up and vanished, and Sae didn't know his face or even his name.

"You don't want to come home?"

"It's too late for that now." Her sister's smile was very quiet. It was the smile of a woman Sae didn't know. Her black hair was unbound and clung to her sweaty nape and collarbone in waves. Her white blouse was low cut. The cleavage of two firm, voluptuous breasts was clearly visible. Her skin was glistening with sweat.

Sae put the postcards away and instead pulled out a peach handkerchief. As she'd thought, her own neck was moist with sweat; she wiped it delicately. "I asked you to call me like a hundred times in my postcards. But you never did, so I thought maybe you'd gone and offed yourself."

"You were worried." Her sister shifted a hand. There was a dry, rustling sound. When Sae glanced down, she saw dried flowers. It looked as if Chizu had spread them out on the floorboards to do some trivial handicraft. "I picked some flowers to make a sweet-smelling sachet. But I can't. This season is so humid that the flowers rot before they dry out."

"I didn't know you enjoyed this sort of thing, sis."

"Lots of things smell bad. You wouldn't understand." She stood up. At that moment, a fragile voice sounded from behind a stained sliding door. "Oh dear," she said and turned to disappear back into the house. Her pale calves melted into shadow. She left footprints, and they were the only places on the floor that gleamed darkly. It must be because the whole floor was covered in layers of thin dust.

Sae eyed the scattered flowers. Every one of the unfamiliar blossoms was curled up and dark. Sae wondered if her sister had called them 'rotten' because they'd lost their color.

Chizu returned holding a baby, wrapped in a mother's *neneko* kimono. "My baby," she said, smiling, before her sister could ask.

Sae said nothing.

Her sister spread out her lemon colored skirt over the blackened petals, then murmured endearments to the babe as she opened the shell buttons of her blouse. Her breast spilled out readily, a white brighter even than the blouse. She gently lifted the child up to it and the tiny mouth opened wide for the nipple. Chizu gazed down at the baby in a trance. Sae averted her eyes to look outside. It was painfully bright beyond the sliding door. She drew closer to the doorway as if entranced. When she reached it, a strong ray of light stole all the color from her sight once again.

She felt the presence of a person standing at her back. Without turning around she asked, “Hey sis, can I stay the night?”

“If you like,” her sister answered. The smell of something organic – milk perhaps – drifted by Sae’s nose. She felt a faint wave of nausea and went outside without glancing back.

The skylark was still singing. The color of the sky seemed somewhat more diluted than earlier. She headed down the road that ran under that sky. Beyond some trees that were heavily threaded with dead branches lay a thick green wood. Sae had no doubt that if she kept leisurely walking up the path she’d find herself up a mountain. She had no desire to go that far, although the breeze coming down from the mountain was refreshing.

Abruptly, the birdsong broke off. The wind died. Everything in view went quiet as if time stopped.

Sae saw movement in that frozen panorama and shifted her gaze to look. In the reflection of some water pooled at the edge of a meadow, something dark gleamed. More than a dozen butterflies with pale brown wings loitered there. They looked almost like someone had arranged them just so. The butterflies were moving their wings slowly, as though breathing.

Her sister slid up beside her. The child let out a little yawn. A drop of milk oozed from the exposed breast.

Red.

The milk was red.

A splinter of light pierced her eyes and Sae shut her eyelids tight.

**\*\*Blank line**

“They’re *nymphalidae* butterflies. They drink water and absorb the nutrients dissolved in it. I heard they’re almost all male,” her sister said as she laid out a futon. The tiny light bulb on the ceiling only served to make the shadows darker. The stains on the sliding door were getting on Sae’s nerves.

“You sure know a lot about weird stuff.”

“Those cute little things take nutrients from humans too you know. From sweat and urine, among other things,” she said, her voice sounding a bit grave.

The sound of something softly thumping the futon became audible. Chizu let the infant sleep together with her and she was probably lulling it to sleep. Sae said nothing and closed her

eyes. Children weren't the only ones who got sleepy when they heard rhythmical sounds. An indistinct female voice reached her dozing ears. *A lullaby?* she thought. But no. It wasn't a woman's voice after all. It was like the hum of wings. It rose and fell like a singing voice might. Something was passing through the darkness.

The homely butterflies.

In the blink of an eye they increased in number, rippling as they alighted along the floor. Their wings, more yellow than brown, flicked upward. Softly they closed. Softly they opened. Closed, the color was pale and sickly. Open, the wings were speckled black. When she looked up, Sae saw that the ceiling light's string was loaded down with butterflies, a hanging cluster of them.

Sae opened her eyes and sat up. There wasn't a single butterfly to be seen. It had been a dream from the edge of sleep. Her brow was damp with sweat when she rubbed it. Another buzz of wings passed by her. There must be flies in the room despite the lack of light. Sae burrowed back under the covers. The smell of mold was getting under her skin.

**\*\*Blank line**

The tap water tasted like iron.

Sae had no appetite to speak of. She washed her face mechanically and left by the entrance way door. The scattered flowers from yesterday were still more withered and blackened. When she slid open the badly-hung door a nice morning breeze came inside. Sae breathed in deeply instinctively. Her sister had been right – the house gave off a peculiar sour-sweet smell. She'd stopped noticing it once her nose had grown accustomed, but it was different when she reacquainted herself with the outside. Light also filled the air.

Sae moved to the front yard. It felt like she was wiping the smell and the dark from her skin. The rustle of the wind felt so good. A clump of chameleon plants clung to a rice field footpath. Butterflies perched there, the same species from last night's hallucination. Did they naturally flock to such plants or did a bunch of them just happen to be gathered there? Sae followed them with her eyes, brows slightly lowered. The insects were fluttering above the same thicket as yesterday.

She realized that her sister was standing beside her. Eyes still facing forward Sae said, "No one comes down the road."

"No."

"Nobody lives there?"

"There aren't any other houses up this road. Visitors are few and far between."

The babe was at her sister's breast again. It was the quietest infant Sae had ever known. The *nenneko* looked to be stitched together from scraps of cloth covered in loud prints. Next to that, Chizu's skin and even her complexion looked leached of color.

Sae kept her eyes on the butterflies. One or two traced an arc in the air and sank down to another bush. She had wondered whether the thickets hid flowers, but perhaps it was water.

*I'd like to see some flowers*, she thought. She started walking toward them but was called to a stop. "Where are you going?"

"Over there."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Water isn't the only thing over there," her sister said, pushing back some black hair. "I told you didn't I? The butterflies don't just gather at the water for moisture. They want the nutrients dissolved in the water. So they'd even leech off of a corpse."

Sae flicked her eyes over to the bushes and then back to her sister's face. Chizu was staring at the plants. Sae could tell nothing from her eyes.

"What corpse?" Sae asked without thinking.

"You can smell it on the wind. It's vile."

Sae asked, "Where is the baby's father?"

"Who knows?" Chizu said. She gazed down at the child lovingly.

Sae tried asking one more time. "Where is the baby's father?"

"I don't know. He's been out of my life for two years now."

"So this baby is..."

"My baby." Chizu hefted the child up higher in her arms. Jostled, the baby opened its eyes and felt around for Chizu's breast with tiny fingers. "Oh, are you hungry little one?" Chizu undid her shell buttons as she turned back to the house. The voice that chased after her was anxious.

"Hey sis. Is everything okay?"

"Now why would you ask that?" Chizu stepped into the dark house.

Sae halted at the doorway. Her eyes were used to the light and wouldn't adjust to the darkness; she was blind even to the position of the ground. Vestiges of the sunlight made visions of blue-white spirits dance within the house. Something let out a jarring *creeeeaaak*. Her sister must have sat down on the floorboards beyond the step.

"Your milk looked like blood yesterday." The spots of light still weren't fading. She blinked furiously.

"Silly. They're one and the same," Sae heard her say. "Milk is made from the mother's blood." The blue-white points of light lost their brilliance and turned red. The red was spattered across her field of vision and resembled blood despite its shimmer, or because of it. "That's why the baby drinks blood. All babies drink blood."

Sae blinked again. Her pupils had finally dilated. Her sister was breastfeeding in the same way and in the same place as yesterday. The gorging baby's hands were twitching. Before

long, it released the nipple. Breast milk trickled from its mouth. It looked red to Sae, but that must be because her eyes still hadn't adjusted. She slid slowly closer. "It's like a vampire," she said. Chizu smiled faintly.

The *nenneko* trembled. A butterfly flew out from the sleeve. The *nymphalidae* fluttered its wings in the calm darkness and arced over to fly out past her.

Something had occurred to Sae. She hadn't yet seen the baby's face. Nor had she seen its diaper being changed. She asked, "Is it a baby boy?"

"Yeah," her sister said, and smiled again. "I'm sure the butterflies drink blood too." Her voice trembled slightly.

Sae approached closer still and stretched her fingers toward the baby.

A piece of flesh peeled away from him. Then it took flight. The baby moved its hands and they crumbled into pieces. Like silent breathing, light brown wings opened. Closed.

The butterflies were assembled together like a bouquet of flowers with thin black antennae waving, and Sae was reflected in each of their little eye-like spots.

The flower bunch collapsed in a flurry. Panicked, most of them flew toward the bright outdoors and escaped. But some stayed in the dim room, busily fluttering their wings. Her sister sat in silence, one breast still exposed. Her arm was curved like the neck of a swan, looking as if it was still cradling a baby. Blood was smeared on her white skin.

Sae ran outside. She jumped the slack bird repelling tape and ran over the remains of dried out fields. When she got near the clusters of daisy fleabane, a sweet smell rose up that made her sick to her stomach. Biting her lip hard, Sae pulled open one of the middle bushes.

There were butterflies gathered together. There was water. Collected in a natural basin in the ground, there was water of a color she couldn't name. There were flies too. And ants. And hair.

Sae raced back to the house. Her breath was labored and her throat was dry. She stood now in front of her sister, struggling for air. Several *nymphalidae* had come back to rest on Chizu's chest. She was unchanged – holding herself like she was embracing them. Like they were precious to her.

"Sis. Let's go home." Sae forced a grin. "We'll go back together."

Her sister didn't look at her. Sae grinned again. "I'm sorry. I only told you off. In my letters. I called you stupid."

"But it's true," Chizu murmured, eyes downcast.

Sae stepped up to her, shoes still on, and took her hand. "It doesn't matter anymore. I'm sorry." Her hand was cold.

Chizu said, "You forgive me?"

"Yeah, let's go home."

The butterflies were leaving her sister's chest. She raised her head slowly. Then she smiled, black eyes clear. "Thank you. I was so lonely."

The feeling of holding a hand faded away and something tickled Sae's palm. When she looked, there were butterflies on it. A couple of them had been damaged by her grip, their wings folded and crushed. A rancid smell penetrated her nose.

Her sister was gone without a trace. In front of her was a mass of insects – she was sick to death of them. Her field of vision was dyed the color of butterfly scales. Countless hard, light wings battered her hands and face as they flew past. They swarmed around Sae and ranged about the house, making a sound like the wind blowing through grass. Hundreds of them left by the front door, heading for the light.

Sae could see only her own footprints on the floorboards. Only the scattered shriveled black flowers remained. She put one in her pocket and left the house.

The *nymphalidae* were playing among the bushes, as ever. The hair that lay beyond them had been long. Swollen fingers had still been gripping a silver weapon. Sae wondered if something had been living inside the abandoned woman who had committed suicide. She felt no urge to check. However, her chest had probably brimmed over with an abundance of blood – 'red milk.' Nothing is born from a withered flower. But they decompose and dissolve, giving necessary nourishment to soil, grass, and even butterflies.

The birdsong was tranquil, unchanged.

Sae started down the road. When she left the house, a single butterfly continued to flutter about her. She kept pace with it as she went down the mountain to the village. She left the painfully bright sunshine and entered a small copse of cedar trees. Only here was the air chilly. When she walked out of it, the early summer sun toasted her face once again.

She saw no one, but signs of human habitation were plainly visible. There were more than a few roofs. Cardboard boxes were stacked in front of the glass door of an old general store, holding pastries and a cat. The path got a bit steeper and widened into a paved road.

Sae came out onto the street with the bus stop. She was sweating lightly. The butterfly landed on her arm as if longing for that moisture. A car passed her. The wind changed. The butterfly flew off. A white pickup raced by and the wind-buffeted butterfly was sucked in. The *nymphalidae* vanished. After an empty moment, wing fragments fell to the side of the asphalt. Sae picked them up and wrapped them in a tissue.

Finally, the bus came. She rode it. She rode the train, swaying. She got home and spread open the tissue. The fragments had turned into powder and lost their shape entirely. Only the shriveled flower in her pocket remained the same.

## *Butterfly Dust*

by Kamon Nanami

She was rocked by the train carriage then rode the bus, briefly climbing a gentle hill before taking a letter from the rusted mail box covered in peeling paint. The writing was completely blurred and dirtied by countless rainstorms.

Sae blinked her eyes then took in her surroundings.

The colors leapt in the early summer sunlight. A skylark's voice singing high above her seemed more tangible than the largely flat landscape.

The dazzling light brought tears to her eyes and, for a few moments, she closed her eyelids. Between the pauses in the skylark's nimble song she could hear, far off and then closer by, the warble of an unknown bird, their songs thinly bleeding together. The wind, choosing only to blow through the tender grass, made a rustling sound.

The humidity was surely very high. The air smelled of sunshine and was so viscously heavy as to be almost melancholy.

Suddenly, *swoosh*, a large wing beat passed closely by Sae's ear and she opened her eyes.

There was no sign of any insect that could have made such a violent noise. Instead, she saw the silhouette of a butterfly.

As her eyes gradually adjusted to the light she saw the connected outline of grass, trees, fields and telephone wires. It was a peaceful but deserted countryside landscape.

The cracked paved road was losing a battle against time and the roots of grasses. The field exposed a soil turned reddish brown and seemed to be abandoned. Silver tape used to scare away birds had lost its sparkle and was slackly twisted around slanting bamboo poles.

The starving sunflowers hung their heads. In front of chameleon plants long past their prime and the proud daisies, tawny butterflies were flying to and fro around the centre of a dense, luxurious thicket.

Perhaps it had a beautiful flower inside?

Still holding the old letter in her hand, Sae turned to look behind her. There stood a one-story wooden house, even more rotten than the letter.

Rancid air leaked from the cracks in the barren slope. It was broad daylight in early summer so the house was black and dark.

Exhaling then hesitating slightly, she opened the crooked door.

Light spread out onto the wide dirt floor.

Her older sister was sitting flopped down on the wooden floor across from the front entrance step, thinly smiling.

"So, you came?"

"I didn't get any reply."

Once again, Sae let out a breath and held out the letter to show her sister.

"Well, do you want to look?"

"No, that's OK."

It was too much trouble to take off her shoes before entering the house so Sae just sat down on the front step. Her older sister did not apologize for her ingratitude but just sat with a smile on her white face.

"I wrote you so many letters! How much of this did you even read?"

Sae shook the leg of her jeans.

Chizu had gone missing around four years earlier. It was not known until the autumn of three years ago that she had run away.

No one knew the identity of the man she was with so there was nothing the family could do. However, after running away she did send letters, but only to her close younger sister.

The false addresses written in fine pencil were essentially random. Her father and mother were at a complete loss. Despite her parents' distress at not knowing where their daughter was, she frequently sent news from these false addresses.

They had only worked out where she was staying two months previously and, then, only because the post mark had been left so clearly on the letter.

Soon after, Sae went looking for Chizu's house without telling her parents. She knew that Chizu would be alone there. The man already had another wife and child and, before long, he had turned violent and run away with their money.

Chizu had frankly written everything in her letters.

*--- He is no longer here.*

Before anyone had known his face or even his name, her older sister's lover had disappeared.

"Aren't you going to come back?"

"No, it's too late now."

Her older sister's laughter was very quiet. To Sae, she almost looked like a stranger. Her untied hair clung like a wave around her sweaty face and collarbone. The low neckline of her white blouse revealed the gap between two full breasts.

Her skin shone with perspiration.

Sae put away the letter and, in its place, took out a peach-colored handkerchief. She then softly patted her own neck which was also moist with sweat.

"I asked you to call, didn't I? I wrote asking you so many times in my letters. But nothing ever came so I was afraid you'd killed yourself."

"You really worried about me, didn't you?"

Her older sister shifted her fingertips making a dry sound.

When Sae looked down she realized the sound had been made by withered flower stalks.

It looked like Chizu had spread them out on the wooden floor and had been doing some sort of trivial handiwork.

"I tried to collect them to make a scented sachet. But it isn't working. This season is too damp so they rot before I can dry them."

"So my big sister is into that kind of thing?"

"There are all kinds of odors in here. But maybe you can't tell."

Her older sister made a move as if to stand up. At the same time, a tiny voice escaped from the shade of the mottled sliding screen door.

"There, there."

The back of a pale leg was seen before disappearing back into the shadows.

Footprints could be seen on the floor. They must have been glistening black because the entire floor was covered in a thin layer of dust.

Sae looked at the scattered stalks. The unknown flowers were all blackly shriveled up.

Her sister would probably say that these colorless flowers were just rotten.

Chizu came in holding an infant wrapped in a *nenneko* nursery coat.

"This is my baby", Chizu replied with a smile before Sae could even ask.

Sae said nothing and remained silent.

Her older sister spread her lemon-colored skirt over the black flowers, spoke soothing words to her child then unfastened the mother-of-pearl buttons of her blouse.

Her breasts spilled easily out of the blouse, more radiant than the white of the fabric.

As she raised the child towards her breasts, the baby's small mouth opened as far as it could and consumed one nipple.

Enchanted, Chizu gazed down at the baby. Sae turned to look outside. There was nothing but brightness beyond the sliding door. As she moved towards the doorway as if captivated, the strong beam of light once again stole all color from her field of vision.

She sensed someone standing behind her.

"Sister, can I stay here today?", Sae asked without turning around.

"If you like.", came the reply.

An organic reek, possibly the smell of milk, tickled her nostrils.

Sae felt faintly nauseous and headed outside.

The skylark was still singing.

The color of the sky seemed to have grown a shade paler than before.

Under such a sky, she continued further down the road.

In front of trees woven with dead branches was a densely edged border between the farming landscape and the mountain foothills. If she continued up the gentle climb there is no doubt she could have reached the top.

She had no desire to go that far but, nevertheless, the wind from the mountain felt good.

Suddenly, all the bird song came to a stop. The wind also vanished. Even the landscape fell so quiet it was as if time had stopped.

Sae turned her gaze towards something that was still shifting in this otherwise still scene.

Water that had secretly collected in the meadow was glittering blackly with reflections. Over ten butterflies with light brown wings had assembled there.

It was almost as if someone had arranged them that way. The butterflies moved their wings as if slowly breathing.

Chizu had quietly stood beside her. The child let out a small burp.

There was a speck of milk on the exposed breast that the baby had missed.

It was red. The milk looked red.

Splintered light filled Sae's eyes and she closed them tightly.

\*\*blank line

"They're nymphalids. They drink water and absorb the nutrition dissolved in it. I heard that they're mostly male, you know.", her older sister told Sae as she arranged the futon.

The miniature light bulb lit on the ceiling blackened the shadows excessively. The stains on the sliding door made her uncomfortable.

"You know a lot about some strange things."

"That's because those little ones swarm around humans. They swarm around sweat and urine too."

Her older sister's voice was slightly moist.

Sae could hear the sound of a futon being gently beaten. Perhaps her older sister was comforting the baby she had placed by her side.

Sae was silent and closed her eyes. Becoming sleepy after hearing a rhythmic sound was not just the privilege of small children, after all.

A faint female voice reached her half-asleep ears.

A lullaby, perhaps?

But there was something wrong. It was not like a female voice at all.

It was like a hum from beating wings, the rise and fall of the sound resembling a singing voice.

