

“Runs from Scissors”

by Toshiyuki Horie

The long arm of the excavator swung a second and a third time into the northeast wall of the site, bashing the stone into dust, and with the last wall breached the fruit-stripe sign of a huge electronics store gradually appeared through the moiling sandstorm of debris. I was standing across the road in the entrance of a building that faced the lot, staring speechless at the scene as if witnessing the arrival of a long-awaited moment. The excavator operator, the truck driver, and their ad hoc team of three black workers, probably from a staffing agency, must have gotten an early start. By the time I arrived around noon they were putting on the finishing touches. The shovel bucket, curled down like a bird with its beak tucked into its neck, had its broad side aimed at its target, ready to strike again. The stone wall made a dull thud and collapsed into an even pile, its fragility belying the apparent ballast of the sound. With its iron palm, the bucket scraped up the pieces and cast them into the dumper of the truck. As this hypnotizing process shifted into yet another cycle, a stone house I had known but briefly prepared for its demise. The shop’s fixtures—the chair, the sink, the giant mirror—had been hauled away, and apart from the matte umber tiles and the tiny sign, nothing betrayed its history as a place where hair was cut.

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I hate barber shops. Mere mention of them makes me tense. It’s been that way ever since I was a kid. As soon as the barber sat me up in the adjustable chair I’d start to scream, and when he tried to hold me still I lashed back like a rabid animal. Since the same sort of battle ensued whenever I visited the dentist, it could have been that I was only skittish around sharp knives—except the barber had that awful mirror and made you watch as he transformed your flabby little face into something unrecognizable. I must have been around four when my father got so fed up with all my monkey business that he took the barber aside and asked him to buzz my hair down to the skin. Now and then a photo pops into my head from that evening, of me sitting on a hill with a buzzcut, utterly exhausted. I think it’s the only time in my life I’ve ever had one. Since the day of that historic photograph I’ve never let things escalate to the point of getting buzzed again,

but that doesn't mean my sickness has been cured. My innate disdain for barbers has passed through many stages, developing beyond all instinct into a rigid tenet of existence.

Having to talk during a haircut is nothing short of torture. Sitting through boring local gossip and being probed on personal affairs was always more than I could bear, so I got in the habit of letting my hair grow out. When a cut was unavoidable, I made a day trip to a strange town and found a shop there, where I was safely off the radar. Inside, I asked them for a haircut as if I'd just been passing through. I assumed an air of privacy permitted only to an outsider, and denied every invitation to divulge further information. I went to great lengths to protect myself. But what made me turn my back on Tokyo's barbers once and for all, as their sworn enemy, was when they started asking, in that cloying tone they use just as they begin to rub in the shampoo, "Any itchy spots today?" They wait until your hands are trapped, until your hair is compromised with suds, your body bent over the sink, when all you can do is pray hot water doesn't drip into your ears, and say it like they know already that some part of your head is itchy. In my meekness I was unsure how to reply, but nevertheless when I mustered the courage to open my mouth and tell them that I'd come in for a haircut, not a head scratch, hot water spiked with shampoo leaked in from the corners of my lips and my retort was garbled into nonsense. I wasn't about to raise my voice above the spray-wand and say something that would make the customers waiting in the corner think I had an unclean scalp. Besides, even if my head was feeling itchy, there was no way that a guy who couldn't accurately describe an itchy spot on his back was ever going to be able to pinpoint one on his head while reclining backwards, unable to tell up from down and left from right.

Whether this scripted dictum had its origins in a bulletin from the barber guild, or was a new customer service tactic everyone had learned from the same column in an industry magazine, who can say. But I had painfully confirmed that the words the barber utters at the sink, just like the stale Mild Seven cigarette he offers you when you pay, are the same almost no matter where you go, and I felt queasy from this surfeit of hospitality. Since you can always just ask for a cut, I could have simply told the barber no shampoo or anything, just cut the hair please, and been done with it. But for a captive of that chair to face the mirror and say those words would be impossible. I searched everywhere for a phantom of the barber shop, an antisocial, stoic soul who wouldn't ask me puzzling questions when he washed my hair. At long last I found a shop on a back street of Itabashi that came close to my ideal, a place where you got your hair washed crouching over a tiled sink in the corner, with your head stuck under a cold

water spigot. As luck would have it, though, they went under just a few months later. I remained a devotee of antibarberism, yet to my chagrin was forced to suffer senseless hospitality time and time again, until I found another agreeable establishment in the suburbs of a foreign land.

