



The 2015 Kurodahan Press Translation Prize

Kurodahan Press is pleased to announce the 2015 Kurodahan Press Translation Prize, awarded for translation excellence of a selected Japanese short story into English. The winning translation is intended to be published in the upcoming Kurodahan Press anthology *Speculative Japan Volume 4*, which is scheduled for publication in 2015–16, and the translator given full credit.

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/2015prize.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 when the book project gets under way.

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

「雀谷」 by 半村良 (roughly 4,100 字)

The submission package, including a PDF of the story, style sheet and instructions, is available as a downloadable PDF. The source book is not currently in print, but is available second-hand, including at Amazon Japan:

www.amazon.co.jp/dp/4334741274/kurodahanpres-22

4. Application Deadline

Translations must be received no later than September 30, 2015. A notice confirming receipt will be issued. The results should be announced by the end of the year.

However, the prize may be cancelled, or the deadline extended, if we haven't received at least twenty submissions by the initial deadline.



5. Submission address and contact

Grand Prize / one winner

30,000 yen prize money. At a later time we will invite the winner to publish the story in an upcoming Kurodahan Press anthology (*Speculative Japan Volume 4*) for an additional payment of 30,000 yen, to be covered by a separate contract (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 jurors 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.

Nancy Ross and Karen Sandness are professional translators/editors working from Japanese to English; Lisa Hannett is an author and lecturer at Flinders University in Australia who knows several words in Japanese and quite a few more in English.

Nancy Ross

Karen Sandness

Lisa Hannett



Style Guide for Kurodahan Translation Contest Submissions

v1.3 of June 9, 2014

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/DOCX format if possible. RTF or TXT files are also acceptable, but DOC/DOCX 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 blank lines 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.



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

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 of Style.

We also use the following general reference works as authorities: Encyclopaedia Britannica, and for U.S. spelling the 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 translation 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.**

One last word:

DON'T FORGET TO TRANSLATE THE TITLE, TOO!

「小野田の賢吉さんにや、達者にしとらすかいね。……ほう、入院……そらいかんこっちやねえ。もともと、あの人がてもういい歳やさかいなあ。病氣ぐらいするわいな。ま、寄る年波いうやつちやわいな。そやけど若いころは、そらもう丈夫な男でなあ。おらともよう喧嘩したもんにやわい。のべつやった。この能登あたりでは、ほんまは喧嘩という言葉は使わんがや。いさかい、言いますのや。まったく今考えても、ようあんだけいさかいの種があつたもんにやわいね。同じ村の軒を並べた一本道の向かいとなり。尋常小学校あがるのから学校おえるまで、顔あわさん日は一日もないがやつたさかいねえ。

「喧嘩ともだち……。そやねえ、言うてみればそんなところろな。おらはずつとこの村に住み続けて、よその土地のことはなんも知らんとこの村で生きてきてしもうたけど、あの賢吉がこの村から出て行かんかったら、いさかいはしたかも知らんが、今ちつと面白おかしくうに暮らせた思うんや。実を言うとな、ここんとこ、賢吉のことをよう思い出すんや。おらかてもういい歳や、あんな賢吉みたいしなずつと昔のともだちのこと、なんにや知らん、急になつかしく思い出すなんてことは、あんましい気分のものではないがや。なあ、あんださん。判つても

らえるやろか。年寄のくせに、自分が年寄になつたことに氣づかんでいたいのや。賢吉のことをよう思い出すいうのは、過ぎた昔をなつかしんでのこつちやないか。そないなこつちや。そやさかい、賢吉のことはなるべく思はんようにしとつたわけや。

「東京の亀戸たらいうところに住んどるはずやけど、今もそこかいね。……ほう、やつぱり亀戸かいね。賢吉の奴、よほどその亀戸たらに性が合うとつたんやなあ。……三十年も住んどるてか。早いもんにやなあ。そしたら、おらと別れてからもう四十年以上たつわけや。あれが嫁もろた聞いたんは、たしか十年目のことやつたもんや。お互い歳とるわけや。

「あんたさんは、あれの二番目の娘の婿やそうなね。……子供が一人いる。上は高校行つて……ほんまかいね、信じられんなあ、まったく。で、賢吉の瘧氣てがほとんどなにもやいね。しばらく養生しとればよくなるのやろ。もともと頑丈なやつちやさかい。なつともないのやろ、な、どうなんや。

「え……瘧……瘧やて、賢吉が。瘧やろ、賢吉が瘧やなんて。……ほんま、瘧かいね。え、もうあかん。ほんなら賢吉はもう助からんいうんか。嫌になるなあ、みんな死んで行くやないかい。あの喧嘩の強かつた賢吉までが。あんたさんは知らんにやろうが、おらの同級生はもう賢吉しか残つとらんや。竹馬の友たら言う言葉があるそうやけど、こんなちつちやなところからの遊びともだちいうのは、何年会わずとも、どんなにはなればなれになつていようとも、一生のともだちで格別のもんや。寂しいなあ。歳はとりとうない。同じ年、同じ仲間がさきに死んで行くのを見送るてが、おらの残りの命も少のうなつて行くのが判るだけに、まったく心細

いもんにやわいな。

「あんたさん、東京からわざわざそれを知らせにやつて来てくださつたんか。ご苦労やつたなあ。いい報らせでもないがに。

「え……違つてか。なら、なんの用でわざわざ能登くんたりまでやつて来なすつたんかい。賢吉のことでおらに話がある……だつたらはようそれを言わんかいね。賢吉は今死にかけとるんやろ。おらかて知りたいわ。あいつ、おらになにをせい言うんや。……あ、ひよつとして、あのこか。雀の……。

「やつぱりそうか。いや、な、あんたさんが賢吉の身寄りのもんにや言つておら家においでた時、ちらつとそう思つたんや。これは雀谷のことやないか、とな。そんで、賢吉はどない言うてる。雀谷のことを、や。

「見たい、てか。瘧にとりつかれて、あすをも知れん体になつてもうたのやさかいに、賢吉のその氣持判らんではない。そやけどもう、ここまで旅しては来れんのやろ。見たい言つたかて無理な相談やないか。薄情で言うにやないぜ。おらかて賢吉に会つて見たいがな。雀谷は賢吉とおらの二人きりの秘密の場所や。あの谷はな、日本中の雀が死にに来る場所なんや。

「ちつこい体して、どの村、どの町、どの山、どの谷……電線にも軒先きにも、日本中あいつらのおらところはどこにもありはせん。朝になればチェンチェン鳴いて、機嫌よう人の邪魔にならんと生きておる。そら、少しばかりはたんぼの稲も荒らすやろうが、あいつらは人間が稲を植える前から生きとるんにやぞ。そやないか、鳥が草の実をついばんでどこが悪い。雀が

稲の害になる言うんは人間の身勝手やわい。雀のことをばかにして、鳥のなかでも一番とるにたりんもののように言いくさつて。こないな諺^{ことわざ}があるんを知つとるか。雀でさへ雛^{ひな}のために巣を作る……なんと小さな生き物をばかにした言いくさやないか。ほんながやつたら都会のものは、いったいどんな生きかたをしとる言うんや。雛のためにどんな立派な巣を作っている言うんや。2LDKか。建て売りの一戸だてか。せいぜいがそんなもんにや。それもあらかたはローンやないかい。

「雀たちに笑われるわ。あの雀たちはな、そのうえ自分の墓場まで大昔から作って持つとるにやぞ。おらと賢吉は小学生のとき、その雀の墓場をみつけてしまったのよ。……この話をばしめると長くなるさかい、ちよっこしやりかけた仕事をすませて来るわ。待つとつてくたし。すぐに戻るさかい。

「やあ、すっかり待たしてもうて。東京の人には今どき珍らしいやろが、薩^{さつ}轡^わりをしとつたんや。この家はもうおらひとりだけやし、根が古臭い性分でな、プロパンたら言うもんで煮たきをする気にはようなれん。生火^{なまびき}が一番にやわい。

「ところで、あんたさん、賢吉に言われて東京からまつすぐにここへ来なすつたんかね。……ああ、仕事の途中でかね。忙しいのに賢吉のために苦勞なことで。それでお仕事は何かね。やつぱし会社勤めか何かで。おやまあ、それはまた今はやりのお仕事やないかね。カメラマン

言うたら、時代の花形や。賢吉もいい婿さんを持つたもんやなあ。

「え……話の続きを。ああ、そうやったな。おらと賢吉が二人して雀の墓場をみつけた、言うところまで話したんやつたな。それはこの村の奥にある谷で、昔からなぜか雀谷^{すずこ}言う名がついとつたところやわいな。なんもない小さな谷で、村のもんも寄りつきやせん。おらたちはまだ子供のことやつたさかい、その誰^{たれ}も寄りつかん場所というのが気に入つて、賢吉と二人して雀谷へ入りこみ、なんのはずみだつたかもう忘れてもうたが、とにかく穴を掘りはじめたんやわ。そしたら出るわ出るわ、ちっちゃな骨が、いくら掘つても次から次に際限もなく出て来はしめて、しまいは恐^{おそ}しうなつてもうた。

「それが雀の骨やいうのがなぜ判つたか、言いなさるんか……そら子供でもすぐに判つたわいな。飛んで来て、そこで死んだばかりの雀が、上つつらのほうに積み重なつていたんやもんや。知つとらすかね。世間では、ナニナニと雀の死骸^{しかい}は見たことがない、などとよく言うもんにやわい。普段よう見かけるものでいながら、その運命^{うんめい}の最期の姿はまず見ることがない。これはおらもまた聞きなんやが、都会ではよく、ホステスの老いたのと雀の死んだのは見たことがない、てなことを言うそうやないですか。結局^{けつくり}収^{おさ}まるところへ収^{おさ}まるもんや……そんな気楽な意味なんやろかね。ともかく、ひどく恐^{おそ}しかったもんやさかい、家へ帰つて父親^{ちち}にあの谷の話を聞かせたんや。おら父親^{ちち}はもうとうに死んでもうたが、これが怒^{おこ}ろうか怒^{おこ}るまいか。もう打^{うち}のめかきりや。父親^{ちち}にあんだけ叩^{たた}かれたのは、あとにもさきにもあれがはじめてやつた。

「その場所を教える言いなさるか。そらそうやろな。日本中の雀が死にに来る場所や。誰しも

見たいと思う心に聚りはないやろう。あんださん、賢吉からこのことを聞いて、写真に撮つて帰ろう思うとりなさるな。そうやろう。そうにきまつとる。そやけど、ひとつだけ嘘こいとるね。おらにははつきり判つとる。あの賢吉が大事な娘の婿さんに、雀谷の写真を撮つて来いなんて言うわけがない。賢吉がいまわのきわに、ひとめ雀谷を見たがつとるなんて、嘘のかたまりや。これはたつた今家の裏で薪を割つとつた斧や。仕方ない、あんださん、死んでもらわんならん。逃げるな、このあほたれが。こいでどうだ、こいでも死なんか、どたまかち割つたぞ。さあもう死んだろが。首てが胴から切りはなしてくれる。それ、首がころげた。もう生きかえりやせんやろう。これでしまいや。あの谷のことを知つとるもんは、これで一人ものうなつたわい。おら家は先祖代々雀谷を守つて生きて来た家なんや。同級生はもう一人も生き残つとらんとするや。秘密を知つとたさかいな。みんな賢吉が言い触らしたんや。賢吉はそれで恐しゅうなつて逃げ出したわけや。さあ、おまえも埋めてやろう。あの雀谷へな。

「ちつぽけな雀の命ひとつ、雀たちの墓場ひとつよう守れんで、何が人間さまじやい。おら、人間より雀のほうがずっと好つきや。賢吉かてすぐに死んでまうやろ。賢吉の墓など誰が暴くかい。なあ雀たちよ。

Entry No.	Total Score	Rank
2015.001	208	44
2015.002	274	14
2015.003	270	15
2015.004	312	2
2015.005	310	3
2015.006	276	13
2015.007	254	26
2015.008	266	18
2015.009	228	38
2015.010	292	6
2015.011	264	20
2015.012	264	20
2015.013	312.5	1
2015.014	230	35
2015.015	298	5
2015.016	226	40
2015.017	232	34
2015.018	238	30
2015.019	224	42
2015.020	288	8
2015.021	280	11
2015.022	258	25
2015.023	304	4
2015.024	262	24
2015.025	266	18
2015.026	244	28
2015.027	254	26
2015.028	230	35
2015.029	290	7
2015.030	288	8
2015.031	280	11
2015.032	230	35
2015.033	226	40
2015.034	270	15
2015.035	236	32
2015.036	240	29
2015.037	236	32
2015.038	282	10
2015.039	228	38
2015.040	270	15
2015.041	218	43
2015.042	238	30
2015.043	264	20
2015.044	264	20

Entry No.	Total Score	Rank
2015.013	312.5	1
2015.004	312	2
2015.005	310	3
2015.023	304	4
2015.015	298	5
2015.010	292	6
2015.029	290	7
2015.020	288	8
2015.030	288	8
2015.038	282	10
2015.021	280	11
2015.031	280	11
2015.006	276	13
2015.002	274	14
2015.003	270	15
2015.034	270	15
2015.040	270	15
2015.008	266	18
2015.025	266	18
2015.011	264	20
2015.012	264	20
2015.043	264	20
2015.044	264	20
2015.024	262	24
2015.022	258	25
2015.007	254	26
2015.027	254	26
2015.026	244	28
2015.036	240	29
2015.018	238	30
2015.042	238	30
2015.035	236	32
2015.037	236	32
2015.017	232	34
2015.014	230	35
2015.028	230	35
2015.032	230	35
2015.009	228	38
2015.039	228	38
2015.016	226	40
2015.033	226	40
2015.019	224	42
2015.041	218	43
2015.001	208	44

Valley of Sparrows
Hammura Ryo

I wonder, what's Onoda Kenkichi up to now? Oh, he's in the hospital? Well, if that don't beat all! True, he's gettin' on in years. Ain't no surprise he's sick and all. Old age does that to ya. He was a strapping young lad, y'know. Me and him got into fights all the time. Though here in Noto, the word ain't "fight"—we say "row." Looking back, we never did run out of excuses to row. He lived across the street from me after all. From the day we started school to the day we got done, not one went by that we didn't see each other.

We were brawling buddies, aye, that we were. I stayed in the village, without no clue as to how it was out there. Kenkichi, though, he left. Else, we'd keep rowin' till the end. He'd have enjoyed every second of it too, I'll bet. Truth be told, I've been reliving my memories of him lately. I'm at that age where I reminisce about old friends like my man Kenkichi, seeing as I dunno what happened to 'em. And naw, it don't feel good. Listen here, son. You gotta understand. Just because I'm gettin' old don't mean I wanna hear about it. My memories of Kenkichi, they tell me I'm missing the good ol' days. That won't do, oh no. That's why I try not to remember 'im, much as I can help it.

He went to live in Kameido in Tokyo, I think. I wonder if he stayed there. Oh? So he did go on livin' there. The air must've suited him. Thirty years, you say? How time flies. Forty-odd years since we parted ways, then. Ten years after is when I heard he got hitched, if memory serves. We're both old, eh.

Huh, so you're married to his second girl. Two kids, and the older one is in high school? I'll be damned. Why's Kenkichi in the hospital anyway? All he needs is meds and rest, then he'll be up and about. He's strong, y'know. Nothin' to worry about.

What? Cancer? Kenkichi has cancer? You're jokin'. Why would he have cancer? It's true then? It's really cancer? Holy hell. He don't have much to hope for. Dammit, everybody's dying and leaving me behind. Kenkichi the brawler included. You don't get it, son. Kenkichi's my last remaining classmate that's still alive. Childhood playmates, whatchamacallit, friends you played with as a kid—it don't matter how long you haven't seen 'em, or how far apart you are, you stay friends for life. It's a special bond. Now I feel lonely. I don't wanna grow old. Seeing friends my age leave this world before me, I know I don't have long. It's daunting.

Thanks, sonny. You came all this way from Tokyo just to let me know. It ain't good news, but I appreciate it all the same.

No? Then what did you come all the way to Noto for? You got something to say about Kenkichi? Out with it already! He's dying, is that it? I wanna know. What's he gotta say to me? Oh, don't tell me... Is it about the valley?

I thought as much. Now, it crossed my mind the minute you stepped into my house, the minute you said you're related to Kenkichi, that it might have summat to do with the Valley of Sparrows. So, what'd he say about it? About the valley.

He wants to see it, eh? What with the cancer growing inside of him, he don't know he'll live to see tomorrow. I see where he's comin' from. But how's he gonna travel here? It ain't possible. A pipe dream, I'll say. I ain't sayin' this to be mean. I'd like to visit him. The Valley of Sparrows is our secret place, his and mine. It's the place where sparrows from all over Japan go to die.

The teeny little critters, there ain't a place in Japan where you don't see 'em—villages and towns, mountains and valleys, cables and eaves... In the morning, you hear them chirping away. Chipper fellas, those birds, never getting in the way of people. Well, they can be a pest in rice fields, I'll give you that, but they've been around since before we grew rice. Birds pecking at grains—where's the harm in that? When people say sparrows are a threat to rice

plants, they're lookin' at it from the human angle—selfish of them, if you ask me. They take sparrows for granted, call 'em the most insignificant bird species. Ever hear the saying “Even sparrows make a nest for their chicks”? Mighty patronizing to the small critters, don't you agree? Bah, them city slickers. How big of a nest do they want sparrows to build for their babies? An apartment with two bedrooms now? A spec home, is it? At least that much. The kinda houses that need loans, I reckon.

Those people, sparrows laugh at them. Y'see, sparrows have been building their own graves as well as their homes since the beginning of time. Me and Kenkichi stumbled into their gravesite when we were in primary school. Well, it's a long story once I start telling it, and I gotta finish my work. Just wait here. I'll be back soon.

Heya. Did I keep you waiting? I was chopping wood. Bet you don't see much of that in Tokyo these days. Well, I'm on my own in this house, and I'm an old-fashioned man. Cooking is best done over an open fire—no gas for me.

Anyhow, Kenkichi made you come straight here from Tokyo, huh? Ah, you were in the middle of work, were you? You're busy, but still you make time for him, that's a good boy. What d'you say you do for a living again? You work in some company, don't you? My word, that's all the rage, ain't it? You can't get better than a cameraman. Kenkichi's lucky to have you as son-in-law.

Oh, you want the rest of the story? Right, where was I? I think I stopped at me and him finding the place where sparrows die. There's a valley at the heart of the village. It's always been called the Valley of Sparrows, don't know why. It's a small valley with nothing to see. Even villagers don't hardly go there. Being kids, we loved the idea of having a place all to ourselves. So me and Kenkichi went down to the valley. I forgot why, but we started digging holes. We found teeny tiny little bones in them. Everywhere we dug, we found more and more and more.. There was no end to 'em, to the point we got scared.

Somehow, we knew the bones belonged to sparrows. Even kids could tell. Closer to the surface, fresh bodies of sparrows were piled high—I reckon that clued us in. They say you never see no dead sparrows. You'd think you'd find 'em anywhere, but you never see them meet their fate. I also hear, as the saying goes, in cities you don't see no escorts grow old and you don't see no sparrows die. Maybe they go somewhere when their time's up. That's one way of putting it, the easy way. Anyway, I was damn scared, I ran home and told my old man about the valley. Pops—long gone now, bless him—went ballistic. He near beat me up. It was the first and only time he chewed me out.

You want me to tell you where it is? Right. The place where sparrows of Japan go to die. I don't blame you—most anybody would wanna see it for theirselves. You're thinkin' of bringing home pictures of the place for Kenkichi. Hearing the story from him put that idea into your head. Am I right or am I right? 'Course I am. Except you lied about one thing. It's clear as day to me. Why would Kenkichi send his darling daughter's husband to take pictures of the Valley of Sparrows? His dying wish is to have one last look at the valley? Ain't foolin' me. See this ax? I was just using it to chop wood out back. You don't give me much of a choice. You're gonna die here. Don't run, you fool. How about this, eh? Will this kill you? I just cracked open your head. Dead already? Lemme sever it from your body. Ah, there rolls your head. No way are you comin' back to life. The end. Now nobody knows nothin' about the valley. My family's been guardians of the valley for generations. I did tell you not one of my classmates are alive. 'Cause they found out my secret. They all heard the story from Kenkichi. He was afraid he'd be next and skedaddled. C'mon, I'll give you a burial—in that valley.

If you can't keep safe one tiny sparrow life, one gravesite for the sparrows, you don't deserve to call yourself human. I like sparrows better than people anyway. Kenkichi's gonna die soon. Who'll dig up his grave then? Tell me, sparrows.

The Sparrow Valley
Hanmura Ryō

"You're here about Onoda Kenkichi, eh? Is he doing well? . . . Oh, he's in the hospital. . . I'm sorry to hear that. But that man is long in years. At that age, you're bound to get sick. That's what age does to you. But back when we were young he was such a strong man. We fought a lot. The fighting never stopped. Here in Noto we actually don't use the word 'fight.' We call them scraps. When I think about it now, I wonder what we had to scrap about all the time. We lived in the same village across the street from each other on a straight road lined with houses. Even back then we had to go to elementary school. I don't think there was a day we didn't see each other until we finished school.

"Fight buddies. . . I guess so. When I say it, it sounds about right. I lived my whole life in this village, and us here, we don't know anything about other places. We probably fought all the time just because Kenkichi hadn't left the village yet. But still, when I think about it now we had it good. Actually, recently I've thought about Kenkichi a lot. I'm also pretty old, and thinking about friends from long ago like Kenkichi, I don't know. . . I just get nostalgic all of a sudden, and it really doesn't feel that good. What about you? I wonder if you can understand. When you get old, you don't want to pay attention to the fact that you're old. Remembering Kenkichi all the time, that's just living in the past, or something like that. That's why I try my best not to think about him.

"I think he was living in some place called Kameido in Tokyo. Is he still there? . . . Oh, he is? That Kameido place really must have suited him. . . He lived there for thirty years? Time flies. That means that it's been over forty years since I last saw him. And then I heard he found a wife about ten years after he left. I guess we're both getting on in years.

"And you, you're the husband of his second daughter, I heard. . . He had two kids. The older one went to high school. . . Really? I can't believe it. Not at all. What do you mean, Kenkichi's sick? He'll get better with a little rest, right? He's always been a stubborn one. I'm sure it's nothing, right?

"Huh? . . . Cancer. . . Kenkichi's got cancer. You must be lying. Kenkichi's got cancer! . . . Really? Cancer, eh? Oh, that's awful. So it's too late to save him? How terrible. Well, we all die in the end, don't we? Even Kenkichi. Even though he was so good at fighting. You probably don't know this, but Kenkichi's the only classmate of mine that's left. I guess they call people like us bosom buddies. Even after all this time not seeing the kids I used to play with for years, no matter how far apart we grow, we'll still be friends for life. There's nothing that compares to that sort of friendship. I guess I'll be all alone. But no one stops aging. Watching your friends all the same age as you go first, you just learn how little life you've got left. It really makes me feel helpless.

"And you came all the way from Tokyo just to let me know? Thank you for going through the trouble. Even though it wasn't good news.

"Heh? . . . That's not all? If that's the case, why'd you come all the way down to Noto? You need to talk to me about Kenkichi. . . Well then, why don't you tell me what you have to say about him? He's dying now, isn't he? I want to know what you have to say. What's he blaming me for now? . . . Oh, this couldn't be about. . . The sparrows. . .

"So it is that. When you showed up at my place saying you were Kenkichi's relative, that's what I figured you wanted for a second. 'He's here for the Sparrow Valley, isn't he,' I thought. Well then, what did Kenkichi have to say about the Sparrow Valley?

"He wants to see it? I understand how he feels. Getting cancer, not knowing if he'll live to see another day. But he can't come all the way here, can he? Even if he wants to see it, I can't possibly help you with that. And I'm not saying that to be mean. I want to go back there with Kenkichi, too. The Sparrow Valley is our secret spot. That valley is where all the

sparrows in Japan go to die.

“Those little sparrows, they're in every village, in every town, on every mountain, in every valley. . . They're on electric lines and the eaves of houses. There isn't a spot in this country without one. In the morning they tweet their little songs and they live happily and don't get in anybody's way. They may make a little bit of a mess of the rice in the fields, but they've been living here before people even started planting rice. Exactly! What's wrong with birds pecking at plants to eat? Humans just say that sparrows hurt the plants because we only care about ourselves. We mock the sparrows. Of all the birds, we really pick on sparrows. Do you know that saying? 'Even sparrows make nests for their chicks?' What a condescending thing to say about such a little creature! As if all city people really do anything like that for their children. What kind of great nests do they build? 2LDK nests? Ready-built single story nests? That's the best they can do. And they have to take out loans to do it, too.

“The sparrows must laugh at us. Even their grave was already prepared long, long ago. In elementary school, Kenkichi and I found the sparrows' grave. . . This is a long story, so let me finish some chores I was in the middle of. Wait a minute. I'll be right back.

“Ah, sorry to make you wait so long. People in Tokyo probably don't do this much anymore, but I was chopping wood. I'm the only one left here, and I've got an old man's temperament. I just can't heat my house with propane or anything like that. Wood is the best.

“Anyway, you came straight here when Kenkichi asked you to? . . . I see. You were away on work. Thank you for going out of your way, even though you're so busy. By the way, what do you do? You must work for some prestigious company. Oh, that must be popular work these days. Cameramen are the stars of the generation. Kenkichi must be proud of you, isn't he?

“Ah, the rest of the story. . . That's right. I was alone with Kenkichi when we found the sparrow's grave. I told you that. That valley was deep in our village, and since long ago it's been called Sparrow Valley. It was a small valley, and no one in the village would go near it. We were still kids, so we were curious about a place like that where no one would go, so we climbed into the Sparrow Valley. I don't remember anymore what we expected to find, but anyway, we started digging a hole. And then they just kept coming and coming. These little bones. No matter how far we dug, they just kept appearing. They wouldn't stop. And then we got scared.

“You want to know how we knew those were sparrow bones? . . . Even a child could tell right away. On top of the ground, too, there were piles of sparrows who had just flown there to die. You probably know this. People are always saying this and that about how they've never seen a dead sparrow before. Even though you see them living all the time, you never see them at the end of their lives. I've even heard it out here, but I've heard that people say it a lot in the city. 'The two things I've never seen are a dead sparrow and an old hostess.' But in the end, they go where they go. . . It sounds peaceful, doesn't it? Anyway, it was very scary, so we went home and I told my dad about that valley. He died a long time ago. I wasn't sure if he'd get mad or not when I told him about going into the valley. When I told him, he beat me as hard as he could. That was the only time he ever hit me like that.