Something traveled through the darkness.

A plain butterfly.

Before she knew it, there were more and more butterflies making an even greater din. They landed all over the floor, then pricked up their light brown wings bright with yellow coloring and quietly closed them. Then quietly opened them.

As they closed their wings their color grew light and pale, and as they opened them black spots rose to the surface.

When Sae looked up, she saw that they were also tightly clustered around the thin cord hanging from the electric light.

Sae opened her eyes and lifted her body. The butterflies were nowhere to be seen.

It had been a dream glimpsed at the edge of sleep.

She wiped the perspiration from her face. The hum of a wingbeat passed by her again.

Despite the darkness, there seemed to be some kind of flying insect in the room.

As she curled herself into the centre of the futon once more, she noticed the moldy stench.

\*\*blank line

The water from the faucet tasted like iron.

Sae had absolutely no appetite.

After carelessly washing her face, she went out to the entrance where yesterday's flowers, still left spread on the floor, were blackly curled up more than ever.

As she pulled opened the crooked door, a pleasant morning breeze entered the house.

Unconsciously, she took a large, deep breath.

The inside of the house was full of that characteristic bitter-sweet stench that had been bothering her older sister. Once you had gotten used to it your senses became dull to the odor. But then as soon as you had experienced the outside again, the odor would return.

Sae made her way into the light outside. She felt as though it was wiping off the odor and darkness clinging to her skin. She enjoyed the breath of the wind.

There was a cluster of chameleon plants growing on the path between the rice paddies where some butterflies had settled. They were the same type she had seen in her dream from the night before. Maybe it was their natural habitat, or perhaps they just spontaneously gathered there in large numbers.

Sae gently furrowed her brow but her eyes still followed the butterflies. The nymphalids were fluttering about above the same thicket as yesterday.

She became aware of her older sister at her side. Still facing forwards, Sae said, "There's no one coming."

"It seems that way."

"Is there anyone else around here?"

"There are no more houses down this road so people rarely pass by here."

The baby was still at her sister's breast. The child was more mild than any Sae had ever known. The nursery coat had a gaudy design and seemed to be stitched together from different scraps of cloth. By comparison, her sister's clothes and face seemed to have little color.

Sae followed one butterfly in particular. Drawing one, then two arcs in the air, it sank into the far thicket.

There might be flowers there, she thought, but it could just as easily just be water. If there were flowers there Sae decided that she wanted to see them.

As she started to walk forwards, she was called to a halt.

"Where are you going?"

"Over there."

"I wouldn't if I was you."

"Why not?"

"Because water isn't the only thing you'll find there, if you do."

Her older sister shook her black hair.

"I'm sure I told you. Butterflies don't just gather around water because they want the moisture. Those little ones want the nutrition dissolved in the water. That's to say, they also swarm around dead bodies."

Sae looked at the thicket one more time and then turned back to look at her sister's face. Chizu was staring at the thicket too but Sae could not tell anything from her expression.

"What kind of dead bodies?", she asked without thinking.

"You can smell it on the wind. It's disgusting."

"Where has this baby's father gone?", Sae asked her sister.

"Who knows."

Her sister gazed lovingly at her child. Sae tried to ask one more time.

"This baby's father... where did he go?"

"I don't know. I haven't heard from him since he left two years ago."

"So, what about the baby?"

"This is *my* baby."

Chizu adjusted how she held the child. The baby was woken by being lifted and groped at her breasts with its small fingers.

"There, there. You're hungry, aren't you?"

Chizu returned to the house while loosening her mother-of-pearl buttons. "Chizu! Hey, is everything OK?", Sae called after her in a strained voice.

"Why do you say that?"

Her sister went into the darkened house. Sae stopped at the doorway.

Her eyes were still accustomed to the light and could not adjust to the darkness. While still blinded and unable to even make out the floor, the traces of natural light transformed themselves into the vision of a pale, disembodied human soul.

She heard a creaking sound.

Her sister seemed to be sitting in the entrance.

"Because yesterday your milk looked like blood."

The illusion caused by the sudden change in light would not fade. Sae blinked over and over.

"You're so silly. They're the same thing.", Sae heard a voice say.

"Milk is made from the mother's blood."

The pale points of light lost their brightness and turned red. The red scattered here and there around her field of vision glittered like blood.

"So this child drinks blood, too. All babies drink blood."

Sae blinked again. At last, her pupils had opened fully.

In the identical place and in the identical pose as the day before, her older sister was feeding her child. The greedily drinking baby's hand shifted slightly. Finally, it let go of the nipple.

The mother's milk trickled from the baby's mouth. The reason it had looked red must have been because her eyes had not adjusted to the light.

Sae came closer.

"It's like a vampire."

Her older sister heard this and laughed quietly.

Her nursery coat seemed to be trembling. A butterfly flew out from the hem.

Flapping its wings in the quiet darkness, the nymphalid flew in an arc and passed beside Sae.

Sae realised something. She hadn't yet seen the baby's face, nor had she seen Chizu change its diapers.

"This child, it's a boy, right?", Sae asked.

"That's right", Chizu answered, laughing again.

"So, butterflies must drink blood too, right?"

Her voice trembled faintly. Sae came even closer and extended a finger towards the baby.

Small pieces flaked off the child, then fluttered down.

The infant moved its hand and it just crumbled away.

As though quietly breathing, the butterflies opened their thin brown wings. Then closed them.

Gathered together like a bunch of flowers, the butterflies waved their fine black antenna and reflected Sae's image in each of their small, glistening eyes.

This formation also crumbled and they fluttered lightly down.

As though bewildered, almost all of them flew away towards the brightness outside. But there was still something hurriedly flapping its wings in the darkness of the room.

With one breast still dewy, her older sister was sitting in silence. The shape of her arm, crooked like the neck of a waterfowl, still seemed to be holding her baby.

Blood oozed over white skin.

Sae walked outside.

She crossed over the slack bird-deterrent tape and stepped onto the dried remains of the field. As she approached the clump of daisies, there rose up a sickeningly sweet smell.

She bit her lip hard and opened the back of the thicket.

Nymphalids swarmed there. There was water. In the centre of this naturally formed hollow had collected a strange colored water. There were also flies. Ants. Hair.

Sae ran back to the house.

She was breathing hard and her throat was dry. Her breathing would not calm down, even standing before her sister.

Two or three nymphalids had returned to Chizu's breast. Just as before, she lovingly cradled them in her arm.

"Sister. Let's go home.", said Sae, forcing a smile.

"We can go back together."

Her sister did not look up. Sae smiled again.

"I'm sorry, I did nothing but scold you. And I always called you a stupid fool in my letters."

"But it's true, I am a fool", her older sister muttered, downcast. Sae stepped up inside the entrance still wearing her shoes and took her sister's hand.

"That's enough. I'm sorry. "

The hand was cold.

"Can you forgive me?", her older sister said.

"Yes, let's go."

The butterflies flew away from Chizu's breast. She slowly raised her face.

Her black pupils smiled brightly.

"Thank you. I was so lonely."

Sae no longer felt like she was holding a hand and something tickled her palm. She looked down and saw several butterflies, some with their wings broken and crushed by her hand.

She smelt a sour odor.

Her sister was already nowhere to be seen.

Right in front of her eyes was that all too familiar insect silhouette.

Her field of vision was stained the color of insectile scales. Their stiff, light wings struck her face over and over as they flew past.

Swirling around Sae, hundreds of butterflies flew around the house, making a sound like wind singing in the grass, heading outside through the doorway and then flying into the light.

On the dusty wooden floor Sae could find only her own footprints. Nothing else remained but the blackly wilted flower stalks left just as they had been scattered before.

She slipped one into her pocket, and put the house behind her.

When she looked at the thicket the butterflies were playing there again.

On the far side she saw long water-soaked hair.

Swollen fingers still tightly gripping a silver weapon.

There may have been something living inside the body of that abandoned girl who had killed herself but Sae had no desire to find out what. So much blood, like red milk, must have flowed from her breast. Life would not spring from dead flowers. But the girl's decayed and dissolving body was precious in many ways and nourished the butterflies, the grasses, and the earth.

The birdsong was unchanging and peaceful.

Sae walked down the road.

One butterfly had been following her constantly since she had left the house. Matching its pace, Sae walked down from the mountain towards the village.

She escaped from the painfully bright light into a small copse of Japanese cedar. Its air suddenly grew cold. As she left the copse, her face was once more scorched by the early summer sunshine.

Sae could not see anyone but she still knew that there was someone nearby. She could see many rooftops.

She could see cardboard boxes stood outside the ancient general store's glass doors filled with sweet breads and cats.

The slope grew a little steeper and the paved road widened.

Sae came out onto a road with a bus stop.

She was gently sweating. As though yearning for the moisture, the butterfly alighted on her arm.

A car passed ahead. The wind changed, and the butterfly rose into the air.

A small white truck then ran around the corner, completely consuming the butterfly.

Its shape was obliterated.

A moment passed, then wing fragments drifted down to the edge of the asphalt.

Sae picked them up and put them inside a piece of tissue paper.

The bus finally came.

She rode the bus and was then rocked by the train carriage. When she returned home she opened the tissue.

The remaining fragments had crumbled to dust, failing to retain any of their original form.

As for the withered flowers she had slipped into her pocket, however, she left them just where they were.

## BUTTERFLY PIECES

By Kamon Nanami

First the train, then a bus, and then a gentle climb up the hill. The letterbox there was rusty and peeling, and she found her postcard inside. It had seen many a rainy day, and the ink had run in places.

Sae blinked, and took in the world around her.

The early summer sun brought out the colour in everything, but the scenery wasn't much to look at. More noticeable were the cries of the larks high above.

She shut her eyes to the blinding light. She heard other birds, ones she didn't know, in amongst the larks. Some close, some far away. The wind rustled through the soft grass, and everything else baked lazily in the sun. It was a hot and sticky one out there.

Something roared past her, right by her ear, and Sae caught the beating of wings just before she opened her eyes.

She looked around. Nothing. Certainly no insect big and nasty enough to have made that kind of noise. Only butterflies.

At last her eyes had adjusted to the light. She took in the countryside - the trees, the fields, the power lines, everything at peace. But it was a lonely sight. Weeds grew through cracks in the road. The soil had darkened with neglect. A strip of tape that had once served to repel birds had lost its sheen and was now hanging loose, tangled up in some bamboo at the ends.

She saw brown butterflies flitting back and forth through the trees. Down in the undergrowth, daisies lorded over drooping sunflowers and wilted chameleons. The kinds of flowers that had chosen a place like this to grow.

Sae turned to face the old one storey house. The postcard in her hand was in better shape. The smell of mold wafted out from between the shrunken panelling. And looking in from the midday sun just made the house seem all the darker within.

She took a deep breath, and after a moment's pause, opened the door. It didn't open easily.

The light hit the dirt of the entrance hall. Beyond that, up in the panelled room, someone sat slumped. Smiling at her.

It was her sister.

"Hey, look who's here."

"You never replied," said Sae. She sighed, and held up her postcard.

"Oh? Show me, show me."

"Forget it."

Sae didn't bother taking off her shoes, and sat right on the step. Her sister didn't take offence, simply laughed.

"I sent you a lot of postcards, you know. How many did you actually read?" Sae said, shifting in her jeans.

It had been four years since Chizu had gone missing. By the next autumn, they'd realised she had run away. They would've been against it, but they never even knew who the man was. And still she'd ran off with him, sending only a postcard to her dear little sister.

The return address was always unreadable, a mess. Their parents didn't know what to do with her. And still, every now and then, there would be something from Chizu in the mail.

They'd finally worked out where the mess was only two months prior. It ended up being as easy as reading the postmark left on the card.

Sae had gone looking for her sister without telling their parents. She knew Chizu was living alone now. The guy had gotten violent, taken some money and ran off back to his wife and kid.

And Chizu had written all of this to her sister without a hint of shame.

*I'm afraid he no longer resides here.*

Her sister had loved and lost, and Sae had never even gotten his name or seen his face.

"So you're not coming home?" she asked.

"Now? After all that's happened," Chizu said, with just the faintest smile on her face.

Sae had never seen that smile before. She almost didn't recognise her sister.

Chizu's long black hair fell down to her collar, where it stuck here and there. Her chest bulged in her white blouse, which was low cut to show cleavage. The sweat made her skin sparkle.

Sae put the postcard away and took out a pink handkerchief instead. She dabbed at the sweat about her own neck.

"I wrote you to call me. Again and again. When you didn't reply, I seriously thought you'd gone and killed yourself."

"Aww, you were worried about me," said Chizu.

There came a rustling from her hands and Sae saw that she was holding the wilted head of a flower. It seemed that her sister had been keeping herself busy in here.

"I picked a bunch of flowers to make potpourri," Chizu said. "There's no point, though. It's already too humid, and these'll rot before they dry."

"I didn't know you were into that kind of thing," said Sae.

"I don't know if you can tell, but it kind of smells around here."

Her sister stood, as if to illustrate what she had meant. At the same time, a tiny voice could be heard from the darkness beyond the sliding door.

"Oh dear."

Chizu turned and headed into the shadows. The soles of her feet were pale white.

She left footprints as she went, revealing the dust that coated the floor.

Sae looked around at the scattered flowers, none of which she could name. They had darkened and curled at the tips, which must have been what her sister had meant by rotting.

Chizu came back cradling a small child in a blanket.

Before Sae could even ask, the explanation came back with a smile.

"My baby," Chizu said.

Sae sat quietly, saying nothing.

Her sister spread a lemon yellow skirt over the blackened flower petals.

"It's all right, it's all right," she reassured the baby, as she undid a pearl white button on her blouse.

Without missing a beat, she slipped out a single breast, whiter than cotton. She raised the child to her chest, it opened its tiny lips, and began sucking away.

Chizu stared adoringly at the child, and Sae looked away. It was so bright outside. She was drawn towards the door, and as she approached, the rays of the sun once more took all the colour from her world.

She felt the presence of someone behind her.

"Chizu," she said, not turning, "can I stay over tonight?"

"If you don't mind staying," said her sister.

Sae felt like vomiting. It was the smell of milk that did it, or perhaps just the smell of something alive in her sinuses. She headed outside.

The larks were still singing their song. Beneath the darkening sky, the road continued on into a woodland of withered trees. From then on, it was a leisurely walk to the foot of the mountain.

She had no intention of going that far. But the breeze coming down felt nice on her skin.

The cry of a bird brought everything to a halt. Even the wind seemed to stop. Everything was still, as if time had ceased to exist.

Sae scanned the still image for signs of life.

There were puddles where the grass grew, the sunlight blinking off their surfaces. Ten or so butterflies rested there, their wings a light brown.

It was a scene so perfect that someone must have composed it. The butterflies beat their wings slowly, as if coming to life.

Her sister came up beside her. The baby in her arms let out a little burp, and Sae watched some unwanted milk squirt from Chizu's still-exposed breast.

Red.

She could've sworn the milk was red.

A shard of sunlight entered her vision, and Sae shut her eyes tight.

\*

"Those were brush-foots. They drink water, and soak up all the dissolved nutrients from it. I heard that most of them are males," Chizu said, lining up the futons for the night.

The single bulb hanging from the ceiling put everything in stark shadow. Sae noticed the stains on the sliding doors.

"You know a lot of weird stuff," she said.

"Did you know the little guys feed off people, too? Sweat, pee, they don't mind," mumbled Chizu.

There was a gentle prodding sound coming from the futon. Maybe her sister was rocking the baby to sleep.

Sae said nothing and closed her eyes. It wasn't just babies that could be coaxed into sleep, given the right sounds.

As she drifted off, the next sound she heard was a woman's voice, fluttering.

A lullabye?

She was wrong. It wasn't a woman's voice at all.

It was the sound of wings. The rising and falling pitch had sounded like singing.

Something flew by her in the dark.

Just a bunch of butterflies.

Before she knew it, they had flooded into the room, and the floor was carpeted in brown wings tinged with yellow, standing on end.

Quietly, they spread. Quietly, they folded.

When folded, the wings were a pale white, when spread, they were spotted with black.

A glance upward revealed that the butterflies had even perched themselves on the cord hanging down from the lightbulb, hanging with it in bunches.

Sae opened her eyes, waking herself up. The butterflies were nowhere to be seen.

A dream on the edge of waking.

She dabbed at the sweat on her forehead, and heard the sound of wings going by again. Even though it was dark, she could tell there had been flies buzzing about.

As Sae got back under the covers, she couldn't help but smell the mould in the futon.

\*

The water out of the tap tasted like metal. Sae lost her appetite.

She splashed some water on her face and headed for the front door. The flowers from yesterday still coated the floor, black and twisted.

After she'd forced the door open again, the cool morning breeze greeted her.

Reflexively, she breathed deep and took it in.

Her sister had been right when she had complained that the house smelt. It was a particular sweet and sour stink that had gotten in everything. It was so strong that to get used to it, you had to forget the smell of everything else. But once you got out of the house, it all came back, with the bright light of day.

As Sae set foot outside the door, it was like washing the smell and the dark out of her skin. The breeze felt so nice.

There were clumps of chameleon flowers growing by the path through the fields. Butterflies came to rest on them. The same kinds from Sae's dream last night. She couldn't tell if the flowers were being grown here, or if they had all just popped up by themselves.

Sae frowned slightly but still went after the butterflies. The brushfoots were circling around the same bush, where they had been yesterday.

Before she knew it, her sister had come up beside her. Sae spoke without turning.

"Nobody here."

"So it seems," said Chizu.

"Isn't there anyone around?"

"The houses stop a little further down the road. So nobody really comes here."

The child was at her breast again. Quieter than any child Sae had ever seen. The blanket it was wrapped in really stood out. It looked to have been stitched together from scraps of different clothes. Compared to that, her sister looked almost totally colorless.

Sae followed the butterflies with her eyes. They traced a loop or two in the air, before disappearing back into the bush.

She thought there'd been flowers over there, but it might've just been water. It was worth a look.

No sooner had she taken a step towards them, a voice called her to stop.

"Where are you going?" asked Chizu.

"Over there," said Sae.

"You probably shouldn't."

"Why not?"

"There's things other than just water down there."

Chizu shook out her long, black hair.

"Did I not tell you? When butterflies gather around water, it's not just the moisture they're after. It's the nutrients. They get those from wherever they can. They'd get them off a dead body, if they had to," she said.

Sae looked again at the bush, and then back at her sister.

Chizu still had her eyes fixed on the bush. Sae couldn't tell from her face what she was thinking.

"Whose dead body?" Sae found herself asking.

"The smell carries on the wind. Not very pleasant," Chizu said.

"The baby's father, where did he go?" asked Sae.

"Hmm," said Chizu, and looked down lovingly at the child. Sae tried her luck again.

"The baby's father. Where did he go?"

"No idea. Haven't seen him since he took off, two years ago."

"So this child ..."

"This child is mine."

Chizu cradled the baby in her arms once more, and it woke. With tiny fingers it started padding away at Chizu's chest.

"It's OK, honey. I know you're hungry."

With her pearl button still hanging open, Chizu turned back for the house. Sae's voice followed weakly, almost breaking.

"Chizu? Are you ... are you OK?"

"Now why would you go and ask that."

Chizu entered the gloom of the house once more. Sae stopped at the door and went no further. She'd been outside too long and her eyes weren't used to the dark yet. She couldn't even tell where the floor was, and the sun was still in her eyes as an eerie wash of pale stars.

There was a creak, and it seemed Chizu sat down on the step in the entrance.

"It's just that yesterday," said Sae, "your milk looked like blood."

The spots of light still wouldn't go, and she tried to blink them away.

"Silly girl. They're the same thing," Sae heard her sister say. "Where do you think the milk comes from? A mother's blood, her sweat and tears."