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One winter afternoon, the air swept clear, I was meandering around the streets of Bourgl-Reine in the southern suburbs of Paris and discerned, at the edge of a vast empty lot, a cluster of stone houses standing shoulder to shoulder. I was drawn to the smallest among them, a one story affair with an attic and walls of graying quartzite. I was approaching from across the empty lot, and the razed landscape running up to the backdoor gave the desolate impression of a movie set where filming had been cancelled. The house's face was stone, but its rear wall had been slapped together with countless scraps of wood, for a pattern like papier-mâché that reinforced nothing but the desolation. I walked around front, and in the entrance of the house that had caught my eye I saw a sign that spelled out "BARBIER" in weathered cast-iron letters. Flanking the lamp above the door were two white swallows, ceramic decorations, flying toward each other. When I peeked in through the window I saw a red-faced old man with his arms crossed, leaning against the treacherous barber chair, conversing with another man his age. The rates posted on the glass were less than two-thirds of what you saw in Paris proper.

But it wasn't these undemanding rates or my unruly mop of hair that stopped me in my tracks. It was the strangely lovely face the house made, guarded by the pair of swallows. This street of buildings occupied the southern edge of the empty lot, the rest of which was hemmed in by a low-slung gap-toothed wall. A few doors down was an old six-story apartment, dilapidated and boarded up. You didn't need a local to tell you that this corner of the neighborhood was all that been spared from the last wave of real-estate development. The barber shop, with its back open to the elements, was decrepit to the point that any reasonable person would agree that in the interest of safety it should be rebuilt posthaste. At the top of the facade, the left end of a rain gutter running just below the tiny visor of the eaves was bent like the limp stem of a flower. Even a small amount of rain would blow a localized flash flood straight down the wall, staining the stone or gouging a hole in the dirt. The roof itself leaned to the left like the gutter, and some of the roof tiles had been stirred around like jumbled dominoes. The equalizing rays of fluorescent indoor light, seen throughout town, were absent here, and instead a set of common

casement windows were opened wide, sluicing in the sun. What lights the shop did have were switched off, perhaps for lack of customers.

When I pulled open the door and stepped into the dim interior, the two old men, deep in some debate, both turned my way. I tested the waters and explained to the one whose outfit gave him away as the barber that I'd been out for a walk and just happened to pass by, and asked if I could get a haircut without a reservation. If you're asking me to do it now, he said, you have yourself a reservation! Come on up, I'll even let you cut the line.

The ancient chair I sat in as instructed was the old-fashioned kind, cranked up and down by hand, the likes of which you'd only see back in Japan in the barber shop of a remote island town. It had a fresh cloth over the backrest, but the pedestal that held it to the floor leaned noticeably off its center of gravity. If you didn't arch your back you'd start sliding toward the mirror. Continuing his conversation with the retiree seated by the windows, the barber rinsed a towel in hot water and gave it a very lenient squeeze. I assumed he was going to wrap it around my head to wet my hair, but nope. He scrunched it up into a ball and thwacked me in the temples, drenching my entire scalp. He wacked me with such vigor I could barely follow the reflection of my less than sanguine face as it tossed violently across the mirror glass.

He asked what kind of haircut I was after and my vision snapped into focus. I told him that I didn't like being at the barber and asked if he could make it quick, nothing fancy, just cut it so it parted naturally down the middle and shorten it all over, but keep it this long in the front, this long above the ears, actually touching my hands to my hair to make up for my poor speech. Well now, the old man said, turning to his friend, listen to that! This monsieur walks into a barber shop and the first thing out of his mouth is how he hates the barber. First time for everything. Didn't seem to stop him from coming in though, he laughed.

The barber wielded something like a razor, made more for chopping hair than simply cutting it, and briskly thinned things out. As if to prove the vinyl poncho that traps your hands like a straitjacket had always been a figment of my imagination, he draped my shoulders with a little starchy towel and got on with his work. Hair clippings covered my neck and shoulders and crept into my clothes, prickling my skin. Then, without using any lather, he scraped the blade down my neck to catch the wispy hairs that grow there, leaving the skin swollen and pounding with a hot pain. His approach was so bafflingly rough it almost made me miss the humiliating stunts of the barber shops of Tokyo and all their extra courtesies.