“You want me to show you that place? Of course you would. The place where all the sparrows in Japan go to die. Everyone must want to see it. You heard this story from Kenkichi, and now you want to take pictures and head home, don't you? Of course you do. That's only natural. But there's one thing that's a bit suspicious to me. I know. I know that Kenkichi would never tell his beloved daughter's husband to go take pictures of the Sparrow Valley. He wanted to see that place laying on his death bed. That's a stinking lie. This is the ax I was just using to split wood in the back. I have no choice. You have to die. Don't run, you idiot. Take this! Still think you can get away? Your head's split open. Well, you're probably dead. I'll take

your head off, just in case. Ah, you're head! It just rolled away. You won't be coming back to life. That's it for you. Now there's just one person who knows about that valley. My ancestors have protected that valley for generations. I'm sure I told you I don't have any other classmates left. That's because they found out about the secret. Kenkichi told them all. Then he got scared and ran away. Well, I guess I'll bury you, too. In that Sparrow Valley.

“These tiny sparrows, they can't protect their own grave, even with their own lives. So what's taking a human life to keep them safe? I like sparrows far more than I like humans. Kenkichi will die soon. And is anyone going to try to ruin his grave? What do you think, sparrows?”

Sparrow Valley

“And Kenkichi Onoda, is he well?... Oh! In hospital. ... That’s too bad. But then he’ll be getting on in years. You expect illness. Well, what they say about the tides of time. But he was a strong fellow when he was young. Fought with me many a time. Endless, it was. Tell the truth, here round Noto we don’t use the word “fight.” Folk talk about having a “scrap.” Looking back now, we found so many reasons for starting scraps. He lived on the other side of the one street in the same village. From joining elementary till we finished school there weren’t a day we didn’t cross paths.

“Fighting friends... Ah, you put it like that and that’s how it was. I’ve always been here in the village, and I’ve lived here knowing nothing about other places, but if Kenkichi had never gone away, maybe we’d have had our scraps, but I think that by now we’d have got on and had some laughs together. Fact is, I often remember him these days. I’m getting on too and not knowing anything about an old pal from way back like Kenkichi and suddenly getting all lonesome for him just makes me feel rotten. You know, son? You understand what I mean? Though you’re old, you don’t want to know it happened. If I keep looking back at Kenkichi, it means getting dewy-eyed about the past that’s gone. That’s what it is. That’s why I’ve tried to think of him the least I can.

“I’m pretty sure he lived in a place called Kameido in Tokyo, but is he still there? ... So he *is* still in Kameido. Ho ho, that Kameido must have really suited old Kenkichi. ... Lived there thirty years, you say. Time flies. So it must be over forty years since we last saw each other. I think it was in the tenth year I heard he’d taken a bride. Ah, we’re both getting older.

“And you’re the husband of his second girl. ... Got two kids. Oldest in high school... Is that so? I don’t believe it, at all. So what is it Kenkichi’s sick with? Rest himself up a while and he’ll be fine, right? He always was a tough one. Nothing too serious, right, is it?

“What? ... Cancer ... Kenkichi’s got cancer? That can’t be right, Kenkichi with cancer. ... So he’s really got cancer. That’s it, then. You say there’s nothing can be done. Makes me sick how everyone’s dying on me. Even that tough old bastard Kenkichi... You won’t know it, son, but he’s the last of my old classmates. They talk about the friends you had since you were playing on bamboo stilts together, but those pals you had since you were so high—even if you don’t see them for years and no matter how far you’re scattered—they’re your pals for life and it’s something really special. Ah, so lonesome. It’s awful getting older. My heart sinks just seeing those friends the same age dying first and knowing I’ve not got much time left.

“And you’ve come from Tokyo just to let me know? Well, thanks for making the trip. It ain’t glad tidings you bring, though.”

“What? ... That’s not the reason. So why’d you come all the way out here to Noto? Something to tell me about Kenkichi. ... Spit it out then. Kenkichi’s dying now, ain’t he? I want to know what it is. What’d he say he wanted me to do? ... Was it perhaps about that thing? The sparrows...

“So it *is* that. You know, young fellow, when you arrived at my house, saying you were Kenkichi’s relative, it came to me then that was it. I thought, this is going to be about Sparrow Valley. What’d he say? About Sparrow Valley.

“He said he wanted to see it. Not that I don’t understand him thinking that way if cancer’s got a grip on him and no clue if he’ll make it to tomorrow. But still, he can’t make that kind of journey here. He can say it, but it’s not going to happen. I don’t mean to be harsh. I want to see Kenkichi too. Sparrow Valley was a secret place just between me and him. It’s the valley where all of Japan’s sparrows come to die.

“On power lines and under eaves, there’s no village, no town, no mountain, no valley... no place in Japan where those little creatures can’t be found. Chirping each morning

and living happily doing folk no harm. Maybe they do help themselves to some of the rice in the fields, but they've been here since before people started planting rice. What's wrong with birds pecking at the seeds of the grass? It's people being self-important when they say that sparrows are a pest on the rice. They look down on the sparrows and call them the lowest of birds. Did you hear about this proverb? Even sparrows make nests for their chicks... What a way to mock harmless little creatures. And what can those city bastards say about how *they* live? What kind of fancy nest do they build for *their* chicks? A two-room apartment? A detached house ready for sale? That's the best they can come up with. And practically all of them have home loans anyway.

"It's the sparrows that are laughing at them. Those sparrows have had their own graveyard too since ancient times. When me and Kenkichi were in elementary school, we found the sparrow graveyard. ... This is a long story when I get going, so I'll just finish up a job I was working on and come back. Wait here a moment. I'll be back soon.

"Ah, I really kept you. This must be rare for you Tokyo folk today, but I've been chopping firewood. I'm alone in this house now, and I'm stuck in my musty old ways—can't be doing cooking with that propane stuff. Nothing like an open fire.

"So, did you come straight here from Tokyo after Kenkichi told you? ... Ah, on the way from a job. Good of you to come for him when you're busy. And what is it you do? Must work for a company or something like that. Aha, that's all the rage now. A photographer's the hero of the hour. Kenkichi got him a good son-in-law.

"What? ... Go on with the story. Ah, that's right. I'd got as far the part where me and Kenkichi found the sparrows' graveyard. It's a valley round back of the village that they'd called Sparrow Valley, for some reason, since the old times. A small valley with nothing there that no one from the village ever goes near. Because we were kids, we liked the idea of a place no one went near and so we headed into Sparrow Valley and for some reason I don't remember we started digging a hole. And then one after the other, these tiny bones—however much we dug—kept coming out with no end to them and we got frightened.

"You're asking how we knew they were sparrow bones? ... Even as kids we could tell right away. Sparrows that had only just flown there and died were piled up to the surface. You know what I mean? There are these sayings you always hear like 'I've never seen a whatnot or a dead sparrow.' Although you see sparrows everywhere, you never set eyes on one that's passed over. Not heard it myself but don't city folk talk about how you never see an old bar hostess or a dead sparrow? Everything falls into place in the end... that kind of rosy meaning, isn't it? Anyway, I was so terrified, I went and told my dad about the valley when I got home. My dad's long gone now, but did he get angry? He thrashed me half to death. He never beat me before or since the way he hit me then.

"Now you want me to tell you where it is. I suppose you *do*. The place where all of Japan's sparrows come to die. You're still thinking it's something everyone will want to see. You heard about it from Kenkichi and you're planning on taking some snaps and going home. That's right. That's for damn sure. But you're lying about just one thing and I'm sure of it. Kenkichi would never tell the husband of his precious daughter to go and take some pictures of Sparrow Valley. It's a pack of lies to say that Kenkichi is yearning on his deathbed for one last look at the place. This is the ax I've been using to cut firewood behind the house. And now I'm sorry, son, but I can't let you live. Don't run away, you great lunkhead. How's this?!...What, still not dead? ... Knocked your block off! Dead now, aren't you? Here, let me cut your head off your body. There it goes rolling away. Not coming back to life from that one, I'll bet. It's the end for you and that's one less person who knows about the valley. My family has guarded Sparrow Valley for generations. I must have told you that none of our

classmates were still alive. That's because they learned the secret when Kenkichi spilled it to them all. Then he got scared and ran away. Right, time to bury you. In Sparrow Valley.

“What are these high-and-mighty humans who can't look after one little sparrow's life or one sparrows' graveyard? I like sparrows much better than people, myself. So Kenkichi's about ready to die, is he? Well, who'd give a damn enough to dig up *his* grave? Right, my sparrows?”

Sparrow Valley

So, old Kenkichi Onoda's doing well, I trust? Oh, he's in hospital, is he? Well well, that won't do at all! Still, I suppose he's no spring chicken. It stands to reason that a man would go getting sick from time to time at that sort of age. There's no holding back the years, or so they say! Though he was such a tough lad when he was young, our Kenkichi. Me and him, we used to do our fair bit of fighting, that's for sure. Neverending, they was, our fights. Though here on Noto Peninsula we don't use that word, "fight," mind. "Wrangle," that's what we say around here. Thinking back on it now, it's hard to imagine what we ever found that much cause for wrangling over. We came from the same village, see, old Kenkichi and me. He lived in the house across from mine, on the same street. Dead straight street, it was, too. Course with that being the case, from the day we first started primary school to the time we finished our studies, there wasn't a single day went by we didn't see each other.

Fighting buddies, you say? Hm, well, I suppose you could call us that. Thing is, I stayed put in this village, lived here all this time and never got to know a thing about other places. See now, if old Kenkichi hadn't gone and left, then maybe there would have been a touch of wrangling, but things would have been a fair bit more entertaining too, or so I reckon. Truth be told, I've thought of him a fair deal of late. I'm getting on myself too, you know, just like he is, and I'm darned if I know why, but I've suddenly found myself pining for my old friends, see. It doesn't half bring me down, thinking about those sorts of things. You understand my meaning, don't you? Old folks like me would rather keep oblivious to the fact they've gone and gotten old. If I'm going around thinking about Kenkichi, it's a sign that I'm getting nostalgic about the past, see. That's what it means. So I've been doing my best not to think about him.

Anyway, I heard he was living in Kameido, over in Tokyo. Is he still there? Oh he is, is he? I guess it must suit him well enough, then. It's been thirty years he's been there now, you say? Well! How the time passes. That must make it over forty since he left Noto. Yes, that makes sense. It was around ten years or so after he'd gone that the news came he'd gotten married. Well, well, I suppose we all age at the same rate, that's how life is...

And you're married to old Kenkichi's daughter, aren't you? Oh, you've two children? The first already in high school? Well, I can hardly believe it! So what exactly is it he's come down with, then? Nothing a spell in bed won't fix, I imagine. He was always a tough one, that Kenkichi. I'll bet it's just a trifling thing, aren't I right?

Hm? Cancer, you say? So, old Kenkichi's gone and got cancer has he? Really, now. Well, that's just terrible. You mean to tell me he's done for, then? Honestly, it makes me sick, everyone going and dying off, even that old fighter Kenkichi. I don't suppose it means much to you, but he's the only one in my year at school who's still around... There's that saying, isn't there, about childhood friends – "the ones you made bamboo stilts with back in the day." When you get to my sort of age, see, you come realize that the ones you played around making stilts and all sorts with when you were youngsters are your friends for life, no matter how many years you go without seeing each other, or however far you find yourselves apart. They're different from other friends. I'll sure be sad to see him go. I don't want to go getting old myself. When I look at people the same age as me, old friends of mine all dying off before me, I get to realizing how little of my own life I've got left. There's nothing so sad as that, now, I'll tell you that for nothing.

And you came all the way from Tokyo just to let me know that, did you? I'm much obliged to you, even if the news itself is hardly good.

Hm...? Oh, that isn't what you came for? Well now, what on earth has brought you all the way to Noto, then? You've something related to Kenkichi to speak with me about, you say? Well, in that case you better hurry up and spit it out, hadn't you? Kenkichi's on his

deathbed as we speak, isn't he? I'm curious to hear. What does that old Kenkichi want from me? Oh, wait a minute, I bet I know what it's about. It's them sparrows, am I right?

Yes, yes, that figures. Truth be told, when you turned up at my place saying you were a relative of Kenkichi, the thought did cross my mind. I'll wager this is about Sparrow Valley, I thought to myself. So what's he got to say about it, then, old Kenkichi?

Oh, he wants to see it, does he? Well, if the cancer's taken hold of him and they're saying he might not even make it till tomorrow, I can understand why he might get to feeling like that. But he can hardly come all the way here in a state like that, can he? He can want all he likes, but a fat lot of good it'll do him. Don't get me wrong, I don't mean to be cold-hearted. I'd like to go take a look at it with him as much as he would. Sparrow Valley was mine and Kenkichi's secret place, you know. Only the two of us knew about it. It's the place where all the sparrows from all across Japan come to die.

They're everywhere, them tiny little sparrows—every village, every town, every mountain, every valley, on telegraph poles and in the rafters, you name it. There's no place in Japan you won't find them. In the morning they start their twittering, going about them happy lives of theirs and not bothering anyone. Well, maybe they do a bit of damage to the rice plants in the fields, but sparrows were around a long time before folks started planting rice, that's for sure. It's true isn't it? It's not the birds' fault if they go around pecking at what's growing on the ground. Saying that sparrows harm the rice crop is just folk being self-centered. Then they go around ridiculing the sparrows, making out that they're they least worthy of all the birds. Have you heard that saying: "Even sparrows build nests for their young"? Can you believe that? Such disdain for creatures smaller than themselves! How do the folks in them big cities live, then? What kind of splendid nests are they building for their chicks, I'd like to know? Two-bedroom flats with all the mod-cons? Or ready-built detached houses, maybe? That's about the size of it. And almost all of them mortgaged, too!

Sparrows would laugh at folks like that, I tell you. Them sparrows don't just build their own nests, they've got their own graveyard too, that they built back in the old times. When Kenkichi and I were in primary school, we found it, you know, that sparrows' graveyard... But this story could go on a bit, and there's a job I've started I've got to see to. Can you hold on a few minutes? I'll be back in no time.

Say there! I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I suppose this must sound mighty strange to a Tokyo lad like you, but I've been chopping firewood. It's only me left in this house now, and being an old-fashioned sort, I just can't bring myself to use that propane stuff that folks these days use. There's really nothing can beat a real fire, you know.

So now, tell me, did you come straight here from Tokyo when Kenkichi told you to? Oh, you had to take time off work and all, did you? Well, that's right good of you, a busy man like you finding the time to do as Kenkichi asks. What is it that you do? I'll guess you're working in some company somewhere? Oh, I say, that is a mighty fashionable job to have! Photography is a star profession these days, isn't it? Well well, Kenkichi went and got himself a good husband for his daughter.

Yes, right you are. What was it I was talking about again? Oh yes, I remember. I got to the part where Kenkichi and I found the sparrows' graveyard, didn't I? It's a valley behind the village, which somehow came to be called Sparrow Valley. It's just a little valley, nothing there to see at all, and no one from the village ever goes there. We were still just kids at the time, old Kenkichi and me, and we liked going places where no one would bother us, so one day we snuck in, just the two of us, and I don't remember why, but we started digging there, see. And we just kept on finding all these little bones, popping out of the ground one after another, see. It seemed like there was no end to them. It put the fear right into us, it did.

How did I know they were sparrows' bones? Oh, it was just obvious, even to kids like us. Up near the top there were all the bodies of the sparrows that had come to die there the most recently, piled up on top of one another, see. You know how there's that phrase people often use: "You never see so-and-so or dead sparrows." The "so-and-so" is something you see around all the time, but never near the end of its life. I don't rightly know if it's true, but I've heard that in the city they go about saying that "you never see old barmaids or dead sparrows." People throw it about quite casually, when what they mean to say is just that everything finds its proper place in the end. Anyway, seeing that really did put the fear into me, so when I got home I asked my pa about the valley. My pa's long dead now, see, but by damn did he get angry. What a thrashing I got! That was the first and only time he ever gave me a beating like that.

You want to know where it is, do you? Yes, that figures. It's the place where the sparrows from all across Japan come to die, after all. I should think that anyone would be interested in seeing a place like that. You heard about it from Kenkichi, and you thought you'd come out here and take a photo or two, didn't you? I'm right, aren't I? Yes, I'm sure I am. Just like I'm sure that you're not telling me the whole truth. Oh, trust me, I know full well there's no way that Kenkichi would ask the husband of his precious daughter to go and take a photo of Sparrow Valley. You mean to come here and tell me that Kenkichi's dying wish is to get a last peek at it? A bundle of lies! You see this? This here is the axe that I was just chopping firewood with behind my house. I'm afraid you've left me no choice now, I'm going to have to kill you. No, don't run away, you damned idiot! There, how's that? Not enough to do away with you, eh? There, how about that? Now your skull's cracked in two. You must be dead now. Here, though, I'll just lop your head off. Oh, there we go! It's rolled clean away. No chance of your coming back to life now, is there? That's the end of you. Now there's nobody left who knows about Sparrow Valley. My family has been in charge of protecting that there Valley for generations. I think I told you that none of the people from my year at school were left, didn't I? They all found out the secret, that's why. Found it out, because that Kenkichi went spreading it about. It's that which gave him the fear, see, and sent him running away from the village. Right, I'll bury you along with the others, in the Valley.

I sure do wonder what makes folks think people are so high and mighty when they can't even protect the life of a single tiny sparrow, let alone the sparrows' graveyard. I'd take sparrows over people, any day. I suppose Kenkichi will die soon enough, and who's going to go disturbing his grave? Eh, sparrows?

Sparrow Valley
By Hanmura Ryō

Onoda Kenkichi? How's he doing then? Oh – he's in the hospital? Well, that's too bad. But then he's pretty old – guys get sick, it happens to everyone. It's hell getting old. But he was a tough guy when he was young – we used to fight all the time. Constantly. We don't really use the word 'fight' up here in Noto. We say 'bicker'. Come to think of it, we'd bicker about just about any old thing. We lived right across the street from each other. The whole time we was kids in school together, not a day went by we wasn't looking at each other's faces.

We was fighting friends. Now that I said it that way, I guess that's about right. I've lived in this town my whole life, I never knew nothing about anywhere else – if Kenkichi hadn't of took off we would have kept on fighting, but it would have been a more interesting life. To tell the truth, people around here remember Kenkichi pretty well. I'm old now, and old friends like Kenkichi – I don't know – I suddenly start remembering things we did long ago and it don't make me feel so good. You know? Us old guys, we don't even notice how old we're getting sometimes. I been thinking about Kenkichi a lot lately, thinking about the old days. That's what it is. I suppose I should try not to think about him so much.

Last I heard he was living in Tokyo, in Kameido. Is he still there? Still Kameido, huh? I thought so. A guy like Kenkichi, he'd like living in a place like that. . . so he's been living there thirty years. Time flies, don't it? I ain't seen him in forty years now. He'd been married for ten years before I even heard about it. The two of us, we're both getting old. You say you're married to his younger girl...Two kids? The older one, she's in already in high school? Is that right? That's amazing, it sure is. So what it is that Kenkichi's got? He'll get better fast though, right? He's a tough old bastard. Things will turn out all right, don't you think? Huh? Don't you think?

Oh . . . cancer . . . Kenkichi's got cancer? I can't believe it . . . cancer? Well, that's it then. Is there anything they can do for him? That's a tough one. I guess we all got to die sometime. Even a guy like Kenkichi, a tough bastard like him. You may not know this, but he's the last one of the kids I grew up with who's still around. I suppose you could say he was my best friend, but that don't quite . . . we was kids together. It don't matter how he left, or how long I ain't seen him for – we was kids together, it's something special. It's so damn sad. I hate getting old. I watch all my friends die, guys the same age as me. I know I don't have much time left myself. It just makes me feel all emptied out.

You came here all the way from Tokyo just to let me know about Kenkichi? That was real nice of you, going to go to all that trouble, even though it was bad news.

Oh . . . , you didn't come here special just for that? So why *did* you come then? You need to talk to me about Kenkichi? . . . well, go ahead then, tell me already. He's dying, ain't he? Just tell me, I want to know. What does he want from me? By any chance, would it be . . . about the sparrows? . . .

That's what I thought. As soon as you showed up here at my house saying you was his family, I could tell. It's about the sparrow valley, ain't it? What does he say about it? About the sparrow valley?

He wants to see it? That guy, the cancer's got him all twisted up inside, he don't know if he'll even see tomorrow or just wake up in the morning a corpse. I figure I can understand why he wants to see it. That's the way it is, he couldn't get here himself. He wants to see it, but that ain't gonna happen. I ain't saying it to be cold, I'm just saying it. Hell, I'd love to see him if I could. Sparrow valley was our secret – we was the only ones knew about it. It's where all the sparrows in Japan come to die.

They're just little things, but every town, every city, every mountain, every valley . . . on the power lines and under the roofs, there's no place in the whole damn country where you don't see them. Every morning they're singing, just 'peep-peeping' away, they're so happy and cheerful, they don't get in no one's way. Of course, they steal a little rice from the fields, but they was here long before us. So they peck at the crops a little, where's the harm in that? To say they're a nuisance, that's just people being selfish. People don't give them no respect, say they're the lowest of all the birds. Do you know that saying, 'even a sparrow builds a home for its young'? *Even a sparrow?* What a crap way to talk about a little bird. City people, what kind of life do they live? What kind of home do they make for their kids? Two-bedroom apartments, little shitbox cookie-cutter houses. And mostly it's the bank owns 'em, you know.

The sparrows, they're laughing at us. And that ain't all, them sparrows been making their own graveyard here since a long, long time ago. Me and Kenkichi, we found it when we was in grade school . . . This is getting to be an awful long talk, I need to finish up something that I was doing. Can you wait here a second? I'll be right back.

Sorry about the wait there. It must seem kind of funny to a Tokyo guy like you, but I was just splitting up some wood for the fire. I live alone, and for an old-fashioned guy like me, heating with propane just don't seem right – there's nothing like a real wood fire. By the way – we was talking about Kenkichi, did you come straight here from Tokyo? Oh, you had some business near here? It was awful nice of you to come all the way to help Kenkichi out, I'm sure you got plenty other things to do. What is it you do for a living, do you work in an office? Oh really, that's a pretty fancy job – I bet a lot of young guys want to be a photographer. Kenkichi got himself quite a son-in-law, didn't he?

Yeah . . . so what was it we was talking about before? Oh, that's right – I was telling you about how Kenkichi and me found that graveyard the sparrows made for themselves. It was up in a little valley behind town– people from around here always called it 'sparrow valley'. There wasn't nothing there, nobody ever went back there. We was just kids, getting a hoot out of being in a place nobody else ever went – I can't remember why, but we started to dig a hole. Then we started to dig up all these little bones. We kept on digging and digging, and we kept finding more of them. We was starting to get scared.

How did we know they was sparrow bones? We could tell they was from sparrows, easy, even if we was just kids. Sparrows just kept flying there to die, it was nothing but sparrow bones all over. You know what I'm talking about? People say how you don't never seem to see any dead sparrows anywhere. We see them every day normally, but then when they die, they're gone, we don't never see what's left of them. Someone said to me once – it's like them girls who work in the bars, you don't never see one who's got old – just like we don't never see a dead sparrow. In the end, we all end up where we're supposed to end up, I guess. . . what the hell is the point of it all? It don't amount to nothing. Anyway, finding them bones, it scared the hell out of the both of us, so we went home. I asked my father about it, about the valley. He's dead now, of course – I'd never seen him so mad before, he beat the living crap out of me, worst whupping I ever got from him.

Kenkichi told you all this already? That don't surprise me none. It's the place where all the sparrows in Japan come to die. It's the kind of place anyone would want to see – that ain't changed none. After hearing about the valley from Kenkichi, I bet you wanted to come here and take a picture. That's it. You'd be wanting to, for sure. But there's one thing you're lying about. I can see what you're up to. You're telling me you're here because Kenkichi is about to die, and he wants to see the sparrow valley again – that's a lie. See this? This here is the hatchet I was just using to split firewood out back. You got no real job, you should die.

Go ahead and try to run away, you son of a bitch. How d'you like this? How'd you like to die like this? I'll split your head in half. Die already! I'll hack it right off your body. There – your neck is twisting off. You ain't gonna wake up now, are you? It's finished. There's one less person knows about the valley. My family, from way back, we been living here just to protect it. I already told you all the kids we went to school with was dead. They all found out the secret, Kenkichi went and told everyone. Then he got scared, and ran away to Tokyo. Now I'm gonna bury you too. In the sparrow valley.

What the hell are people good for if they won't even protect a single tiny sparrow, or the graveyard they made? Me, I've always liked sparrows more than people. Now Kenkichi will be dead soon. Who's gonna bother to dig him up out of the ground? Right, sparrows?

“Sparrow Valley”
By Hanmura Ryou

“Onoda Kenkichi? Is he in good health? ... Hospitalized? ... That just can’t be. Well, he is old, huh. Even he can get sick. You know what they say about the perils of advancing age. Even so, Kenkichi was so strong during our younger years. I fought with him—all the time. Actually, here in Noto, we don’t use the word “fight.” We call it “quarreling.” Just thinking about it all now, there was a reason for all that quarreling. We grew up across the street from one another. From the beginning of grade school to the day we graduated there was not a day during which we were not in each other’s face.

“We were...friends who fought. Yeah, that sounds about right. Since then I’ve continued to live in this village, a village that knows nothing about other places. If Kenkichi hadn’t left the village we probably would have continued quarreling, but now I think I would have at least been able to have a little more humorous life. To tell the truth, I’ve been thinking about Kenkichi a lot lately. I’m old. To go from knowing nothing about a friend from so long ago, such as Kenkichi, to suddenly remembering them and missing them doesn’t really feel good, does it? Hey. Can you help me figure something out? Even though I’m old, it pains me when I realize I’ve become so. When I think about Kenkichi, am I just yearning for the past? That’s it. Because of that, I’ve been trying my best to not think about him.