The light started to dull, and took on a reddish hue. It was only because the spots of light had spattered her vision earlier, sparkling red under her eyelids, that she thought she had seen blood.

"So you see, this child is drinking blood. All children do."

Sae kept blinking, and at last her pupils widened to let the light in.

Yesterday, she had seen exactly the same sight. Her sister, standing there, breastfeeding.

The hungry child's hand finally moved, and surrendered control of the breast. Milk dripped from its mouth.

It wasn't red after all, her eyes just hadn't been used to the light. She'd been seeing things.

Slowly, Sae moved a little closer.

"Just like a little vampire," she said, and her sister smiled faintly.

The patchwork blanket was shuddering, unravelling before her eyes. From under it, out flew a butterfly.

The little brushfoot beat its wings, tracing an arc past Sae and into the quiet dark.

There was something she had been wondering for a while.

She had never seen the child's face. Never seen its diaper being changed.

"Is it a boy?" she asked.

"That's right," said Chizu. She laughed once more. "I bet butterflies drink blood, too."

Her voice was a little shaky. Sae came even closer.

She reached out to touch the baby.

A piece broke off.

And flew away.

The child's hand moved, and then crumbled.

The mass of light-brown wings opened. And shut. Like a calm, even breath.

The butterflies flocked together, packed like a bouquet, probing with their antennae. In their bright little eyes, Sae was reflected again and again.

As if panicked, the bouquet scattered and flew away.

After a moment's confusion, most escaped for the bright light outside. But there was still something in the room still busily flapping its wings.

Chizu was still sitting there quietly, a single breast still exposed. She had one arm bent like the neck of a swan, as if still cradling the baby. There was blood there, smeared across her pale skin.

Sae ran outside.

She crossed the tape that was supposed to keep the birds out, and entered what was left of the field. The closer she got to where the daisies grew, the stronger that sickly sweet smell would get.

She bit down hard on her lip, and made her way into the bushes.

There were brushfoots everywhere, and there was water too. It had a color she could not name, collected at the bottom of a little pit.

There were flies, too. And ants.

And hair.

Sae ran back to the house.

It was hard to breathe now, and she was thirsty. She gasped for air, right in front of Chizu.

A few butterflies had come back to rest on her sister's chest. And just as before, her arm was positioned as if to dearly cradle them.

"Chizu? Let's go home," Sae said.

She forced herself to smile.

"Come on, let's go back," she urged, "you and me."

Her sister didn't look at her. Sae tried smiling once again.

"I'm sorry. All I did was lecture you. And I'm sorry I called you those things in the postcard."

"Honestly," whispered Chizu in a tired voice.

Sae stepped inside, shoes on, and took her sister's hand.

"Let's stop this. I'm sorry," she said.

It was a cold hand.

"You'll forgive me?" said Chizu.

"Yeah. Let's go home."

The butterflies began to fly off her. Chizu looked up slowly.

There was a smile in those dark eyes, clear as day.

"Thank you," she said. "I've been kind of lonely."

Sae no longer felt the grip of her sister's hand, instead, only a light tickle on her palm.

Butterflies.

She felt something cut, and looked down at her hand. There was a wing there, crushed and broken.

The sweet and sour smell came at once.

Her sister was no longer there.

The mass before her was nothing but the same old bugs she no longer wanted to see.

Her vision was flooded with tiny little scales as they flew by, their stiff, light wings brushing against her face, her hands, every part of her.

First they stuck close, then they explored the room, and finally, they were out the door in one great gust, out into the light.

The footprints on the dusty floorboards belonged only to Sae. But the wilted flower stems remained scattered about, just as they had been.

Sae pocketed one, and headed out the door.

The brushfoots were still dancing about by the bush.

And behind it, there was hair. Long, and drenched.

Swollen fingers still gripped something tight. Silver. A weapon.

The woman there had been cast away, and had committed suicide. She looked as if she might've been pregnant. Sae didn't feel the urge to check. But surely from that bloody chest, red milk had flown.

Nothing would ever flower from a wilted plant. But the decomposing body had vital nutrients to nurse the soil, the grass. The butterflies.

Sae walked back down the road. The birdsong was as gentle as she'd remembered it.

A single butterfly had followed her all the way from the house. But she kept her pace, heading from the mountain back to the village.

The sun was so bright it hurt to see, so Sae found a small grove of cedar trees to hide in. The air grew cool, suddenly. When she came out again, it wasn't long before the summer sun was warming her face again.

She didn't see anyone, but she did feel signs of life. There were rooftops all around. Someone had stacked boxes outside a drugstore, by the sliding door. There were snacks in some of them, and in one of them, a cat.

As the hill got steeper, the pavement got wider. Sae headed down the road for the bus stop.

She'd worked up a light sweat. A butterfly came to rest on her arm, perhaps hungrily eyeing the moisture there.

It took off again, with the wind from a passing car.

A little white truck was coming in the opposite direction, and the brushfoot was swept up into its path.

Then it was nowhere to be seen.

After a little while, Sae found a piece of wing in a crack in the asphalt. She picked it up, and wrapped it in some tissue paper.

At last, the bus came.

First the bus, then the train, and at last she was home. She reached into her pocket.

There was a tissue. She opened it. The little piece of butterfly wing hadn't kept its shape. It was nothing but dust now.

But the wilted flower was just as it had always been.

## Butterfly Fragments

By Kamon Nanami

After a bumpy train ride, a bus ride, and a brief climb up a gentle hill, Sae came across a mailbox whose coat of paint was peeling and clinging on for dear life. She reached in and pulled out a letter from the mailbox. The letter was completely soaked from the rain and the words were smudged and blurred.

Sae peered at the letter for a bit and looked around her. The landscape was completely flat, its colors radiant in the early summer sunlight. A skylark sang as it flew high in the sky above; its voice made the scene seem three-dimensional.

Sae's eyes started to water from the brightness so she closed them for a bit. She could hear another bird singing. She didn't know what kind of bird it was, but here and there, its melody filled the rhythmic pauses of the skylark's song; it was a faraway sound that drew closer as she listened. As the wind blew over the soft grass, she heard a sound not unlike that of rustling leaves.

The weather was rather humid. The air, saturated with the sun's aura, was heavy, sticky, and languid.

Suddenly, Sae heard something buzz past her ear. She opened her eyes but saw no sign of any bug that could make such a powerful noise. Instead, she saw a butterfly.

Tranquil, quiet rural scenery appeared before Sae as her eyes gradually adjusted to the light: green grass, lush trees, farm fields, and power lines. The road she was walking along had worn and broken down as the days passed, and grass sprouted within cracks in the pavement. Scattered patches of reddish-brown earth appeared within the fields, as if they had been abandoned. She also saw sagging bamboo poles entwined with silver bird repellent tape; the tape itself had slackened and lost its luster.

She passed some wilting sunflowers that stood limply like people hanging their heads in shame, as well as patch of imperious-looking daisies and some chameleon plants that had passed their prime. A dense green thicket lay further ahead. Brown butterflies fluttered about within the thicket.

Perhaps there were some lovely flowers over there?

Sae glanced over her shoulder, the old letter in her hand. Behind her stood a wooden bungalow in a worse state of deterioration than the sodden letter. Putrid air flowed through the cracks in the house's thin boards. Even in the light of the early summer afternoon, the house looked black and dark. Sae let out a sigh and hesitated slightly before opening the rickety front door.

As Sae entered, light from outside spread throughout a large room with a dirt floor.

The house was laid out in the traditional rustic Japanese style: the room Sae stood within functioned as a kind of foyer, and a wooden ledge at the other end of the foyer separated it from a raised inner room with a wooden floor. Inside the inner room was a woman seated on the floor, wearing a thin smile on her face. It was Sae's older sister.

"Ah, you've come," she said.

"Well, you never even replied to my letters," Sae retorted. She let out another sigh

and unfolded the letter in her hand. "Which one of these shall we look at?"

"That's enough."

It was too much trouble to take off her shoes so Sae sat on the wooden ledge. Her sister just let a smile cross her pale face, without apologizing for her own lack of courtesy.

"I wrote you so many letters. Did you even look at any of them?"

Sae shook some dust off the legs of her jeans.

Sae's sister Chizu had gone missing four years ago. The following autumn, three years ago, Sae learned that her sister had actually eloped. Nobody even knew the man that her sister had eloped with, and it was inevitable that their family would oppose their union. So, Chizu ran off with her man and only revealed the news in a letter sent to her younger sister Sae; they had always been close.

The address penciled onto the letter was completely fake. Father and Mother didn't know what to make of it. Yet Chizu would still send letters from time to time, all from fake addresses.

Sae had discovered her sister's real address just about two months ago. It didn't require much effort; a postmark had been left neatly on one of the envelopes. Without saying anything to her parents, Sae searched for Chizu's address based on that postmark. She knew her sister was alone. Chizu had given birth to a child, but the situation between her and the father had grown violent, and he had taken some cash and run away one day. Chizu, not embarrassed in the slightest, wrote openly about it in one of her letters: "That man isn't here anymore."

Her lover had simply vanished, without anyone ever knowing his name or face.

"He doesn't plan on coming back?" Sae asked.

"Well, it's too late now..."

Chizu's smile was very serene. Sae hardly recognized her sister now; it was like she was talking to a total stranger. Chizu's untied black hair fell in waves around the nape of her neck and her collarbone, plastered there by her sweat. Her ample breasts nearly burst through her white blouse, revealing her cleavage. The sweat made her skin shine.

Sae put away the letter and took out a peach-colored handkerchief. She gingerly patted dry her own sweat-drenched neck.

"I told you to call me, you know? I wrote so many letters telling you to call me, yet I never got an answer from you. I thought maybe you'd gone and killed yourself."

"You were worried about me, weren't you?"

Chizu fiddled with something in her hands. It made a dry, rough sound. Sae saw that it was a bunch of withered flowers. Chizu spread them out on the wooden floor. It seemed she had been working on a little handicraft.

"I gathered some flowers and tried to make a incense pouch," she explained, "but it didn't turn out well. It's been so humid this summer that the flowers went bad and rotted before they could dry properly."

"It definitely smelled that way, Sis."

"Yes, there are all sorts of smells here. Didn't you know that?"

Chizu rose to her feet as a feeble voice echoed from the shadows beyond a soot-stained screen door.

“Aaaaaah...”

Chizu walked through the doorway. Only the soles of her pale feet were visible from within the room beyond. She left footprints on the wooden floor that gave off a dark sheen, undoubtedly due to the thin layer of dust covering them.

Sae looked at the scattered flowers. Just as Chizu had said, they had gone bad and lost their color. She didn't know what they were called or what kind of flowers they were; they had all shrunk into blackened coils.

Chizu returned to the room cradling a baby tucked in an infant pouch slung over her shoulders. She answered the question on Sae's mind with a smile: “This is my baby.”

Sae kept mute, unable to say anything. Chizu spread out a lemon-yellow skirt over the blackened flowers, then undid the shell buttons on her blouse while cooing at the baby. Without any hesitation, she let her breasts tumble out of her blouse. The skin of her breasts was more brilliant than the white fabric that had sheathed them. She rocked the baby to rouse it as she brought it up to her breasts. The baby opened its mouth with all its might and sucked one of her nipples.

Chizu stared intently at her baby, as if in a trance. Sae averted her eyes and looked outside. An intense bright glow lay beyond the front door. She felt like something was luring her toward the doorway. As she approached it, the bright light overcame her eyes and blinded her once again.

Sae felt the presence of someone standing behind her. Without turning, she asked, “Sis, is it okay if I stay over tonight?”

“You can stay if you want to,” Chizu answered.

Was that milk that Sae smelled? An organic odor filled her nostrils. She felt a slight twinge of nausea so she went outside.

The skylark was still singing. The sky seemed to have become paler than before. Sae walked down the road. Beside the road grew trees with withered branches scattered here and there. Ahead of the trees lay the lush, verdant woodlands and mountains surrounding the nearby village. If she kept making her way forward through the forest, she would surely reach the mountains, but she didn't feel like going all the way there. The wind rolling down the mountains made her feel much better, though.

Suddenly, all of the birdsongs abruptly fell silent. The wind died down and the landscape grew utterly still, as if time had stopped.

Sae spotted something moving in the midst of the static, picture-like scenery surrounding her, and turned her gaze toward it.

A pool of water filled a crevice within the meadow. Its surface gave off a dark reflective shine in the sunlight. More than ten brown-winged butterflies rested by the pool as if someone had arranged them that way. The butterflies shifted their wings lazily; it looked like they were breathing.

Chizu softly made her way beside Sae. The baby let out a tiny burp. Chizu's breast still lay exposed. A bit of milk oozed on her nipple, untouched by the baby.

It was red.

It looked like red milk.

Bits of light filled Sae's eyes and she shut them tightly.

\*\*blank line

"Those were nymphalid butterflies," Chizu said as she prepared the futons. "They drink water and absorb the nutrients dissolved in it. What you saw earlier were probably male nymphalids."

The light bulb lit near the ceiling cast very dark shadows throughout the room, making the stains on the screen door more prominent in her mind.

"You sure know a lot about odd things."

"Well, butterflies feed off humans too. Even their sweat and piss." Chizu's voice sounded a little moist.

Sae could hear her sister gently dusting off the futons. Chizu was probably also rocking the baby, who would be sleeping beside her tonight. Sae quietly closed her eyes; it wasn't just babies who had the privilege of being lulled to sleep by hearing rhythmic noises. The sound of a woman's voice filled her ears as she started nodding off – a lullaby.

On second thought, it didn't sound like a woman's voice but rather like something buzzing. The sound and pitch rose and fell, resembling the voice of someone singing. Something was buzzing around her in the darkness.

It was just a plain old butterfly.

But before Sae knew it, the butterfly was joined by others. They multiplied with a clamor until they covered the floor. The butterflies pointed their light yellowish-brown wings in the air and gently opened and closed them. When they closed their wings, their color grew light and faint, and when they opened their wings, black spots appeared on them. Looking at the thin pull string dangling from the light bulb, Sae saw masses of butterflies tightly clustered along it.

She opened her eyes and sat up with a start.

There was no sign of any butterflies. It was just a dream she had while dozing off.

She patted her sweaty face. Again, she heard a buzzing sound whiz past her ear. In spite of the darkness, she could tell it was probably a fly. Easing herself back into her futon, she noticed a musty, putrid smell hanging in the air.

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The tap water tasted of iron. Sae had no appetite at all. After quickly washing her face, she walked over toward the foyer. The flowers from the day before still lay scattered on the wooden ledge leading down to the foyer; they were darker and even more shriveled than before. When she opened the rickety front door, a cool morning breeze entered the house. Unconsciously, she took in a deep breath of it. Just as Chizu had noted earlier, a peculiar, bittersweet aroma filled the interior of the house. It was enough to dull Sae's sense of smell once she got used to it. Yet all that changed once she got a taste of the fresh air and light outdoors.

Sae went outside. She wanted to wipe off the grime and odor from her skin. The rustling breeze felt good.

A patch of daisies grew beside a footpath leading through the fields. Butterflies rested on the flowers – the same kind of butterflies Sae had seen in her dream the night before. Did they live there together in masse, or had they just appeared there spontaneously? She furrowed her brow and stared at the nymphalids as they fluttered above the thicket, just as they had done the day before.

She noticed her sister by her side. Looking ahead, she said, “So...I guess nobody comes here.”

“That’s right.”

“There’s nobody else here at all?”

“There aren’t any houses this far down the road. Nobody wanders over this way.”

Chizu held her baby to her chest again. The child was quieter and more docile than any infant that Sae had ever seen. The infant pouch slung over Chizu’s shoulders had a garish design; it looked as if it had been sewn together from random scraps of cloth. By contrast, Chizu’s face and clothing were nearly devoid of color.

Sae followed a butterfly with her eyes as it traced an arc in midair, followed by another, before descending back into the thicket. She thought there might be flowers beyond the thicket, or perhaps some water. But if there were flowers, she wanted to see them. She started walking toward the thicket but stopped short when her sister called out to her.

“Where are you going?”

“Over there.”

“I think you’d be better off not going there.”

“Why?”

“Water’s not the only thing you’ll find over there.” Chizu threw back her black hair. “I told you, didn’t I? Butterflies gather near water because they want moisture, but that’s not all they want. They also want the nutrients dissolved in it. That’s why they also gather around corpses.”

Sae looked toward the thicket once again before turning back to her sister. Chizu was staring at the thicket. Sae could not tell what her sister was thinking; her gaze gave nothing away.

“Whose corpse is it?” Sae blurted out.

“Can you can smell it on the wind? It’s very unpleasant.”

“Where did the baby’s father go?”

“Uh, well...”

Chizu gazed lovingly upon the baby.

Sae asked again, “Where did the baby’s father go?”

“I don’t know. He just disappeared two years ago.”

“Well, what about the baby?”

“It’s my baby.”

Chizu hugged the child and cradled it again. The baby woke up and groped around

with its little fingers in search of its mothers breasts.

“There, there,” Chizu said. “You’re hungry, aren’t you?” She went back inside the house while undoing the shell buttons on her blouse.

Sae’s voice cracked anxiously as she called out, “Sis, are you OK?”

“Why do you ask that?”

Chizu went inside the dark house. Sae stopped short inside the doorway. Her eyes were not used to the darkness inside after having been outside in the light. The ground seemed to vanish beneath her feet, while the light from outside made her sister look like a pallid ghost. She heard a creaking sound; her sister have taken a seat by the doorway.

“I asked because your breast milk looked like blood yesterday.”

The ghostly apparitions caused by the light would not disappear. Sae blinked her eyes again and again, trying to get them acclimated to the darkness.

“They’re the same thing, silly,” she heard Chizu say. “Milk comes from a mother’s blood.”

The pale, hazy light took on a reddish hue as it fell dim and transformed into bright red spots scattered within Sae’s field of vision. The spots resembled drops of blood.

Chizu continued, “Therefore, this child is also drinking blood. All babies drink blood.”

Sae kept blinking her eyes again and again. Slowly, her pupils opened up and she could see Chizu breast-feeding her baby in the same spot and manner as she had done the day before. The ravenous baby’s hands fidgeted slightly on its mother’s breast before letting go of her nipple. Milk dripped from the baby’s mouth. It looked red, of course, but perhaps that was only because Sae’s eyes had not yet adjusted to the darkness?

Sae slowly edged closer and said, “Like a vampire...”

Chizu smiled upon hearing this.

The design on Chizu’s infant sling pouch looked like it was fluttering. A butterfly emerged and flew out of the lining. Fluttering its wings in the darkness, the nymphalid traced an arc in midair and landed beside Sae.

Then Sae realized something – she had never seen the baby’s face, nor had she seen the baby have its diaper changed.

“That baby, is it a boy?”

“Yes.” Chizu smiled again. “Butterflies definitely drink blood too,” she added, her voice quivering slightly. Sae edged a bit closer and reached out to touch the baby.

Pieces of the baby broke off. The fragments turned into butterflies that took off in flight. The baby’s hands also crumbled into similar fragments when he tried moving them.

The butterflies’ light brown wings opened and closed gently, just as if they were breathing. They wiggled their thin black antennae as they gathered by the small pile of withered flowers by the wooden ledge. Sae could see her own body reflected in

each of their small, yet brilliant, eyes. The flowers, too, crumbled into fragments that fluttered about and took flight.

Utterly bewildered, she turned to flee outside and back into the light. But the room was filled by the loud buzz of the butterflies flying around her.

Chizu sat mutely with one of her breasts still exposed. Her arm remained bent, as if she was still cradling the baby. Blood seeped through her white skin.

Sae fled from the house, rushed past the bamboo poles draped with the loose bird repellent tape, and trampled through the desiccated fields. As she approached the patch of daisies, a bittersweet smell arose that made her feel uneasy. Pursing her lips tightly, she dashed through the thicket.