He announced that we were done and looked me over, but the hair above my ears was blatantly uneven, so I had to suffer through the chopping ritual all over again. When I was finally released almost all my hair was gone, and my head looked like a hard-boiled egg with a square of seaweed pressed on top. I didn't have the energy to complain so I just told him it was shorter than expected. These things happen, the old man replied, not in the least bit perturbed. What sort of things he meant I'm not so sure, but before I could give him a piece of my mind I started to laugh. My monument to antibarberism had been summarily upended in a fraction of an hour, and I savored the event with a peculiar awe.

Years ago, he told me, there was a man in the neighborhood who married a woman from Japan. I cut the hair of their son for many years. His hair was black and lifeless just like yours. Just once I cut the hair of a Chinese, but it was hard as yesterday's baguette. I see no difference from the face, but from the hair, the barber said with pride, I know that you are Japanese.

I countered this by saying that although I was indeed from the Land of the Rising Sun, the hardness or softness of a person's hair isn't a matter of race so much as genetics. With that I found myself involved in the first barber shop conversation of my life. Evidently quite pleased at guessing his customer's nationality, the proprietor began to speak more comfortably. He started telling me how they were going to turn the empty lot behind the shop into a giant supermarket. Since the landlord had signed off on demolition, the shop was as good as gone. So it wasn't the old man's house after all. Without the shop, he said, I'll still get by somehow, but what makes me drag my feet is all the memories. If the buildings change, the people and the town will change. And even if this one building could be spared, what good would it be without the town I love? We have this expression, "lose your way." That doesn't happen to you in towns, with all the crowded buildings, or someplace out in the middle of the woods. It happens in a wasteland, when everything else has vanished.

The people living in the house three doors down are already gone, the retiree chipped in. We can't say when but you can bet it's booked for demolition. Ever since they boarded up the doors there's been squatters living in there without water or electricity. A few even look familiar. But they aren't bothering anybody or making any noise, so people mostly look the other way.

Given the chance today, I'd suck it up and have myself a look around that house. At the time, though, I hadn't quite yet fixated on the quartzite domestic architecture of the Parisian suburbs, and was doing all I could to endure the soreness in my neck from the nicks of the razor and the itch of little hairs crawling over my skin. I lacked the patience to even try to listen as

another building in this foreign suburb lamented its inevitable lot.

The old man's expansive—or shall we say a tad too barbarous—scissor work was a blessing, undeterred by little slip-ups, and while he chuckled at my antibarberism he understood. I was thankful that he didn't speak any more than necessary while he worked. His shop wound up being my go-to spot for quite some time. I went every other month, or sometimes every three if things came up. I knew that if the spirit moved me he would always take me in, no reservation necessary. Once I had decided it was time for another haircut, unless it was a holiday I never had to wait.

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The barber shop with the white swallows assumed an overpowering magnetism and began to haunt my thoughts after an encounter, one autumn night almost a year later, with the book of essays *La fortune* by Georges-Olivier Châteaureynaud, which sounds like the name of the lord of an estate built in a forest clearing. The book was published in 1987, so it wasn't very old, but it had been remaindered and was priced at next to nothing. I picked it up at a flea market in Vanves and flipped aimlessly through the pages. One of the chapters was titled “Hirondelles de Céramique,” or “Ceramic Swallows.” In short sentences packed with life, Châteaureynaud remembers his affection for his paternal grandfather's old stone house. “Laugh all you want, but to me that house in the suburbs, replete with garage and arbor and marked by those ceramic swallows, stood in the midst a garden of Eden. It was the haven from which Adam was banished, and the bastion of his harrowing nostalgia.” While it had no arbor or garage, the barber shop with the swallows, guarded all these years by the old man, was surely the sanctuary of his own story of Eden. But Châteaureynaud's description goes beyond mere recollection. Rather than dress up a house forgotten by time as something precious by linking it to individual memories, he uses it to frame the suburbs as a kind of sacred fellowship. “A fixed convoy of ships, forever anchored rail to rail in the slate-green ocean of the world, the rows of houses that line the suburbs retain something eternal, even holy. This is the only place to make a home: away from the brutalities of the country, away from the harassments of the city, away from Evil.”

Those stone houses, shored up on the border of the construction site in Bourg-la-Reine, were no less than a “fixed convoy.” Standing in a landscape gradually given over to concrete,

they were so conspicuous you might confuse them for a giant cardboard mural, but their closeness to the unreal amplified their sanctity.