“I think he was living in Kameido near Tokyo. Is he still there? ... Ah, so he is. It seems he really fit in there, didn’t he? ... He’s been living there for thirty years? Man, time really flies. If that’s the case, then it’s been at least forty years since we parted. I remember hearing he had found a wife, and I believe that was ten years after he left. They were the same age.

“And you said you’re married to one of his daughters? ... With two kids? The oldest is in high school? ... Is that true? I just can’t believe it. So what kind of sickness does Kenkichi have? If he goes through treatment for a while, he’ll probably get better. He’s always been so sturdy after all; he can take on whatever it is, so what is it?

“What...? Cancer... He has cancer? You’re kidding, Kenkichi has cancer? ... He really has cancer? That’s no good. If he really has cancer, then he can’t be saved. When they get sick with cancer, everyone ends up dying, don’t they? Even that strong fighter, Kenkichi, will die. You probably didn’t know this, but of all my former classmates, Kenkichi is the last one remaining. You could say they’re just childhood friends, but even if you haven’t seen them in many years and even if you don’t know what has become of them, friends you’ve had your whole life are special. It’s lonely. It’s just the consequences of growing old, I guess. Watching all of my friends, all the same age as me, passing away before me while I see my own remaining life fall away is really discouraging.

“You came all this way from Tokyo just to tell me this, didn’t you? You went through a lot of trouble for me, even to bring such unfortunate news.

“Hmm...? Was I wrong? Then what exactly did you come all this way to Noto for? Was there something that Kenkichi wanted to tell me...? If there is, will you just go ahead and tell me? He’s on the verge of death. I want to know. I want to know what he has to say to me. ...Ah, could it be? The valley...

“I’ve figured it out. Hmm, no, actually it was when you came to my house and said you were a relative of Kenkichi’s. I knew at once. ‘This is about Sparrow Valley, isn’t it?’ And then, ‘What does he want to tell me, about the valley?’

“He said he wants to see it? Overcome by cancer, unable to know what his condition will be tomorrow, well, it’s not that I don’t understand his feelings. However, it

seems he's not able to travel here himself. Isn't what he's asking impossible? I don't mean to sound cold-hearted; I'd like to see Kenkichi. Sparrow Valley is our secret place. It's where sparrows from all over Japan come to die.

"They're tiny. Whichever village, whichever town, whichever mountain, whichever valley... whether it's on power lines or the eaves of houses, there's no place in Japan where you won't find them. When morning comes, they sing and chirp, and they live peacefully amongst good-spirited people. Well, I guess some of them do destroy rice plants, but those birds have been living here since before humans began planting rice. Isn't it so that wherever birds are pecking at seeds, they're considered bad? Whenever sparrows damage our rice, we get selfish. We belittle them and call them the most worthless of all birds. Did you know that there's a proverb about them? 'Even sparrows build nests for their young.' ...Doesn't it just sound like we're talking down on them? If that's the case, then how does society want them to live? What sort of splendid nests should they be building for their young? Two bedroom apartments? Ready-built, single family homes? That's just as good as it gets. Oh, and don't most of them come with loans?

"The sparrows make me laugh. Oh, and furthermore, those sparrows have even taken charge of building their own grave since long, long ago. When we were in elementary school, Kenkichi and I stumbled across their graveyard... If I start this story, it's going to be a long one. I've got to go finish doing some things first, and then I'll be back. Please wait. I'll be back in a second.

"Okay, sorry to keep you waiting. I bet things are great for those in Tokyo these days, but I've still got to chop wood here. I live by myself in this house and am old-fashioned to the core. I just can't bring myself to cook with a gas stove. Wood stoves are the best.

"By the way, did Kenkichi tell you to come straight here from Tokyo? ... Ah, you were at work? Even though you're busy, you went through all this trouble for Kenkichi. What do you do? As I thought, you're a businessman of sorts. My goodness, that really is a popular field these days, isn't it? Photography is like today's flower arrangement. Kenkichi sure has a wonderful son-in-law.

"Hmm... Now, where was I? Ah, yes. I was talking about how Kenkichi and I discovered the sparrows' graveyard. I was going to talk about why this valley near our village had been called 'Sparrow Valley' since long ago. No one from the village ever approached that small, empty valley. Since we were kids, we liked the idea of a place where no one ever came near, so one day we decided to enter the valley. I've since forgotten what impulse caused us to do so, but anyhow, we started digging holes once we got there. As we dug and dug, we began to unearth tiny bones in one hole after another, endlessly, until we were too scared to go on.

"You might be wondering how we knew they were sparrow bones... Even though we were kids, we knew immediately what was going on. The sparrows would fly there and, after dying, would pile up on the ground. We figured, that must be it. All my life I had never before seen sparrow remains, or anything similar. Although it may seem like something people see often, I had seen little of what life looks like at its final hour. This may just be hearsay, but in the city, wouldn't it be the same as saying you never really see old people lying in hostels? Those settling down in the place they'll be settled down when their end comes... Putting it that way sounds kind of reassuring. Anyway, because we had seen such a horrible, terrifying thing, Kenkichi and I returned home and I told my father about what happened in the valley. My father died a long time ago, but I still wonder whether or not my telling this story will make him mad. He beat me as hard as he could. That was the first time in my life my father had given me such a beating.

“Shall I teach you more about the valley? I think I will. It’s the place that Japan’s sparrows come to die. I bet there is nothing that could change someone’s mind if they wanted to see it. When Kenkichi was telling you about this, he asked you to return with a photo, didn’t he? Yes? Then it’s decided. However, that’s all just a big lie. I understand perfectly. There’s no way Kenkichi would send his all-important son-in-law all this way just so you could bring him back some pictures of Sparrow Valley. Saying that he just wants a glimpse of Sparrow Valley is a bunch of bull. This here is the axe I keep behind my house for chopping firewood. You know, it’s inevitable: we’re all going to die. Even this fool before you can’t escape death. How about this, how about smashing my noggin in or something like that? Come on, I’m already dead anyway. Cut my head off. Then my head will roll around on the floor. You probably won’t be able to revive me after that. This is the end. With this, there will be one less person who knows about the valley. For generations my family has lived here in order to protect the sparrows. And now, no one from our class will remain. Because we knew the secret. Everyone told rumors about Kenkichi, saying he became frightened and ran away. Hmm, you’ll probably have to be buried, too. Off to the valley.

“If we can’t even protect the life of a single sparrow or their one, single graveyard, then what good are humans? I like sparrows *much* more than I like humans. Kenkichi will die soon. And who will assault his grave? The sparrows will.”

Sparrow Valley

"That Onoda Kenkichi, is he still kicking? . . . In the hospital . . . Now that's a shame. Well, I suppose he must be a ripe old age, too, by now. We do get sick. It's like they say, the ravages of age. But he was such a tough little rascal when he was young. We fought so many times. All the time. Though we don't really say *fight* here 'round Noto. We say *quarrel*. Now I look back on it, how did we have so many things to quarrel over? There was his house, right across that straight old street in the village. From the day we started primary school to the end of our schooling, there couldn't have been a day I didn't see his mug.

"Fighting buddies . . . Yeah, I guess you could say that. I've ended up whiling away my years in this little village, never knowing anyplace else, but that Kenkichi ended up going away; if he'd stayed, maybe we would have quarreled, but as it stands I remember it as an amusing time. Tell you the truth, these days, I've been thinking about Kenkichi. I'm getting to be a ripe old age myself, and then for some reason I get thinking about some friend from way back like Kenkichi; it's nostalgic, but it's not that much of a pleasure, you see. Look, son. I wonder if you can see what I mean. I'm an old man, but I don't want to realize how old I am. Thinking back on Kenkichi like this, it's like I miss the days gone by. That's what I'm saying. That's why I try not to think about Kenkichi too much.

"He was living in Tokyo, in some place called Kameido, wasn't he? Is he still there? . . . Eh, he is after all, is he. That Kenkichi, he must have really have taken a fancy to that place . . . Thirty years already? Time does fly. That makes at least forty years since we went our separate ways. After all, it was the tenth year when I heard he'd taken a wife, if I remember right. We're getting old, we are.

"Aren't you the one who married his second daughter? . . . Two kids. The older one in high school . . . You kidding me, I can't believe it; I tell ya. So, Kenkichi's sick, you say; what's wrong with him? I'm sure he'll be fine if he just takes a little rest. You could never keep that one down. It's nothing, right; what is it?

"What . . . cancer . . . you're saying Kenkichi's got cancer? How could Kenkichi have cancer? . . . He's really got cancer, eh. Now, that's too much. So you're saying it's too late for him? I can't take this; everyone's dying and leaving me all alone. Even that Kenkichi, who could fight like no one. I guess you wouldn't know, but Kenkichi's the last of my classmates left. You know how they talk about 'friends from the womb' or such like; well, when it's a friend you played together with since you were little, no matter how many years go by without seeing them, no matter how far apart you get, they're always your friend; they're special. It's sad. I don't want to get any older. Watching people my age, watching my chums pass on before me, it just reminds me how little time I have left; it's so disheartening.

"So you came all the way from Tokyo specially just to tell me? It's awfully kind. Even if it's not good news.

"Oh . . . you didn't? Then what brings you all the way down to Noto? Something to talk about regarding Kenkichi . . . Then spit it out, will you? Kenkichi's dying, right? I want to know myself. What's he want? . . . Oh, you mean, you know. Sparrow . . .

"Ah, it is, is it. Yeah, when you showed up at my house saying you were a relative of Kenkichi's, that did pass through my head. Must be about Sparrow Valley, I thought. So what did Kenkichi say? About Sparrow Valley, I mean.

"He wants to see it, you say? I can see that, when he's afflicted by cancer and doesn't know if he's going to wake up tomorrow. But, still, how can he travel all the way over here? Sure he might want to see it, but there's nothing to talk about. I'm not trying to be coldhearted here. Of course I'd love to get together with him. Sparrow Valley, it's our secret place, just the two of us. The valley where sparrows come from all over Japan to die.

"Those little birds, they're in the villages, in the towns, in the mountains, in the valleys . . . on the telephone wires and on the eaves; there's no place in Japan they don't get to. When the morn comes, they cheep out their song, living with cheer without getting in the way of anyone. Sure they might mess up the rice fields a bit, but they've been around longer than we people have been planting rice. Ain't that so; what's wrong with birds pecking the grasses for seeds? Those folks who complain they damage the rice have no right. Talking down on the sparrows, saying they're the most worthless little birds. You heard this saying? 'Even a sparrow makes a nest for her young' . . . What kind of muck is that, talking down on small creatures like that? What about these city folks; what kind of lives do they lead? What kind of grand nests do they make for their young? A two-bedroom apartment? A ready-built house? That's about as much as they can do. And usually on a loan to boot.

"The sparrows must laugh at them. The sparrows have even prepared their own graveyard long ago. Kenkichi and I ran into it when were in primary school.

". . . This is gonna get to be a long story. Let me go finish up some work I was doing first. Wait here, will ya? I'll be right back.

"Here I am; sorry I took so long. You people from Tokyo might find it strange these days, but I was splitting some firewood. I'm the only one left in this house, and, you know, I'm a bit stuck in the old ways; I can't get my head 'round the idea of cooking over propane or whatever you call it. There's nothing like an open fire.

"By the way, son, did you come straight here from Tokyo on Kenkichi's request? . . . Oh, on your way for work. Thanks for making time for Kenkichi; I know you must be busy. What is it you do? Let me guess, you work behind a desk. Oh, well now, that's quite the current job, isn't it? A photographer, well, you're the star of the modern age. Not a bad son-in-law Kenkichi's got himself.

"Oh . . . the story. Yeah, that's right. I was just telling you how Kenkichi and I found the sparrows' graveyard together. It's a valley way in the back of the village. For some reason, it's always been called Sparrow Valley. A little empty valley no one from the village goes to. We were still children, you see, so we took a liking to places that no one went to. So Kenkichi and I went down into Sparrow Valley, and, I forget what it that was gave us the idea, but in any case we started digging a hole. And then, what do you know, these little bones popped out; the more we dug, the more came out, on and on and on, until it got scary.

"You ask how we knew they were sparrow bones . . . Well, that was clear even to children. There were fresh sparrows that had just flown there and died, piled up at the top. Have you heard? People say you never see something or other or a dead sparrow, or something like that. You see 'em all the time, but you never see the end of their fate. I'm just telling you what I've heard, but there's something they say in the city, like, you never see a bar girl get old or a sparrow die, you know? They end up where they end up . . . they must mean it all easygoing like that. Anyway, it scared me senseless, so when I went home I told my pa about the valley. My pa's long dead and gone, but I still don't know whether to be angry. He beat the stuffing out of me. That was the first and last time my pa ever beat me like that.

"You want me to tell you where it is, you say? Well, you would, wouldn't you? It's where the sparrows come from all over Japan to die, after all. People are always gonna want to see that. You heard about it from Kenkichi, and now you want to take a picture and bring it back to him. I know. Of course. But there's just one thing you're lying about. I can see right through ya. Kenichi wouldn't tell his beloved daughter's man to go take him a picture of Sparrow Valley. Kenkichi's on his deathbed and he wants to take a peek at Sparrow Valley? That's horseshit. Look here, this is the ax I was just using to split wood behind the house. We don't have no choice about this no more; you're gonna have to die. Hey, don't run, you bonehead. How about this, is this enough to kill ya; look, I split your damn head open. Yeah, I

guess you should be dead by now. But let's split that head off your shoulders. There, head's off. You should stay good and dead like that. It's over. Now everyone who knows about that valley is gone. Our family's protected Sparrow Valley for generation after generation. I mentioned none of my classmates are still alive. That's because they found out the secret. It was Kenkichi who let 'em all know. Kenkichi ran away because he was scared. All right, let me bury you, too. In Sparrow Valley.

"You can't even respect the life of a little sparrow, you can't even protect their one little graveyard, and you brag about being human? I like sparrows much better than I like humans. Kenkichi should be dead soon. Who's gonna dig up his grave? Right, sparrows?

Sparrow Valley by Hanmura Ryō

“Ah, Mr. Kenkichi Onoda is well, I expect? ... Oh no, he’s in the hospital, you say? That’s a real shame. He is getting on in years, it’s true. Sure to suffer a bit from some complaint or other, I suppose. They say years come on as inevitably as waves to the shore. In his youth, though, what a strong man he was! We quarreled often. All the time. Out here in Noto on the northern coast, we don’t use the word quarrel. We say tussle. Thinking back, we tussled over everything about. We lived in the same village, across the street from each other. All through our days as schoolchildren, a day didn’t pass as we didn’t see each other.”

“Unending squabbles but best friends... Yes, if you put it that way. I lived in this village my whole life, yes, my whole life, just here, ignorant about other places... If Kenkichi hadn’t left, we would have continued our tussling over everything no doubt, and maybe life would have been a little more interesting. Truthfully, I think of Kenkichi often nowadays. I’m old now have suddenly started longing for friends from way back, like that old Kenkichi... I’m old, but I don’t want to notice that I’m old. And remembering about Kenkichi, well, that’s just me thinking of the old days long past, and that makes me feel bad, you know? It gnaws at me. So I do as I can and try not to think about him.”

“He is supposed to live in Tokyo, in a place called Kameido, is he still there I wonder? ... Oh, I see, still in Kameido. That rascal Kenkichi, Kameido must suit him well indeed. Lived there thirty years. Time passes quickly. It’s been more than forty years since we parted ways. I heard he had married, some ten years after that. We are both old now.”

“I see, you are Kenkichi’s son-in-law, married to his second daughter? And two children, the older one already in high school? How about that, incredible! By the way, what is Kenkichi sick with? Nothing a little rest can’t cure him of? He was always a sturdy one. He’ll be fine, I expect?”

“Cancer, you say? Cancer? Kenkichi? It can’t be... Kenkichi has cancer...”

“So it’s true, cancer. There’s no hope, he can’t be saved. How awful, everyone is dying off. Even Kenkichi, the fighter. You probably don’t know, but besides myself, Kenkichi is the last of our school class. Childhood friends, we are, and however far apart you get, friends from your earliest days are special. I feel so lonely! I don’t want to get old. Seeing companions to their graves, it’s devastating.”

“You made the long trip all the way from Tokyo just to tell me? You are very kind, though you come bearing bad news.”

“No? Then what brings you to this backwater of Noto? Kenkichi has something to tell me?... Well, speak man! What with Kenkichi on the brink, I want to know his mind. Does he want something from me? ... Ah, could it be about the Valley...?”

“So I wasn’t mistaken. When you said you were Kenkichi’s relative and were coming to my house, I suspected. I knew it was about Sparrow Valley.”

“He wants to see it? Caught in the maws of cancer, not knowing whether he will see another day... it’s not that I don’t understand. But he can’t make the journey himself now, so say what he will, there’s no way he can come to see it. I’m not being callous. I want to see him again myself. Sparrow Valley is a secret place that only we two know about. It is the valley where all of the sparrows of Japan come to die.”

“The sparrows are small, and are in every village, every town, every mountain and every valley. On power lines and eaves, there’s no place in Japan that doesn’t have sparrows living there. They chirp in the mornings and live happily without burdening people. Well, maybe they can damage crops in a field, some, but they’ve been here since before people planted rice. Isn’t that so? What’s wrong with a bird eating some seeds? Calling them crop pests -- nothing but selfish! Cursing them, saying they are trifling birds. Do you know that

saying, that ‘even sparrows build a nest for their young’ ... what a way to look down on a living thing, however small. And how do the city people live anyways? What magnificent nests do they build for their young? A two-bedroom apartment? A prefab home? That’s in the best case. And almost always with a loan attached too.”

“The sparrows are the ones laughing. You know, sparrows even make their own graves, and have done so since ancient times. When Kenkichi and I were in elementary school, we found the sparrows’ gravesite. ... But this story might drag on once I start, so I’m going to go and finish a little bit of work I had started before you came. Please wait, I’ll be back soon enough.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting. A modern Tokyoite might find it unusual, but I was chopping wood. I’m the only one left living in this house and I’m an old soul who can’t bring himself around to propane. A live flame is best.”

“By the way, you say that you came from Tokyo right away when asked by Kenkichi. Oh, you had other business in these parts? You are kind indeed, doing this for Kenkichi while you’re so busy yourself. What is it you do? Office work of some sort, I suppose? Well, well, isn’t that a high-class line of work, a photographer, the star career of the times! Kenkichi must be proud of his son-in-law.”

“The rest of the story, you say? That’s right, I know where I stopped. Kenkichi and I, just us two, had found the gravesite of the sparrows. It’s a valley out behind the village, and for whatever reason the name Sparrow Valley stuck. It’s an unremarkable tiny valley, and the village folk don’t go near it. We were still kids though, and liked places that others avoided, so we entered the Sparrow Valley and – I don’t remember what made us do it –but we started digging a hole, and they started coming out, one after the other, the tiny bones. However much we dug, they came out of the earth, one after another, inexhaustible. We got afraid.”

“How did we know they were sparrow bones, you ask? Even as children we knew right away. Some sparrows had just flown in, died, and piled up on the ground. Have you heard what they say? They say that you never see the remains of two things, sparrows and... I can’t remember. Really, it’s said often. Sparrows are a common sight, but you never see them meet their fate. It’s just hearsay, but in the city they often say that you never see an old hostess or a dead sparrow. But in the end, things come to rest where they do, that’s all. In any case, it scared us, and I went home and told my father about the place. My father, well, he died long ago, but I never saw him so angry as then. I took a terrible thrashing. He never struck me like that before or since.”

“Where is it, you ask? No doubt you would like to know. It’s where the sparrows of all of Japan come to die. Anyone would want to have a look at it. And you too, you heard about it from Kenkichi and would like to go back home with some photographs of it. I guessed it, didn’t I? Of course you do. It can hardly be otherwise. But there was one thing you are lying about, it’s clear as day to me. Kenkichi would never tell the husband of his beloved daughter to go and photograph the Sparrow Valley. And it’s a pack of lies that in the last days of his life he wanted to come and have a final glance at the place.”

“This here is what I was using to chop firewood out back: my axe. There’s no remedy, you must die. Don’t run, you fool. Take that! Why don’t you die? Ah, cracked your head open there. And here comes the head, cleanly off the torso... and rolls away. No one can bring you back to life now. That’s that. Now, everyone who knew about the Valley should be gone. My House has guarded the Sparrow Valley for generation after generation. Didn’t I tell you that all of my classmates were gone? It’s because they knew the secret.

Kenkichi sent them all to me. Then he got scared and ran off. Well now, I suppose I'll bury you... in the Sparrow Valley."

"People are so arrogant! They can't even protect the life of a tiny sparrow, or the sparrows' grave. I've always loved the sparrows more than people. Kenkichi will pass on soon enough himself, and no one will profane *his* grave. Isn't that so, my sparrows?"

Valley of the Sparrows
by Hanmura Ryō

“Onoda Kenkichi, is he doin’ well? ...Oh, in the hospital... That’s terrible news. Well, he has reached a certain age, hasn’t he? Gettin’ a little sick is normal. Time and tide wait for no man, right? Be that as it may, he surely was a tough guy when he was younger. We often got into fights, he and I. All the time, actually. But here in Noto we don’t use that word ‘fight’. Quarrel is what we call it. When I think about it now, we sure as hell always found a reason to quarrel. We lived in the same village on the main street right across from each other. There wasn’t a single day we didn’t see each other from entering elementary school until graduation.

“Fightin’ buddies...? Well, I reckon you could call us that. I continued livin’ in this village not really knowin’ what was going on in the rest of the world. If Kenkichi hadn’t left, we probably would’ve kept on quarrelin’, but I think that way at least I might’ve lived a more interestin’ life. To tell the truth, I’ve been thinkin’ of Kenkichi a lot these days. But I’ve reached a certain age, and good old friends like Kenkichi – I don’t know – rememberin’ them all of a sudden just doesn’t have a good feelin’ to it. Y’know what I’m sayin’? When you get old, you don’t wanna be reminded of that. The fact that I often remember Kenkichi, doesn’t that mean I’m nostalgic for the past? That’s exactly what it means. And that’s why I try my best not to remind myself of him.

“Does he still live in Kameido in Tokyo? ...I see. So he’s still livin’ there. The Kameido lifestyle really seems to suit Kenkichi well. He’s been livin’ there for the past 30 years after all. Time really flies. And it’s been already more than 40 years since we parted ways. When I heard he had gotten himself a wife, it had probably already been 10 years. We all get older.

“And you’re the husband of his second daughter, did I get this right? ...Two kids. And the older one already goes to high school! ...Man, I can’t believe it, really. And Kenkichi, what’s he in the hospital for? They’ll take care of him for a while and he’ll be good as new, right? He’s always been a tough guy. He’ll be fine, right? ...Tell me.

“What? ...Cancer... Kenkichi has cancer? This can’t be true! Kenkichi doesn’t have cancer... No way... Cancer, huh? Man, I need a minute. So, that means he can’t be saved? I don’t like this, everyone around me keeps dyin’. Now even that strong fighter, Kenkichi. You probably don’t know this, but Kenkichi, he is the last one left of my old classmates. You could probably just call them my childhood friends. Y’see, the great thing about friends you had since you were little is that no matter how many years you don’t see each other or how far apart you are from each other, you’ll always stay friends. This makes me feel kinda lonely. Growin’ old is cruel. To see how your friends die before you, showin’ you time over time how little remains of your own life... It makes you feel kinda helpless.

“Anyways, so you came all the way from Tokyo just to let me know about him? Thank you, I really appreciate that. Even though it wasn’t good news.

“Hm...? What do you mean that’s not all? What is it then that brought you all the way down here to Noto? Ask me something on behalf of Kenkichi? ...Well, you should’ve started with that. He’s dyin’ after all. Now, stop makin’ me curious. What does he want? Oh, by any chance, could it be about... the sparrows?

“So that’s what this is after all. Oh well, actually when you came here sayin’ you were Kenkichi’s kin, it came into my mind for a moment. That you might’ve come here for the Valley of the Sparrows, that is. So, what does Kenkichi want? With the Valley of the Sparrows, I mean.

“He wants to see it? It’s not like I don’t understand his feelings. His body being eaten away by cancer, not knowin’ if he’ll live to see another day... But as things are, he’s unable to travel here by himself. Even if he says he wants to see it. It’s impossible. I don’t wanna sound

heartless. Don'tcha think *I* would like to see him? The Valley of the Sparrows was our secret place. The sparrows from all over Japan, y'know, they go there to die.

"There is no village, no town, no mountain, no valley.... there's not even an electrical wire or a rain gutter in Japan where you can't find 'em, those small creatures.... As soon as mornin' dawns they start singin', good-humored, not disturbin' a single soul. Alright, they might mess up the rice plants on the fields a little, but they've been on this earth long before men started plantin' rice, haven't they?! It can't be right to complain that birds would pick seeds. It's our selfish nature that makes us blame the sparrows for harmin' the rice. To mock the sparrows, to dare say they are the most insignificant of all the birds. Did you know there is this sayin'? 'Even those puny sparrows make nests for their chicks'... What kinda cruel way is this to make fun of those small beings? I mean, how are the people in the cities livin'?! What kind of *gorgeous* nests are they buildin' for their chicks? A two-bedroom apartment? A family house? Isn't that how it is? Aren't they just livin' on borrowed things?

"The sparrows are laughing at *them*. The sparrows, they even made their own graveyard a long, long time ago. When Kenkichi and I were still in elementary school, we accidentally found that graveyard. ...It's kinda a long story, so before I start let me finish somethin' first. Please wait here. I'll be right back.

"Man, sorry I kept you waitin' for so long. I'm sure it's a lil strange for someone from Tokyo to hear that nowadays, but I was choppin' wood. It's just me livin' in this house now. I'm a really old-fashioned guy, y'know, and I don't quite like to cook with gas. Open fire. That's the real thing.

"By the way, I meant to ask you before... so, you talked to Kenkichi and then came straight here all the way from Tokyo? ...Ah, I see. You're on the job. Well, that's awful kinda ya to find time for Kenkichi despite your busy schedule. What's your job, anyway? Probably an employee of some kind? Oh geez, isn't that *the* job to be doing right now? Cameramen are today's rock stars. Kenkichi should be proud to have such a great son-in-law.