The nymphalids were gathered there. There was a pool of water too; stagnant, colorless water filling a sinkhole. There were flies too, and ants, and... a head of hair.

Sae ran back to the house. She stood before her sister, her breath ragged and her throat choked and dry. Two or three nymphalids flew toward Chizu's chest. Chizu was still holding out her arms as if she was cradling the baby and nothing had ever happened.

"Let's go home, Sis," Sae said with a forced smile. "Let's go home together."

Chizu did not look up at her.

Sae smiled again. "I'm sorry for scolding you all the time and calling you a fool in my letters."

"But I really am a fool," Chizu muttered as she hung her head sadly. Still wearing her shoes, Sae walked toward her sister and took her hand.

"It's all right now. I'm sorry, OK?"

Her sister's hand felt cold.

"Please forgive me?"

"I forgive you. Let's go." More butterflies flew out of Chizu's kimono, near her chest. She raised her head. Her black eyes were as clear as glass. "Thank you. I was so lonely."

Sae felt the sensation of Chizu's hand fade as she held it. Then she felt something tickling her palm; she looked down to see a tiny butterfly. The butterfly scratched her hand with its fluttering wings until they broke off and crumbled. A foul stench assailed her nostrils.

As for her sister, she had vanished without a trace.

A swarm of insects loomed before Sae as far as she could see. Everything in her field of vision was saturated with the colors of their scales. They buzzed past her, striking her face, hands and other parts of her body with their wings – some were soft to the touch, others were rough. The insects swarmed around her and throughout the house, making a sound not unlike grass rustling in the wind, until several hundreds of them escaped through the open doorway, toward the light.

Sae's footprints were the only things visible on the dust-caked wooden ledge, except for some black wilted flowers that remained in the spot where they had been placed before. She took one and put it in her pocket, then left the house.

She looked over toward the thicket, where the nymphalids had reappeared. There, drenched in the pool of water, lay the head of long hair of the corpse she had seen earlier. Its swollen, waterlogged fingers still held a tight death grip around the silver gun.

The woman had gone mad and killed herself. Was she pregnant? Sae didn't feel like finding out. Yet red blood and red milk flooded out of her chest in torrents. No withered flowers had sprouted here, but the decomposing corpse held many critical nutrients that gave sustenance to the butterflies and grass and earth around it.

As for the birds, they kept singing as they always had.

Sae made her way back down the road. One of the butterflies had been following her ever since she left the house. It kept pace with her as she made her way from the mountain down toward the village.

The sun was so bright it hurt her eyes, so she ducked into a small cedar thicket to escape it. The air cooled down immediately. Upon emerging from the thicket, though, the scorching summer sun beat down on her head once again.

Although she did not see anyone else, she could sense that there were other people around. She spotted the roofs of many nearby houses, and in front of the glass doors of an old general store she saw stacks of cardboard boxes filled with sweet buns and cats.

The road widened as the hills grew steeper and more difficult to climb. Sae eventually reached the road where the bus stop was located. She was sweating lightly. The butterfly landed on her arm, yearning for her moisture.

The wind shifted as a car passed by on its way down the road, and the butterfly flew off. Then a small white truck sped by, dragging along the agitated butterfly in its wake. The butterfly disappeared. Shortly thereafter, pieces of its wings fluttered down and landed beside the pavement. Sae picked up the pieces and wrapped them in some tissue paper.

The bus soon arrived. After riding the bus and enduring the bumpy train ride, Sae returned home, where she unwrapped the tissue paper. The wing fragments were pulverized and had lost their shape. But the withered flower looked just as it did when Sae had put it in her pocket.

## Fragment of a Butterfly

By KAMON Nanami

After a shaky train ride she got on the bus, then, having climbed a gentle slope for a short while, she reached a rusty mailbox. The paint was coming off and it was filled with postcards, which she pulled out. They had been drenched with rain over and over, and the characters were smudged and stained. Sae blinked her eyes and let her gaze wander across the surroundings. In the early summer sunshine, the colors seemed faded and the landscape was completely flat. The song of a skylark high above seemed more three-dimensional in comparison. The dazzling light made her eyes water and she closed them for a little while. The intervals of the skylark's cheerful song were filled with the scattered chirping of birds, unknown to her, sometimes distant, sometimes nearby. The wind was choosing only the tender grasses to produce a whisper. Humidity was fairly high, and the air smelled of sun and felt sticky and heavy, almost weary. Suddenly, the loud buzz of wings passed close to her ears, and Sae opened her eyes. The bug that could have produced this violent, disruptive noise was nowhere to be seen — instead, there was a butterfly. Sae's eyes had finally grown accustomed to the light, and she noticed the greenness of the grass, the green trees, a field and telegraph wire. It was peaceful, but it was the scenery of a deserted countryside. The cracked asphalt road was losing its battle against time and the roots of weeds. The field with its discolored, reddish-brown soil seemed to be completely abandoned. Long strips of silver foil, which had served to scare birds away, had lost their shine and hung limply and tangled around slanted bamboo poles. Haggard sunflowers hung their heads. Behind chameleon plants that had passed their peak and daisies that acted as if they owned the place was a thickly-grown patch of green shrubbery where light brown butterflies were fluttering in and out. Perhaps there were some lovely flowers.

The old postcards still in her hand, Sae turned around. There stood a wooden one-story house that was in an even more desperate condition than her postcards. Musty air was leaking from gaps between the thin wooden boards. In the brightness of the early summer midday sun the house seemed all the more dark and gloomy. Sae breathed out, hesitated a moment and then opened the warped sliding door.

Light spread out on the dirt floor of the wide entrance way. Farther inside, on the other side of the high step separating the entrance way from the actual living space, her older sister was sitting slumped down on the wooden floor, smiling faintly.

“My, you came.”

“You haven't even sent me an answer.”

Consciously breathing out again, Sae held up the postcards in her hand to show them to her sister.

“Oh, shall we have a look at that?”

“Never mind.”

As taking off her shoes was too bothersome, Sae sat down on the high step where the wooden floor began. Her sister did not even try to apologize for what had happened and just kept smiling with her white face.

“I wrote you lots of postcards. Have you seen *any* of them at all?”

Sae let her jeans-clad legs dangle.

Four years ago Chizu had disappeared and it had not been until fall three years ago that Sae learned that her sister had eloped with a man. No one knew who he was, and therefore her family had not

even had the chance to object. And yet Chizu had eloped and, though they used to be close, her little sister Sae had gotten nothing but postcards from her. The sender's address, which her sister had written in fine pencil lines, was completely made up. Her father and mother were at a loss. Still, Chizu kept sending news from time to time, using the made up address. Only two months ago did Sae find out about her sister's whereabouts from a postmark that had happened to be perfectly legible. Sae had not told her parents anything about it and had started to search for Chizu's house. She knew that her sister was living by herself now. The man had another wife and a family somewhere else and eventually he got violent and ran away with Chizu's money. Chizu had written everything on a postcard to Sae without feeling ashamed. *That person is not here any longer.*

Her sister's lover had disappeared while Sae didn't even know his name and had not seen his face.

"Don't you want to come home?"

"Well, it's too late for that now."

Chizu's smile was awfully quiet. She looked like a completely different woman. She had not even tied her black hair, it was clinging to her, drawing waves around her sweaty nape and collarbones. The neckline of her white blouse was low and revealed the cleavage between her two taut, ample breasts. Her clothes were shiny with sweat.

Sae put away the postcards and pulled out a pink handkerchief. Then she gently wiped her sweaty neck, as you would normally do.

"On my postcards I asked you over and over again to call me. But you wouldn't answer at all, so I thought you might have killed yourself or something like that."

"How sweet of you, you were worrying about me."

Her sister moved her hand and there was the noise of something dry rustling. As Sae looked closely, she saw that it was withered flower heads. Chizu had spread them on the floorboards and seemed to have been doing some little handicraft work.

"I've collected flowers and was trying to make sachets. But it's no use. In this season the humidity is strong and they start to rot before they're completely dry."

"I didn't know you had such a hobby."

"A lot of things smell bad in here. I wonder if you smell it too?"

Chizu stood up. At the same time the sound of a feeble voice filtered through the stained sliding screen.

"My my."

Showing the pale soles of her feet, Chizu disappeared inside the house.

She left footprints on the floor — where she had stepped, the floor looked black and shiny. There was no mistake that everything must have been covered with a thin layer of dust. Sae looked at the scattered flowers. She did not even know their names, and all of them were black and crumpled. She wondered if her sister would call flowers 'rotten', just because they had lost their color.

Chizu came back, in her arms she held a baby wrapped up in a *nenneko*, a traditional Japanese coat worn when carrying a baby on your back.

"That's my baby."

Before Sae could ask, she had received the answer together with a smile. Sae did not say anything and just kept silent. Her sister spread her lemon colored skirt over the black flower petals, soothed the child with a 'there, there, precious' and opened the mother-of-pearl buttons of her blouse.

Unabashedly, her breasts welled forth, more radiant than the whiteness of the fabric. When she held her child up to her breast, the baby opened its little mouth with all its might and took in the nipple. Absorbed, Chizu looked down on the baby. Sae turned her eyes to the entrance. Outside the sliding door was nothing but brightness. As she approached the doorway as if she were drawn to it, the strong light rays stole all the colors from her sight again.

She felt the presence of someone standing behind her.

“Chizu, can I stay for the night?” Sae asked without turning around.

“If you don't mind.”

An organic odor, it might have been the smell of milk, wafted up her nostrils. Sae was overcome by a faint feeling of nausea and went outside at once.

The skylark was still singing. The color of the sky seemed somewhat paler than before. She followed the path further along. Beyond some trees with entangled dead branches there was thick green woodland on a mountainside. If she continued walking slowly uphill she would surely reach those woods. She did not feel like going that far. However, the breeze coming from the mountain was pleasant. Suddenly, the birdcalls all died down. The breeze also stopped. The whole landscape looked as quiet as if time stood still. Sae saw something move inside this still image and shifted her gaze. The puddles of water filling the gaps in the grassland were shining black. Butterflies with light brown wings, over ten in number, were sitting there as if someone had arranged them. Slowly, as if they were breathing, they were moving their wings.

Chizu quietly stepped beside her. The child let out a burp. Leftover mother's milk trickled from Chizu's still uncovered breast.

Red.

The milk looked red.

A ray of light entered Sae's eyes and she shut them tightly.

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“Those are nymphalid butterflies. They drink water and suck up the nutritious substances dissolved in it. I heard most of them are males”, explained Chizu when she had laid out the futons side by side. In the light of the tiny light bulb under the ceiling the shadows looked even darker and the stains on the sliding screen made Sae feel uneasy.

“You know a lot about strange things, don't you?”

“After all, those little ones also swarm around humans. They are drawn to sweat and pee.”

Chizu's voice was a little damp. Sae heard the sound of gentle tapping on the futon. Perhaps her sister was comforting the baby, who was lying next to her. Sae kept silent and closed her eyes. Getting sleepy from monotonous sounds is not a privilege for children. As she was nodding off, the faint voice of a woman reached her ear. A lullaby? No, it sounded different. It did not sound like a woman's voice. It was like the buzz of wings, which gave the sound its highs and lows and made it sound like a singing voice. Something passed Sae by in the darkness. A plain butterfly. Before she had even time to think, the butterflies increased in number, fluttering boisterously. They were soon covering the whole surface of the floor, silently folding up their stiff, yellowish brown wings, silently opening them again. When they closed their wings, they looked a pale white, when they opened them, black speckles became visible. Above, they were hanging from the fine string of the lamp, closely packed, like a bunch of grapes. Sae opened her eyes and sat up. There was no sign of a butterfly anywhere. She must have fantasized just before falling asleep. She softly rubbed her sweaty forehead. Again, the buzz of wings passed her by. In spite of such darkness there seemed to

be a fly. When she slipped under her covers once again, the musty smell bothered her.

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The tap-water tasted of iron. Sae had no appetite at all. She gave her face a perfunctory wash and when she left through the front door, the flowers from the day before were still lying scattered about, more crumpled and darker than ever. When she dragged open the crooked sliding door, a pleasant morning breeze blew softly inside. Unconsciously, she took a deep breath. Just like her sister had said: the house was filled with a peculiar sweet and sour stench. If you got used to it, your sense of smell would become numb, but that would change again if you went outside.

The world outside was also full of light.

Sae stepped in front of the house. She felt as if the gloominess and the smell that had clung to her skin were being wiped away. The murmur of the wind was soothing. Next to the field path there was a cluster of chameleon plants, where a butterfly sat. It was the same kind that had haunted her the night before. Were they living as a swarm or had the population suddenly exploded here? Sae frowned slightly but kept an eye on the butterfly. The nymphalid was fluttering over the same thicket that had caught her eye the day before. She noticed that her sister was standing beside her. Sae kept looking ahead of herself and said: "Nobody's coming this way."

"You're right."

"Is there really no one here?"

"There are no more houses farther along this path. That's why practically no one passes by here."

Chizu was carrying the baby at her chest again. Her child was quieter than any other infant Sae had ever known. The pattern of Chizu's *nenneko* coat, which seemed to have been sewn combining different scraps of cloth, was beautiful. Compared to that, there was not much color in her clothes or her complexion. Sae followed the butterfly with her eyes. It made one or two arcs in the air and disappeared into the thicket. She had thought that there were flowers, but perhaps there was water instead. However, if there were flowers, she wanted to see them. When she started to walk, her sister's voice stopped her.

"Where are you going?"

"Over there."

"I think it's better not to go."

"Why?"

"There's not just water over there."

Chizu shook her black hair.

"I told you, right? The reason butterflies swarm around water is not only their need for fluid. Those little ones want the nutritious substances dissolved in there. That's why they also swarm around corpses."

Sae glanced at the thicket once more and then focused on her sister's face again. Chizu was gazing in the direction of the thicket. Sae couldn't read anything from her face.

"What corpse?" she asked without thinking.

"The house is down-wind, so we get the smell. It's unpleasant."

"Where's the father of that child?" Sae inquired.

"Who knows?"

Her sister looked at her child affectionately. Sae asked her again: "Where's the father of that child?"

"I don't know. It's already been two years since he disappeared."

"What about the baby, then?"

"It's my baby."

Chizu shifted the child in her arms. It groped for her breasts with its little fingers. It had probably woken up from the shaking.

"There, there. You're hungry, right?"

She was loosening her mother-of-pearl buttons while walking back to the house. Sae's voice trailed after her, sounding agitated.

"Sis, are you okay?"

"Why do you ask something like that?"

Chizu went inside the dark house. Sae stayed in the doorway. Her eyes had gotten used to the light and could not adjust to the darkness. She could not even see where she was standing on the ground, as the light outside had left traces in her sight, phantoms of bluish-white ghost lights.

There was a creaking sound. Her sister seemed to have sat down on the high step in the entrance way.

"Because your milk looked like blood yesterday."

The phantoms of light had not disappeared yet. Sae blinked her eyes repeatedly.

"It's the same, silly", she heard her sister's voice. "Mother's milk is made from blood."

The bluish-white spots of light lost their brightness and turned reddish. Scattered across her field of vision, the red spots were pulsating and therefore reminded her even more of blood.

"That's why this child is also drinking blood. All babies drink blood."

Sae was still blinking. At last, her pupils widened. Sitting in the same place and in the same way she had the day before, her sister was breast-feeding her baby. The greedily suckling child was moving its hand a little. Then finally, it let go of her teat. Mother's milk was dripping from its mouth. Sae wondered if it was due to her eyes still not having adjusted to the light, but she could not help thinking that it really looked red. She softly approached.

"Like a vampire."

Her sister smiled faintly when she heard that.

The pattern of her coat seemed to tremble. A butterfly fluttered out of its hem. Flapping its wings in the quiet darkness, it made an arc and then flew away, passing Sae by.

There was something she had noticed a while ago. She had not seen the child's face. She had not seen its diaper being changed either.

"This child is a boy, isn't it?" she asked.

"That's right."

Her sister smiled again.

"Surely butterflies also drink blood, don't they?"

She could not stop her voice from trembling slightly. Sae approached even closer and reached out her finger to the baby. A splinter came off and flew away. While it was still moving its hand, the

baby crumbled to pieces. Light brown wings opened and closed as if they were breathing quietly. Clustered, like a flower bouquet, the butterflies were moving their thin, black antennas. In each of their shiny little eyes there was Sae's reflection.

With a flutter, the bouquet also crumbled to pieces and took off. Confused, most of the butterflies disappeared into the light outside, but some remained in the darkness of the room, hectically flapping their wings. Chizu sat on the floor, silent, with one of her breasts still exposed. Her arms were bent like a water bird's neck, as if she was still cradling her baby there. Her white skin was smudged with blood. Sae ran outside.

She passed the slackened strips of bird deterrent foil and walked across the remains of the dried up field. As she came closer to the group of daisies, a sickening sweet smell wafted up her nose. She pressed her lips tightly together and parted the thicket. Inside, nymphalids were gathering. There was water. In an overgrown hollow water of an indescribable color had accumulated. Flies were also there. And ants. And there was hair.

Sae dashed back to the house. She was panting for air, her throat was dry. As she was standing in front of her sister, she was breathing even more heavily. Two or three nymphalids had come back to Chizu's chest. Her arms were still bent as if she were holding them lovingly.

"Sis, let's go home." Sae forced herself to smile. "Let's go home together."

Her sister did not look at her.

Sae smiled again.

"I'm sorry. Criticizing you, writing in my letters that you were stupid."

"But it's true.", her sister murmured, looking downward.

With her shoes still on, Sae went inside and took her sister's hand.

"It's okay. I'm sorry."

It was a cold hand.

"Can you forgive me?" Chizu asked.

"Sure. Let's go home."

The butterflies left Chizu's chest. She slowly raised her head. Her black eyes were smiling distinctly.

"Thank you. I was lonely."

Sae lost the feeling of holding her sister's hand. Something tickled her palm. When she looked, there were a few butterflies. A few of them had been damaged by her hand and the wings were broken and crushed. A putrid smell penetrated her nostrils. There was no trace of her sister anymore. Clustered together in front of her eyes were the insects she had seen in such sickening numbers. Her field of vision was steeped in the color of the butterflies' scales. They passed her by, softly slapping against her face, arms and hands many times with their stiff, light wings. Hundreds of them were circling Sae, then fluttering through the house, producing a sound like grasses in the wind, before they flew outside through the door, striving towards the light.

On the dust-covered wooden floor only Sae's footprints were visible. Nothing but the black, shriveled flower heads were left, still lying scattered as they had before. Sae put one of them in her pocket and left the house behind. When she looked at the thicket, she saw that there were nymphalids again, fluttering about cheerfully.

The hair she had seen there, soaked in water, had been long. The swollen fingers had still been firmly clutching the deadly silver weapon. There might have been a child inside the woman, who

had committed suicide after she had been abandoned. Sae didn't feel like verifying her assumption. However, the overflowing blood from her chest must have looked like red mother's milk. Withered flowers cannot give birth to anything. Yet, her decaying, dissolving body with its various valuable nutrients, had nourished the soil, the grass and the butterflies.

The birds were still singing peacefully.

Sae walked down the path. Since she had left the house a butterfly had been fluttering beside her. Adjusting her pace to it, Sae walked away from the mountain towards the village. She left the sunshine, which was so bright that it hurt her eyes, and entered a little wood of cedars where the air suddenly felt chilly.

When she came out of the wood, once again the rays of the early summer sun warmed her face. Although she didn't see anyone, she noticed signs of people living there. She could see a lot of rooftops and in front of the glass door of an old general store there were piled up cardboard boxes. A cat was sitting in the topmost one, a sweet bun beside it.