"Hm...? How the story went on, y'ask? Yeah, well, where was I? Ah, right. Kenkichi and I found the graveyard o' the sparrows. It was in a valley behind the village. I'm not sure why, but it's always been called the Valley of the Sparrows. It's a small valley with nothin' much to see, so the people from the village usually don't go there. But we were nothin' more than children and intrigued by this place where no one ever went. So, the two of us entered the Valley of the Sparrows, and I can't seem to remember what the reason, but anyway, we started diggin' a hole. And then, one by one, little bones began to appear, and no matter how deep we dug, it just wouldn't stop. At the end we got real frightened.

"Now, you might wonder how we knew that these were the bones of sparrows... Even as the little kids that we were, we immediately knew. I mean, sparrows that had just recently died were piled up all over the place. Did ya know? There are people who say 'I never seen this and that just as I never seen the dead body of a sparrow'. While you often might see things everyday, you never see the last seconds of their fate. Another expression I heard is 'I never seen an old escort girl or a dead sparrow in the city'. Isn't that what people say? All things die where they are supposed to. Isn't that what they are tryin' to say in an interestin' way? Anyways, it was a horribly scary thing to see, so, when I went back home, I told my father about what I had witnessed in the valley. My father died a long time ago, but boy was he angry that day. I got the beatin' of a lifetime. It was the first and last time my father ever beat me this hard.

"You want to know where that place is, y'say? I imagine you'd like to know. The place where all of Japan's sparrows go to die. There is probably no one in this world who wouldn't like to see that place. So, you heard this story from Kenkichi and thought you'd come here and take some pictures, ya? Am I right? Of course that's the reason. But you're

lying. I know you are. There is simply no way that Kenkichi would tell the husband of his precious daughter to come here and take pictures of the Valley of the Sparrows. There is no chance in hell that Kenkichi wishes to see the Valley of the Sparrows in his last moments! This is the ax I just used to chop firewood behind the house. I have no choice. You need to die. Don't run away, you fool! How's that? You still won't die? I'll split your head in two! Finally dead, are we? Would you mind lettin' your head part with your body? That's it, now your head's rollin'. Your life is finished once and for all. This is the end. Now there is only one person left who knows about the valley. Y'know, for centuries now my kin has lived to protect the Valley of the Sparrows. I told you, there is not one of my classmates left alive, didn't I? That's 'cause they knew the secret. Kenkichi just couldn't keep his mouth shut. Then he got scared and ran off. Anyway, let's bury you, shall we? In that Valley of the Sparrows, of course.

“What kind of person would I be, if I couldn't even protect the lives of those tiny sparrow and their graves. Personally, I would choose a sparrow's life over a person's any day. I'm sure Kenkichi will die soon too. But who will dig a hole in *his* grave, I wonder. Yes, the sparrows should.

Sparrow Valley
by Hanmura Ryō

“So he’s still going strong, is he? Good old Onoda Kenkichi....What’s that? He’s in the hospital....Well, that’s no good, no good at all. Tends to happen at our age, though. Bound to catch something now and again. It’s like they say: time spares no man. But darn it if he wasn’t a strapping young man back in the day. We were always fighting, him and me. Around the clock. Of course, folk here in Noto don’t use that word, ‘fighting.’ We call it ‘quarreling.’ I tell you, it’s hard to believe two kids ever could have had that much to quarrel about. We came from the same row of houses in the village, lived just across the street each other. From first grade up till we finished our schooling, not a day went by we didn’t hang around together.

“The tussling twosome...Yeah, that was us, all right. Me, I stayed on here in the village, so it’s the only place I’ve ever known, but I can’t help thinking Kenkichi would have enjoyed it here, in spite of the quarrelling, if he hadn’t up and left. To tell you the truth, Kenkichi’s been on my mind a lot lately. I’m an old man myself, though, so it makes me feel kind of blue, all this sudden nostalgia for old friends like Kenkichi. How can I explain it. It’s like, I may be old, but I’d like to carry on like it never happened to me. All this reminiscing about Kenkichi is just a yearning for the old days. Nothing more. That’s why I’ve tried to put him out of my mind for so long.

“Last I heard, he was living in Tokyo, in Kameido, I think it was. Probably still there, am I right?Ha, I knew it. Still in Kameido. That rascal, he took to that place like a duck to water....Thirty years now, you say? Time sure flies. That means it’s been more than forty years since we went our separate ways. If I remember correctly, he’d been gone ten years when he found himself a wife. I suppose they’ve grown old together.

“You were saying you married his younger daughter....Two kids, is that right? And the oldest is in high school....No, sir, I can’t hardly believe it. And you said Kenkichi came down with what, now? Whatever it is, I’m sure a little rest and relaxation will fix him right up. He was always a tough son of a gun. I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about. Right?

“What...you mean he’s got...cancer? Gotta be some mistake. He can’t have cancer, not Kenkichi....No kidding, huh? Cancer. But that’s terrible. You’re saying he’s not going to make it? I’m sorry, this is too much. Looks like everyone’s going to die on me after all. Even scrappy old Kenkichi. I don’t suppose you know this, but Kenkichi’s the last of my old classmates. To say we were childhood friends hardly covers it, I mean, we go back to when we were barely this high; I don’t care how many years it’s been since we last met, or how far apart we’ve drifted, we’re friends for life, doggone it. No, this is beyond sad. I don’t want to get any older. Saying goodbye to one old pal after another, realizing how little time I have left--not a comforting thought, believe me.

“And you came all the way from Tokyo, did you, to deliver the news? Well, I appreciate it. Even if it isn’t good news.

“Oh...That’s not it? Then what brings you all the way out here to Noto? You wanted to ask a favor for Kenkichi?Well, why didn’t you say so? The man’s on his deathbed, for crying out loud. Well, let’s hear it. He wants me to do anything, just say the word....Wait a minute. I think I know what this is about. It’s about the sparrows, isn’t it....

“Yup, I knew it. You know, the moment you showed up saying you were one of Kenkichi’s relatives, I had this feeling. This has got to be about Sparrow Valley, I thought. Well, let’s hear it. What’s he got to say about Sparrow Valley?

“He wants to *see* it? Listen, it’s not like I don’t understand the urge, what with the state he’s in with the cancer and all. But there’s no way he could possibly make it out here.

He couldn't see it even if he wanted. I'm not saying this to be cruel. I mean, I'd like nothing more than to see Kenkichi again. Sparrow Valley was our little secret, a place for just the two of us. It's the valley where all the sparrows in Japan come to die.

"Tiny sparrows... They're in every village, town, mountain, and valley... On almost every power line, under almost every eave... There's hardly a place in Japan you can go without finding them. There they are in the morning, singing cheerfully as they go about their lives, more than happy to stay out of people's way. Sure, they hurt the rice crops a little, but really, what can you expect, they were here long before people started planting rice. Where's the harm in some birds pecking at seed? Calling them rice pests is typical human arrogance. The nerve of it, looking down on sparrows like that, like they're almost less than birds. You ever hear that saying? *Even sparrows build nests for their chicks*... Now, that's a pretty mean way to talk about such small creatures, if you ask me. I mean, how do you city folk go about it? How plush are the nests you build for your little fledglings? Some two-room apartment? A cookie-cutter, prefab house? That's the best you can do. And most of you have to take out a loan to do it.

"Brother, sparrows put all that to shame. And you know what else? Since olden times they've had their own cemetery, even made it themselves. And we found it, Kenkichi and I did, when we were in elementary school... Ah, I almost forgot. Before I get carried away with this story, I just have this chore to finish, if you don't mind. Just a moment. I'll be right back.

"Sorry for keeping you so long. I don't suppose folk in Tokyo do much of this anymore, but I was out chopping some wood. It's just me here these days, and call me old-fashioned, but I just can't bring myself to cook with propane. No, sir, nothing beats a real, open flame.

"By the way, Kenkichi didn't send you here straight from Tokyo, did he?.... Ah, taking care of some business, too, then. Well, I'm sure Kenkichi appreciates everything you're doing for him. And what kind of work did you say you did? Something behind a desk, I bet. Well, color me impressed! That's the job to have these days, isn't it? A photographer, huh. Doesn't get much better than that. Kenkichi sure is lucky to have a son-in-law like you.

"Now, then... Where was I? Right. I was telling you how Kenkichi and I found the sparrow graveyard. Well, there was this little valley tucked away behind the village, a spot everyone's called Sparrow Valley since olden times. Just this empty little valley, no one ever went near it. Well, we were still little kids, and the fact that no one ever went there only made us more curious, so one day the two of us made our way down into the valley, where for some strange reason, I don't remember why anymore, we decided to start digging around. And to our surprise, we kept turning up these tiny little bones, wherever we dug, just one set of bones after another, until finally we'd uncovered so many it gave us the creeps.

"Now, you're probably wondering how we knew they were sparrow bones... Well, even a kid could have told you. The sparrows had obviously flown there to die, and their bodies had piled up in the ground. I'm sure you know that expression. People are fond of saying it. You never see such-and-such or dead sparrows. You know, something you'd expect to see, but which fate conspires to keep out of view. I heard there's one they say in the city: *You never see old bar hostesses or dead sparrows*. I guess it's supposed to mean 'things have a way of sorting themselves out'... or something puerile like that. Anyway, back to the story. I was scared out of my wits so I went home and told my father about the valley. He's long since passed, rest his soul. But no sooner had I told him than he started pummeling me. Let me tell you, he gave me the whooping of a lifetime.

"I bet you want me to tell you where it is, huh? Sure you do. It's the place where all the sparrows in Japan come to die. There's not a person alive who wouldn't want to see that.

You must have heard about it from Kenkichi, so you thought you'd just come around and snap a few photos. Am I right? Of course I am. But then you had to lie about it. Believe me, I saw right through it. See, Kenkichi would never send any son-in-law of his to take pictures of Sparrow Valley--not if he loved his daughter. All that stuff about him wanting to see Sparrow Valley one last time before he died, it was all a bunch of lies. Now, then. This here's the axe I was chopping firewood with out back. Unfortunately, you're going to have to die. Come back here, you little... Take that! Still alive? There, I've split your skull open. That ought to do the trick. Here, why don't I just take your head clean off. There we go, nice and decapitated. There's no coming back from that. Nope, that's all, folks. One less person who knows about the valley. For generations it's been up to my family to watch over Sparrow Valley, you know. I mentioned that all my other classmates were dead, didn't I? It's because they found out our secret. Kenkichi told them all. Then he turned tail and fled the village, scared as can be. Well, looks like I've got to bury you, too. Off we go to the valley.

"I mean, what good's a man if he can't respect the dignity of a little sparrow, or protect a sparrow graveyard? Me, I'll take sparrows over people any day. I mean, Kenkichi will be dead soon enough. And when he is, which one of you would ever disturb his grave? Eh, my little sparrows?"

Vallee O'Sparroez
by: Hanmura Ryo

"Ken'kichi Onoda, ye say? Alive 'n' kickin', I reckon ... Oh ... hospitlized? Natch, he b no spring chicken. Nossir. Well, that b just ducky! All part of gettin' old, I s'pose. Yabbut when he whuz just a fledglin' young lad, lemme tell ya, he whuz as tuff as talons. We used to lock horns. Non-stop. We duddn't really say *lock horns* 'round here, mind ye. *Pick bonez* b what we say. Even now methinks it crazy we had so many bonez to pick with each other. After all, we whuz side by side on the one 'n' only street in this here villij. From the first day of grade skool up until graduation, there wuddn't a day when our paths duddn't cross.

"Frenemies? Yuh-huh. I guess that b one way to put it. Me? I've always called these parts home. Wound up spendin' me days in this villij and never knew nuthin 'bout any parts elsewhere. Iffin Ken'kichi wuddn't have left this villij, we might have had bonez to pick, but I reckon we wudda buried the hatchet by now. Truth b told, these parts remind me of Ken'kichi a lot. I b no spring chicken meself, and to remember an old chum from way back like Ken'kichi, I dunno, gettin' nostalgic all of a sudden duddn't feel all that great. Now, lemme help ye understand sumthin. As old as I b now, I duddn't realize how old I whuz. Bein' reminded of Ken'kichi makes me think of the old days, but it duddn't mean that I yearn fer the past. Geddit? I whuz makin' it a point not to remember Ken'kichi.

"Last I heard he whuz nestin' in a place called Kamedo. He still there? Hah, I knew it. That Ken'kichi, Kamedo must have stroked him the right way. Now 30 years he b livin' there. Time does fly, n'yeah? That means it b more than 40 years sints we parted ways. Heard tell that he found himself an old biddy, too. I reckon that whuz ten years after he left these parts. Time sure has cot up with the both of us.

"Ye b the sunnin-law to his second dotter, yassay? With a brood of yer own! Two young 'uns. Oldist goes to high school. Izzatso? Can't b'lieve it. Not fer a second. And what b wrong with Ken'kichi? Nuthin a liddul bed rest won't fix, I s'pose. Always whuz stout-hearted. Old birdz b hard to pluck, n'yeah? Well, what it b?

"Ech! Cancer? Ken'kichi has cancer? Ye gotta b shittin' me. Well, that b it, then, duddn't it? Vultures b circlin'. Won't b long now. 'Tis a shame iffin it b true. Ken'kichi can't b saved now. It b too much to bear, n'yeah? Must everyone die? Even that brawny bonez-picker? S'pose ye duddn't know this, but me classmates have gotten to b as scarce as hen's teeth ... Ken'kichi b the last one still hangin' in there. 'Tis sumthin to b said 'bout childhood chums, but a mate to play with from such an early age, even iffin it b years sints they crossed paths, no matter the distints b'tween 'em, they have a speshul friendship and a friend fer life. Sure did miss him. Don'cha let time pass ye by. Standin' by idly, watchin' friends me own age go b'for me makes me realize me days are numbered. It b an uneasy feelin'.

"And ye came all the way from Tokyo to tell me that? Ye sure have gone to a lot of trubbul. Wuddn't even good news, wuddit?

"Heh? That wuddn't why ye came? So, what brings ye to Noto, then? Have a chat with meself 'bout Ken'kichi? Iffin so, hurry up 'n' spit it out then. Ken'kichi b 'bout to croak, and I b dyin' to know. Whattid that chap say 'bout me? Ah, s'pose it had to b that. The sparroez ...

"Just as methinks. Yuh-huh, ye know when ye came up to me house and said ye whuz a relative of Ken'kichi, immediately methinks it has sumthin to do with the vallee. And what did Ken'kichi have to say? Sumthin 'bout the Vallee O'Sparroez, that b fersure.

"He b twitchin' to see it, n'yeah? Chock full of cancer and on his last legs. Can't say I duddn't know how he feels. Yabbut I reckon he ain't gonna make it all the way out to these parts. Impossibul, I'd say. Don'cha get me wrong now, I'd like to go out there and see it with

Ken'kichi meself. The Vallee O'Sparroez b a seekrit place 'tween only Ken'kichi 'n' meself. That vallee, ye see, b the place where sparroez from all over J'pan come to die.

"Those iddy biddy bodies of theirs in ev'ry villij, ev'ry town, ev'ry mountin, ev'ry vallee ... even on the telephone wires 'n' eavestroffs, there b no place in J'pan where ye duddn't see sparroez. Tweetin' away in the mornin', livin' in good humor and not bein' a stain on nobody's life. S'pose they do mess up the rice fields a liddul, but sparroez have been 'round longer than hyumanz have been plantin' rice, haven't they? Only natural fer birdz to peck at seeds, iddn't it? Where do folks get off sayin' that sparroez b pests? They mock the sparrows and call 'em the last among birdz. There even b a proverb, ye know? It goes, *even sparroez build nests fer their babes* ... who do they think they b to mock such a small creature, amirite? And just what do they have to say 'bout their way of life in the city, huh? What do they say they do to build fine nests fer their babes, n'yeah? A 2-bedroom apartment? A d'tached reddi-bilt home? Iffin they b lucky ... and financed!

"The sparroez'd laff. Yuh-huh. And to crown it all, sparroez have been makin' their own boneyard sints the olden times, duddn't ye know? When Ken'kichi 'n' meself whuz grade skoolers, we done found that boneyard ... once I get to tellin' this story, it takes a while to get to the end. Lemme go take care of sum work I whuz in the middul of doin', okay? I'll b back in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

"Hullo there! Sorry to keep ye waitin'. Prolly rare fer folks in Tokyo these days, but I whuz splittin' logs fer firewood. Just meself in this here house, ye see, and I b a bit old-fashioned by nature, duddn't ye know. That propane stuff duddn't put me much in the mood fer cookin'. Can't beat a raw flame, n'yeah?

"By the by, ye said Ken'kichi told ye to come straight here from Tokyo, duddn't ye? Ah, ye b on yer way to work. Ye sure have gone to a lot of trubbul on Ken'kichi's b'half, even tho ye b so busy. And what kind of work ye do? S'pose it b sum sort of office work or the like. Kee-rist! That work b all the rage these days, duddn't it? A shutterbug, ye say. The long tom of the times. Ken'kichi must b proud as piss of his sunnin-law.

"Whassat? The rest of the story? Ah yes, that b right. We got up to the part where Ken'kichi 'n' meself had found the sparroez boneyard, n'yeah? It b a vallee in the remote parts of this villij, and has been called *Vallee O'Sparroez* sints the olden times. It b a deserted vallee that even the locals duddn't go near. We whuz still just kidz, and we got curious 'bout a desolate place nobody'd go near. So Ken'kichi 'n' meself went off into the Vallee O'Sparroez, just the two of us. I can't remember what drove us to it, but we started diggin'. And then we dug them up. Those iddy biddy bonez just kept on a comin', no matter how much we dug, they just kept comin' one after the other until at last we got plumb terrafied!

"How'd we know they whuz sparroez bonez? Lemme tell ye. Even kidz such as ourselves wudda known that right away. The sparroez had just died after flyin' into the vallee, and their bonez whuz in heaps up on the ground, ye see? Spottin' chooks b a regular event to the everyday observer, but it not b everyday that ye can spot 'em dyin'. I even heard tell that city folks offin say things like they've never laid eyes on old barmaidz or dead sparroez. In the end, it b 'bout findin' peace in a peaceful place, duddn't it? That b all there b to it, I s'pose. All the same, it whuz quite terrafyin', and I went home to tell me pops all 'bout it. Me pops has long sints gone paws up, but I'll b damned iffing he wuddn't as angry as a wet hen then. He beat the stuffin' out of me. That whuz the first 'n' last time that me pops beat me like that.

"Yethinks I whuz 'bout to tell ye where that place b? Natch. It b the place where sparroez from all over J'pan come to die. Who wuddn't want to see that? Ye said ye heard 'bout this place from Ken'kichi, and that ye'd come here with yer kam'ra, spray 'n' pray and b on yer way, n'yeah? Of course ye did. But ye counted yer chickens b'for they hatched, and now the chickens have come home to roost. Ye can't catch an old bird with chaff,

ye know? And I b no spring chicken. No way in hell Ken'kichi wudda sent his precious sunnin-law out to take pictures in the Vallee O'Sparroez. To think that Ken'kichi, with one foot in the grave, wants to come have a looksee at the Vallee O'Sparroez. Well, that b a complete cock 'n' bull story. Here b me hatchet I just used fer splittin' logs out b'hind me house, n'yeah? Ye've given me no choice. Yer goose b as good as cooked. No good tyrin' to run, ye bloody birdbrain! What say I split yer noggin and ye die fer me now? How'd ye like that? Yer fubar'd, bud. Lemme chop off that head of yers. Look at it roll. S'pose ye won't b comin' back to life now, will ye? 'Tis the end, n'yeah? One more liddul birdie that knew too much fer its own good got its wings clipped. Fer generations, me family has known to butcher, bury, and b quiet. I told ye meself me classmates b as scarce as hen's teeth, and I whuz the one dippin' the clutch. They knew too much. They all heard 'bout the vallee from that stoolpidgin Ken'kichi. That chicken-livered Ken'kichi got his feathers rufful'd and flew the coop. Well, s'pose I'll bury ye now. In that vallee, n'yeah?

"I took those iddy biddy sparroez under me wing, and protected their livez and their boneyard. And what of hyumanz? Me? Always did prefer sparroez meself. Ken'kichi b the last flea on a dead duck. Who b there to dig his grave? Amirite, me sparroez?"

Sparrow Valley
Hanmura Ryou

“Onoda Kenkichi, huh... How’s he doing? Oh, he’s in hospital...? Sorry to hear that. He is getting on a bit though, isn’t he? I’m not surprised to hear he’s unwell. That’s old age for you. You just can’t help it. Having said that, he used to be a brawny young lad. We used to fight all the time. *All* the time. Around these parts, we don’t use the word ‘fight’. See, we’d call that a ‘quarrel’. Looking back, I’m amazed that we managed to quarrel quite as much as we did. We lived in the same village, right across the street from each other. From the first week of school to the last, not a day went by that we didn’t lock horns.

“We were rivals and friends at the same time... Saying it out loud, that sounds about right. I stayed on in this village, not knowing what lies beyond it. I think if Kenkichi had stayed too, well, we might have quarrelled but we would have had a blast. To be honest, I’ve been reminiscing about those days a lot recently. To suddenly get swept up in nostalgia over an old friend like Kenkichi makes me feel uneasy. Do you know what I mean? I’d rather go through life without realising just how old I’ve become. The reason that I recall Kenkichi so much is because I’m getting sentimental. Don’t you think? I try not to look back with such sentimentality, that’s why I’ve always tried to avoid thinking about him.

“Last I heard he was living in Kameido in Tokyo. Is he still there? Ah, it’s just as I thought. He must be well-suited to Kameido... To think, he’s been there 30 years. Time flies. That means that it’s been over 40 years since he left this village. I heard that he got married 10 years after we went our separate ways. It’s been such a long time.

“So you say you’re married to his second eldest daughter... you have two children. Your eldest goes to high school... Really? I can’t believe it. So, how is Kenkichi? Surely he’ll recover with treatment. He’s always been in good health or, at least, he used to be. Tell me, how is he?

“What...? Cancer... did you say he has cancer? Kenkichi has cancer? That can’t be true. What do you mean it’s no good? Do you mean his illness isn’t treatable? I can’t bear it; everyone is giving up the ghost - even Kenkichi, who was as strong as an ox. You may not know this but he’s the only classmate I’ve got left. I’ve heard of the expression ‘childhood friends’ but this was different. We were all lifelong friends, and even if we went years without seeing each other, no matter how far apart we were, they always had a special place in my heart. I miss them so much. Getting old is no fun. Watching all my classmates leave me behind makes me feel like my time’s almost up too. It makes me feel really vulnerable. “So you came all the way from Tokyo to let me know about Kenkichi. That is good of you, but it is not good news.

“Oh... am I wrong? Well then, why did you come all this way to a rural place like Noto? You want to talk about something regarding Kenkichi? You should have said sooner. He’s dying, isn’t he? I would like to know what he wants me to do for him. What does he want? Perhaps it’s about that... sparrow...?

“Well, I’m right, aren’t I? When you turned up at my door and mentioned that you were one of his relatives, I thought that might be the case; I thought it might be about Sparrow Valley. So what has he told you?

“Did he say he wants to see it? Now that he’s struggling with cancer and doesn’t know how much time he has left? That’s quite understandable. However, he cannot reach it any longer. He is not physically fit enough to make the journey. It’s impossible, isn’t it? Even though I would love to see Kenkichi, it’s just not feasible. Sparrow Valley is our secret place. That valley is where sparrows from all across Japan go to die.

“There’s nowhere in Japan - no village, no town, no mountain or valley - where you won’t find a sparrow. Even on telegraph poles or on the edges of rooftops, they manage to make a home for themselves. Every morning, they fill the air with birdsong, not disturbing a thing. Well, aside from the rice fields. Still, they were there first. Weren’t they? Tell me what’s wrong with birds pecking at crops. To consider it an attack is a purely human point of view. Mankind look down on sparrows; they consider them the lowest amongst birds. There is a saying - ‘even sparrows make nests for their young’. That really means the sparrow is quite unlike any other animal. However, what kind of lifestyles are we leading in the city? What kind of nests are we making for *our* young? 2 LDKs? Purpose-built flats? At best, that’s all we can do. Moreover, we’re dependent on loans to even afford them.

“Sparrows would laugh at that. Those sparrows have been making not only their own nests but also their own graves all this time. When Kenkichi and I were in primary school, we stumbled across their graveyard... It’s a long story. I’ll just finish off what I was in the middle of doing before I begin. I’ll be right back.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Someone like you from Tokyo might find it hard to believe but I was in the middle of chopping wood. I’m the only one left in this house and I’m rather old fashioned. I don’t feel like using propane gas for my cooking. A real fire is best for me.

“By the way, did you come here straight from Tokyo? Ah, you’re on the way to a business trip? It’s good of you to find time for Kenkichi even though you’re busy. So what’s your line of work? Are you a so-called businessman? Well I must say that’s such a trendy profession. Working as a cameraman is very popular, very modern, isn’t it? Kenkichi is lucky to have you as his son-in-law.

“Oh, you want me to continue with the story? Alright, let me see. Ah yes, we got up to the part where the two of us happened across the sparrows’ graveyard. It’s a valley that lies just beyond this village and, for some reason, has always been known as Sparrow Valley. There’s nothing there but a little valley and it is always deserted. As children, we treasured this sanctuary, a place no one dared to come near. I can’t recall exactly how it happened but we ended up in that valley and decided to start digging. And, one after another, no matter how deep we dug, an endless stream of tiny little bones came pouring out of the earth. We were absolutely terrified.

“You’re asking me how we knew they were sparrows’ bones? Even a child could tell. The surface of the valley was littered with the fresh corpses of sparrows. What’s that saying? You never see something something nor the corpse of a sparrow... They’re something you see daily but never in their last moments. I think I’ve got it, yes, the saying is: in the city, you never see a hostess past her prime nor the corpse of a sparrow? Is it true? Everything falls into its proper place. Perhaps it’s not as profound as that. In any case, we were so terrified that I ended up telling my father (who has long since passed) about Sparrow Valley. He was beside himself with rage; he gave me a right beating. That was the first and last time that he hit me that hard, it’s something that will stay with me forever.

“You want me to tell you where it is. Of course you do. It’s where all the sparrows in Japan go to die. Anyone would jump at the chance to see it. You heard about it from Kenkichi and you want to take a photograph to show off back home. Am I wrong? Ha, I can tell that you’re lying. I know that for a fact. Why on earth would Kenkichi send his precious daughter’s husband to take a photograph of Sparrow Valley? It’s an outright lie that Kenkichi is dying to see it. This is the axe I was just using to chop wood. You’ve really given me no choice; you’re going to have to die. Do not run, you stupid fool. How’s this... you just won’t die, even after I’ve split your head wide open. Are you dead yet? I’ll sever your head from

your body. Ha, there rolls your head. Well, I don't think you'll recover from that blow. I guess that's that. There is now no one left who knows about the valley. My family have been the guardians of Sparrow Valley for generations. I must have told you that I have no surviving classmates. It was because they all knew. Kenkichi told them. The reason he left this place was out of fear, out of guilt. I guess I'll bury you too. In Sparrow Valley.

“If you cannot protect the life of a fragile sparrow, nor their grave, what right do you have to call yourself a man? I prefer sparrows to mankind, a thousand times over. Kenkichi will soon be dead. He's not worth anyone even digging up his grave. The prized bones of a sparrow are worth infinitely more than the ashes of a coward. Isn't that right, my comrades, my sparrows?”

The Valley of Sparrows by Hanmura Ryō

Onoda Kenkichi.... Is he doing well? Oh, he's in the hospital? That's not good. Well, he's getting up there, too. I'm not surprised he has an illness or two. You can't fight your age. Back in the day, you know, he was a real tough guy. He and I fought all the time. All the time. But around here in Noto, we don't say "fights." We say "scuffles." I'm amazed how we never ran out of things to scuffle over. We both lived in this village, across the road from each other. We saw each other every single day while we were school kids starting with elementary school.

You say we scuffled a lot because we liked each other? Well, that must be it. I've lived in this village all my life and I don't know anything about any other places. If Kenkichi didn't leave here, probably we continued to scuffle, but I think my life would have been a little more exciting. To tell you the truth, he has been popping up in my mind a lot lately. I'm getting old, too. I don't like the idea of suddenly wanting to see an old friend like Kenkichi when I don't have a good reason. I hope you can understand. I'm old, but I don't want to think I'm old. He must have been on my mind a lot because I miss my younger days, but they're long gone. That's what it is. That's why I was doing my best not to think about Kenkichi.

I heard he lived in a place called Kameido in Tokyo. Does he still live there? I see...he must really like it there. Oh, for 30 years. Time flies, doesn't it? That means he's been gone more than 40 years all together. I heard he got married about 10 years after he left. No wonder we're both getting old.

So, you're married to his second daughter, huh? And with two kids. The older one is in high school.... Imagine that. Amazing.... Come now, what's the problem with Kenkichi? He'll get better with treatment, right? He's a tough guy. It's nothing to worry about, right?

What ...? Cancer.... He has cancer? That can't be. Kenkichi can't have cancer.... Are you sure it's cancer? It's too late.... There's nothing they can do.... That's horrible. Everyone's dying. Even Kenkichi. He was such a fighter. I'm sure you wouldn't know this, but he is the last one of my class mates who's still alive. There's something special about friends you played with when you were just small kids. Even if you've been far apart for many years, you're friends for life. It's sad. You don't want to get old. I've been saying good-bye to people my age who belonged to our group. I can't help thinking about how little time I have left, and it's pretty depressing.

So, you came all the way from Tokyo to give me the news. I really appreciate it. It must have been difficult for you.

What? You came here for a different reason? Then, what brought you way out here to Noto? You want me to do something special for Kenkichi? Why didn't you get to the point sooner? He could die any minute. Tell me what he wants. Wait. Is it...is it about sparrows?

I thought so. Well, when you showed up and told me that you're Kenkichi's relative, it crossed my mind. I had a hunch this is about the Valley of Sparrows. Well, what did he tell you about the Valley of Sparrows?

OK. So, he wants to see the valley. The cancer could kill him any day now, and he wants to see the valley. I understand how he feels, but he can't travel, can he? He's asking for something he can't have. I don't mean to sound heartless. I wish I could go there with him, too. The Valley of Sparrows is our secret place, just for two of us. That valley is where sparrows from all over Japan come to die.

Those small creatures...every village, every town, every mountain, every valley. On telephone lines, around roofs...they're all over Japan. They chirp in the morning like they're so happy, and they never bother anyone. Sure, they eat some of the rice crop. But they were here before people started to plant rice. There's nothing wrong with birds eating some plant

seeds. Don't you agree? People call sparrows pests, but that's just human arrogance. People look down on sparrows like they're the most useless among all the birds. You know what they say? They say even sparrows build nests for their babies. That's a terrible put-down on these small creatures. If that's the case, how superior are people living in cities? What kind of splendid nests are they building for their kids? Two bedroom apartments? Tract housing? That's about it. And most people do that with borrowed money.

Sparrows would laugh at that. The sparrows had even built their own burial ground way back then. Kenkichi and I stumbled onto this burial ground when we were in elementary school. But if I get started on this, it's going to be a long story... Let me go out for a minute and finish something I started before you arrived. Will you wait here? I'll be back soon.

Sorry I kept you waiting. Probably you people in Tokyo don't get to see it any more but I was splitting fire wood. I'm living alone and I'm old-fashioned. I don't feel like switching to propane. There's nothing like a wood fire.

By the way, did you come straight from Tokyo just for Kenkichi? I see, so you're also on a business trip. It's good of you to do this when you're so busy. What kind of work do you do? Are you a corporate man? Really? That's a job everyone wants. Professional photographers are riding high these days. Kenkichi must be proud to have a son-in-law like you.

The rest of the story? Oh, yes. I told you Kenkichi and I found the burial ground of sparrows. It's in a valley outside this village. It's been always called the Valley of Sparrows for some reason. It's just an ordinary, small valley and there's really nothing there, so villagers don't even bother to go. We were small kids and we liked the idea that nobody ever went there. He and I sneaked into the Valley of Sparrows, and I don't remember why, but we started to dig a hole in the ground. The next thing we knew, we were digging up gobs of small skeletons. The more we dug, the more came out. We kept digging, and digging, and digging up endless piles of bones until we got real scared.

You ask how we knew those were sparrow bones. Even kids could tell. The sparrows that just flew in and died, and were piled up in layers around us. Have you heard this before? You know, people say, "You never get to see this and that or dead sparrows." That's because you see the live ones around all the time, but you don't know what happens to them in the end. Someone told me city people often say you never get to see old bar maids or dead sparrows. Probably they just mean things reach their own conclusions, or something along that line. Anyway, I got so scared, I went home and told my father what happened in the valley. He passed away a long time ago but, boy, did he get mad. He was furious. He beat the dickens out of me. That was the only time he punished me like that.

You want me to show you where it is? Of course, you do. Sparrows all over Japan fly in and die there. Who wouldn't be curious to see it? Kenkichi told you the story, and you want to take pictures of the valley. That's what you want. I know that's what you want. But you are lying about one thing. I know so. Kenkichi wouldn't make his precious daughter's husband go take a picture of the Valley of Sparrows. You're lying when you say he wants to see the Valley of Sparrows just one more time before he dies. This is an axe I used a minute ago to split wood in the backyard. Now I'm afraid you must die. Don't you run away, you fool. How about this? You're not dead yet? There, I've split your head open. I'm sure you're dead now. I'm going to cut your head off. Yeah, now your head is rolling around. There's no way you can come back now. This finishes it. There's no one left who knows about the valley any more. My family has been the guardian of the Valley of Sparrows. I told you all my class mates are dead. They knew the secret because Kenkichi spilled the beans. He became afraid and ran away. Now, I'm going to bury you, too, in the Valley of Sparrows.

What's so high and mighty about humans who can't even protect a tiny sparrow or protect the sparrows' burial ground? I'll take sparrows over humans any day. Kenkichi will die soon. Nobody would bother to dig up his burial ground. Isn't that right, my dear sparrows?

Sparrow Valley
HANMURA Ryō

So how's old Ken doing anyway? Oh? In the hospital....that's a shame. But, he's not so young I guess. At that age, you get sick, like it or not. "The march of time," and all that. Still, when he was young he was strong as they came. We fought a lot though. Almost constantly, in fact. But in these parts, we don't like to say "fight." Instead we say "tussle." Looking back, I'm amazed we found so much to tussle about. We lived in the same town, across the street from each other on a road full of houses. From the time we started grade school until we graduated, there wasn't a single day we didn't see each other.

Fighting friends... Yeah, that's what we were. I stayed here in town. Didn't bother much with the outside world. But I think if Ken hadn't left, life would of been a little funnier. We probably would of tussled though. To tell you the truth, lately I think about Ken a lot. I'm not so young myself. Not sure why, but when I reminisce about old friends like him, it just doesn't sit right somehow. You know? Wonder if you see where I'm coming from. It's like, I got old, but I don't want to *notice* I got old. The reason I remember Ken is that I miss the old days. That's just how it goes, I guess. So, I try not to think about Ken too much.

I think he was living in a place called Bellevue up near the city. Wonder if he's still there? ...Hmm, it was Bellevue, you say? Thought so. Good old Ken. I guess Bellevue suited him. He's been there 30 years after all. The time sure goes by fast. Been more than 40 years since he left. I heard he got married, let's see, ten years later. Guess we both got old.

So, you married his second daughter... Two kids? The oldest in high school... really? Wow. Anyway, what's wrong with Ken? Probably nothing some rest won't fix. He always was tough. It's nothing serious, right?

What now?Cancer... Ken? You're kidding. You're sure it's really cancer? That is a damn shame. Do you think it's already too late for him? It really gets to you. Everyone you know dies in the end. Even Ken, the fighter. I guess you couldn't have known, but aside from him, not one of my old classmates is still alive. People talk about "childhood pals," but it's true —the friends you played with when you were little are special. They're your friends forever, no matter how many years have passed since you last saw them, no matter how far away they are. This is sad news. Getting old is no fun. Seeing all your old classmates and buddies die off reminds you your own time is running out. Makes you feel real helpless.

So, you came all that way from the city just to tell me? You must be beat. Wish it'd been for better news.

Oh... that's not why you came? So what brought you down here then? Ken wants a favor from me? Why didn't you say so! Ken is dying after all. Just let me know. What does he want me to do? Hmm... I wonder if it has something to do with that one time. The sparrows...

Am I right? Actually, the thought crossed my mind soon as you showed up here telling me you were Ken's relative. You're here about Sparrow Valley, huh? So, what did he say? About Sparrow Valley, I mean.

He wants to see it? I guess I can understand. With the cancer in him, who knows how long he's got. But there's no way he can make the trip down here in his condition. I know he wants to see it again, but it's just not doable. I don't mean to be cruel. Hell, I want to see Ken too. Sparrow Valley was Ken's and my secret spot. All the sparrows in the country go there to die, you know.

They may be tiny, but they're in every village, town, mountain, and valley... not a power line or roof where you can't find them. They chirp away in the morning, no bother at all to good-hearted folks. Sure, they get into the fields and make a mess of the seed sometimes, but they've been here a lot longer than we've been planting. Can't blame a bird for pecking at seed, now can you? Saying they hurt the crops is just arrogant. People make fun of sparrows

too... say they're not worth nothing. You ever heard that old saying? "*Even* a sparrow builds a nest for its chicks." See? People look down on them just because they're little. What kind of life do you city folks have, even if you do your damndest? What kind of fancy nest can you build for your chicks? A two-bedroom apartment? A pre-fab house? That's about the best you can hope for. And even then you need loans.

If anything, the sparrows are laughing at you. And let me tell you, those sparrows have their own graveyard. They built it way back when. Ken and I found it when we were in grade school. But if I start talking about it now it'll take awhile, so let me finish my chores first. Hang on. I'll be back soon...

Thanks for waiting. Just had to chop some firewood. I suppose that's a rare sight in the city these days. Never had any interest in cooking with propane. I prefer the old ways, and I'm all alone in this house anyhow. Nothing like a wood fire.

So, did you come straight down when Ken asked you? ...Oh, you were at work. Real nice of you to take the time to do all this. So what do you do? An office job, maybe? Well now! That's a popular line of work these days, huh? In my day we thought photographers were pretty classy. Ken got himself a good son-in-law.

What? The rest of the story? Oh, right! We'd gotten as far as Ken and me finding the sparrows' graveyard. It's in a valley behind town that folks around here always called Sparrow Valley for some reason. The valley is such a boring little place, not even the locals go there. Like most kids, we liked places off the beaten path. One day we went into Sparrow Valley and —I forget why— started digging a hole. Then we found them. Tiny little bones. No matter how much we dug, we found them, one after another. There was no end to them. We started to get scared.

How did we know they were sparrow bones? Even a kid could have figured it out. See, the sparrows that had landed there and died recently were all piled up on top. Didn't you ever think about it? Everyone says they never seen a dead sparrow. You see live sparrows all the time, but you never see them when they're just about to die. I hear in the city folks say "you never see an old bottle girl or a dead sparrow?" Guess that's supposed to be comforting... means that everything works itself out in the end or something like that. Anyway, we got real scared. I went home and told my dad about that valley. I wondered if the old man —he died years ago— would be angry with me. Well, he thrashed me good. Never gave me such a beating before or after that day.

You want me to show you that place? Of course you do. It's where all the sparrows in the land come to die, after all. Anyone would want to see it. You heard about it from Ken, and thought you'd take some pictures before heading home, didn't you? Am I right? Of course I am. But you lied about one little thing. It's clear as day to me. Ken wouldn't have sent his precious daughter's husband here to take pictures of Sparrow Valley. That story about him wanting to see it again before he passes is all lies. Here's the hatchet I was just chopping wood with out back. Afraid I have to ask you to die, son. Don't run, you damn fool! How's this? Will a busted skull settle you down? You look pretty dead to me. Let's get that head off, just to make sure. Look at it roll away. No coming back from death's door for you. Guess that's that. Now there's not a soul left who knows about that valley. My family's been guarding Sparrow Valley for generations. I told you: not a one of my classmates is still alive. They all learned the secret, you see. Ken went and blabbered about it to everyone. Then he got scared, and ran away. Well, I'll bury you with the rest. Bury you in Sparrow Valley.

What good are people if they can't even save one tiny sparrow or protect a single sparrow's grave? I always did like sparrows better than people. Ken will be dead soon too. Nobody will bother *his* grave. Isn't that right, sparrows?

Sparrow Hollow
by HANMURA Ryo

Onoda Kenkichi, huh? He's well, I hope? What's that? Hospital? Well, that's no good, is it? But then he is getting on a bit, isn't he? You get sick at that age. You can't fight it, getting old. It gets you in the end. And he was a tough customer when he was younger, let me tell you. We used to fight all the time. Not that you'd really call it fighting. Not round these parts anyway. No, I suppose they were more like scuffles. Thinking back, it's hard to believe we found so much to disagree about. But then, we saw a lot of each other. We both lived here in the village, you know. You've got all the houses on this one street, and he was just across from me. From when we started school right the way till we left, there wouldn't have been a day we didn't see each other.

What's that? Friendly rivals? Heh, I guess that's it. When you put it like that, I guess that's what we were. Now, I ended up living here my whole life. This village is the only place I know. And if Kenkichi hadn't left, there might've been more scuffles, you know, but I think he could've been happy here. If he'd stuck around.

To tell you the truth, I've been thinking about old Kenkichi a lot lately. I mean, I'm not getting any younger, and when you get to my age, you find yourself thinking about old friends. I don't know why, but you just find they're on your mind and you miss them. It doesn't make you feel too good about things, I'll tell you that. I don't suppose you'd understand, but just because you're getting old doesn't mean you want to be reminded of it the whole time. I guess I'm thinking about Kenkichi a lot 'cause I'm missing the old days. Yep, that must be it. And that's why I'm doing my best not to think about him at all.

I heard he was living in Tokyo, in some place called Kameido. He's still there, huh? I guess he must've found the place for him. What's that? Thirty years he's been there? Heh. Where does the time go? That must make it, what, forty years since he left? I remember hearing he got hitched. Yep, that's right. He'd been gone ten years. Ah, we went and got old, didn't we?

And you're married to his daughter, you say? The second one? And you've got two kids yourselves? Well, how about that? The older one's in high school? Heh. Is that so? Ah, I can't quite believe it, I really can't. So what's the matter with Kenkichi anyway? If he rests up, he'll be back on his feet, right? He always was a tough customer. It can't be anything serious, can it? Well?

Cancer? Kenkichi's got cancer? Are you serious? And he's pretty far gone? So I guess he's not going to pull through. Damn it, it really gets to you. Watching folks die, I mean. And now even that tough son of a bitch is on his way out. You won't know this, but he's the last one. Of all the kids I went to school with, it's just him and me left. People go on about their childhood friends, you know, and they're right—there's something about those friends, the ones you played with when you were a kid. It doesn't matter how many years go by, or where they end up. There's something different about them. You're friends for life. Ah, it's a damn shame. Getting old's no fun, I tell you. Watching your old school friends dying, folks the same age as you... Well, it brings it home to you. How little time you've got left. It gets you down, it really does.

So you came all the way from Tokyo to tell me that, did you? About Kenkichi? Well, I appreciate it. Even if it wasn't exactly good news. Huh? What's that? That's not why you're here? Well, what is it then? What else could've brought you all the way out here to Noto? Kenkichi wants something, does he? Well, why didn't you say so? He's at death's door, isn't he? Come on, spit it out! What does he want from me? Ah, wait. I know what this is about. It's about the sparrows, isn't it?

I thought as much. The moment you turned up here saying you were a relative of Kenkichi's, I just had this feeling it'd be about Sparrow Hollow. And? What did he have to say about it?

He wants to see it, does he? Well, I guess I can understand that. I mean, he's got cancer, he hasn't got long left. But it's not like he's going to be able to make it all the way out here, is he? He might want to see it, but that's too bad. It's not going to happen. Look, I'm not trying to hurt anyone's feelings. I mean, I'd love to see him again, you know. We had that secret spot, after all, just him and me—the valley where every sparrow in Japan goes to die.

They're everywhere, you know. Go to any village, any town, any mountain, any valley, and you'll find them. You'll see them sitting on power lines, making their nests in porches. There's not a single place in the country you won't find those little fellows. You hear them chirping away in the morning, but they're just happily minding their own business. They don't get in anyone's way. Sure, they might mess up the odd farmer's field, but they've been around a lot longer than people have been planting rice, let me tell you. I mean, what's the big deal about some birds taking a bit of grain, anyway? They say sparrows ruin rice crops, but that's just people thinking of no one but themselves. And then they mock them, talk about them like they're the worst birds in the world, the lowest of the low.

You know that saying they have, right? "Even sparrows build nests for their chicks." What the hell's that supposed to mean? Who do people think they are, laughing at a little creature like that? And what? Do city folks really think the way they live is so much better? What kind of amazing nests are they building for their chicks, huh? Tell me that! Some poky little rabbit hutch or a single story prefab? And that's if they're lucky! Most of them can't even afford the damn things! They need to borrow money to pay for them!

If the sparrows knew, they'd think you were out of your minds. They're not idiots, you know. I mean, they've had their own cemetery for a long, long time. And one day we found it. Me and Kenkichi, back when we were just kids. Now, look. Once I start on this stuff, we're going to be here a while. I was in the middle of something when you came and I want to finish up. Just hold on, will you? I won't be a minute.

Sorry to keep you waiting. I know it's isn't something you Tokyo folks have to worry about, but I had to chop some wood. I live here alone, you see, and I guess I'm what you'd call old-fashioned. I've got no interest in cooking with propane gas or what have you. No, you can't beat a real fire.

So anyway, you talked to Kenkichi, and then what? You came all the way out here from Tokyo? Oh, you're in the area for work, are you? Well, it's good of you to take time out of your busy schedule for old Kenkichi. And what do you do? You work for some company or other, I'll bet. Oh, is that so? Seems that's all the rage these days. A photographer, huh? That's everyone's dream job now, isn't it? Well, Kenkichi's done alright, having a son-in-law like you.

Hm? You want me to go on? Right, right. Well, where were we? I told you that me and Kenkichi found the sparrows' cemetery, didn't I? It was in a valley in the mountains just beyond the village, this place that'd always been known as Sparrow Hollow. No one knew why it was called that, it just was. It was this little valley, nothing special about it, but no one from the village ever went near it. We were just kids, so I guess you could say we liked places where other folks didn't go. Anyway, we went there and for some reason or other, we decided we'd start digging. And that's when we found them. The ground was full of them, all these tiny skeletons. We kept digging and digging and they just kept on coming. We realized they weren't going to stop, and that's when we got scared.

What's that? How did we know they were sparrows? Look, we were kids, but we weren't stupid. When we looked around, we could see piles of them lying on the ground, sparrows that'd just flown there to die. You must've heard people talk about it. That a dead sparrow is one of those things in life you'll never see. You might see them all the time, but you never see them right at the end, when they go to meet their maker. In the city, they say that you'll never see an ageing woman working in a hostess bar and you'll never see a dead sparrow. They say it all the time, or that's what I heard anyway. When it's your time to go, you've got to go, I suppose. I guess that's what they mean by it.

So anyway, I was still pretty shaken up when I got back home, so I told my old man what had happened. He's long gone now, of course. Anyway, I decided I'd tell him, even though I wasn't sure how he'd react. And I took one hell of a beating, I tell you. He beat me to within an inch of my life. He'd never hit me like that before, and he never did again...

You want me to tell you where it is, do you? Well, that's no surprise. I mean, we're talking about the place where every sparrow in Japan goes to die. Who wouldn't want to see that? You heard about it from Kenkichi and now you want to go and get yourself a picture, right? Admit it. I know what you're after. I knew right away, you know. That you were lying to me. There's no way Kenkichi would ever tell his precious daughter's husband to come out here and take a picture of Sparrow Hollow. No way in hell. You really expect me to believe that Kenkichi is there, lying on his death bed, telling you he wants one last look at it? Bullshit!

Here, recognize this? It's the axe I was chopping wood with out back. No, you've given me no choice. You're going to have to die. Don't even think about it! You're staying right here! Come here, damn you! How's that? Did you like that? What, still not dead? What if I split your head open, like that? Did that do the trick? Now, let's take that head right off, huh? There we go. That's better, isn't it? Now it's free to roll around. You won't be getting up again anytime soon, will you?

It's finally over. My family protects that place, you see. It's what we've always done, generation after generation. Remember me telling you how none of my old classmates were still around? It's because they knew. Kenkichi blabbed. Then he got scared so he turned tail and ran. Now, let's bury you along with the others. Over in Sparrow Hollow.

Who the hell do people think they are, acting so high and mighty? Sparrows' little lives are worth something too. And what sort of man would I be if I couldn't protect their burial ground? Who needs people anyway? I'd choose sparrows any day. Now it won't be long before Kenkichi's dead and buried. And no one's going to want to go and dig up his damn grave, are they? Well, are they, my little friends?

Sparrow Valley

"So he been healthy, that Mr. Onoda Kenkichi? Huh, the hospital? Well, that's no good. Still, he'd be plenty old by now, no surprise he'd be sick sometimes. Old age come for everyone, after all. Sure was a healthy fella when he was young, though. He and me, we was fighting plenty, most of the time. Although we ain't much call it 'fighting' here around Noto, we call it 'scrapping'. Even now I can see there was plenty to scrap about. After all, he lived right across our little village street from me, so hardly a day went by I ain't see him, from first day of first grade till we finished school, and still we went on doing it.

"Scrap buddies? Sure, that's about how it was. I been in this village my whole life ain't know a thing about nowhere else. That Kenkichi, though - if he hadn't left, well, might be we'd get to scrapping, but... he made life interesting. Tell you the truth, I been thinking of him a good bit these days. I'm an old man, and now and then these fond old memories of friends like Kenkichi spring up all of a sudden, who knows why. But it ain't an easy feeling. You follow me, kid? I may be old, but I don't want to think about how old I've gotten. Reminiscing about Kenkichi, that's just clinging to the past, is all. So now I try not to think of him so much anymore.

"He still living in Tokyo - in where was it, Kameido? Ha, so it was. That old Kenkichi, guess he must've fit right in there in Kameido. He been there thirty years now? Went by quick. So, must be forty years or more now since we saw one another. Heard he took a wife, must be ten years on from when he left. Guess we both get old just the same.

"So you, kid, you married his second daughter? And now you got two kids, older one in high school? Go on, I don't believe a word of it. Now what about Kenkichi, what's this condition he got? Little rest and care and he'll be right again, I bet you. He was always a tough one. Bet you it's nothing at all, right?

"Cancer, Kenkichi? Don't you lie, he'd never... Really. Cancer, huh. Well, that's a damn shame. No helping him now, is there? Ah, I'm sick of it, how we all do get old and die. Even Kenkichi, that scrapper. Doubt you'd know, kid, but Kenkichi, he's the only other one in our whole class left alive. People talk about old childhood friends, but buddies like him who you know from way back, they're a whole different category - a lifelong friend, no matter how long, no matter what may come. Now it's awful lonely. Wish I didn't have to get old. I see all these friends my own age go off and die before me, and I know I ain't got much time left. Just feels so helpless.

"Kid, you come all the way from Tokyo just to let me know that? Appreciate you going to the trouble, rough as the news may be.

"Hm? Not that? So why come all the way out here to Noto? Kenkichi has something to ask me, huh. Well then, go on, out with it - he may be dying as we speak. And I'd like to know myself what he'd want with me. Ah, come to think of it... Wasn't nothing about sparrows, was it?

"So that's it. No, you know, when you come to my house and say you was Kenkichi's family, I got a feeling. 'It's about Sparrow Valley,' I thought. What'd Kenkichi want to ask about Sparrow Valley, then?

"Wants to see it, does he. Worn down from cancer like he is, body might not hold out till tomorrow, can't say I don't understand. But how'll he see it if he can't get out of bed to get here? What can I do about it? I don't say that to be cruel. I'd even like to see Kenkichi one more time. Sparrow Valley, it was my and Kenkichi's secret. It's where every sparrow bird in Japan go to die.

"You'll find those little sparrows in every nook and cranny of Japan - in every village, every town, every mountain, every valley; on the power lines and on the eaves. They start chirping at sunup, stay cheery and don't bother nobody. Sure, they may tear up the rice fields

a bit, but they was there long before humans planted any rice. What on earth's wrong with a bird pecking at rice? The nerve of people, saying sparrows is the bane of rice fields, the lowest of all the birds. You ever heard the saying 'even a sparrow builds a nest for her young'? What a thing to say, picking on such little birds. How about them big city folk, then, what kind of lives they living? What kind of nest they leaving their young? A two-bedroom apartment? A pre-fab house? Best they can hope for. Most of 'em taking out loans too, I bet.