The slope became slightly steeper while the asphalt road widened. Sae arrived at the road where the bus stop was. She was sweating a bit, and the butterfly landed on her arm, as if it had been yearning for moisture. A car passed in front of her. In the whirling breeze the butterfly rose into the air again. A white light pick-up truck dashed past and swept away the stirred up butterfly.

The nymphalid was gone.

A little while later, a fragment of the butterfly's wing came tumbling down next to the asphalt. Sae picked it up and wrapped it in a tissue. Before long the bus came. She got on the bus and arrived home after a shaky train ride. When she opened the tissue, the fragment had not kept its shape but had turned to dust. Only the withered flower in her pocket was still the same.

## Fragments of a Butterfly

A train trip, a bus ride, and a short walk up a gentle slope had brought Sae to this rusty, paint-peeling postbox from which she now took out a postcard well smudged from previous rains. Blinking her eyes, she looked around.

The early summer sun made every color sharp and vibrant. The scenery was completely flat. The chirping of a skylark high above her had more contours than this planate vista.

Her eyes started to water in the brightness so she closed them. She could hear the feeble wavering warble of another bird, of a type she did not know, during pauses in the nimble skylark's song. The wind blew only the softer grass and made the leaves give a gentle rustle. The humidity was unrelenting and a heavy listless air full of the scents of a sunny day lingered.

A sudden loud buzz of wings made her open her eyes.

She couldn't see any insect that would make such a sound—only some butterflies.

Her eyes had now gotten use to the sun. She saw before her the green of the grass, and lines of trees, fields, and electric pylons. It was a tranquil but lonely country scene.

The crumbling paved path was over-strewn with grass in places. The fields with their reddish clay looked abandoned. Silver-colored tape spooled out to stop birds encroaching had lost its glitter and dangled loosely from crooked bamboo poles.

Scrawny sunflowers drooped. A grey butterfly fluttered to and fro midst the overgrown greenery of aging weeds and imperious daisies.

The flowers looked quite dainty indeed.

Sae turned around to see a wooden bungalow even more decrepit than the postcard she held in her hand.

She could smell ever so slightly its interior from between the spaces of its thin wooden boards. She took a deep breath and with a touch of trepidation slid back the stiff, jarring sliding door allowing a patch of light to fall in on the wide front hall.

There sat Chizu, Sae's older sister, flopped on the inside entrance step. Seeing Sae she gave a little smile and said, "Oh, it's you".

"You never replied", stated Sae, releasing her breath, lifting up the postcard in her hand to show her sister.

"Is that right? Let me see."

"Forget it. It doesn't matter"

She couldn't be bothered taking her shoes off so she just plonked down on the inside step. Chizu overlooked her sister's discourtesy and maintained the smile on her pale face.

"I wrote many, many postcards. How far did you get through them?"

Sae shook the leg of her jeans.

Four years ago Chizu had disappeared. In the autumn of the following year it was discovered that she had eloped.

The family didn't know the man and never opposed her being with him (which of course they couldn't have since they didn't know him to begin with) but still Chizu had elected to elope with him. The only contact she bothered to keep with her family after that were postcards sent to her younger sister and erstwhile companion: Sae.

The address written on those postcards in thin pencil each time looked false. Her parents were clueless as to where she was. Even so, Sae would still occasionally send letters to this phantom address.

But about two months ago, Sae managed to find out her whereabouts. It had actually been quite easy since the postmarks on the cards were clearly legible.

Unknown to the parents, Sae had tracked down Chizu's house. She knew Chizu was living alone, and that the man, who had already been married with children, had turned violent at some stage and had ran off with their money.

Chizu had written all about it in the postcards matter-of-factly without embarrassment: 'That man is no longer with me'.

And so Chizu's lover was now gone before Sae ever had a chance to find out his name or see his face.

"Are you planning to come home now?"

"Well, not at the moment", Chizu smiled quietly.

It felt like talking to a stranger.

Her untied black hair stuck to her sweaty nape forming a wave-shape around her collarbone. Her blouse was open wide at the top revealing her largish bosom.

Sae put away the postcard and produced in its place a pink handkerchief. She gently wiped in one slow move her own now sweating neck.

"I asked you to phone me. I wrote loads postcards. But still you didn't contact me. I thought you'd committed suicide."

"Ah. You worried about me."

Chizu moved her hands with a soft crinkly sound to reveal some withered flower heads. She spread them out delicately over the wooden flooring boards as though engaged in some intricate handcraft.

"I gathered some flowers to make a scented sachet. But it's no good. The humidity is high now so it all rots before they're dried out."

"Is that how you pass the time, Chizu."

"The house has lots of smells. Can you get them?"

Chizu started to stand up. At that moment, a small voice was seeping through from the other side of the discolored screen partition doors further inside the house.

"Now", she said softly as the pale back of her legs disappeared into the dark of the house.

Sae could see footprints on the tatami mats. It was obvious, even in the dark, that the whole place was covered in thick layers of dust.

Sae looked at the scattered flowers, the names of which she did not know, and saw that they were all shriveled black. She wondered if by 'it all rots' Chizu had meant the flowers losing their color.

Chizu returned holding a sleeping baby.

"This is my baby", she said with a smile before waiting to be asked.

Sae remained silent.

Chizu spread out her lemon-colored skirt on top of the blackened flower petals and opened the pearl button on her blouse.

Without a flicker of self-consciousness, she exposed a breast more radiant than the whitest shroud. She gently rocked the child which opened its little mouth to suck with full might on the nipple.

Chizu stared down at the child with a vacant look. Sae averted her gaze. Outside the sliding door all was bright. Sae let herself lean against the door frame and once again a strong beam of sun stole away all the color from her view.

She felt someone standing behind her.

"Can I stay here tonight?" she asked her sister without turning around.

"Sure, if you want", replied Chizu. An organic smell invaded Sae's nose, probably the smell of milk, making her feel a bit nauseous. She went outside.

The skylark was still singing.

The color of the sky was less vibrant than before.

She walked a little bit down the road.

Hills of dark green vegetation lay at the end of a line of trees with tangled withered branches. They were only a stroll up the gentle slope.

She wasn't going head up there. She was just happy to enjoy the breeze blowing down from them.

Suddenly the birds stopped singing. The wind ceased and a stillness, as though time itself had frozen, invaded the scene.

In this paused picture Sae spied something moving.

In a gap between the meadows where water lay, a dozen or so butterflies had gathered, their light-brown wings shimmering blackly in the water's reflection.

The butterflies gently flapped their wings with a graceful poise that resembled slow rhythmic breathing. It was almost as if someone had choreographed it.

Chizu came quietly to Sae's side. The baby belched and the milk she hadn't swallowed came spilling out onto Chizu's breasts.

It was red.

Sae could see red milk.

Fragments of light hit her eyes and she shut her eyelids tight.

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“Those were brush-footed butterflies. They drink water. They suck out the nutrition dissolved in the water. Apparently they’re mostly male.”

Chizu said all this as she lay out the futon mattresses for the night.

The light from the miniature light-bulb on the ceiling lamp made the shadows in the room even blacker. Sae noticed all the stains on the sliding panel doors.

“You know a lot about butterflies.”

“Well, those lot tend to swarm around people. They swarm were there’s sweat and urine.”

Chizu’s voice sounded a little subdued.

Sae heard the sound of Chizu's futon mattress being patted repeatedly and assume it was her soothing the baby laid beside her.

Sae quietly closed her eyes. It is not only children that get sleepy to the sound of a gentle beat.

In her drowsy state, she could hear a faint female voice coming through the air.

Was it a lullaby?

It didn’t sound like one. In fact, It didn’t sound like a woman’s voice at all.

It was more like the hum of wings. A sound varying in tones like someone singing.

In the darkness she felt something pass her by .

It was just butterflies.

Now there was suddenly more of them. It was getting noisy with them all. They gathered in one spot on the floor, opening and closing ever so silently their stiffened yellow to light-brown wings.

When opened the wings looked pale, when closed they revealed black spots. Sae looked up and saw more of them clustered around the thin cord for the ceiling lamp from which they hung down like tassels.

She opened her eyes and sat up to look.

She couldn’t see any butterflies anywhere.

It had been a dream just before falling fully asleep.

She wiped her sweaty forehead. Again buzzing wings passed by.

Even in the dark, a fly was fluttering around.

Sae sank back into the futon, smelling its musty odor.

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The tap water tasted of iron.

Sae didn’t want to drink any.

She hastily washed her face and then went back to the hall. The flowers from yesterday still lay scattered and seemed a shade even blacker.

She opened the stiff sliding door allowing in the welcome morning breeze.

She instantly gulped it in deeply.

The house had a peculiar bitter-sweet smell, as Chizu had mentioned, which got weaker as you got used to it. But it came back as soon you were exposed again to the outside. The hall was now filled with the light coming in.

Sae stepped outside. She felt as though the smell on her skin and all the gloom from within was being wiped away. The breeze was so good.

There were bunches of chameleon weeds running along the ridges of the rice fields, and on them perched butterflies—the same she had seen the night before in her dreams. Was there a colony of them or had they suddenly mass generated themselves here?

Sae frowned slightly keeping them in her view. They were fluttering about the same thicket as the brush-footed ones the day before.

She noticed now Chizu beside her. Sae looked straight ahead and said,

“No one comes up here.”

“That’s right.”

“Is there no one else here?”

“There are no houses up that path anymore. So people hardly ever come round here.”

Chizu still held the baby at her breast, the quietest baby Sae had ever encountered. The baby sling it was in seemed to have been made from various scraps sewn together. It’s colors were bright, making Chizu’s own clothes look subdued.

Sae followed the butterflies with her eyes. One or two flew in an arch-shape sinking into the thicket beyond.

She’d assumed there were only flowers in that place but now she wondered to herself if there was water there as well. She wanted to take a look.

She started walking but was called to stop.

“Where are you going?”

“Over there.”

“I don’t think you should go there.”

“Why?”

“There’s not just water over there.”

Chizu’s shook her head, her black hair flapping.

“I told you. Butterflies gather round water not to drink the liquid but to absorb the nutrition dissolved inside it. That’s why they’re gathering round the dead body.”

Sae looked again at the thicket. Chizu came back into view. She was staring at the thicket. Her gaze gave nothing away.

“What dead body?” Sae asked instinctively.

"The wind is carrying the smell. It's not nice."

"Where's the baby's father?" Sae asked.

"Well now..."

Chizu stared lovingly at her child. Sae asked again.

"Where's the baby's father?"

"I don't know. He disappeared two years ago."

"So whose child is it?"

"It's my child."

Chizu shifted the baby in her arms. Probably woken by this, the baby stuck out its little finger and groped Chizu's breast.

"Ah, little baba. You must be hungry."

Closing her button, Chizu went back towards the house. Sae called after with some agitation in her voice.

"Are you OK Chizu?"

"Why do you say that?"

Chizu entered the dark house. Sae stepped in as far as the doorway.

Her eyes still had to readjust to the darkness. She couldn't see even as far as the floor, but in this spectacle the traces of the light from outside still in her eyes formed the specter of a whitely ghost.

She heard a creaking sound. Chizu was sat at the entrance.

"I ask because yesterday I saw your milk and it was blood."

The phantasm from the light hadn't gone away. Sae blinked repeatedly.

"Don't be silly. It's the same thing." She could hear Chizu say.

"Milk, you know, is made from the mother's blood."

Spotches of pale light dimmed turning red. These crimson patches of light scattered around Sae shined almost like blood.

"So, yes, this child drinks blood. All babies drink blood."

Sae kept blinking but her pupils were now gradually widening with the dark.

In the same spot, in the same position, as the day before, Chizu was breast-feeding the baby. The baby moved its hand relishing the feed. It then opened its mouth to release the nipple.

Milk, proper milk, spilt from the mouth. So the red milk she had seen the day before was probably just her eyes not being adjusted to the dark.

Sae approached slowly.

"It's like a vampire."

Hearing this, Chizu smiled slightly.

The patterns on the baby sling seemed to sway and a butterfly flew out from the hem.

It was the brush-footed type again and it flapped its wings in the darkness, making an arch, just missing Sae's side.

Something had been puzzling Sae about the whole situation. She never got to see the baby's face. She couldn't see anywhere about for changing nappies.

She asked, "It's a boy, isn't it?"

"That's right."

Chizu smiled again.

"Butterflies must drink blood as well." Sae said in a voice that was a little shaky.

She came closer and stretched her finger out towards the child.

A fragment of the baby came away.

She leaped back.

The baby moved its hand and then just crumpled into small pieces.

Light brown wings flapped pulsatingly as though in silent respiration.

Butterflies. They bunched together like a clump of flowers, shaking their slender black feelers. Sae's reflection shone in each of their small glossy pupils.

With a flutter, the cluster broke up and flew up.

After some floundering, most of them of them fled off into the brightness outdoor. Some still lingered, flapping furiously in the darkness of the room.

Chizu sat quietly with one breast exposed. Her bent arm, still as though holding the baby, made the curvaceous shape of a waterfowl's neck.

Her white skin was stained with blood.

Sae ran outside.

She hopped over the loose hanging bird-protection tape into the dry rice-field. As she approached a cluster of daisies, a sickly sweet smell rose up.

Biting her lip tightly, she pushed into the thicket.

The brush-footed butterflies were there. And there was water there, of an unclear hue, gathered in a natural hollow in the ground. She saw flies. She saw ants. She saw human hair.

Sae raced back to the house.

Her breathing was hard, her throat dry. She stood before her older sister trying to catch her breath.

Two or three brush-footed butterflies had again gathered at Chizu's breast. As always, she was lovingly caressing them.

"Chizu. Let's go home."

Sae tried to force a smile.

"Come home with me."

Chizu did not look at Sae. Once more Sae smiled.

"I'm sorry if I gave out to you. I always called you stupid in those letters."

"Well, it was true enough." Chizu muttered, her head hung low. She stood up with her shoes still on. Sae took her sister's hand.

"It's OK. I'm sorry."

The hand was cold.

"Do you forgive me?"

"Yes. Let's go home."

The butterflies fled from her breast. She slowly raised her head.

There was a look of joy shining out from her glossy black pupils.

"Thank you. I was so lonely."

And then Sae could not feel Chizu's hand in her grasp anymore. Instead she felt something tickly. She looked down and saw butterflies, many of them having thorn wings from her hand.

An awful sour smell arose.

Chizu was now completely gone.

All there was now in front of Sae was once more a swarm of those now utterly familiar insects.

She could see only the scaly color of butterfly wings as they beat, some stiffly some softly, against her face in a rush passed her.

In a cluster around her, they span around the room making a sound like wind howling through grass. Hundreds of them flew out the door towards the light.

On the plank of wood covered in dust all Sae could see were her own footprints. But the black withered heads of flowers still lay scattered there.

Sae put one of them into her pocket and left.

She looked at the thicket and saw the brush-footed butterflies still prancing about.

A short bit away from them she could see long drenched hair.

And swollen fingers still gripping some silverish weapon.

What lay within the body of this abandoned woman who had killed herself? Sae had no desire to find out. But the blood that gushed from her chest must have been like a torrent of red milk. Nothing grows from a withered flower. But from a decaying corpse dissolving into the earth there are precious nutrients to feed the butterflies, the grass, and the ground.

The bird songs were as peaceful as ever as Sae continued on down the road.

When she'd left the house one butterfly had stayed with her constantly. Keeping pace with it, Sae made her descent from the hills to the village.

She entered a small cedar wood which gave her relief from the harsh glare of the sun. The air felt considerably cooler. When she emerged from the wood, the early summer rays once more scorched her face.

She couldn't see anyone around but it was obvious there were people about. She could see the roofs of a few houses. Then cardboard boxes with sweet bread and cats inside them piled up in front of the glass door of an old general store.

The slope became a tad steeper but then widened into a paved road.

Sae made her way to the road with the bus stop.

She was sweating a little. The butterfly—a brush-footed one—rested on her arm as though craving the moisture.

A car passed by. The wind changed and the butterfly flew up.

A white minivan drove by, sucking in the fluttering butterfly.

It was gone.

A fragment of it landed in a gap at the edge of the road paving.

Sae picked it up and put it in tissue paper.

The bus came.

A bus ride and a train trip and then she was home again. She opened the tissue.

The butterfly fragment had crumbled into powder and nothing of its shape remained.

But the withered flower in her pocket was still the same.

## Severed Butterfly Wings

She took a train ride, then rode a bus, then spent a little while walking up a gently sloping hill. She pulled out a postcard from a rusty mailbox with the paint peeling off. It was dirty and the letters were thoroughly blurred from weathering numerous rainstorms.

Sae blinked and looked around her.

The early summer sunlight bleached all color from the landscape, making everything look flat. There was more dimension in the calls of the skylarks flying high in the sky. The glare made Sae's eyes water, and for a while, she closed her eyes. The chirping of unknown birds was scattered near and far within the gaps in the rhythmic song of the skylarks. Only the tender grass rustled in the wind.

It was definitely humid. The air was sticky and heavy to the point of sluggishness, with the scent of sunshine. Suddenly, the sound of wings flapping whizzed loudly past Sae's ear. She opened her eyes. There was no sign of the insect that made that jarring noise. Instead, what she saw was a butterfly. Her eyes finally adjusted to the bright light, and she now saw the green grass, trees, fields, and electrical lines. The country landscape was peaceful but desolate. The road had cracks in it, and was slowly but surely succumbing to time and the encroaching grass roots. The fields were turning reddish-brown and looked abandoned. Silver tape, used to repel birds, had lost its shimmer and hung loosely wrapped around bamboo poles. Withered sunflowers turned their heads toward the ground. Beyond the overgrown heartleaf and daisies that had invaded the area, pale brown butterflies flitted about a dense thicket. Perhaps there were beautiful flowers there.

Sae turned to look behind her, still holding the old postcard in her hand, and saw a small wooden house even more dilapidated than the postcard. The air seeping through the cracks in the boards smelled of mold. The house looked particularly dark and gloomy in the early summer midday sun. She exhaled, waited for a moment, and then opened the house's clumsily built door. The light from outside spread across the wide dirt floor. Sae's older sister was sitting beyond the step in the entryway with her legs flat against the wooden floor. She smiled gently.

"Oh, you came!"

"You didn't even write back," Sae said as she let out another breath and showed her sister the postcard she was carrying.

"Which one? Let me have a look."

"Oh, forget it." Sae couldn't be bothered to take off her shoes, so she sat down on the entryway step. Her older sister did not point out her lack of manners. She just smiled blankly. "I wrote you so many postcards. When was the last time you read one?" Sae asked, shaking the legs of her jeans.

Chizu had gone missing almost four years ago. Three years ago, in the autumn, her family had found out it was because she eloped. They didn't even know the man she was with, and since they didn't know who he was, they couldn't object to the marriage. And yet Chizu eloped and only sent postcards to the younger sister she had been so close to. The unknown address written in narrow letters in pencil on the postcard baffled her parents. Even so, Chizu would send a postcard from that unknown address every now and then. Sae had only found out where her older sister lived about two months ago, and that was because nothing bad had

happened to the postcard -- the postmark on it was clear and crisp. She had gone to look for Chizu's house without telling her parents. They did know that Chizu was by herself. Her husband got another wife and children, got violent with Chizu, and took all of her money and left. Chizu unabashedly wrote all of this in her postcards.

He wasn't around anymore. Chizu lost the man she loved without her family even knowing his name or what he looked like.

"Don't you feel like coming back home?"

"After everything I've done? I couldn't." Chizu's smile was very calm. She didn't look like the woman Sae knew. Her loose black hair stuck to her sweaty neck and collarbone in waves. The front of her white blouse was wide open, showing the narrow valley between her full, firm breasts. Her skin glistened with sweat.

Sae put away the postcard, pulled a pink handkerchief out of her pocket and gently wiped the sweat from her neck. "Even though I asked you so many times in my postcards to please call me, you never did. I thought you might have killed yourself or something."