"They're just laughing stocks to the sparrows. Those birds even been making and keeping their own graves since long ago. When Kenkichi and me was in elementary school, we stumbled on that graveyard of theirs, and... well, once I get onto this story, ain't no getting off for a while. Let me go finish up my work and I'll get back to you. Just wait here, would you. I'll be back soon.

"Hey there, boy, did I ever keep you waiting. I know it ain't every day we get a visitor in from Tokyo, but I had to chop some wood. It's just me in this old house now, and I'm an old-fashioned type. Can't bring myself to cook with propane or the rest of it. Plain open flame, that's the best thing.

"By the way, kid, you come here straight from Tokyo just because Kenkichi told you to? Ah, on the way to a business trip, huh. Good on you, making time for Kenkichi even when you're busy. What line of work you in? Company man or something? Well now, that's a pretty fashionable job these days, ain't it? Cameramen, the stars of their generation. Kenkichi sure got himself a fine son-in-law.

"Oh, the rest of the story? That's right, I was up to how Kenkichi and I discovered the sparrow birds' graveyard. It was deep in the heart of the village, and we knew it was called Sparrow Valley but we ain't know why. Just a plain old valley no one went near. We was still acting how kids do, and this spot nobody else went sounded just perfect, so we got down into Sparrow Valley, Kenkichi and me. Now who knows why, but we decided to dig us a hole, and look here, out come these little bones - we dig and dig and they just keep on coming, more and more. We was scared out of our minds by the end.

"How'd we know they was sparrow bones? Well, a kid could tell you that - there was sparrow birds who'd just flown in and died there lying all across the surface, that's how. You know, around the world people have sayings that go: there's two things you'll never see, a dead sparrow and a something-or-other. You see 'em alive all the time, but never in that last fateful state. I know I do keep asking you questions, but don't they sometimes say in the city, there's two things you'll never see, a dead sparrow and an old club hostess? We all settle where we will in the end, is all it means. In any case, I was so scared, I run home and tell my dad about the valley. I never got hit so bad before as dad hit me then, and never again neither.

"You want to know where it is? Fair enough. Anybody would be curious to see where all the sparrows in Japan come to die, I bet. So, kid, you heard about this place from Kenkichi and thought you'd take some pictures and bring them on back to him? I'm sure you did, didn't you. But I know there's a lie here. Know it well. That Kenkichi would never tell his dear daughter's husband to take him pictures of Sparrow Valley. Him asking from his deathbed to see the place one more time - what a pack of lies. Here's that axe I was chopping wood with out back. Afraid you leave me no choice, kid, you've got to die. Don't you run, you fool. How's that, you dead yet, now that your head's smashed open? Suppose you must be, but let's see. Wonder if this head'll come off those shoulders. Whoops, down it tumbles. That's that, no coming back to life now. And now there ain't no one else left who knows about the valley. For generations my family's watched over Sparrow Valley. Didn't I tell you I got no more classmates left alive? They all learned the secret. Kenkichi told them all, before he got scared and ran away. Well, best bury you too, kid... down in old Sparrow Valley.

“How can humans say we’re so grand, if we can’t even protect one little sparrow bird, or guard one sparrow graveyard? I always did like sparrows better than people. I bet you Kenkichi will be dead too before long. Who’d bother violating his grave? Ain’t that right, little sparrows?”

The Sparrows' Valley

Kenkichi? From Onoda? He's doing well I hope? ... What, he's been taken into hospital? ... Blimey, that's a shame. Well, he's done well living this long – getting ill at his age can only be expected. Time is man's greatest enemy and all that. Did you know, he was a pretty tough guy when he was younger? He and I used to argue loads. All the time. Saying that though, around here in Noto, we don't really use the word "argue;" people tend to prefer the term "disagreement." Though, actually, there's quite a few different types of "disagreement" aren't there? As many as there are houses in a village. From the day we started at Jinjo Primary School till the day we left, I don't think there was a day when me and Kenkichi didn't see each other.

"Arguing friends..." Yeah, I suppose saying it like that, that's about right. I've lived here for my whole life so I know nothing of the world outside it. But Kenkichi, I'm sure we would've quarrelled, if he hadn't left. And though I can't say for sure, I think I would have lived a more interesting life. To tell the truth, I've thought a lot about Kenkichi recently. I'm pretty damn old now, and I think a lot about my old friends, like Kenkichi. Feeling suddenly nostalgic about the "good old days"... I wouldn't really call it the best feeling. Say, I want you to listen to something I've got to tell you. It's a funny thing; exactly *because* of the fact that I'm old, I don't want to notice that I've been getting old. If you were to ask me why I've been thinking about Kenkichi recently, I'd probably just yammer on about something nostalgic that happened in the past, you know. And so, I try my best to avoid thinking about him.

I'm sure he was living in Kameido in Tokyo, but I wonder if he's still there now... Oh, he is? Haha, I thought he'd still be there, it must suit him after all ... So he's been there for thirty years now. The time has sure flown by. So, that means it's been over forty since we last spoke... It was ten years after he told me that he was getting married, you see. Ah, we're both getting old.

You're the husband of his second daughter, aren't you? You've got two kids? And the eldest is already in high school? Is that right, is that right... Ah, time passes so quickly, I can hardly believe it. So what's ol' Kenkichi ill with then? Does it look like he'll get better anytime soon? He used to be such a hardy guy after all. But I bet it's nothing to cry home about, right?

What? Cancer?! Kenkichi's got *cancer*? You can't be serious, that can't be... You're not joking then, he's got cancer, huh... So that's it, is it? Kenkichi won't get better. It's not the nicest feeling you know, everyone dying around you. Kenkichi was so tough, and we argued so much, I can't believe even *he*, even he's at death's doorstep. You probably don't know this, but Kenkichi is the only one of my school friends to still be alive. He's a childhood friend. And when you've been friends with someone since you were, you know, this high, even though we've not seen each other for many years, no matter how separated we became, he's the most special friend I've made during this life.

Ahh, it really is lonely. You can't take back the years that have passed you by. Watching your friends and people your age pass away. It makes me realise how little of my own life is left, and that really makes me feel quite hopeless.

You've come all the way from Tokyo to tell me this. I appreciate the effort you went through to come. Well, even though it's not the best news to hear.

Huh? You didn't come here to just tell me about Kenkichi? ... So why did you come all the way to Noto then? You've got something to ask me about Kenkichi? Hmm you should have said so earlier. Kenkichi is on his deathbed after all. So what is it? What did he want to ask me? ... Perhaps ... *that?* About the sparrows' ...

Ah so it was that after all. You see, when you came to my house saying that you were a relative of Kenkichi, I had an inkling it might be about that. "Ahh this young man's come to ask about the Sparrows' Valley," I said to myself. So, what did Kenkichi say then? About the Sparrows' Valley?

He said he wanted to see it, did he? He doesn't even know what state he'll be in tomorrow, but he still wants to see the valley. I suppose I can empathise with him. However, he's unable to come here himself is he? Haha. It's a bit pointless him saying he wants to see it if he physically can't. I'm not trying to be completely heartless – I want to see the valley with Kenkichi too after all. For you see, the Sparrows' Valley is a place that only Kenkichi and I know about. The Sparrows' Valley is where sparrows from all over Japan come to die.

Even though they're small, they'll come from any village, any town, any mountain, any valley... And it's not on any power line, not on the eaves of any house; it's our valley, the only one in the whole of Japan, where they come to die. These sparrows, every morning, you'll hear their quite pleasant chirping, not existing to be a nuisance to anyone. You see, although you can say that they cause damage to the rice plants in the fields over there, sparrows have been around since long before people had even been growing rice. And even so, what's wrong with birds having a few pecks at some plants? Saying that the sparrows are ruining your crops is a selfish, human thing to say. People always mock sparrows, saying that they're the bird we could do most without. Do you know this saying? "Even the sparrow makes its nest for its young"... And even so, people always tend to ridicule them! You know, I wonder how they live in the cities. What kind of amazing nests do they make for their young? Do they live comfortably? In two bedroom apartments? A detached house? At least that, surely. Though they'd probably need a loan to afford it!

The sparrows laugh at us you know. They always build their graves long, long before they come to die. Speaking of which, me and Kenkichi actually found the place where sparrows come to die... It's a bit of a long story, so if you don't mind I just need to do something quickly. Just wait there, I'll be right back.

Sorry for keeping you! It's rare to have someone here from Tokyo, so I just went to go and chop some wood. It's just me who lives here, and I'm a bit old fashioned. I can't eat anything cooked on a propane cooker! Nothing beats an open fire.

So by the way, after Kenkichi told you about me, did you come straight from Tokyo? ...Ahh and you were in the middle of work? I must say, you're very admirable to do this for Kenkichi while you're so busy. So what kind of work is it that you do? I suppose you just work at some sort of company? No? Oh wow, that is a job to suit the times! A cameraman... Shooting the stars of our generation I suppose, ha ha ha. Kenkichi really does have an admirable son in law.

Eh? ... You want to hear the rest of my story? Oh yes, of course, the sparrows. I'd just told you how Kenkichi and I had just found the graveyard of sparrows. Well, the graveyard is in a valley that lies behind our village. For some reason or other, it's been called the Sparrows' Valley for generations. It's only a small valley, nothing there, so no one from the village ever approaches it. We were only kids at the time, and were entranced by this place that no one dared to go to. I can't remember what spurred us to do so, but we went together one time and arriving there decided to start picking at the ground. Upon digging, we found these small bones, and no matter how much we dug, we kept discovering more. We were really quite surprised, and it scared us quite a bit.

Somehow we knew that these were sparrow bones, but I can't exactly pinpoint why... I think it's just one of those things that you just know as a kid. The sparrows who had just flown there and died recently were at the top, of course. Let me tell you something. People often say things like "Huh, I've never seen a dead sparrow before." Despite it being something you'd expect to see, you never see this fated sparrow in its final days. I don't really hear it myself, but in the city, you hear hostesses saying they've never seen a dead sparrow, or even an old sparrow. But, in the end, the sparrows have to end up somewhere, don't they? It's as simple as that. At any rate, it was a terrible sight to behold. When I got home, I asked my father about the valley. My father died a long time ago, but at the time I wasn't sure how furious he would be when I told him about it. Well, needless to say, there was no end to his anger. I don't think I've ever been spanked so hard in my life.

You want me to tell you more about the valley? Haha, I wonder. It's where sparrows from all across Japan come to die. No matter what you tell people, they won't stop going on about how they want to see the valley. Hey. You listened to Kenkichi, and thought to take a photo back to him, am I right? Ah I thought so, is that how it is. That may be so, but I think you're lying to me. No, no, I see what's going on here. There's no way old Kenkichi would demand, of even his favourite son in law, to go to the Sparrows' Valley and take him a picture. It's a huge lie to even suggest that on his death bed, Kenkichi would want to have a last glimpse of the Sparrows' Valley. This is the axe I was using to chop the firewood behind the house. I guess there's nothing else for it; I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to die for me. Don't even try and run, you fool! How's that!? You still alive? I'm going to smash your head in. Well then, you dead yet? I'm just going to separate your head from your body, thank you very much. And oh, look, your head's already gone. No coming back to life for you. My family's been protecting the Sparrows' Valley for generations. I did tell you that none of my classmates were still with us, didn't I? They all found out my secret too, you see. Kenkichi had been spreading the secret a bit too far. And so, fearing for his life, he ran away from this village. Guess I'll have to bury you too. In the Sparrows' Valley.

Protecting the lives of those tiny sparrows, as well as their resting place. What does it mean to be human, I wonder? I've always preferred sparrows to people. Guess Kenkichi won't live much longer. No one will disturb his grave. Isn't that right, my sparrows?

Sparrow Valley by Handa Ryō

“Oh, good old Onoda Kenkichi, how is he doing? In hospital is he? Aw, that’s too bad. He must be getting on a bit now, I guess. We all get sick in the end. You know what they say, you can’t fight old age. But he was such a fit guy when he was young. We used to fight all the time, you know. But up here in Noto, we don’t use the word fight. We say quarrel instead. Looking back, it’s a wonder we had so much to quarrel about. He lived across the road from me in our little village with just one main street. We started first grade together and graduated together. Saw each other every single day back then.

“Fighting friends... Well, I guess you could call us that. I stayed in this village all these years, I know nothing of other places. Spent all my life here, you know. If old Kenkichi hadn’t left, we probably would’ve kept on quarreling. I’ve had a good life in this village. You know, I’ve been thinking about Kenkichi a lot lately. I’m an old man now and I get kinda sentimental when I remember old friends from way back like Kenkichi. Not always happy memories, you know. I’m not sure you’d understand. I’m an old man but I don’t want to be reminded of the fact. When I remember Kenkichi, I guess I’m just longing for the good old days. Yeah, that’s what it is. That’s why I try not to think about Kenkichi too much, I s’pose.

“I think he was living somewhere in Tokyo called Kameido. Still there, is he? Still in Kameido? Well, I guess the place must’ve suited him. Lived there over thirty years, has he now? Time flies, doesn’t it? So it’s been more than forty years since I saw him last, then. I heard he got married about ten years after he left. Ah, we’ve both gotten old.

“So you’re married to his younger daughter, are you? You’ve got two children, the older one in high school. Can’t believe it. So what’s wrong with Kenkichi? Will he recover in time? He was such a sturdy guy, you know. It’s not serious, is it?

“Cancer. Kenkichi’s got cancer? Hard to believe Kenkichi would get that. It’s really cancer? And he’s not well. You say he’s not gonna make it? Terrible. Everyone’s ended up dying, you know. Even Kenkichi who never lost a fight. You wouldn’t know but Kenkichi’s the last one of my classmates left alive. We’ve been friends since we were this high. When you’re friends from that age, it’s special, you know. You’re friends for life - no matter if you don’t see them for years, no matter how far apart you are. How sad. Getting old is awful, you know. Seeing your friends, your classmates all dying before you. Reminds me that I don’t have long left. Makes a man feel lonesome, it does.

“So you came all the way from Tokyo to let me know? Well, I guess I should thank you, even though it’s bad news.

“That’s not the reason you came? Why’d you come all the way to Noto, then? You have a message for me from Kenkichi? Well, why didn’t you say something earlier? Kenkichi’s on his deathbed. I want to know. What does he want of me? Could it be about...the sparrows...?

“Of course it is. I thought that might be it when you came to my house saying you’re Kenkichi’s kin. I kinda knew you’d be asking about Sparrow Valley. What did Kenkichi say about it...about Sparrow Valley?

“He wants to see it. He’s got cancer and might not live to see tomorrow. I understand how he feels, I guess. But he can’t come all the way here. Even if he wants to see it, he can’t. I’m not trying to be mean. If only I could go and see Kenkichi for myself. Sparrow Valley was our secret place, just him and me. That valley is where all of the sparrows in Japan come to die.

“Those little birds, you see them in every village, every town, every mountain, every valley in the country. Sitting on power lines and under eaves, they’re everywhere you go. When morning comes, they go ‘cheep cheep’ and go about happily, not getting in anyone’s way. I s’pose they might steal a bit of rice from the fields now and then, but they were around

long before people even thought of planting rice. So you see, there's nothing wrong with them stealing a few seeds here and there. People say they wreak havoc on rice fields but those folks are just selfish. They look down on sparrows, saying they're the most worthless birds of all. Do you know, there's a saying - even sparrows make nests for their chicks? They're just picking on sparrows because they're small. What kind of cold-hearted people are city folk if they can say that sort of thing? I tell you, sparrows make wonderful nests for their chicks. Do you live in a two bedroom apartment, or some kind of cookie cutter house? That's probably about right, and I bet you have a mortgage, too.

"The sparrows would laugh at you city folk. Long ago, those little sparrows made a place where they could go to die. When Kenkichi and me were in elementary school, we found the sparrows' graveyard. It's a long story so I'll just finish off a chore or two first. You wait here, I'll be right back.

"So sorry to keep you waiting. You Tokyo folk might not have to do it any more but I was chopping some firewood out back. I'm the only one who lives here and I'm a bit old-fashioned, I guess. I don't fancy cooking with that new-fangled propane gas. Nothing beats a wood fire, if you ask me.

"So let me get this straight, you came all the way here from Tokyo the minute Kenkichi told you about it? Oh, you were on business and took a side trip for Kenkichi's sake. So what do you do? Probably work at some company or other? Oh, really? Well isn't that something. A photographer, now. Sounds real glamorous. Kenkichi must be real proud to have a son-in-law like you.

"So you want to hear more? Now where was I? So Kenkichi and me found the sparrows' graveyard. That's what I told you so far. It was in a valley deep in the heart of our village. For some reason, it was given the name Sparrow Valley long ago. It's just a little valley - nothing special but the villagers know to keep away. We were just kids, though. We were excited by someplace that nobody else would go. We went to Sparrow Valley - I can't even remember what made us go there. But we went there and started to dig. And what we found...hundreds and thousands of little bones. No matter how deep we dug, it was just bones, bones, bones. We started to get a bit scared.

"How did we know they were sparrow bones? Well, even as kids we knew what they were. There were sparrows that had just arrived and dropped dead there and then. The new bodies were just piled on top of the old. You know that they say, you never see a dead sparrow or a whatever-it-is. Live sparrows you see every day but you never see them when they're dead. I've been told that in the city, they say you never see a wrinkly bar hostess or a dead sparrow. Am I right? It's just a silly way of saying that things end up where they're supposed to, I guess. Well, anyway, we got real scared and ran home and I told my father about that valley. My father's long dead but I never saw him so mad. Gave me a right thrashing, he did. He never beat me that bad before or since.

"So you want me to tell you where it is? Well now, I s'pose you would. It's where all the sparrows in Japan come to die. Plenty of people would wanna see that. So you heard about the valley from Kenkichi and came here hoping to take pictures of it. I'm right, aren't I? Of course I am. But you're lying about something, I know it. Kenkichi would never tell his precious daughter's husband to take pictures of it. Saying it's Kenkichi's dying wish to see Sparrow Valley again. Well, that's a bald-faced lie. This here is the axe I just used to chop wood out back. It has to be this way. I can't let you live. Don't try to run, you damned fool! Take that, and that! Not dead yet? There, I cracked your skull wide open. You're done for now. Now to separate your head from your body...and off it comes. You're gonna stay dead, now. It's over. One less person knows about that valley. My family has guarded the secret of Sparrow Valley for as long as we can remember. I told you my classmates were all gone.

Well, they knew the secret. Kenkichi told them all. Then he got scared and ran away. Now I'll have to bury you too...in Sparrow Valley.

“People think they're so great but they can't even protect one little sparrow, or keep the sparrows' graveyard to themselves. I like sparrows much better than people. Kenkichi will be dead soon enough. And who will care where his grave is anyway? Right, little sparrows?”

Sparrow Valley

Hanmura Ryo

“So how’s Kenkichi doing?...Oh, really? Hospital?.....Sorry to hear that. Mind you, he’s getting on in years now, isn’t he? We all go down with something sooner or later. That’s old age for you. But even so, in his young days, Kenkichi was strong as an ox. We fought all the time, you know, day in day out. Not that we call it fighting here in Noto. We call it scrapping. When I think about it now, my god, we scrapped about everything under the sun. The village is just this one street, all of us living within shouting distance of each other. There wasn’t a day we didn’t see each other, from the first day of school right up to when we finally left.

“Fighting buddies?Well, yeah, you could indeed call us that. I’ve lived here all my life, and know nowt about anywhere else. If Kenkichi hadn’t left, I reckon we’d have had a lot of good times, even if we’d gone on scrapping. Actually, Kenkichi’s been on my mind a lot recently. I’m old now, and know next to nowt about friends like Kenkichi what I had long ago, and it doesn’t make me feel right good to suddenly remember and get all nostalgic about ’em. You know what I mean? I’m getting on in years, but I don’t want to be reminded of the fact. With Kenkichi coming to mind so often, it’s almost like I’m pining for the past. That’s how it feels, anyway, and that’s why I’ve been trying not to think about him as much as possible.

“Kameido, weren’t it? The place he was living in Tokyo. Is he still there?...Ah, thought so. He must like it then, living in Kameido....Been there for over 30 years, eh? My god, time flies. So that means it’s over 40 years since he left us. I think it was ten years after he left that I heard he got married. There’s a lot of water gone under the bridge for both of us since then.

“You married his second daughter, you said? ...Two kids, eh? The first went to high school?...No kidding? That’s grand! What’s ailing him, anyway? Probably something what’ll mend in time if he takes care of himself, eh? He was always pretty fit, so it’s probably nothing, right?

“What? Come again, cancer?....Kenkichi’s got cancer? It’s hard to imagine Kenkichi with cancer...You’re absolutely sure? That’s bad. Does that mean he’s not going to make it? It’s right depressing, seeing ’em all dying one by one, even a scrapper like Kenkichi. You wouldn’t know, of course, but he’s the only one of my classmates left. And we’re bosom buddies, we go way back. We was friends from when we was only this tall, you see? Your mates from those days are real special. No matter how many years go by, no matter how far apart, you’re friends for life. It’s sad, this business of growing old. Seeing friends of the same age into the grave before you brings it home that your time is limited too. Makes you feel even more lonesome.

“So you came all the way from Tokyo just to fill me in on all this? I’m indebted to you, even if it’s not great news...

“You what?...You didn’t come to tell me about Kenkichi’s illness? What brought you to Noto then? You wanted to talk to me about something Kenkichi’d said?...If that’s the case, then speak up. I want to know. After all, he’s on his last legs, right? What’s he got to say to me?...Wait a minute, I reckon I know what it is. The sparrows, right?....

“Thought so. Actually, as soon as you called in here saying you’re a relative of Kenkichi’s, I had a feeling this might be about Sparrow Valley. So what’s Kenkichi been telling you about the Valley?

“Wants to see it, eh? Well, I’m not saying I don’t understand why he’d want to. After all, he’s suffering from cancer, and doesn’t know whether he’ll live to see tomorrow. Even so, he’s not fit enough to come all the way up here, is he? It may sound heartless, but it’s asking too much, even if he wants to see the Valley again. I’d like to see Kenkichi again myself. Sparrow Valley’s a secret shared by just me and Kenkichi. It’s where all the sparrows in

Japan come to die.

“They’re cute little things, and there’s nowhere in Japan you won’t find ’em. You can see ’em on telephone wires and under the eaves of houses in every village, every town, every mountain, every valley. You can hear ’em chirping away early morning, but they’re no bother. Sure, they may go scavenging for rice in the paddy fields, but they was here long before we people started planting rice. What’s the harm in birds pecking at seed? It’s pure selfishness to say that sparrows are pests. People look down on sparrows, saying they’re the most worthless of birds. Do you know that saying? Even sparrows make nests for their young. People’ve got a nerve, making fun of such little creatures like that. I mean, look at how those city folk live. What kind of splendid nests are they building for their broods? Poky little apartments? Poky little prefabs? That’s pretty much all they’re making. And they’re all mortgaged to the hilt too.

“It’s the sparrows what should be making fun of us. I mean to say, they even made their own graveyard ages ago. Kenkichi and I found that sparrow graveyard when we was elementary school kids...It’s a long story, so I’ll just finish what I was doing. I’ll be back in a minute, so make yourself at home.

“Phew, sorry for keeping you waiting so long. I was chopping some firewood. That’s probably something what you Tokyo folk rarely ever get to do these days, eh? I’m living here alone and am pretty stuck in my ways, so I don’t feel too inclined to cook with gas. Nothing like a real fire, eh?

“Tell me, did you come straight here from Tokyo after talking with Kenkichi?...Oh, on the way from a job, eh? Good of you to come on Kenkichi’s behalf when you’re so busy. What’s your line of work? You working for some company or other? Oh really? Wow, photographer, eh? That’s a pretty hot profession these days, all the rage in this day and age, eh? Kenkichi got himself a good son-in-law.

“Come again? ...Oh right, the sparrows. Where was I? Oh, I remember. I’d got up as far as telling you about how Kenkichi and I had found the sparrows’ graveyard, right? It’s a valley beyond this village toward the mountains. For some reason, it’s always been called Sparrow Valley. It’s just an ordinary little valley what no one in the village ever bothers to go. We was still kids, and drawn to places where no one goes, so one day Kenkichi and I went into the valley. And when we got there, I’ve forgotten what exactly it was that prompted us, but we started digging a hole, and there they was! Tiny bones, masses of ’em, no matter how deep we dug. So many that it got pretty scary.

“How did we know they was sparrow bones?...That’s easy. Even us kids could tell. You see, there was sparrows piled up on the surface what must’ve just arrived and died. Haven’t you ever heard people talking about something or other, and saying you never see dead sparrows? They’re so common you never really notice ’em, but you never see ’em die, right? This is something we’d also heard, but in the cities, they apparently have this saying that you never see old bar girls and dead sparrows, don’t they? I guess that simply means that when your time comes, you end up where you’re supposed to. Whatever, we was scared stiff by what we found, and when I got home, I told my father. He’s long been in the grave, but I had to tell him, whether he got angry or not. And he gave me such a thrashing, I can tell you. I’d never been beaten so hard before or after that.

“So you want me to tell you where the place is? Of course you do. I mean, it’s where sparrows come from all over Japan to die. Anyone’d want to see such a place. You heard about it from Kenkichi, and you no doubt decided you’d go take some photos, right? Sure you did. But you’ve told one lie. You can’t fool me. There’s no way that Kenkichi would tell the husband of his beloved daughter to go take photos of Sparrow Valley. Your tale about him, his days now numbered, wanting to see the Valley, that’s all just one big lie. You see this

axe? I was using it just now to chop wood out at the back, but I'll have you perish by it now. I've no choice. Don't try running, you devil! Take that! Wait, you still alive with your head split open? You've got to be dead, but I'll make damn sure by cutting your head off. There you go. You'll never come back to life now. You're finished for good. Now no one knows about the Valley. My family's guarded the Valley for generation upon generation. I told you none of my classmates are alive today. Because they knew the secret. Kenkichi told everyone about it, but he got scared and ran away. And now I'm going to bury you. In the Valley.

"If I can't protect the lives of tiny sparrows, if I can't guard their graveyard, what kind of a man would that make me? I like sparrows much more than people. Kenkichi's going to kick the bucket any day now. And no one's going to unearth his grave, are they, my darling sparrows?"