"So you *were* worried about me." Chizu moved her hand. Sae heard a dry, rustling sound. She looked down and saw dried flower heads. Chizu had spread them out on the wooden floor. It looked as though she had been working on some sort of craft project.

"I picked flowers and tried to make potpourri sachets out of them, but it didn't work. It's so humid during this time of year that they rotted before they could completely dry out."

"I didn't know you liked that kind of thing, Chizu."

"They all have different scents. You probably can't tell right now, though."

At the same time Chizu moved to stand up, a tiny voice came through the shadows in the next room.

"Oh my."

Her silhouette receded into the next room, with the pale soles of her feet showing. She left shiny black footprints. This was unmistakably due to a thin layer of dust covering the entire floor. Sae looked at the flowers scattered there. All of them, whose names she did not know, were black and shriveled. She wondered if the flowers losing their original color was what Chizu meant by "rotting".

Chizu came back holding a baby wrapped in a sling.

"This is my baby," Chizu said with a smile before Sae could ask. Sae remained silent, unable to say anything.

Chizu spread out her lemon yellow skirt over the blackened flower petals, soothed and cradled her baby in her arms, and unfastened the shell buttons on her blouse. Her breasts unhesitatingly fell out of her shirt, shining whiter than the cloth. She held her baby there. The baby opened its tiny mouth as wide as it could, and put her nipple inside. Chizu looked down dreamily at her baby.

Sae turned her head to look outside. It was quite bright outside the door. Captivated by the light, she approached the doorway, and the strong sunshine once again robbed her vision of all color. Then she felt someone standing behind her.

"Chizu, can I stay here tonight?" she asked, without looking behind her.

"If you want to," Chizu replied.

A faint natural smell, possibly the smell of milk, grazed Sae's nostrils. She gagged slightly, and left to go outside. The skylarks were still singing. Beneath the sky, its color somewhat paler than before, she walked farther down the road. Beyond the trees with both living and dead leaves were lush green wooded slopes. If she were to walk up those gentle hills, they would most definitely lead into the mountains. She did not feel like going that far, but the breeze from that direction felt nice.

All of the birds suddenly fell silent. So did the wind. Even the landscape around her was silent, as if time had stopped. Sae saw something moving within that still life, and turned to look toward it. Water that had pooled in the meadow reflected the sunlight, glittering darkly. A dozen pale brown-winged butterflies were resting on the water, almost as though someone had carefully placed them there. The butterflies folded and spread their wings slowly, as if taking breaths.

Chizu appeared silently at Sae's side. Her baby let out a tiny burp. Milk sprayed out of her exposed nipples.

Red. The milk was *red*.

Splinters of light filled Sae's eyes. She shut them tight.

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"Those are brush-footed butterflies. They drink water and take in the nutrients dissolved in it. I've heard most of them are male," Chizu explained as she spread out mattresses. The little lamp burning on the ceiling made the shadows unnecessarily dark. The stains on the sliding door made Sae uneasy.

"You know a lot of strange things, Chizu."

"Those butterflies feed off humans too, you know. They drink sweat and urine." Chizu's voice was slightly muffled. Sae heard the gentle sound of tapping on a mattress, probably the sound of Chizu lulling her baby to sleep. Sae quieted down and closed her eyes. Children are not the only ones able to fall asleep to rhythmic noise.

As she nodded off, Sae could faintly hear a woman's voice. A lullaby? No, not quite. It didn't quite sound like a woman's voice. It sounded like something flapping its wings. Its pitch rose and fell, imitating a singing voice.

Something went by in the dark.

One of those plainly colored butterflies.

Before she knew it, Sae heard the hum of more butterflies covering the floor, their pale yellow-brown wings held high, quietly folding, quietly spreading. When they were folded, the color of the wings was lighter and paler, and when they were spread, they were speckled with black. When she looked up, there were more butterflies, crowded close together, hanging down from the long, thin light switch cord on the ceiling.

Sae opened her eyes and sat up. There were no butterflies to be seen. It was a dream she'd had as she was about to fall asleep.

She ran her hand across her sweaty forehead. The sound of wings whizzed by again. In spite of the darkness, it sounded somehow like a fly in the room. Sae got into bed again, but the smell of mold kept her worried.

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The water tasted like metal. Sae was not at all hungry.

She absentmindedly washed her face and walked to the front entryway. The flowers from yesterday were scattered on the floor, even blacker and more shriveled than before. She opened the clumsily built door and let in the fresh morning breeze. She unconsciously took a deep breath. The house was filled with a sweet-sour smell unlike any other, as Chizu had feared. It dulled your sense of smell when you got used to it, but that changed once it mixed with the outside air.

It was as bright as ever outside. Sae walked out to the front of the house. She felt as though the stench and darkness were being wiped away from her skin. The breeze felt wonderful.

A butterfly rested on a clump of heartleaf along the dirt path. It was the same kind of butterfly as the ones from her dream the night before. Had there always been lots of these butterflies living in this place, or was there a sudden mass outbreak? Sae worried, scowling slightly, but chased after it anyway.

The brush-footed butterflies were gathered on the same thicket as yesterday. She then realized that her older sister was standing beside her.

"There's nobody coming," Sae said, still facing ahead.

"Right," Chizu replied.

"Isn't there anyone else around?"

"There are no houses farther down this road, so people very rarely come this far."

Chizu held her baby at her chest once again. It was the quietest infant Sae had ever known. The sling holding the baby looked to be sewn together from little scraps of fabric, and had a colorful design. In contrast, Chizu's clothes and face were rather devoid of color.

Sae continued to follow the butterfly with her eyes. It arced once or twice in the air, then disappeared down into the thicket. She thought there were flowers there, but it could also be water. "But if it's flowers, I want to have a look," Sae thought. She started to walk toward the thicket, but Chizu stopped her.

"Where are you going?"

"Over there."

"I don't think you should do that."

"Why not?"

"That's not just water over there." Chizu ruffled her black hair. "I told you, those butterflies don't just gather around water because they need water. They want the nutrients dissolved in it. They feed on corpses, too."

Sae looked at the thicket again, then turned back to look at her older sister's face. Chizu was staring at the thicket. Sae could not gather anything more from the look on Chizu's face.

"What kind of corpses?" Sae asked before she could stop herself.

"You can smell it on the wind. It's disgusting," said Chizu.

"Where did your baby's father go?" Sae asked.

"No idea." Chizu gazed lovingly at her baby.

"Where did your baby's father go?" Sae asked again.

"I don't know. He left two years ago and that's the end of it."

“Then whose baby is that?”

“Mine,” Chizu said, hugging the child again. The baby awoke from being jostled around, and grasped at Chizu’s breast with its tiny fingers.

“There, there. You’re hungry, aren’t you?”

Chizu began to walk back to the house, unfastening the shell buttons on her blouse. “Hey, Chizu. Are you all right?”

Sae’s voice was tense as she followed her older sister.

“Now why would you ask something like that?”

Chizu entered the dark house, but Sae stopped at the doorway. Her eyes, now acclimated to the light outside, couldn’t readjust to the darkness. The traces of light from outside left pale ghostlike patches in her vision, and she couldn’t even tell where she was standing. She heard a creaking noise. It sounded like Chizu had sat down in the entryway.

“Because yesterday,” Sae said, “your milk looked like blood.”

The ghosts of light still wouldn’t go away. Sae blinked her eyes over and over.

“Don’t be silly. They’re the same thing,” she heard Chizu say. “Breast milk is made from a mother’s blood.” The pale patches of light now darkened and turned to red. The splotches of red scattered across Sae’s field of vision glittered and looked all the more like blood. “So my baby drinks blood, too. All babies drink blood.”

Sae blinked her eyes repeatedly. Her pupils finally adjusted to the darkness. Chizu was nursing again in exactly the same place, in exactly the same position as the day before. The baby’s greedy hands made tiny movements, and eventually, they let go of her nipple. Milk trickled out of its mouth. Maybe it only looked red because her eyes hadn’t completely adjusted. Sae slowly and quietly approached the baby.

“Like a little vampire,” Sae said. Chizu heard this and smiled faintly. The design on the sling appeared to flutter. Out of the hem flew a brush-footed butterfly. It flew past Sae in an arc through the quiet darkness. She suddenly realized something – she had not yet seen the baby’s face, or Chizu changing its diaper.

“Your baby is a boy, right?” Sae asked.

“Right,” Chizu replied, smiling again.

“Those butterflies must drink blood, too, right?” Her voice quivered slightly.

Sae got even closer to the baby, and reached toward him. Pieces of him began to peel off and fly away. The baby moved his hand, which immediately fell apart. Their pale brown wings spread, and then folded again, as if breathing softly. The bouquet-like swarm of butterflies twitched their skinny black antennae, and Sae’s reflection shone in every one of their tiny, glossy eyes. The bouquet of butterflies scattered all at once into the air. Most of them got lost and disappeared into the light outside, but a few still fluttered here and there in the darkness indoors.

Chizu sat silently, one breast still exposed. Her arm, bent like a swan’s neck, still appeared to cradle her baby. Blood ran down her pale white skin.

Sae ran outside. She jumped over the bird-repelling tape and followed the tracks leading into the parched fields. She got close to a thicket of daisies, and a cloying smell rose up that made her heart sick. She closed her lips tightly, and parted the dense vegetation. A swarm of

brush-footed butterflies was there. There was water of an indescribable color pooled in a natural basin. There were flies there too, and ants. And hair.

Sae dashed back to the house. It was hard to breathe, and her throat was dry. She breathed even harder as she stood in front of Chizu. Two or three brush-footed butterflies had returned to rest on Chizu's chest. As always, Chizu cradled them lovingly in her hands.

"Chizu, let's go home," Sae said, forcing a smile. "Come back with me."

Chizu didn't look up. Sae smiled again. "I'm sorry for always blaming you for what happened. And writing senseless things in my letters."

"But it's all true," Chizu mumbled, still looking down. Sae walked into the house still wearing her shoes, and took Chizu's hand. "I can't take it anymore. I'm sorry." Her hand was cold. "Can you forgive me?"

"Yes. Now let's go home."

The butterflies flew away from Chizu's chest. She slowly looked upward. Her dark eyes were clearly smiling.

"Thank you. I was so lonely."

Sae didn't feel as though she held Chizu's hand anymore. Something tickled her palm. She looked down and saw several butterflies. There was a small cut on her hand, and the wings of one butterfly had been ripped off and crushed. A sour smell rushed into her nostrils.

There was no trace of Chizu anywhere.

The clump now before Sae's eyes was a swarm of ordinary insects. The color of their bodies stained her field of vision. Their light, stiff wings hit her face and hands over and over as they flew past. They chased Sae around the house, making a sound like grass rustling in the wind, then several hundred of them escaped through the doorway, making their way toward the light. Sae could see nothing on the dusty wooden floor, save for her footprints and the blackened, wilted flowers still scattered there. Sae picked up one of the flowers and put it in her pocket, then left the house.

She looked over to the thicket, where the brush-footed butterflies were frolicking again. The hair she had seen soaking in the water was long. Bloated hands still tightly gripped a silver weapon. Sae wondered whether that abandoned, suicidal woman had been pregnant. She didn't have the desire to make sure, but she had little doubt that plenty of blood, plenty of red milk had flowed from her breasts. Wilted flowers cannot give life to anything, but with the nutrients in her decaying, dissolving body, she was able to give life to the earth, the plants, and the butterflies. The birds sung as peacefully as ever.

Sae walked down the hill. Ever since she'd left the house, one of the butterflies had been following her. Keeping her step with the butterfly's pace, she walked down from the hills toward town. She entered a small grove of cedar trees, out of the painfully bright sun. The air quickly became very cool. As soon as she walked back out, the early summer sun once again warmed her face. She did not see anyone around, but it still felt as though someone was there. She could see the roofs of several houses. She saw snack bread and a cat inside cardboard boxes piled in front of the glass door of a run-down general store.

The hill got a little steeper and the paved road widened. Sae reached the road with the bus stop. She was sweating faintly. The butterfly rested on her arm, wanting a bit of water. A car passed by, changing the direction of the wind, and the butterfly blew off Sae's arm. A white truck came down the road, sucking the brush-footed butterfly into its path. The

butterfly disappeared. A few minutes later, she saw its remains lying on the side of the asphalt road. Sae picked them up and wrapped them in a tissue.

At long last, the bus arrived. She rode the bus, then rode the train, arrived home, and unfolded the tissue. The remains of the butterfly had completely lost their original shape and disintegrated, but the wilted flower in her pocket still looked the same as it always had.

## Fragment of a Butterfly

Sae rode the train, the bus, climbed a short, gentle slope and took a postcard from a rusted, peeling postbox. Frequent showers had stained the text illegible.

Blinking several times, Sae cast her gaze across her surroundings.

All color had been lost to the early summer sun; the landscape appeared flat. A skylark's cry soaring through the sky appeared more real than the view in front of her.

Tears welled in her eyes at the radiance of the sun; she closed them for a moment. Between the deft songs of the skylark intermingled sparse twitter of anonymous birds near and far. She listened to the wind rustling as it caught in the soft grass.

The humidity was oppressive. The air that carried with it the smell of the sun felt heavy and languid.

Suddenly, a growl of wings passed by. Sae opened her eyes. She saw no sign of the insect that had made the intense noise. Instead, all she saw were butterflies.

As her eyes adjusted to the light, images of electrical wires, fields, trees and grass resolved on her retina. She saw a peaceful, yet desolate provincial scene. The cratered pavement was slowly losing its struggle against time and verdure. Fields of reddish-brown soil looked abandoned. Silver tape strung up to protect crops from birds hung loose and discolored from slanting poles of bamboo. A faded sunflower cast its head toward the ground.

On the far side of a contagion of daisies, and some lizard tail well past its prime, brown butterflies arched to and fro around thick, verdant greenery.

Maybe flowers were blooming over there?

Sae turned, still holding the old postcard. A wooden bungalow stood before her, more perished than the postcard held in her hand. An air that stank of mould escaped from between lean wooden planks; the house appeared dark in the midday sun.

Sae breathed out and, hesitating, opened the ill-fitting door.

Light spread onto a large earthen entranceway. Sitting on the raised wooden floor across from the door, Sae's elder sister smiled, wanly.

"Oh, you're here."

"You never replied." Sae held the postcard up to her sister and let out another breathe.

"Which one is it? Let me see."

"Stop it."

Not bothering to remove her shoes, Sae sat on the edge of the raised wooden floor. Her sister smiled, simply, and offered no kind of apology.

"I've written so many times. How many did you read?"

Sae's legs juddered in her jeans.

It was four years since Chidzu had left home, and it was three years last fall since they learned that Chidzu had eloped. At the time, the family had no idea whom Chidzu was seeing, and because of it had never objected. Nevertheless, she has eloped, and left

behind her only postcards sent to her younger sister with whom she had once been close. The postcards came written in fine pencil, with a sender's address that was obviously a fake. It left her mother and father at wit's end.

She continued sending the occasional postcard with the same fake address.

It was just two months ago that Sae had discovered her older sister's whereabouts. A legible postmark had been left on one of the postcards. Since finding this clue Sae has secretly searched for her sister's whereabouts, saying nothing of it to her parents. She knew Chidzu lived alone. She knew the man already had a wife and child elsewhere. And she knew he had turned violent then run off with all of his and Chidzu's money.

Chidzu had openly written of everything in her postcards.

- That man isn't here anymore

Chidzu's lover was gone for good and Sae had never even seen his face or learned his name.

"Don't you want to come home now?" Sae said.

"It's a bit late for that." Chidzu's smile was calm, like that of a stranger.

Chidzu's black hair, left untied, clung to her moist skin in waves from her nape to her collarbone. She wore a white blouse with a wide décolletage that showed off a deep valley between two large breasts. Her skin glistened in the light. Sae put the postcard away and took out a peach-colored handkerchief in its place. She briefly wiped her own neck. It was covered in sweat.

"I asked so many times for you to phone but you never did. I thought you'd killed yourself."

"Thank you for caring."

As Chidzu moved her hand Sae heard a dry, rustling sound. Looking down she saw the wooden floor was covered in withered flower heads. Chidzu had spread them out and seemed engaged in some kind of fine handiwork.

"I gathered the flowers to make scented bags, but it hasn't work out. It's too humid this time of year, the flowers spoil before they dry." She said.

"I didn't know you did that."

Chidzu motioned to stand. Just then a thin voice came from the behind the stained, papered sliding doors.

"There, there." Muttered Chidzu.

Sae watched her sister's pale white feet disappear into the dark house. The footsteps remained imprinted on the surface of the wooden floor, shining in black. They betrayed the fact that the entire surface of the wooden floor was covered in a thin layer of dust.

Sae looked down at the scattered flowers. She did not recognize them. They were all withered into a black, colorlessness. This must have been what Chidzu meant when she said the flowers had spoiled.

Chidzu reappeared holding a baby swathed in a nursery coat.

"My son." She said, smiling, before her sister could say a word. Sae stood speechless.

Chidzu spread her lemon-colored skirt over the blackened petals and, comforting the child with motherly sounds, undid the mother of pearl buttons on the front of her blouse. Brighter than white cloth, her breast suddenly spilled out from the blouse. As Chidzu rocked the small child towards her breasts the baby's mouth gaped urgently, taking a nipple within its mouth. Chidzu looked down upon her child in rapt fascination.

Sae turned away. On the other side of the entranceway door it seemed perfectly bright. As if attracted to it, Sae moved towards the door. The harsh daylight once again robbed all color from her sight. She heard her sister getting up behind her.

"Chidzu. Can I stay the night?" Sae asked without turning.

"If you want to." Her sister replied.

An organic smell, most likely milk, swept up into Sae's nasal cavity. Feeling slightly nauseous, Sae stepped out of the house. The skylark continued its song while the color of the sky seemed thinner than before. Sae walked further along the path under the same thinning sky. Past trees and withered branches she saw the deep green of *satoyama*, the verdant domain between mountain foothills and arable flat land. If she wandered carelessly on she would surely reach the mountain. Sae preferred not to go that far. And yet, the breeze that came from the mountain felt so pleasant to her.

Suddenly, the birdsong stopped and the breeze disappeared. The landscape became quiet around her as if time stood still. Sae's eyes caught sight of the only object moving in the static diorama around her. Some water that had collected in a gap in the grass shone obsidian in the midday sun. At the water were settled ten or more butterflies, all with identical light brown wings. The butterflies rested there as if arranged; their wings moving slowly as if breathing. Silently, Chidzu appeared beside Sae. A small amount of milk was overflowing from her child's mouth, and still more escaped from Chidzu's exposed breast.

It was red. Her milk was red.

A splinter of sunlight entered Sae's eyes and shut them tight.

\*\*blank line

"They're brush-footed butterflies. They take nutrients from the water. Someone told me they're mostly males." Said Chidzu, lying on the futon next to Sae.

A night-light shining from the ceiling made the shadows appear all the darker. Sae noticed the stains on the papered sliding doors.

"You seem to know a lot about them."

"They gather around people, you see. And sweat and urine too." Said Chidzu.

Chidzu's voice was dull as she spoke.

Sae listened to the gentle sound of Chidzu patting the futon rhythmically. Sae imagined Chidzu comforting the baby to sleep. She shut her eyes and felt herself being lulled to sleep by the rhythmic sound.

The faint noise of a woman's voice reached Sae's ears. Was it a lullaby? No, it was not a lullaby. It was not even a woman's voice. It was the growl of insect wings, rising and lowering in tone, mimicking a singing voice.

Something passed by in the dark.

It was just a butterfly.

And then, in an instant, the number of butterflies swelled to cover the whole floor. The room bustled with yellow and brown wings standing to attention, then closing and opening in total silence. The wings turned pale as they closed and revealed black spots as they opened. Sae looked up to find the light pull hanging from the ceiling bristling with butterflies, poised in a cluster.

Sae awoke. There were no butterflies. It had been a dream.

She stroke her forehead; it was covered in sweat. Once more Sae heard the growl of insect wings around her. In the darkness she saw it was a fly in the room. Sae nestled back down into the futon, again noticing the smell of mould in the air.

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The tap water tasted of iron. Sae had no appetite at all. After giving her face a cursory wash she stepped out into the entranceway. The flowers from yesterday still covered the floor in a single layer. They were withered black. Sae pulled the ill-fitting door open to a pleasant morning breeze that entered the house. Unconsciously, she breathed a deep lungful of air.

Just as had bothered her sister, the house overflowed with a distinctive, sweet-sour odor. Once used to it the smell dulled your own senses, though when you stepped outside your sense of smell returned.

Outside, the world overflowed with light.

Sae stepped in front of the house. It felt like the odor and darkness clinging to her skin was being washed away. The stirring breeze was pleasant. She saw a clump of heartleaf leading to a path between the rice fields. Some butterflies had alighted there; they were the same kind as in last night's dream. Sae wondered if it was a colony, or if they had gathered here by chance. Curious, Sae followed the butterflies. Some of the brush-footed type flew to and fro above the same thicket she had noticed the day before.

Sae noticed her sister stood beside her.

"There's no one around here." Said Sae, still staring ahead.

"I know."

"Don't people live here?"

"There aren't any homes at this end of the path. Hardly anyone comes along here."

The baby was at her sister's breast. The child was quieter than any newborn Sae had known. Its nursery coat seemed patched together from a variety of odds and ends - its pattern was garish. Compared to the pattern of the nursery coat her sister's face and skin appeared almost colorless.

Sae's eyes followed one of the butterflies. It described an arc through the air once, twice and settled down into the distant thicket. Maybe there were flowers there, or water perhaps. Sae decided that if there were flowers she wanted to see them, but a voice stopped her as she started off.

"Where are you going?"

"Over there."

"You shouldn't."

"Why not?"

"There's water... and something else."

Chidzu shook her black hair gently.

"I told you, they don't gather at water for the water - they gather there for the nutrients dissolved in the water. They gather around dead things too, you see."

Sae looked towards the thicket, then returned to look at her sister. Chidzu was staring out toward the thicket. Sae failed to interpret anything in her sister's gaze.

"What kind of dead thing?" Sae said without thinking.

"You can smell it on the wind - something terrible."

"Where's the baby's father? What happened to him?" Sae asked.

Chidzu stared tenderly at her child.

"What happened to the baby's father? Where is he?" Sae asked again.

"I don't know. He left two years ago."

"So the baby..."

"The baby is mine." Chidzu again embraced her child. Perhaps awoken by the embrace, the baby's fingers groped toward Chidzu's breast.

"There, there. You're hungry, aren't you?" Chidzu returned to the house, unbuttoning her blouse. An excited voice followed her.

"Chidzu. Are you all right?"

"Why do you ask?" Replied Chidzu.

Chidzu walked back into the dark house. Sae stopped at the doorway. Her eyes were accustomed to the light outside. She had lost sight of the ground below her while remnants of the brightness from outside formed of a pale spirit in the doorway. Sae noticed a creaking noise. Her sister had sat down.

"Why do I ask? Yesterday your milk looked like blood."

The phantom in the light failed to dissipate. Sae blinked several times again.

"Don't be silly. They're one and the same." Chidzu said.

"Milk comes from the mother's blood."

Pale atoms of light dimmed and turned red in Sae's eyes. The red light scattered and fell, glistening like blood.

"You see, all children drink their mother's blood. This one is the same."

Sae continued blinking. Finally, her pupils adjusted to the darkness. Chidzu sat nursing her baby in the same place and same position as yesterday. The baby's eager hand moved fitfully. After a while the baby released its hold on the breast and drops of milk spilled from the baby's mouth.

Maybe it was because her vision had not yet adjusted? Maybe that was why those drops of milk appeared red? Quietly, Sae drew nearer.

"It's a vampire."

Chidzu laughed a little.

The pattern on the nursing coat appeared to quiver. A butterfly flew out from under the hem. In the dark silence the butterfly beat its wings and flew through the air, passing Sae. Sae thought of something. She had never seen the baby's face. She had never even seen its nappy changed.

"He's a boy, isn't he?" Sae asked her sister.

"That's right." Chidzu laughed again.

"I suppose butterflies drink blood too."

Sae's voice trembled a little as she stepped nearer and put a finger out toward the child. A fragment of the child peeled off and took flight. The child moved its hand, and the whole hand collapsed upon itself. Light brown insect wings opened, and closed as if breathing silently. Butterflies' thin black antennae waved. They gathered together like a bunch of flowers. Sae's image was reflected in a crowd of small, glossy pupils.

Quivering, the bunch of flowers collapsed in on itself and took flight. Bewildered, many of the butterflies escaped into the daylight outside, while some remained inside to flutter in the gloom. Chidzu sat in silence with dewdrops of blood resting on her breast. The shape of her arm was curved like a waterfowl's neck, still bearing the image of her baby.

Blood spread across pure white skin.

Sae ran outside.

She ran past the loose, metallic tape protecting nonexistent crops and across the dry ruins of the fields. Nearing a clump of daisies a sweet odor arose and a malignant smell spread through her lungs.

Biting down painfully on her bottom lip, Sae parted the furthest thicket.

There was water and there were gathered brush-footed butterflies. She could not make out the color of the water but it filled a natural depression in the ground. There she saw flies, more insects, and human hair.

Sae ran back to the house and stood in front of her sister. Sae was out of breath and her throat was dry as it gasped for air. A few of the brush-footed butterflies had returned to alight on Chidzu's chest. Chidzu cradled them tenderly in her arms.

"Let's go home, Chidzu"

Sae forced herself to smile.

"Come on, let's go."

Chidzu looked away. Sae smiled again.

"I'm sorry - for blaming you - for what I said in the postcards."

"You should be." Whispered Chidzu, her face cast down towards the ground. Sae left the entranceway leaving her shoes on and held her sister's hand.

"I'm sorry. I really am."

The hand was cold.

"You forgive me?" Said Chidzu.

"Yes, lets go home."

A butterfly escaped from Chidzu's breast. Her head lifted slowly. Chidzu's black pupils smiled lucidly.

"Thank you. I... I was lonely."

The physical sense of Chidzu's hand receded from Sae's grasp leaving a tickling in her palm. Opening it she found several butterflies there. Some were crushed and broken.

A sour odor reached her nostrils. Chidzu's shape had already disappeared. All Sae could see now was a mass that was clearly insectine. Her field of view became submerged in the color of insect scales. As they passed, innumerable hard, light wings buffeted Sae's hands and face. Some clung to her, and some flew back through the house.

As hundreds flew towards the door and out into the light they made the sound of wind catching in soft grass.

Sae looked down. Only her own footsteps were left in the dust-covered wooden flooring. To them lay the black and shriveled flower heads, scattered across the floor.

Sae took one of the shriveled flower heads and left the house behind her.

Going over to the thicket, some brush-footed butterflies were playing there once more. On the other far side of that same thicket long hair lay sodden in the water. Swollen fingers held firmly onto a shining weapon. There seemed to be something living inside the dead body of the forsaken woman; the forsaken woman who had killed herself.

Sae did not wish to go any closer; she saw a large amount of blood - or red milk - must have been spilled. Faded blossoms bear no fruit; and yet the decomposing body nourished butterflies, grasses and soil alike with its precious nutrients.

The birds sang on peacefully.

Sae walked from the mountain and toward the village. A single butterfly stayed with Sae since she left the house. As she set off for home her footsteps matched the flight of the butterfly. Sae walked into a copse of cedar out from the burning sunlight. The air cooled suddenly and, as she left the copse, lit her face once again. Though Sae could see no one around her some signs of life distinguished themselves. Roofs came into view as she walked. Outside the glass door of an old general store were stacked cardboard boxes. Inside were sweet buns and a cat, sat silently.

The slope became steeper and the paved path widened out. Sae stepped out onto the road with a bus stop. A thin film of sweat covered her. As if needing the moisture, the butterfly landed on her arm. A car passed along the road.

The wind changed and the butterfly took flight. A small, white truck passed by, catching the butterfly in its wake. The brush-footed butterfly disappeared from Sae's sight. Then, a moment later, a fragment of an insect wing fell onto the verge beside the asphalt. Sae picked it up and wrapped it in tissue paper. Finally, a bus came.

Sae rode the bus, the train and arrived home. She opened out the tissue. The piece of

insect wing had disintegrated into a shapeless powder, but the shape of the withered flower head remained unbroken.

# Butterfly Fragment

Kamon Nanami

After a jolting train journey, a bus ride, and a gentle uphill walk, she took a postcard from the rusty, paint-cracked letterbox. Soaked time and again by the rain, the ink had run, turning the writing into a dirty mess.

Sae blinked, and then turned her gaze to her surroundings.

The scene looked utterly flat, the colours leached by the early summer sun. The voice of the skylark singing high in the sky possessed more depth.

The glare brought tears to her eyes, blurring her vision, and she closed her eyelids for a few moments. From far off and close by, the intermittent calls of unfamiliar birds coalesced in the gaps between the skylark's airy bursts of song. The wind, singling out only the pliant grass, made a rustling sound.

It felt fairly humid. Permeated with the scent of sunlight, the air was oppressively muggy, even listless.

When something suddenly flew past her ear with a loud humming sound, Sae opened her eyes.

There was no sign of the insect that had made the menacing noise. Instead, she could see a butterfly.

Acclimatised at last to the light, her eyes took in the green of the grass and the green trees, the fields and the electricity cables. A tranquil but run-down country scene.

Here and there the cracked pavement was being swallowed up by grass roots. The fields, showing their reddish-brown soil, looked as though they had been abandoned. Silver tape meant to scare away birds had lost its glitter and, hanging slack, had tangled itself around a leaning bamboo pole.

A spindly sunflower faced downwards. Beyond a patch of dokudami that had finished flowering, and some haughty fleabane, a brown butterfly fluttered back and forth within the depths of a thick clump of greenery.

There must be some nice flowers there.

The old postcard in her hand, Sae turned around. Before her stood a single-storey wooden house in a worse state of repair than the postcard.

Mouldy-smelling air escaped from the gaps between the thin weatherboards. The early summer noon made the house look particularly sombre.

With a sigh, and slightly hesitant, she opened the badly-fitted door.

Daylight fell across a broad earthen-floored entrance.

In the room beyond, slumped on the raised wooden floor, her elder sister smiled faintly.

‘Oh, you’ve come!’

‘You never reply.’

Letting out another sigh, Sae showed her sister the postcard.

‘Let me see which one it is.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

Not bothering to take off her shoes, Sae sat on the wooden step that separated her sister’s room from the entrance. Unapologetic, her sister merely laughed, her face pallid.

‘I wrote so many cards. When did you stop reading them?’

Sae shook the bottom of her jeans.

Chizu had gone missing about four years ago. It was three years ago, in autumn, that they found out she had eloped.

No one knew who the man was. Since they didn’t know him, the family wasn’t opposed to the relationship. But Chizu ran away all the same, sending only postcards to the younger sister with whom she got on so well.

The address written in thin pencil strokes was made up. Their mother and father were at their wits’ end. Nevertheless, from time to time she had continued to write from her false address.

They had discovered her whereabouts only two months ago. All it took was a clearly legible postmark.

Without telling her parents, Sae began to look for Chizu’s house. She knew that her sister was living by herself. The man, who had a wife and children, had turned violent, and had left her, taking her money.

Unabashed, Chizu had told them everything in her postcards.

– He’s not here any more.

Chizu’s lover had vanished without her sister knowing his name, or seeing his face.

‘Don’t you want to come home?’

‘It’s too late now.’

Chizu smiled gently. She seemed a complete stranger to her sister.

Fanning out in a wave, her unbound hair stuck to her shoulders and her neck, damp with perspiration. A white blouse clothed her broad bosom. Her cleavage showed between ample,

taut breasts.

The perspiration made her sister's skin glow.

Putting away the postcard, Sae took out a pink handkerchief. She wiped it delicately along her own neck, which she had noticed was also damp.

'I don't know how many times I wrote, asking you to phone me. As I never heard back, I thought you must have killed yourself.'

'You were worried about me.'

Her elder sister moved her hands, making a dry, rasping sound. When Sae looked, she could see some dried flower stems. In what seemed a trifling piece of handiwork, Chizu had spread the flowers on the wooden floor.

'I've been gathering flowers, trying to make scent sachets. But it doesn't work. It's too damp at this time of year, and the flowers rot before they dry up.'

'I didn't know you were interested in things like that.'

'There are different types of fragrance. Maybe you wouldn't understand.'

Chizu made as if to stand up. At the same moment, a feeble cry came from the shadows behind the soot-stained fusuma.

'There, there.'

She disappeared into the shadows, exposing the pale soles of her feet.

Her footprints remained on the floor. Since only these revealed a black sheen, the floor must be coated with a thin layer of dust.

Sae looked at the scattered flowers. All black and shrivelled, she didn't know what kind they were. As her sister had said, no doubt they had lost their colour because they had rotted.

Chizu came back, cradling a baby swaddled in a short padded coat, of the kind nursing mothers wear.

'It's my baby,' said Chizu with a smile, anticipating Sae's question.

Sae remained silent.

Spreading her pale yellow skirt over the black petals, and making little noises as she dandled the baby, Chizu undid the mother of pearl buttons on her blouse.

Gleaming more brightly than the fabric of her blouse, her breast promptly spilled out. When Chizu brought the baby to her breast, the infant opened its small mouth with all its might and started suckling.

Abstractedly, Chizu looked down at the child. Sae, averting her gaze, looked outside. The world beyond the sliding door was intensely bright. As if drawn to it, she went over to the door, and once again she saw that all of the colours had been consumed by the strong sunlight.

She felt someone standing behind her.

‘Sis, do you mind if I stay the night?’ she asked, without turning around.

‘If you want to, go ahead.’

An organic smell, what you might call the smell of mother’s milk, wafted into her nostrils. Feeling slightly nauseous, Sae went outside.

The skylark was still singing.

The sky looked a little paler than before.

Beneath the sky, she continued walking up the road.

There were some dead branches in the trees, beyond which there were deep green wooded hills. If she kept walking gently uphill, she would definitely reach the mountains.

She didn’t feel like going as far as that. But the breeze from the mountains felt good.

The birds suddenly fell silent. The wind dropped too. It was so quiet, it seemed that even the landscape had come to a standstill.

When something in that frozen image moved, she shifted her gaze.

A black glitter reflected from a pool of water that had formed in a hollow in the grass. Around the pool sat a dozen or more butterflies with pale brown wings.

It was as if they had been arranged thus. Moving their wings slowly, the butterflies looked as though they were breathing.

Her sister quietly came and stood beside her. The baby gave a little burp. The milk that it had not managed to swallow spurted onto her still exposed breast.

Red.

The milk looked red.

When a splinter of light entered her eye, Sae screwed her eyelids shut.

\*\* blank line

‘They’re fritillaries. They drink water, and absorb the nutrients dissolved in it. Apparently they’re nearly all males.’

So said Chizu as she laid out the bedding.

The glow from the tiny lightbulb on the ceiling only made the shadows darker. Sae was bothered by the stains on the fusuma.

‘You know a lot about some peculiar things.’

‘Well, the little dears flock around people. They flock around sweat and urine too, you know.’

Her sister's voice sounded a little moist.

Sae heard the sound of a futon being gently patted. Chizu was probably playing with the baby as it lay beside its mother.

Sae kept quiet and closed her eyes. It wasn't only children who began to feel sleepy when they heard a steady rhythm.

A faint woman's voice reached her drowsy ears.

A lullaby?

No, it wasn't. It didn't sound like a woman's voice.

It was some kind of humming sound. When the hum began fluctuating, it sounded like someone singing.

Something went past in the darkness.

A plain-looking butterfly.

No sooner had she seen it than there was a commotion of butterflies which, covering the floor, raised their yellow and light brown wings straight up, quietly closing them. And then quietly opening them.

Wings closed, they created a pale glow; open, they dappled the air black. Glancing up, Sae saw that the butterflies had covered the light-cord too, turning it into a tassel.

Opening her eyes wide, Sae sat up.

She couldn't see any butterflies anywhere.

It was just a dream that she had been having as she drifted into sleep.

She wiped her damp forehead. Again, she heard a humming sound.

There must be a fly, she thought, even though it's so dark.

Slipping back into her futon, she noticed a mouldy smell.

\*\*blank line

The tap water tasted metallic.

Sae didn't feel the slightest bit hungry.

After splashing some water on her face, she went out towards the front door, where yesterday's flowers, now a little blackened and shrivelled, lay scattered as before.

When she managed to slide open the sticking door, a lovely morning breeze entered the house.

Involuntarily, she took a deep breath.

Just as her sister had feared, the house was filled with a distinctive odour, sour but sweet.

If you got used to it, it would blunt your sense of smell. But if you went out, you would notice it again. The outside was saturated with light.

Sae went out. Standing in front of the house, she felt as though the smell and the darkness were being brushed away. The wind rustled pleasantly.

A clump of dokudami led towards the path through the fields. That's where the butterflies were. The same kind as the ones in last night's dream. It must be where they gather, or perhaps they all suddenly materialized there, out of the blue.

Despite her slightly furrowed brow, she went in pursuit of the butterflies. The fritillaries were flitting above the same thicket as yesterday.

She noticed that her sister was beside her. Looking straight ahead, Sae said:

'No one ever comes here.'

'That's right.'

'Isn't there anyone else around?'

'There are no more houses up the road. So people hardly ever come.'

The baby, swaddled in the short coat, was nursing again. It was quieter than any other baby she knew. The coat's bright pattern suggested that it had been patched together from leftover pieces of fabric. Her sister's clothes and her complexion looked colourless by comparison.

Sae followed a butterfly with her gaze. It traced an arc, and then another, before disappearing into the thicket.

There might be some flowers there, but perhaps there's water there instead. If there were flowers, I'd like to see them, thought Sae. As she started to walk over, Chizu's voice stopped her.

'Where are you going?'

'Over there.'

'I don't think you should.'

'Why not?'

'Because there's only water there.'

Her elder sister shook out her black hair.

'But like you said. The reason butterflies gather beside water isn't just because they're thirsty. They're after the nutrients that have dissolved in the water. That's why they swarm around dead bodies.'

Once more Sae looked at the thicket, and then turned her gaze back to her sister. Chizu was staring at the thicket. The look in her eyes gave nothing away.

‘What dead body?’ she asked, despite herself.

‘You can smell it on the wind. It’s horrible.’

‘The baby’s father, where did he go?’ inquired Sae.

‘Hmm.’

Chizu looked affectionately at her child. Sae tried again:

‘The baby’s father, where did he go?’

‘I’ve no idea. He’s been gone two years.’

‘So how do you explain the baby?’

‘It’s my baby.’

Cradling the child, Chizu shifted her arms. The baby woke as she lifted him higher, and with its little fingers it fumbled for the breast.

‘There, there. Who’s a hungry baby?’

She undid her buttons as she walked back to the house. Her words trailing behind her, she sounded tense.

‘Hey, sis. Are you okay?’

‘What do you say that for?’

Chizu entered the dark house. Sae paused at the threshold.

Her eyes, used to the sun, couldn’t adjust to the gloom. As she tried to work out where the floor was, the little daylight that trickled inside transformed into a ghostly will o’ the wisp.

She heard a creaking sound. Her sister seemed to be sitting on the wooden step inside.

‘Because yesterday, your milk looked like blood.’

The glowing apparition was still there. Sae blinked, again and again.