The Valley of Sparrows by Ryō Hanmura

"Is Onoda Kenkichi-san doing well? ...Oh, he's in the hospital? That's too bad. I guess he is at that age, after all, of course he'd get sick. Nobody can fight the tide of time, when all's said and done. But for all that, he was a tough fellow when we were young. We fought a lot. All the time. We don't really call it fighting here in Noto, though. We call it quarreling. Jeez, now that I think about it, we quarreled over so many things. Growing up in the same village, the same neighborhood, living across from each other on the same long road through town... From elementary school to graduation, not a day went by that I didn't see his face, you know."

"Yeah, I guess you could say we were fighting friends. I've lived here in this village my whole life without knowing anything about the outside world. Things probably would've been livelier around here if Kenkichi had stuck around, though we might have quarreled. To tell the truth, I often think of Kenkichi nowadays. I'm getting old, too, and I don't know why, but I find myself suddenly getting nostalgic all the time for my old friends like Kenkichi. It's not really a pleasant feeling."

"Hey, y'know... you get it, right? Though I am old, the reality of it hasn't truly set in. When I start thinking about Kenkichi, I start missing the good old days. That's all that gets me. So I try not to think about him too much. Heard he was living in Kameido, in Tokyo. He still there now? ...Ah, so he is. Seems he got along well there... been there thirty years? Time sure flies. So it's been more than forty years since we parted ways. Heard he got married about ten years after he left. Just means we're getting older."

"Ah, so you're married to the second oldest daughter? ...Got two kids, huh? The oldest is already in high school? Really? I can't believe it. Jeez. So what is Kenkichi sick with? He just needs to rest for a bit and he'll get better, right? He's a tough one, after all."

"Wha... Kenkichi, cancer? You're kidding me, right? ...Man, cancer. No way. Is he terminally ill? You're telling me there's no saving him, huh? Everybody's dying, it sucks. Even Kenkichi, who fought so tough. I guess you wouldn't know, but Kenkichi is the only one of my classmates still alive. When you're childhood friends, been playing with each other since you're yai small, don't matter how many years since you've seen each other, how far apart you've been - you're friends for life. It's something else. It's lonely, you know. I don't want to grow old."

"Seeing off my friends and classmates is depressing. Makes me realize I don't have much time left myself."

"Thanks for coming all the way out here from Tokyo to tell me, even though it's not exactly good news."

"Hm? What's that? Well then, what else brings you out to Noto? So you have something to tell me about Kenkichi? Then get to the point already. Ain't Kenkichi dying as we speak? Tell me. Why did he want you to come to me? ...Ah. By any chance, could it be... the sparrow's...?"

"I thought so. When you came to my house and said you were Kenkichi's relative, I had a flash of intuition that might be why you're here. Probably here about the Valley of the Sparrows. So what did Kenkichi tell you about the Valley of the Sparrows and all?"

"So he wants to see it?"

"Battling cancer, not knowing if he'll live to see another day... not like I don't understand how he feels. It's not like he can make it here himself. Just because he says he wants to see it doesn't mean he can. I don't mean to sound cold. I want to see Kenkichi, too. The Valley of the Sparrows is our secret place. That valley is where all the sparrows in Japan come to die."

“Tiny things that you can find in every town, every city, every mountain, every valley... on powerlines, on eaves all over Japan, there’s no place where you can’t find them. Come dawn, they chirp their tune cheerfully without getting in anybody’s way. See, I guess they destroy the rice plants a bit, but they were living here way before humans starting planting rice. Where’s the harm in birds pecking at some seeds?”

“It’s pure human egotism to say that the sparrows harm the rice seeds. Those bastards make fun of the sparrows like they’re the most worthless of birds. Do you know the saying around here? Even sparrows build nests in order to raise their young... How dare they make fun of such little creatures?! And how exactly are the city folk going about their lives? Do *they* build homes for their young with their own two hands? What, a two bedroom house? Cookie-cutter homes? That’s the best they can do. And you can bet it’s all on mortgage, too.”

“We’ll be the ones being laughed at by the sparrows. The sparrows have even got themselves their resting place since long, long ago. That graveyard, that’s what Kenkichi and I stumbled on when we were kids in grade school. Before I get started on that, let me run out back to take care of something. Hang on. I’ll be right back.”

“There we go. Thanks for waiting. Bet it’s rare for someone from Tokyo nowadays, but I went and chopped some firewood. I’m the only one in this house, and being an old-fashioned guy at heart, cooking with gas or whatever just don’t feel right. An open fire’s the best. By the way, did you come straight here from Tokyo after talking with Kenkichi? ...Oh, in the middle of work, are you? Kind of you to be going out of your way for Kenkichi. So what kinda work do you do? Some kinda desk job? Oh, those aren’t so popular these days?”

“A photographer, you say? A modern-day star. His daughter got herself quite the catch.”

“Oh, about the valley... yeah, that’s right. I told you about up until Kenkichi and I discovered the sparrow graveyard. It’s a little ways from town, been called Valley of the Sparrows for ages. Just a place with nothing in particular, so no one from town bothers heading out there. Couple of little kids, of course we’d be taken with some place no one goes, so the two of us went into the valley, and I can’t remember if something caught our eyes or what, but we just started digging. And so out they came, these little bones, no matter how many holes we dug, the bones appeared one after another until we began to get frightened.”

“How’d we know they were bones from a sparrow, you say? Even us kids then knew right away. The ground was littered with sparrows that had just flown in and died. You probably know this one. The saying that goes kind of like this, “The corpse of a sparrow and something or other are things that I’ve never seen.” Something that you usually see around, but haven’t seen the final fate of. Another one I’ve heard is that, in the cities, they say you never see a hostess that’s gotten old or a sparrow that’s died. Means things fit where they fit. Don’t sound too bad, huh? Anyhow, we were spooked pretty bad. When I got home, I asked my father if he knew anything about the valley. My father’s long since passed away, but – was he angry? Well, he sure as hell beat me.”

“Only time I’d ever gotten that much of a beating; ain’t nothing like it before or since. So, you want to know where it is. That’s natural. The place where all the sparrows in Japan go to die... Anybody who wants to see it isn’t going to change their mind, are they? You heard about all this from Kenkichi, thought that you’d come here, take some pictures, and go home. That’s what happened, right? Obviously. Caught you in your one big lie. I see right through you. There’s no way that Kenkichi asked the husband of his darling daughter to come here to take photos of the Valley of the Sparrows. Kenkichi asking with his dying breath to see the Valley of the Sparrows is a load of horseshit. This here’s the axe I was just splitting firewood with. Sorry, pal. Gotta kill ya. Don’t even try running, you dolt. How’s

this? Not enough to kill you? Split your head right open. This ought to do it. Gonna take your head clean off. Ah, there it goes. Ain't no coming back from that. Well, that's that. That makes one less person who knows about the valley. My family's part of a long line that's looked after the valley, generation after generation. I think I mentioned that none of my other classmates are alive anymore. It's because they knew. Kenkichi just had to tell everybody. He got scared and ran out of town. Guess it's time to bury you, too, out in the valley. What's the use of a human being if he can't even protect one little sparrow, or one sparrow graveyard? I've always preferred the sparrows over people. Kenkichi'll be dead soon, right? And then someone might just mess with his grave. Right, sparrows?"

Sparrow Valley
Hanmura Ryō

“About Onota Kenkichi, is he healthy? ... Oh, he’s been admitted to hospital... that’s no good is it. But then, he’s already got to a good age. It’s not surprising he’s ill. I suppose you’d have to say it’s his advancing years. That’s how it is now but when he was young, he was a strong man. He fought with me a lot. It was constant. In this area around Noto the word fighting isn’t really used. You’d say argument. Even if I think about it now, there were lots of different arguments. We lived opposite each other in the same row of houses. From the time we started at the local elementary school until the end of school, there wasn’t one day I didn’t see his face.

“We got on with each other by fighting... Yeah now I’ve said it, it was probably like that. I’ve continued to stay in this place, knowing nothing about the outside world and living in this village, but if Kenkichi hadn’t left, we might have continued arguing and I think it would have been an amusing life. To tell the truth, every so often, I’d remember about him. I’m also a good age now, and I don’t know why, but suddenly thinking about my old friends like Kenkichi isn’t a very good feeling. Hey. Do you understand? Even though you’re old you don’t want to realise you’re getting old yourself. Remembering about him like that I get nostalgic for the past. It’s no good. That’s why I try not to think about him as much as possible.

“He should have been living in Kameido in Tokyo, and he’s still there right... Oh, he really is still there. His personality would fit well in Kameido... He’s lived there for 30 years already? It’s flown by. Then it’s already been more than 40 years since we went our separate ways. I heard he got a wife, but that was 10 years after. They’re the same age.

“You’re his second eldest daughter’s husband aren’t you? ... You’ve got two kids? The eldest is in high school... Yeah, I can’t believe it, really. Anyway, what sort of illness does Kenkichi have? If he rests for a bit, he’ll get better, right. From the start he was a strong guy. It can’t be anything serious, whatever it is.

“Huh... cancer... He’s got cancer. That’s a lie, surely he hasn’t got cancer... Really, it’s cancer? It’s already too late? Isn’t there anything at all that can help him? That’s awful, isn’t everyone dying? Even Kenkichi, who was good at fighting. You probably don’t know, but he’s the only one of my classmates left now. It seems like I could say childhood friends, but even if you don’t meet for years, and don’t know what happened to them, I prefer calling the friends you played with when you were little friends for life. It’s sad. I don’t want to get old. Seeing off friends the same age, who are dying before me, I realise that I haven’t got long left either. It’s really disheartening.

“Did you come all the way from Tokyo to tell me? Sorry to have troubled you. I don’t really have any way to repay you.

“Huh... that’s not it? Then why did you come all the way down here? He had something to say to me?... If that’s the case then you should say it. He’s going to die soon, right? Even I want to know. What did he want to say to me. ... Ah, is it that?. The sparrows...

“It really is that? You know, when you came to my house saying you were a relative of Kenkichi I thought it might be that. This is about the sparrow valley. Anyway, what did he tell you?

“He wants to see it? With cancer and a body that might not make it to tomorrow, I can understand his feelings a bit. But he can’t travel here, can he? Even though he said he wants to see it, isn’t it an impossible request. I don’t say it heartlessly. I want to meet him too. The sparrow valley is his and my secret place. That valley is the place where sparrows from all over Japan come to die.

“With their small bodies, from whichever village, town, mountain or valley... On the electric wires and under the eaves, there’s nowhere in Japan that they aren’t there. When it got to morning they’d cheep, and cheerfully get in peoples way. Some of them would damage the rice in the paddies, but they were living long before humans were planting rice. Otherwise we would complain about the birds picking at grass seeds. Saying that the sparrows do damage to the rice is human selfishness. We make fun of the sparrows, saying that among birds they are the least important. Do you know this saying? Even sparrows will make a nest for their chicks.... Why do we make fun of small animals? What sort of amazing nest would you say they make for their chicks. Is it two bedroomed? Ready built? That wouldn’t usually be it right? Anyway they wouldn’t be able to get a loan.

“We laugh at sparrows. Those sparrows, a long time ago made their own graveyard. When we were in elementary school, we accidentally found those sparrow’s graveyard.If I start this story it’ll go on for a long time, I’ve just got a task I was in the middle of that I need to do. Can you wait for a bit? I’ll be back soon.

“Well, thanks for waiting. Nowadays it must be rare for people in Tokyo but I needed to chop some wood. I’m already the only one in this house and I’m old fashioned by nature, so I don’t really like cooking with gas. An open fire is best.

“Anyway, you told Kenkichi that you couldn’t come here from Tokyo straightaway... Oh, you’re in the middle of work. Even though you’re busy you’re still going out of your way for him. Anyway, what do you do? Do you work for a company or something? Really, that’s a pretty good job now, right. Cameramen are the stars of this generation. He found himself a good son in law.

“Huh... the rest of the story. Oh yeah, that was it. I’d just told you how Kenkichi and I found the sparrow graveyard, right. It’s in a valley behind this village, and for some reason it has been called the sparrow valley for a long time. The people from the village also didn’t approach that small valley with nothing in it. Perhaps because we were children at the time, that place that no one went to interested us, he and I went into the sparrow valley together. I’ve already forgotten on what impulse it was, anyway we started to dig a hole. And they came out, small bones, however much we dug they started coming out one after each other endlessly, until finally we became scared.

“How did we know they were sparrow bones?... Even though we were kids we knew quickly. It looked like the sparrows had piled up in the place they just came to die in.. You understand, right? People often say that they haven’t seen sparrow bones. Although you see them often, you hardly ever see that final form. This is something I’ve only heard but often in cities, it seems like you can say that you don’t see old hostesses or dead sparrows. In the end do the established thing in the established place ...it’s that sort of carefree meaning, right? Anyway, I was terrified and I returned home and told my father about the valley. My father is already dead so maybe this isn’t scary. That was the worst of the beatings. Both before and since, I had never been beaten that much by my father.

“You want me to tell you about that place? That’s it, isn’t it? It’s the place where all of Japan’s sparrows come to die. There’s been no change to everyone thinking that they want to see it. You heard about this from Kenkichi, you thought you’d take a photo and go home. That’s right. That’s what you decided. But you’ve told just one lie, haven’t you. I easily realised. That he wouldn’t ask his important daughter’s husband to come here to take a photo of the sparrow valley. It’s a big lie that he would want to see the sparrow valley in his dying moments. This is the axe that I was just using to chop firewood behind the house. I’ve got no choice, would you please die. Don’t run away you idiot. What are you doing over there, you’re still going to die, I’ll break your skull. Well you’re going to die anyway. I’ll cut your head from your body for you. You can’t go back alive anymore. This is the end. With this

there'll only be one person who knows about the valley. My family has lived and protected the sparrow valley for generations. I told you there was only one of my classmates left, right. I have a secret. Everyone talked about Kenkichi. He got scared over there and ran away. Well I'll bury you too. In that sparrow valley.

“If they can't protect the life of one sparrow, or one sparrow's graveyard, what good are humans? I like humans more than sparrows. Even Kenkichi is going to die soon. I wonder if someone will also violate his grave. What do you think, sparrows?

Sparrow Valley
Hanmura Ryō

“Onoda Kenkichi, huh? How’s he doing? ... Oh, in the hospital? I’m awful sorry to hear that. Then again, he must be getting old. Old enough to get sick. It’s like they say: ‘*years come rolling in like waves*.’ But he was such a sturdy fellow when we were young. You know, he and I always got into fights. Happened constantly. Actually, out here on the Noto Peninsula, we don’t use the word ‘fight.’ We call ‘em ‘quarrels.’ Looking back on it now, we sure did quarrel a lot. We lived across from each other in the same little one-horse town. Between starting primary school and graduating, wasn’t a single day I didn’t see his face.

“Friends who fight... when you put it like that, yeah, that’s what we were. I ended up staying right here – lived out my life in the same little village, never did get to know the outside world. If Kenkichi hadn’t left town, we’d probably have kept quarrelling, but he went and led kind of a funny life on his own, I suppose. Tell you the truth, being here always reminds me of Kenkichi. I’m getting on in years too, and always remembering friends from long ago – I don’t know, suddenly I get nostalgic, and that’s not such a good feeling. I wonder if a fellow like you can understand that. I know I’m an old man, but I wish I could keep on living without realizing that’s what I’ve become. Remembering him – that means pining after a time that’s long gone. So I do my best not to think about Kenkichi.

“Last I heard he’s living in Tokyo, some place called Kameido. He still there? ... Kameido, huh. I thought so. Kameido really suited him ... Been there thirty years now? Sure went by fast. That makes it more than forty years since I saw him last. I recall hearing he got married – must’ve been about ten years on. We’ve both grown old.

“So you, young man, must be his second daughter’s husband ... Two kids. One in high school already ... why, I just can’t believe it. What’s Kenkichi sick with? I bet if he just rests up and takes care of himself awhile, he’ll be better in no time. After all, he was always a solidly built fellow. Nothing to worry about, now is there.

“What? ... Cancer ... Kenkichi has cancer. That’s a joke, Kenkichi can’t... It’s really cancer? That’s horrible. You mean there’s nothing we can do to save him? Dammit, I can’t stand the way everybody’s dying. Even a powerful fighter like Kenkichi! You can’t have known this, but out of all my old classmates, Kenkichi’s the only one left. I’ve heard they call it ‘*bosom friends*,’ but that doesn’t begin to describe how special it is really having a friend like that – playmates since childhood, friends for life no matter how far apart you are and how many years pass. And now I’m alone. I just wish I wouldn’t get any older. It’s the most hopeless feeling in the world, outliving my old friends, friends my same age, while all I can do is watch my own life growing shorter and shorter.

“You come all the way here from Tokyo just to tell me? I’m grateful for that, even if it’s sad news.

“Oh ... something else? Why did you come all the way out to Noto? Kenkichi got something he needs to tell me? If that’s it, go ahead and say it. He must be on the verge of death. What on earth could he want from me... unless by any chance, it’s about Sparrow–?

“Aha, I knew it! Soon as you came in my house and said you’re a relative of Kenkichi’s, that’s what I thought. This has to be about Sparrow Valley. Well, then, what exactly did Kenkichi tell you? About Sparrow Valley?”

“Wants to see it. Torn apart by cancer, not even knowing if his body will last him till tomorrow... I suppose I can understand why he’d feel that way, but there’s no way a man that sick could make the long trip here. No point talking about it, no matter how much he wants to lay his eyes on it. Now, I don’t say this to you lightly! I wish I could see Kenkichi one more time. Sparrow Valley is me and Kenkichi’s secret place, just the two of us. You see, that valley... it’s where all the sparrows in Japan go to die.

“Those tiny little bodies come from every village, every town, every mountain... from train tracks to rooftops, there’s nowhere in Japan you won’t find sparrows. Every morning they’re out there chirping and tweeting, and they live out their good-natured lives without bothering anyone. They may steal a little rice from our fields from time to time, but after all, they lived there long before people ever planted rice. What’s the harm in birds picking at grass seed? People say sparrows ruin the rice crop, no, that’s just human selfishness. They talk about sparrows like they’re the most worthless bird there is. Make fun of ‘em. You know that saying? *‘Even sparrows build nests for their chicks...’* What an insult to those tiny little creatures! What in hell do you call the way city people live? How good are the nests *they* build for their chicks? Two-bedroom apartments? Prefabricated houses? That’s the best they can do. And even that’s with loans.

“No, it’s the sparrows that are laughing at us. And what’s more, ever since ancient times, they’ve built and taken care of their very own graveyard. Me and Kenkichi stumbled upon it as schoolkids ... once I start in on this, it’ll be a long story, so I’d better go and finish off a chore out back. You just wait right here, I’ll be back in a minute.

“Oh, I’ve gone and kept you waiting. This must seem unusual to a Tokyo fellow like yourself, but I’ve been out chopping wood. It’s the old-fashioned streak in me. Living here all alone like I do, won’t have any of that propane nonsense. Nothing beats a real fire.

“So, young man, you just dropped everything and traveled here when Kenkichi said so? ... Oh, you’re in the area for work. It’s sure kind of you to take the time for Kenkichi’s sake, even with a busy schedule. So what line of work are you in? Must be at a big company or some such... Why, if that isn’t a fashionable job! A photographer – now, that’s who the real stars are today. Kenkichi got himself a fine son-in-law.

“Huh – the rest of the story? Oh, that’s right. I was about to tell you how me and Kenkichi found the sparrows’ graveyard. It’s a valley deep in the woods of this village that’s had the name ‘Sparrow Valley’ since long ago. A little valley, empty of anything or anyone from the town. Being kids, we liked the kinds of places no one else would go near, so the two of us went down into Sparrow Valley, and I’ve long forgotten what possessed us to do this, but the point is, we got to digging a hole. And when we did that, what came up, one after the other, was tiny little bones. No matter how many we dug out they kept on coming, no end in sight, till finally we got scared.

“How’d we know they were sparrows’ bones? ... Oh, we may have been kids, but we knew right away. The thing is, more sparrows kept flying in and dying right there, piling up on top. You know that saying? *‘No one in the world has ever seen - something something - or*

the corpse of a sparrow.’ Even though you see them everywhere, somehow you never see how they look at their last moments. I heard that in big cities they even say ‘*No one’s ever seen an elderly stripper or the corpse of a sparrow.*’ They settle down wherever they settle down... maybe that’s all it means. In any case, it was a terrifying sight, and I went straight home to tell my father about the valley. My father died a long time ago, so I suppose it hardly matters if I feel angry about what happened anymore... he beat me within an inch of my life. It was the only time, before or since, that he ever hit me that hard.

“Where is it? You want to know where it is. It’s where all the sparrows in Japan go to die. In their heart, nobody really wants to see that. You heard about it from Kenkichi so you’re hoping to snap some pictures and go home. That’s your plan, isn’t it. You’ve made up your mind. But you lied to me about one thing. I can see that clear as day. There’s no way Kenkichi would tell the husband of his beloved daughter to bring him a picture of Sparrow Valley. To think that Kenkichi would want one last look at Sparrow Valley on his deathbed, that’s nothing but lies. I was chopping wood just now, behind the house, with this ax. No two ways about it, young man - you’ll just have to die. Don’t you dare run, you son of a bitch! How about this – can you live through this? I’ve chopped right through your neck. I reckon you’re dead now. Head’s clean off your body. There it goes, rolling away. Won’t be coming back to life after that. It’s over. Everyone who knows about that valley is gone. My household’s lived on and on, protecting Sparrow Valley, for generations. What you should’ve told me is that every last one of my old classmates is dead – seeing how they all knew the secret. Kenkichi told ‘em all, before he got scared and ran. Well, let’s bury you too, you bastard. Down in that valley.

“If we can’t even protect a tiny sparrow, a sparrows’ graveyard – what’s humanity good for? I’ve always liked sparrows more than people. Kenkichi will be dead soon. Who’s going to expose *his* grave to the world? Come, my sparrows, come!”

Sparrow Valley

Hanmura Ryo

How's Onoda Kenkichi holdin' up these days? What? Hospitalized...that's no good. Well, he's no spring chicken after all. Not surprised he'd go and get sick. That's what you call gettin' old. But he was such a strong fella when he was younger. He and I fought with each other all the time. All the time. Around Noto, we don't say "fight" though, we say "quarrel". Now that I think of it, we had fair reason to quarrel so much. We lived across the street from each other, right on the village's main road. We saw each other everyday, start to finish, at our local elementary school.

Fightin' pals...yep, it sounds right when you say it. I've stayed on in this village, and I don't know nothing about anywhere else, but I kept on here. If that Kenkichi hadn't left town, sure we would've quarrelled, but it would've been fun. I'm getting up there in years myself, and suddenly remembering an old friend like Kenkichi out of the blue doesn't really put me in a good mood, ya know? Listen, buddy. I don't know if you can understand what it's like, but you don't want to realize it when you're getting old. Remembering Kenkichi makes me miss the past, ya know? Yep, that's the way it is. That's why I've been doin' my best to forget Kenkichi.

I was sure he was living in the Kameido district of Tokyo. How 'bout now? Ha, I knew it was Kameido. It seems that Kameido really suits him well, eh? He's been living there for 30 years now? Sheesh, time flies. That means it's been more than 40 years since we parted ways. I'm sure it was 10 years after he left Noto when I heard he got himself a wife. Heh, we've both gotten old.

So you're the husband of his second daughter...with two kids. Your oldest going to high school...ha, that's hard to believe. Anyhow, what kind of illness does Kenkichi got? He'll probably be right as rain after some rest. He was always a sturdy fella. So it's nothing serious, right? Well?

What...cancer...Kenkichi's got cancer. That can't be. There's no way he's got cancer. Is it really cancer? Shoot, this is it. Kenkichi's had it if it's cancer. Ain't it awful having everybody go off and die? Even the rough and tough Kenkichi. You wouldn't know it, of course, but Kenkichi's the only one left of my classmates. They call it childhood friendship, but if you have a playmate from that early on who'll will stay your lifelong friend, even if you don't see each other, and no matter how far apart you get separated, now that's something special. This is real sad. I don't wanna get any older. Seeing people go from my old crowd, who were the same age as me, makes me feel helpless knowing that my remaining days are slowly disappearing.

Did you come all the way from Tokyo to tell me this? I appreciate that. Even if it isn't good news.

Oh, no? Well, why'd you come all the way to Noto then? You have something about Kenkichi you wanted to talk about...well, why didn't you say so earlier? Kenkichi's knockin' on death's door, ain't he? What's that fella got to say to me? Ah, could it be that? The Sparrow...

That's what I thought. Yep, when you said you were Kenkichi's kin and came to my house, I had a hunch. I thought, "I bet this is about Sparrow Valley." So what did he say? About Sparrow Valley?

He wants to see it? It's not that I don't understand Kenkichi's feelings, what with being taken by cancer and having a body that may not see tomorrow. I get it, but he can't make the trip here, ya know. It's pointless saying he wants to see it. I'm not being heartless. Maybe I just want to see him. Sparrow Valley was our secret place, just the two of us. That valley is where all of Japan's sparrows go to die.

They have such tiny bodies, and they're in every village, town, mountain and valley...on the power lines and house eaves; there ain't a place in all Japan they ain't. They chirp in the morning and live happily without being a bother to nobody. Well, they make a little bit of a mess with the rice in the fields, but they was around way before humans started planting rice. Right? There's nothing wrong with a bird pecking at grass seed. Saying sparrows harm the rice is just human selfishness. People look down at them and say they're the least important of all birds. Do you know the saying "even sparrows build nests for their young"? Saying that just belittles these tiny little creatures. In that case, how are

the city one's carrying on? What kind of wonderful nest do they build for their young? A two bedroom apartment with living room, dining room and kitchen? A ready-built house? At least that good. That'll certainly mean a loan, won't it? We're laughed at by the sparrows. And the sparrows, on top of that, have even built their own graveyard since forever ago. Kenkichi and I found that graveyard when we were in elementary school. This story will take a while once I begin, so I'll go finish a little chore I'd started, okay? I'll be back soon, so please wait here.

Ah, I really made you wait a long time. It may seem strange to a Tokyoite, but I was chopping wood. I live alone and I'm old-fashioned, and it just don't seem right to use propane for cooking. An open flame is best.

By the way, did you come straight here from Tokyo after talking to Kenkichi? Aah, you're on your way somewhere for work, huh? Well, I appreciate you helping Kenkichi out when you're busy. So what kind of job you do? Probably work for a company, right? Well, well, that's a pretty popular job right now. The cameraman was the star of the old days. Kenkichi's got a real good son-in-law, didn't he?

Oh yeah, finishing up that story. Yes, yes. Kenkichi and I, we found the sparrow's graveyard, just the two of us. That's as far as we got, right? That valley is way in the back of this village, and for some reason, it got named Sparrow Valley a long time ago. It's a tiny valley with nothing in it, and no one from the village goes down there. We were still kids, so we really liked having a place nobody goes. Kenkichi and I would go there, just the two of us, and I don't recollect why we did it, but anyhow, we started diggin' a hole. And then one after another these little bones came out. No matter how much we dug, they came right after the other without stoppin'. In the end, we got real scared.

You ask how we knew these were sparrow's bones? Well even a kid can see that. These were the bones of sparrows that had just flown and died there. And they were all piled up on the surface like that. Did you know? In society we often say stuff like you never see the dead bodies of sparrows, don't we? Even if we see something all the time, we basically never see it in its final hour. I heard that in the city they often say that you don't see old bargirls nor dead sparrows. Don't they say that? Anyhow, what will be, will be. It's just that kind of easygoing meaning, ya know? Anyways, it was really scary, so when I got home I told my pap the whole story about the valley. My pap nearly kicked the bucket right there, but wasn't sure whether to be furious or not. He beat me silly. I've never been hit so hard by my pap before or since.

You say you want me to tell you where it is? Well, it's no wonder. After all, it's where all Japan's sparrows go to die. There's nothing odd about anyone thinking they'd like to see it. So you heard about it from Kenkichi and thought you'd take a picture and go home, huh? Right? Of course that's right. Yeah, but you're lying about just one thing. It's obvious. There's no way Kenkichi would tell his dear daughter's husband to go and take a picture of Sparrow Valley. Him wanting to get a glimpse of Sparrow Valley right when his time is nearly up is nothing but a lie. This here's just an axe for cuttin' wood out back. I've got no choice but to have you die. Don't run, you fool. How's this you. Won't die with that? Whoop, there. Now it's chopped off. Ah, I guess you're dead then. The head's cut clean off the body. Oh, the head's gone rolling. Well, you won't be comin' back to life I suppose. This is it for you. Now there's one fewer person knowin' about the valley. Our house has been protecting Sparrow Valley for generations. I told you there were no more surviving classmates, didn't I? 'Cause they found out the secret. That Kenkichi blathered it to 'em all. Okey-dokey, I'll go bury you as well. In Sparrow Valley. There's nothing so great about humans if they can't protect just one sparrow graveyard, the life of just one little sparrow. I much prefer sparrows to humans. Kenkichi will die soon I guess. Who'll ever uncover his grave? Right, sparrows?

The Sparrow Valley

“Kenkichi of Onoda – that man was once as fit as a fiddle. And now you’re telling me he’s in hospital... blimey, that ain’t good. Don’t get me wrong, he’s getting on a bit, what with getting sick like that. That’s old age for you. What a strong man he was in his day! He and I used to fight a lot, all the time. To tell you the truth, ‘round here, in Noto, people don’t use the word “fight”. Let me tell you about our quarrel. Even now when I think about it, we hadn’t much reason to quarrel. We lived opposite each other, on the same street in the village. Ain’t a single day go by we didn’t run into each other – from the day we started school right till we left.”

“Fighting buddies... You know, when I put it like this, it’s exactly what we were. I have lived in the same village all my life – I ended up living here where nobody knows a thing about that land. I reckon if Kenkichi hadn’t left the village, even though we used to fight, he’d be living a jolly good life right now. If I’m honest, lately he often comes to mind. I’m not getting any younger, you see, and it’s not like I have any idea what an old friend like Kenkichi is up to. Then suddenly, one day, to think of him, don’t feel good, I tell you. Do you get what I’m sayin’? When you get this old, you don’t wanna be reminded of your age. When I think of Kenkichi, maybe I’m just missing the good old days? That must be it. So I try not to think of him.”

“I heard he lives somewhere in Kameido, in Tokyo, but I’m not sure if he’s still there. Come to think of it, he probably is. The bloke really took to that place Kameido. Already been living there for thirty years, no less. Time flies. It’s been over forty years since we parted ways. I heard he got himself a bride, must have been around ten years after he left. We’re both getting old.

“So, you’re his son-in-law, married to his second daughter... And you have two kids. The elder is in high school... Well, is that so? I can’t believe it, not one bit. But tell me, how about this disease that’s got Kenkichi down? Surely he’ll be fine with a bit of rest? It’s just that he’s always been such a strong bloke. It’s nothing serious, right?”

“Oh...cancer...cancer, you say. You’re pulling my leg, right? Kenkichi can’t have cancer... So, it’s true, it’s cancer. Well, that’s it then. You’re saying Kenkichi can’t be saved. This makes me sick to my stomach. Everyone’s dying on me. Even Kenkichi, the bloke I was always fighting with. You have no way of knowing this, but Kenkichi is the last of my classmates. He’s what they call a childhood friend. When you are playmates with someone from such a young age, no matter how many years you don’t see them or what becomes of you, they remain a friend for life and they will always be special. This makes me feel so lonely. Getting old is such a dreadful thing! When I see peers my age go before me, it’s as though I see the life I have left get shorter, and it fills my heart with so much loneliness.

“So you, sir, have come all the way from Tokyo just to tell me all this. How nice of you. Especially considering it’s not good news.”

“Ah... you’re saying that’s not it. Well then, what is it that brings you all the way to Noto? You have something to tell me about Kenkichi... Well, if that’s the case, why don’t you say it? Kenkichi is on his deathbed right now. I want to know. What is it that the man wants to tell me so badly... Oh, could it be about that? The sparrow...”

“I thought so. Well actually, when you, sir, said you’re related to Kenkichi and came to see me in my house, it crossed my mind. This is about the sparrow valley, isn’t it? I wonder what Kenkichi wants with it. With the sparrow valley, I mean. “

“He wants to see it, then? I mean, to get cancer and reach the point where you don’t even know what tomorrow holds, I understand how he must be feeling. But even so, you wouldn’t come all this way! Even if he wants to see it, isn’t it out of the question? It’s not that I have a cold heart. I *do* want to see Kenkichi again. The sparrow valley is the secret place that only he and I know of. You see, that valley is where all the sparrows from across Japan come to die.”

“There is no place in Japan you don’t find them – you can spot their tiny frames in every village, town, mountain, valley...even on every electrical wire or rooftop. In the morning you hear their chirps; they live their lives without being a bother to anyone. Well, they slightly mess up the harvest from the rice paddies, but they’ve been around long before man even started harvesting rice. Ain’t nothing wrong with some birds pecking a few seeds from the grass, right? It’s man who decided that the sparrows damage the harvest. We poke fun at sparrows and say they’re the most inferior type of bird. You know the proverb “even sparrows build a nest for their little ones”? Isn’t it a mean thing to say about such little creatures? If they weren’t like that, then what would we say about them living in cities? That they build such amazing nests for their little ones – a 2LDK, or a purpose-built detached house? We’d expect no less of them. And maybe their houses would be mostly mortgaged?”

“The sparrows are laughing at us. They’ve even built their own graveyard a long time ago. Kenkichi and I stumbled upon it when we were in primary school... But this is a long story to start now. Let me finish something else first. Wait here, will you? I’ll be right back.”

“Ah, sorry to keep you waiting so long. This might seem strange to you lot, from Tokyo, in this day and age, but I went to chop some wood. It’s just me in this house now and since roof is quite worn-out, propane would set it on fire. It’s best to use raw wood for fire.”

“Incidentally, have you, sir, come here straight from Tokyo on Kenkichi’s instruction? ...Ah, you’ve stopped by on your way to work. Despite your busy schedule, you’ve come for Kenkichi’s sake. And what is it you do? Of course, you must be working for a company or such. Well, I guess this is also a kind of assignment you gotta do. You say you’re a cameraman, so you must be very bright. That Kenkichi was lucky to have such a good son-in-law.”

“But let me get on with my story. That’s right, I told you up to where Kenkichi and I found the sparrow graveyard together. It’s in a valley behind this village and it’s always been called the sparrow valley though nobody knew why. It’s a small valley with nothing in it and even the village people keep out of there. Kenkichi and I were just kids back then, and this place that others avoided was just the kind to pique our curiosity. So we went there and I no longer remember what were looking for, but we started digging a hole. And there they were – tiny bones kept coming out of the ground, again and again, the more we dug. There were so many we lost count and we finally got spooked and left.

“You’re asking how we knew that they were sparrow bones? ...Even kids can tell them apart straight away. They flew there and those that had just died were gathered up on the top surface. You know how people often say they’ve never seen a sparrow carcass? Although you see sparrows everywhere all the time, you actually never see them after they’ve met their end. Haven’t you heard how people in the city say that they’ve never seen “an old hostess and a dead sparrow”? Well this is the kind of thing that comes up and people forget about it...

Don't make much difference either way. In any case, that scared the hell outta me, and when I got home, I told my dad everything. My dad is long dead now, but at the time he didn't know whether to scold me or not. He gave me a mighty good thrashing. I've never been hit by my father like that before or since."

"Don't you want me to show you that place? But, of course. It's where the sparrows of Japan come to die. One thing hasn't changed – no one wants to see it. You, sir, must have heard about it from Kenkichi and have come to take a picture of it to take back to Tokyo with you, right? That must be it. But that's a lie alright. It's clear to me. It makes no sense for Kenkichi to ask his son-in-law, who's married to his precious daughter, to bring him a picture of the sparrow valley. There's no way that Kenkichi, on his last breath, would want to have one last look at the sparrow valley. It occurred to me just now, when I was chopping wood at the back of the house with the axe. Nothing we can do, sir, we can't save him from death. He can't run away, the dull sod. What if he came, would he still die, his existence shattered into splinters? Then he'd be dead. He can have his head chopped off. It would roll down. Then he won't go back to the living. The end. I'd be the only person alive who knows about the valley. This house has seen generations of ancestors who kept the secret of the valley. Like I said, none of my classmates are alive. They all knew the secret. They heard it from Kenkichi. That's why he got scared and ran away. And you must bury it. In the sparrow valley."

"To protect a little sparrow's life, by protecting its grave, what's it to us humans? I much prefer sparrows over humans. Kenkichi will be gone soon. And who do you think will visit his grave, huh? The sparrows, no other."

Valley of the Sparrows
by Ryo Hanmura

“And how’s he getting along, Kenkichi of Onodera? ... Oh, in the hospital... that’s a darn shame. But then, the guy is long in the tooth already, eh? He’d have to be ill at least. Old age gets us all, they say. And yet, he was strong when he was young. He often used to brawl with me. Did it all the time. Actually, we don’t use the word brawl around these parts of Noto. We say quarrel. Come to think of it, we had lots of quarrels. We were neighbors, our houses on the one street in our village, his house across from mine. Usually not a day passed that I ain’t seen his face, from the time we went to school ’til we finished school, and so we’d do it.

“Brawling buddies... Yeah, when you put it that way, guess we were. I been residing in this village the whole time, I don’t know nothing about any other places, and I made a life in this village. But, if that Kenkichi hadn’t left the village, we might have quarreled. Now, I think I been able to spend my days doing some interesting things. But to tell the truth, from time to time, I’d think of Kenkichi a lot. I’m an old man already, but with old friends like that Kenkichi, why I dunno, but it ain’t all too pleasant to suddenly recall. Well, I wonder if someone like you could understand. Although I’m old, I don’t want to notice that I’ve gotten old. Don’t thinking about Kenkichi a lot mean missing the long gone past? And ‘cuz it’s like that, I try not to think about Kenkichi much.

“He was supposed to be living someplace called Kameido in Tokyo. He still there? Oh, still in Kameido, is he? Guess living in Kameido really suits Kenkichi, that guy. Been living there thirty years, right? How quickly it passes. So then, that means over forty years have already passed since he left. I’d heard he got hitched, must have been about the tenth year after he left. We’re both getting old.

“Now, you’re the husband of his second daughter, right? Two kids, eldest going to high school. Is that so. Unbelievable, I tell you. So, what’s Kenkichi got? He’ll get better if he just recuperates for a spell, I bet. ‘Cuz he was always such a strong fella. Probably nothing serious, right? What is it?

“Huh? ... Cancer, you say. Kenkichi’s got cancer. You’re kidding. No way Kenkichi’s got cancer. Really? Cancer, is it? Aw, that’s bad. So, you’re saying nothing can be done for Kenkichi? Makes me sick. Everyone up and dying and all. Even that tough scrapper, Kenkichi. You probably don’t know this, but Kenkichi is the only classmate of ours who ain’t dead yet. Schoolyard chums, they say. But playmates from when you’re so young, you’re friends for life, it’s special—even if you don’t see each other for years, no matter if you been separated. Makes me sad. Don’t wanna get old. Seeing all your pals, born same year as you, die before you, really gets me down just knowing I only have a short time left.

“And you came all the way from Tokyo just to tell me that? Thanks for your troubles. Even if it’s not good news.

“What? That ain’t it, you say? So, why come all the way out to Noto, then? You have to talk to me about Kenkichi. Well, then, why didn’t you say so sooner? Kenkichi’s on death’s bed, I reckon. I wanna know. What did that guy have to say about me? Oh, I wonder. I bet it’s about the sparrows...

“Ah, so that’s it, huh? Naw, ya see, when you come to my house and said you was a relative of Kenkichi, I thought for a sec that might be it, I thought, this is about the Valley of the Sparrows, ain’t it. So then, what did Kenkichi say about it, the Valley of the Sparrows? Huh?

“He wants to see it? Just ‘cuz his body is full of cancer and don’t know if there’ll be a tomorrow—it ain’t that I can’t understand that feeling Kenkichi’s got. Even so, he can’t

make the trip here can he? Just 'cuz he says he wants to see it, don't you think this is a waste of words? And, I ain't saying that 'cuz I got no heart. I wanna see old Kenkichi, too. The Valley of the Sparrows is our secret spot, just Kenkichi and me. That valley, you see, is where the sparrows from all over Japan go to die.

"With their tiny bodies, ain't no place in Japan they ain't — every village, every town, every mountain, every valley... on wires and in roof eaves. When morning comes, they are tweet tweeting, living happily and not causing people no trouble. Well, they sometimes mess with the rice in the fields just a bit, but they were around before people began planting rice in the fields. Ain't that so? What's wrong with birds pecking at grass seeds? Just human selfishness that says sparrows are damaging the rice. Putting down sparrows, they're always saying they're the most worthless of all the birds. And do ya know the old saying, even sparrows built nests for their young? Ain't that a mean way of talking down about small creatures? If they say that kind of thing, what do the city folk say about how they live? What kind of fancy new nest do they say they make for their young? A two-bedroom apartment with a living room, dining room, and kitchen? A pre-fab stand-alone unit? About that at best, right? Even so, most don't got a loan.

"The sparrows are laughing at us. Besides, those sparrows, ya see, made their own graveyard a long time ago, and are just waiting. When Kenkichi and me were grade schoolers, we found the graveyard of the sparrows. ... When I start telling this here story, it grows and grows, so, I gotta wrap up some unfinished business and I'll be right back. Just wait here a bit. I'll be right back.

"Ah, I had ya waiting a long time. Guess for somebody from Tokyo nowadays it'd seem usual, but I went to split some firewood. Just me in this here house, and I'm old-fashioned by nature, ya see, and I just can't get with using propane for cooking. An open flame is for me.

"By the way, you say you came here straight from Tokyo, after Kenkichi told you? ... Ah, you're in the middle of work. Helping out Kenkichi even though you're busy. And so, what's your line of work? Must be a businessman or something like that, huh? Oh, my, well now, ain't that all the rage these days. A cameraman, that's the star of this era. Kenkichi sure got a good son-in-law, didn't he.

"What's that? The rest of the story? ... Oh, that's right. Kenkichi and me found the sparrows' graveyard — think I told you that much, right? That's in a valley deep in this village, and from long ago it's been called the Valley of the Sparrows, see? A little valley with nothing, and nobody from the village ever goes there. We were just being kids, so going to a place nobody goes seemed like fun, and so Kenkichi and me got ourselves into the Valley of the Sparrows, and I long forgot what got us started, but anyways, we start digging a hole. And then, out they came, tiny bones, and no matter how much we dug, they began coming out one after the other without end, and finally we got scared.

"And can you tell why we knew they was sparrows' bones? Even us kids knew it. It's 'cuz the sparrows that had just flown in and died there were all piled up on top. I wonder if you know this one—in society, they often say something like 'I've never seen thus-and-such or a sparrow's carcass'. Even though it's something you see all the time, once it's reached the end of its life, for the first time it can't be found. Something else I heard: 'I never seen an aged prostitute or a dead sparrow' — that's what they say in the city, ain't that right? In the end, you settle for what you can... that's what it means, I reckon. Anyway, it was terribly frightening, so I went home and told my pappy all about that Valley. My pappy died long ago. But he was livid—he thrashed me to the edge of death. Never before was I hit like that by pappy, and never again.

"Tell me the location', you say? That's right. The place where all the sparrows in

Japan go to die. Nobody can change the heart that wants to see it. You heard about it from Kenkichi and you thought you'd take some photos and go on home? Of course you did. It's a given. But, there's just one thing wrong with that. I understand it clearly. There's no way Kenkichi would tell his precious daughter's husband to go and take photos of the Valley of the Sparrows. Kenkichi, on the verge of death, wanting to get a last look at the Valley of Sparrows — that's just a pack of lies. This here's the hatchet I used just now to split some wood behind the house. Sorry about that, but you're gonna have to die. Don't run, fool. And how do you like that? You gonna die or what? I busted your head open. Well now, reckon you're dead. Gonna have to cut your head off your body. There, your head rolled off. No way you're coming back to life, eh? That's the end. That's one less person who knows about the Valley. For generations my family has protected the Valley of the Sparrows. Think I told you not one of my classmates is still alive. It's 'cuz they knew the secret. Kenkichi told them all. And that's why Kenkichi got frightened and ran away. Well, now. Suppose I'll bury you, too. In the Valley of the Sparrows.

“One tiny little sparrow's life, protecting the sparrows' graveyard, what's so great about human beings anyway? I prefer sparrows over human beings anyway. Kenkichi should die right away. Who's gonna dig Kenkichi's grave? Right, my little sparrows?

Sparrow Valley
by Nakamura Ryō

“So, is that Mr. Onoda Kenkichi doin' well? ...oh, he's been hospitalized...that's too bad. After all, he's gettin' up there in years. Sickness is gonna happen. Well, that's what you call advancin' into old age. Despite that, when he was young, he was a real strong guy. He used to fight with me a lot. All the time. Though around here in Noto, you don't really use the word 'fight.' You'd say 'scrap.' Really, when I think about it now, it's hard to believe the reasons we'd get into a scrap. We lived right across from each other on this single village road lined with houses. From the time we started elementary right through the end of school, hardly a day went by when we didn't see each other's faces.

“Fighting buddies...yeah, I guess so, when you put it like that. I been livin' in this village my whole life; ended up not knowin' a single thing 'bout other places. I think if that Kenkichi hadn't left, sure we mighta had our little scraps, but we might be livin' a bit more interestin' lives right now. Tell you the truth, I been thinking about Kenkichi a lot lately. I'm gettin' up there in years, and thinkin' about an old, old friend like Kenkichi and, I don't know, suddenly gettin' get all nostalgic and such, ain't a very pleasant feeling. Say, kid. I wonder if you can understand. Even when you're old, you wanna keep goin' without realizin' you're old. Rememberin' Kenkichi means feelin' nostalgic for a long-gone past. That's how it is. Because of that, I been tryin' best I can not to think about Kenkichi.

“I think he was livin' in some place called Kameido in Tokyo, right? He still there? ...oh, still Kameido all right. I guess he just fit in to that Kameido place. ...he's been livin' there for thirty years? Sure went by fast. So that means it's been more than forty years since we parted ways. If I'm not mistaken, I think it was around the tenth year when I heard he took a wife. Guess we're both getting' older.

“So then, you're the husband of his second daughter, right? ...you have two children. The elder is in high school...seriously? Honestly, I can't believe it. So, what kind of illness does Kenkichi have? I'm sure if he recuperates for a while he'll get better. Always was such a sturdy guy. It's probably nothing, right? What is it?

“Oh...cancer...Kenkichi's got cancer. That has to be a lie, Kenkichi havin' cancer. ...it really is cancer. Oh, that ain't right. So basically there's no way to save Kenkichi now. I don't like this; seems like everyone's dyin' off. Even a strong fighter like Kenkichi. You probably don't know this, but Kenkichi's the only one of my classmates left. You know, there's the term 'childhood friends,' and friends like that really are special. When you're playmates from such a young age, no matter how many years you ain't seen them and how far apart you are, you're friends for life. Ahh, it's real lonely. I'm watchin' friends my own age dyin' before me and realizin' there ain't much time left in my own life. It's a real discouragin' feeling.

“So, you came all the way out from Tokyo just to tell me all that? Thanks for your trouble. Even though it ain't very good news.

“Oh...that ain't it? Then what brings you all the way out to a place like Noto? You have to talk to me about Kenkichi...well why didn't you say so? Kenkichi's approaching the brink of death right now. I'd sure like to know what that guy could have to say to me. ...oh, could it be that thing? About the sparrows...

“Ah, so it was that. Nah, when you came to my house sayin' you were sent by Kenkichi, I thought it might be about that. 'This is probably about the sparrow valley,' I thought. So then, what'd Kenkichi have to say 'bout the sparrow valley?

“He wanted to see it, you say. Can't say I don't understand his feelings, with his body riddled with cancer and not knowing if he'll see tomorrow. But still, he probably couldn't travel all the way here. Sayin' he wants to see it is meaningless talk. Now ain't that a heartless thing to say. I mean, I want to see it together with Kenkichi myself. The sparrow valley is a

secret place just for the two of us. Y'see, that valley is where the sparrows of Japan come to die.

"You see those tiny birds in every village, every town, every mountain, every valley; from phone lines to the eaves of houses, there's nowhere in Japan they can't be found. Every morning you hear their little chirps, and they live happily without bothering people. It's true, they get into the rice fields and disrupt the sprouts, but they were livin' long before people were plantin' rice. And how is it wrong for birds to pick at grass, right? Sayin' that sparrows harm rice plants is just human arrogance. Makin' fun of sparrows, callin' them the most worthless of all birds. Do you know this saying? 'Even sparrows make nests for their chicks'...what a crummy phrase to make fun of such a small creature. Just what sort of life are you sayin' you lead in the city? What kind of wonderful nest are you makin' for your chicks? A 2-room apartment? A prefab house? That's basically all it is. And those are just on loan!

"The sparrows should be laughin' at us. On top of everything else, those little sparrows even made a burial ground for themselves long ago. Me and Kenkichi, we accidentally found that sparrow graveyard when we were in elementary school. ...once I start this story it'll run long, so I'll just finish up this job I started and come back. Please wait a spell. I'll be right back.

"Hey, I sure made you wait. I was off choppin' wood; probably a rare thing for a Tokyo boy nowadays. It's just me all alone in this house, and on account of my old-fashioned nature, I just can't get used to startin' fires with that propane stuff. An open flame really is the best.

"By the way, kid, did you come straight here from Tokyo because Kenkichi told you to? ...ahh, you're here on business. Thanks for puttin' yourself out for Kenkichi's sake even though you're busy. And just what is your job? Probably somethin' working at a company. Oh my, now that's a real fashionable sort of job, ain't it. Bein' a cameraman really makes you a star in this age. Kenkichi sure got himself a good son-in-law.

"Huh...continue the story? Oh, that's right. I'd told you up to the part where Kenkichi and I found the sparrows' burial ground, right? It was in a valley deep in this village, a place that'd been called Sparrow Valley for some reason since old times. It was a small valley with nothin' in it, and no one from the village would go there. We were still real young then, so we were interested in a place no one would go to. So Kenkichi and I snuck into the valley, and I don't remember anymore what we thought we were doin', but we started diggin' holes. And then they just started comin' up one after another, all these tiny little bones, just kept comin' and comin' no matter how much we dug. Finally we started gettin' real scared.

"You want to ask how we knew those were sparrow bones, huh?...that's somethin' even children would know right away. After all, there were sparrows that had just flown in and died recently piled up further along the valley. In this world, people often say stuff about never havin' seen the corpse of a sparrow, right? Normally they're somethin' you see all the time, but you hardly ever see them in that final moment. This is just somethin' I heard, but ain't there a saying in the city that goes 'I've never seen an aging hostess or a dead sparrow.'? When you get down to it, I guess it's just a casual phrase meanin' that everythin' has its place. Anyway, we got real scared, and I went home and told my pops about the valley. Now, my pops is long since dead, but that was the angriest I'd ever seen him. He gave me a real beating. He never beat me that bad before or since.

"You want me to tell you where it is, huh? Yeah, that figures. It is the place where all the sparrows of Japan come to die. I'm sure anyone would feel like they want to see it. You probably heard about this from Kenkichi, and now you're thinkin' you'll take some pictures and go home, huh? That's what you're thinkin'? That has to be it. That may be, but there's one thing you lied about. I know best of all. Ol' Kenkichi would never tell his precious daughter's

husband to come take pictures of the sparrow valley. The idea that Kenkichi, in his dying moments, would want to look upon the sparrow valley is just a pack of lies. This here's the axe I was usin' just now to chop wood behind the house. There's just nothin' else for it; you'll have to die. Don't run, you moron. How do you like this? Are you dead now? I split your noggin right apart. Well, I'm guessin' you're dead now. Your head has come clean off your shoulders. There's your head rollin' around. You won't be comin' back to life now. Now it's over. Now there's only one left who knows about that valley. My family has been protectin' the sparrow valley for generations. I told you that none of my classmates were left alive. They knew the secret. They heard about it from Kenkichi. That's why he got scared and ran off. Now then, let's get you buried too. Down in that sparrow valley.

“Who do humans think they are, when they can't even protect one tiny sparrow's life, one single sparrow burial ground? See, I like sparrows way more than humans. Kenkichi'll probably die soon. I wonder who would disrupt Kenkichi's grave? Right, little sparrows?