‘You silly thing. They’re the same.’

Sae could hear her voice.

‘Don’t you see, a mother’s milk, it’s made from her blood.’

The pale ball of light grew dimmer, and turned red. The light dissolved before her eyes into red drops, which gleamed just like blood.

‘That’s why this baby drinks blood. All babies drink blood.’

Sae kept blinking. At last her pupils dilated, adjusting to the gloom.

In the same place as yesterday, in the same posture, her sister was breastfeeding her baby. The ravenous child’s hands moved a little. After a while, it let go of the nipple.

Milk dribbled from its mouth. I suppose it looked red because my eyes hadn't acclimatised, thought Sae.

She quietly drew closer.

'It's like a vampire.'

The words brought a faint smile to her sister's lips.

The pattern on the short coat looked as though it was trembling. From the hemline, butterflies flew out.

Spreading its wings in the still darkness, a fritillary traced an arc and then flew past Sae.

Sae had already noticed something.

She hadn't seen the baby's face. Or seen its nappy changed. She asked:

'The baby, it's a boy, right?'

'Yes it is.'

Again her sister smiled.

'Butterflies drink blood too, don't they?'

Sae couldn't help the slight quiver in her voice. Drawing nearer, she stretched out a finger towards the baby.

A piece of it peeled off.

It flew away.

When the child moved its hand, the hand crumbled.

As if breathing gently, pale brown wings opened. And closed.

Arranged like the petals of a flower, butterflies extended their slender, black antennae, reflecting Sae's image in their small, lustrous eyes.

Flaking away, the petals likewise crumbled and flew off.

Bewildered, almost all of them vanished into the brightness outside. Even so, there was still a hectic fluttering in the dark interior.

Chizu sat quietly, one of her breasts exposed. She still appeared to be cradling the child, her arm curved like the neck of a waterfowl.

Her white skin was soaked with blood.

Sae ran outside.

Stepping over the loose bird-scaring tape, she walked across the dried-out old field. When she approached the clump of fleabane, a sweet but repulsive scent rose on the air.

Biting her lip hard, she parted the thick growth.

There was a flock of fritillaries. There was water. Peculiar-coloured water had accumulated in a hollow in the ground. There were flies too. And ants. And some hair.

She ran back to the house.

Out of breath, her throat was dry. As she stood in front of her sister she was still struggling to breathe.

Two or three fritillaries had returned to Chizu's breast. As before, she cradled them affectionately with her hand.

'Sis, let's go home.'

Sae forced herself to smile.

'Let's go back together.'

Chizu didn't look at her sister. Sae smiled again.

'I'm sorry for being so critical. Calling you stupid in my letters.'

'But it's true,' muttered Chizu, her eyes cast down.

Without taking off her shoes, Sae stepped into the room and took Chizu's hand in her own.

'It's all right. I'm sorry.'

The hand was cold.

'Will you forgive me?'

'Yes. Let's go.'

The butterflies flew off from her breast. Chizu raised her head slowly.

Her black eyes twinkled brightly.

'Thank you. I was so lonely.'

Losing the sensation of holding her sister's hand, Sae felt something tickling her palm. When she looked, she saw a small butterfly.

Damaged by her hand, part of the butterfly's wing had broken off and crumbled.

There was a putrid smell.

Her sister no longer possessed a shadow.

The mass before her consisted of the insects she was now sick of seeing.

Everything within sight turned the colour of butterfly scales. Hard but light wings tapped against her face and hands as they flew by.

Coiling around her, they made a circuit of the house, and then, emitting a sound like wind rustling through grass, they flew out in their hundreds through the open door, heading towards the light.

Only Sae's footprints showed on the dust-coated wooden floor. But the black shrivelled flowerheads remained where they had been scattered.

She placed one of them in her pocket, and left the house behind.

Looking across at the thicket, she could see some fritillaries still fluttering around.

The soaked hair over there was long.

The bloated fingers still gripped the silvery weapon.

Perhaps something was forming inside the abandoned body of the woman who killed herself. Sae didn't feel like going over to check. Probably a lot of blood from the chest, the red milk overflowing. Withered flowers bear no seed. But through its various precious nutrients, a body that decomposes and dissolves nourishes the butterflies, the grass, the soil.

The birdsong was as peaceful as ever.

Sae took the road downhill.

One of the butterflies had stuck close to her since leaving the house. Matching her stride to the butterfly's flight, Sae headed towards the village.

She passed from the painfully bright sunlight into a grove of cedars. Inside the grove the air suddenly felt chilly. Leaving the trees behind, the early summer sun once again warmed her face.

She sensed that there were people nearby, even though she didn't meet anyone. She saw several rooftops. Cardboard boxes were piled up in front of the glass door of an old general store, with pastries and cats inside them.

The slope grew a little steeper, the paved surface wider.

Sae emerged onto the road where the bus stopped.

She was perspiring slightly. The butterfly alighted on her arm, as if it craved that moisture.

A car drove past. The breeze shifted. The butterfly flew off.

A white pickup truck approached, and the butterfly, buffeted by the breeze, was sucked in.

The fritillary had vanished.

A little while later, a fragment of the butterfly's wing floated down to the side of the road.

Sae picked it up, and wrapped it in a tissue.

Before long, the bus came.

After the bus ride and the jolting train journey she returned home and unwrapped the

tissue.

The last fragment was crushed to pieces, and was no longer recognizable.

But the withered flower in her pocket was still there.

## Fragments of Psyche

She got there swayed by the train, riding a bus, climbing a hill for a while, then finally taking a postcard from a rusty postbox, its paint peeling off. The writing on the card had been completely smudged by the numerous times it had rained.

Sae blinked as she looked around her.

The early summer sun made colors jump out while the scenery was laid out flat before. A lark crying in the high sky had more dimension.

Her eyes watered with the brightness, blurring her vision, and, for a short time, she closed them. The airy song of the lark was interspersed here and there by the sparse twittering of birds she did not know. The wind chose only the soft grass for her to hear its whisper.

The humidity was not low. The air, with the smell of the sun, was heavy and damp to the point of being languid.

Suddenly a sound of beating wings passed her ear and she opened her eyes.

There was no sign of the insect that had assaulted her hearing. Instead she saw a butterfly.

As her eyes finally grew used to the light, the green grass and trees, fields, and electricity lines appeared.

It was quiet but desolate countryside.

The cracked pavement was losing to time and grassroots. The fields baring reddish-brown earth seemed abandoned. Silver tape meant to scare away birds had lost its sparkle and hung loosely tied to bamboo poles that were leaning over.

The heads of skinny sunflowers drooped. Ahead, in the lush green of chameleon plants past their bloom and rampant daisy fleabane, brown butterflies were fluttering about. She wondered if there were pretty flowers in there.

Holding the old postcard, Sae turned around. There was a wooden bungalow that was even more crumbled than the card.

Musty air seeped out from between the gaps in the thin boards. It was midday of early summer which made the house all the more dark and black.

She took a breath, hesitating slightly before opening the crooked door.

Light spread across the wide earth floor.

In the floorboarded room past the front step, her sister, sat flat on the floor, smiled faintly.

“Ah, you came then?”

“You didn’t write back.” Sae sighed and raised the postcard to show her.

“Which? Let me see.”

“Don’t bother.”

She didn’t feel like taking her shoes off, so sat on the front step. Her sister didn’t apologize for her ingratitude, but laughed, her face white.

“I wrote quite a few postcards. How many did you see exactly?” Sae patted the legs of her jeans.

It had been about four years ago that Chizu had disappeared. They had found out in autumn three years ago that she had eloped.

Sae knew nothing about the guy. It was a man they didn’t know so of course her family had been against it. Nonetheless, her older sister, who she’d been good friends with, had eloped, and just sent them postcards.

The address that had been so carefully written was false. Her parents didn’t know what to make of it. Even so, her sister kept sending letters from the fake address.

Sae had finally found where Chizu was just two months ago.

It was just a small thing, but the post mark had miraculously been left in tact.

Without telling her parents, Sae searched for Chizu’s house. She knew her sister was alone. The guy already had a wife and child, and in the meantime had become violent, taken all the money and left. Chizu had written everything shamelessly on the postcard.

*He’s not here anymore.*

Her sister’s lover had disappeared without her ever knowing his name or face.

“You don’t want to come home?”

“Too late now.” Her sister smiled very serenely.

She was like a complete stranger. Her loose black hair clung like waves to the back of her neck and collarbone with sweat. The neck of her blouse was wide and she could see ample cleavage between swelling breasts.

Her skin shone with sweat.

Sae put the postcard away and took out a peach-colored handkerchief instead. She wiped her own neck, also covered in sweat.

“I asked you to call. I must have written it so many times in my postcards. But you never did. I thought you might have killed yourself.”

“You were worried about me.” Chizu moved her hand. There was a faint rustling. Sae looked to see dried flower heads. It seemed Chizu had spread them across the

floorboards and had been doing some detailed handicraft.

“I collected flowers to make scented bags. But it didn’t work. It’s really humid this time of year and they rot before they have a chance to dry.” Her sister explained.

“I didn’t know you were interested in that sort of thing.”

“There are lots of different scents. Maybe you don’t know.”

Her sister made to stand up. At the same time from the dark past the dingy *fusuma* sliding doors Sae heard a small high voice.

“Ah!” Chizu flashed the bare white soles of her feet as she disappeared into the darkness. Her footprints were left on the floor. They shone darkly; the whole floor must be covered in a thin layer of dust.

Sae looked at the strewn flowers. Each of them, flowers she didn’t know the names of, had shriveled and blackened. Did her sister mean the flowers had rotted because they hadn’t left a trace of color?

Chizu returned holding a baby wrapped in a blanket. “This is my baby.” She answered with a smile before Sae even had a chance to ask.

Sae said nothing.

Her sister spread a yellow skirt over the black flower petals and cooed to the baby, calming it, while she unfastened the shell buttons of her blouse.

Her breast, brighter than the white of the blouse, spilled out. She jiggled the baby up and it opened its mouth wide, taking her nipple in its mouth.

Chizu looked down at the baby, enchanted. Sae looked away, out of the room. It was bright outside. As she moved towards the doorway, the strong rays of light once again removed all the color from her vision.

She felt someone standing behind her.

“Can I stay here tonight?” She asked without turning around.

“If you want to” replied her sister. She caught an organic scent, probably the smell of milk. Feeling slightly sick, at that, she went outside.

The larks were still singing.

The color of the sky seemed slightly paler than before.

She followed the road further up. Through trees full of withered branches was a dark green hill. If she kept going up the gentle slope she would reach it.

She didn’t feel like going that far. The breeze from the hill felt good though.

Suddenly the birds stopped singing. The wind dropped. Even the scenery grew so quiet it was like time had stopped. Something moved in that stillness and she shifted her gaze.

Water had pooled in a corner of the grass, sparkling darkly and more than ten butterflies with light brown wings had paused there.

It was almost as if someone had arranged them. They moved their wings slowly like the rise and fall of breathing.

Her sister came quietly over to her. The baby gave a small yawn. Her breast was still exposed and excess milk sprayed out.

Red. Her milk looked red.

A shard of light pierced Sae's eyes and she shut them tightly.

"Those were Nymphalid butterflies. They drink water, taking in the nutrients that have dissolved in it. I heard most of them are male."

Her sister laid out the futons as she spoke. The uncovered light bulb on the ceiling made the shadows darker than they ought to be. The stains on the *fusuma* stood out.

"You know a lot about strange things."

"Well, they come to humans too. They feed on sweat and urine."

Her sister's voice was slightly thick.

She could hear the soft beating of a futon. Chizu was probably soothing the baby sleeping by her side.

Sae stayed quiet, closing her eyes. It wasn't just children that felt drowsy listening to a steady sound.

As she dozed, she could hear a woman's soft voice.

A lullaby?

No, wait. It wasn't a woman's voice.

It was more like the beating of wings. The highs and lows made it seem like singing.

Something passed in the dark.

Simple butterflies.

Before she could think, the butterflies multiplied, rippling, and yellowish light brown wings stood to attention over the whole floor. Silently closing. Silently opening.

Pale white when they were closed, black patches appeared when they were opened. She looked up and the light cord was thick with butterflies hanging in clumps, like grapes on a vine.

Sae opened her eyes and sat up. There wasn't a butterfly to be seen anywhere.

It was something she had dreamt.

She stroked her brow covered in sweat. The sound of beating wings grew fainter.

Somewhere even in this much darkness was a fly.

She got under the blankets again, noticing a musty smell as she did.

The tap water tasted of iron. Sae had no appetite.

She went through the motions of washing her face and when she went out towards the entrance, the flowers from yesterday were still scattered about and had shriveled up to become even blacker.

She opened the ill-fitting door and a cool morning breeze entered. She unconsciously took a deep breath.

As her sister had pointed out, a distinctive sweet and sour smell pervaded the house. As you got used to it your senses were dulled. But once you had been outside, it changed again. It was full of bright light outside too.

Sae walked round to the front. She felt like she wanted to brush away the smells and darkness that clung to her. The gentle breeze felt good.

A path between the fields led to a patch of chameleon plants. Butterflies had stopped there. They were the same variety as last night's dream. Maybe it was a colony or perhaps they had just suddenly congregated there.

Sae frowned slightly, but still watched them. The nymphalids fluttered around over the same bushes as yesterday.

At that moment she realized her sister was standing next to her. Sae kept looking forward, while she commented "There's no-one around."

"No."

"No-one passes by here?"

"There aren't any houses further along this road any more, so hardly anyone comes along." The baby was still at her sister's breast. It was much quieter than any baby Sae knew.

Its blanket was garish with neat stitching. Her sister's clothes and complexion had very little color in comparison.

Sae followed the butterflies with her eyes. One or two drew arcs in the sky before sinking into those bushes.

She had thought there were flowers over there, but maybe it was water. If it were flowers though, she wanted to see them.

“Where are you going?” Her sister stopped her as she began to walk forward.

“Over there.”

“You shouldn’t go there.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not just water over there.” Her sister’s black hair shook. “I told you. Butterflies don’t just collect over water because they want moisture. They want the nourishment of what’s dissolved in it. They feed on dead bodies too.”

Sae looked at the bushes again, then back at her sister’s face. Chizu was staring at the bushes. She couldn’t read anything from her gaze. “What dead body?” she asked without thinking.

“You can smell it in the breeze. It’s foul.”

Sae asked, “Where did this baby’s father go?”

“Who knows?”

Her sister looked lovingly at the child. Sae tried asking again.

“Where did this baby’s father go?”

“I don’t know. He just disappeared two years ago.”

“So this baby is...?”

“Mine.” Chizu repositioned the child. The movement must have woken it as its little fingers groped for her breast. “Ok, Ok, you’re hungry.” Her sister headed back to the house, unbuttoning her blouse as she went, the noise of an agitated voice following her.

“Are you alright?” Sae asked.

“Why do you ask?”

Her sister entered the dark house. Sae stopped at the door. Her eyes, grown so used to the brightness, couldn’t adjust to the dark. She couldn’t even make out the floor and the remnants of the outside light took on the illusion of pale orbs.

There was a creak. Her sister must have sat down on the front step.

“Yesterday your milk looked like blood.”

The illusion of light had not yet faded. Sae blinked again and again.

“Stupid. It’s the same.” She heard her sister say. “Milk is made from the mother’s blood.” The pale white light lost its brightness, turning to red. The red spots in her vision sparkled making it look like blood.

“So this baby is drinking blood. All babies drink blood.” Chizu concluded.

Sae continued to blink. At last her pupils dilated. Her sister was feeding the baby in the same place and same position as yesterday. The hungry child moved its hand slightly. After a while it stopped feeding.

Milk dripped from its mouth. It must only look red because her eyes weren't used to the dark yet.

Sae moved closer.

"It looks like a vampire." Her sister on hearing this laughed.

The pattern on the blanket shook and a butterfly fluttered from it. The nymphalid flew in the quiet darkness, then arced around and fluttered past Sae's arm.

It was then that Sae realized.

She had not yet seen the baby's face. She hadn't seen its diapers being changed either.

"That baby, it's a boy, right?" She asked.

"That's right." Her sister laughed again.

"I bet butterflies drink blood too." Her voice strangely trembled. Sae moved even closer and stuck a finger out for the baby.

Fragments peeled and flew away.

The child moved its hand and at that collapsed.

Pale brown wings opened, closed, as if quietly breathing.

Butterflies gathered like clusters of flowers, shaking their black delicate antenna, small bright eyes all reflecting Sae.

Those clusters began softly falling to pieces, flying away. Most flew outside into the bright light. Some, however, remained in the darkness of the room bustling their wings.

Her sister remained sitting silently, one breast exposed. The shape of her arm was bent as if still cradling the baby.

Red blood stained her white skin.

Sae ran outside.

Passing over the sagging tape that kept birds away, through the remains of the parched field, she came closer to the patch of fleabane, a sweet smell growing stronger all the while that turned her stomach.

She clenched her lips shut and headed through the bushes. The nymphalids had gathered. Water. There was water of an unknown color collected in a natural hollow. In it were flies, ants, hair.

Sae ran back to the house.

She was gasping, her throat dry. She stood in front of her sister, trying to catch her breath.

Two or three nymphalids had returned to Chizu's breast. Her sister was still holding her hand out as if to cradle them.

"Sis, let's go home." Sae forced a smile. "Let's go home together." Chizu didn't look at her. Sae smiled again.

"I'm sorry for always putting you down, writing stupid things in my letters."

"That's true," her sister murmured, head down. Sae came into the house, shoes still on, and took Chizu's hand.

"That's enough. I'm sorry." Her sister's hand was cold.

"Do you forgive me?" Chizu asked.

"Yes. Let's go."

The butterflies flew away from Chizu's chest and she slowly lifted her head.

Black pupils, clearly laughing.

"Thank you. I was so lonely." Sae could no longer feel Chizu's hand. Something tickled her palm instead and when she looked, there were a few butterflies. Among them some had been crushed, their wings broken.

There was a sour odor.

Her sister's form was no more.

The mass in front of her was that of an insect she had seen so many times before. Her vision was filled with the color of butterfly wing scales. Hard, light wings struck at her face and hands over and over.

Flying around Sae, then the house, hundreds of nymphalids made a noise like the wind blowing through grass, before flying out of the door, heading for the light. Sae could now only see her footprints on the floorboards. All that remained in solid form were the withered black flowers scattered around.

She put one in her pocket and left the house. When she looked over at those bushes the butterflies were fluttering there again.

The hair in the water had been long.

The bloated fingers had still been holding the silver knife.

What had possessed the abandoned, suicidal woman? She couldn't bring herself to think. But there had been so much blood on her chest, flowing forth like red milk. The withered flowers had come to nothing. The decomposing body, however, was providing the butterflies, grass, and earth with many important nutrients.

The birds were still calling.

Sae walked down the road.

A butterfly had been following her ever since she left the house, fluttering around her. It kept pace as she came down the hill towards the village.

Entering a small Japanese cedar grove, it took her out of the almost painful light. The air was suddenly chill. When she came out again the early summer light felt hot on her face. She saw no-one, yet felt a presence. There were several roofs of houses visible. In front of an old shop door was a cardboard box with a cat and some pastries in it.

The hill got slightly steeper and the pavement widened.

Sae came out on the road with the bus stop.

She had broken into a light sweat. The butterfly alighted on her arm as if longing for that moisture.

A car passed by. The wind changed. The butterfly flew up.

A small white truck drove past and the butterfly was dragged down.

The nymphalid lost its form.

After a pause, a fragment of wing fell by the side of the road.

Sae picked it up and wrapped it in a tissue.

At last the bus came.

She returned home riding the bus and swayed by the train. Then she opened the tissue.

The wing fragment had turned to dust, unable to keep its form.

Only the withered flower in her pocket remained in tact.