Châteaureynaud's grandfather's house was in a suburb further south: Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois, in Essonne. As a child his family had him "visit for a season or two" every year, to keep him healthy and strong. The first half of *La fortune* is a set of essays of that same title, while the latter half is a literary miscellany including, along with "Hirondelles de Céramique," reflections on the works of Henri Thomas, Bioy Casares, and George Orwell. But the passage I have quoted gets at the spirit of the book, and can be read as a gesture of devotion to the deepest feelings of the boy who grows up to become so intimately acquainted with writers, such as these, who craft dreams for their daily bread.

"I went back to the bedroom in the attic, and said hello first to the plaster dog-shaped piggybank sitting on the pitch pine bureau, and then to Youpette, or 'Pettemoiselle,' the real dog, always waiting to be petted. I stroked her head a hundred times each morning, enough to last the day. I went back to find the same old cherry tree and redcurrant bushes, the rock garden and the well. The sunny kitchen filled with the smell of toast after my grandfather left for the station. Over breakfast, Nanny, the maid, told me dreadful stories from her youth while buttering my tartine. A Eurasian in the truest sense of the word, she had crossed the whole of Asia, witnessing a slew of exotic horrors along the way. In Sainte-Geneviève I was back in a more stable and benevolent world, one made even dearer by Nanny's stories and the bits I heard of father's time as a prisoner of war."

Châteaureynaud's house was a fort of virtue that shielded his developing mind from the wickedness of the world. As I thought my way through his story, I couldn't help but picture the shop, not owned but rented, where the old man cut my hair, and its own passage through time. I had never seriously inquired about its history or pried into the barber's personal affairs, and despite my tenacious interest had never even asked him for the story behind the ceramic swallows that watched over the entryway like guardian angels. My vow of abstinence from needless conversation at the barber shop remained intact, but reading Châteaureynaud made me want to break my own rule just this once. I wanted to go see him straightaway and ask how long the stone house had been standing, and whether the swallows were above the door when he first moved in. But I had to suppress my curiosity, to tuck it away like someone carefully folding up a

freshly ironed handkerchief. My hair was simply too short to be cut. I'd hold off for now and ask him on my next visit, nonchalantly.

To be honest, this was the only essay in Châteaureynaud's collection that held my interest, and without reading more I couldn't be sure whether his writing deserved attention. I decided to withhold my judgment until after I had taken a look at *La faculté des songes*, a novel which the back cover of *La fortune* advertised as having won the Prix Renaudot in 1982. I went to several booksellers but had no luck, and went so far as visiting the publisher, knowing I was probably overdoing it. Once I got a copy, though, I read it in one sitting, and felt rewarded for my efforts.

The real protagonist of the story is a stone house stuck in the middle of a construction site, the future home of the Faculty of Science of a university relocating to the suburbs. Despite its potential as an office, the house stands in abeyance. We also meet Quentin, an unenthusiastic manual laborer who lives in one of Paris's cheap hotels, Manoir, an orphan and now a clerk at the Ministry of Finance, whose clumsiness and tendency to daydream earn him the nickname "Leadhead," and Hugo, a poet working as a librarian who is forced by the construction of a new highway to leave the suburban home left to him by his grandparents. Bemoaning their various misfortunes and their loneliness, these characters find themselves drawn to this dilapidated house, as if led along by an invisible string, and adopt a curious communal lifestyle. This helps us see the "faculté" of the title as being more of a dream "department" than an "ability" to dream. The three young men arrive here burdened by distinctly different dreams, and Louise, a young singer with visions of fame who joins them toward the end, is an especially apt pupil for a dream academy. In actuality Louise is the little girl, now all grown up, who spent the best of her childhood at this very house. After dead-ending in the adult world she returns to the setting of her youth to steep herself in memory. The four eventually disband, but that house, the nebula of its narrative, somehow convolves the transient and the lasting, just like the shop where the old man upturned my antibarberism.

About two and a half months later, my hair a nuisance and Châteaureynaud's book in hand, I went back to the old man's shop. What I found was not a stone one-story house where time flowed gently, but clouds of sand cartwheeling over a vacant plot. The spastic arm of the excavator, busy leveling the skeletons of the few remaining buildings, suddenly became the hand of the old man—blackjacking my noggin with his soppy towel—and whenever the bucket swung again an odious hum radiated from my temples.

After watching the shop, which secretly I called Swallow Hall, get sucked into the dirt that would soon hold up the supermarket, I bided my time at a nearby cafe until the construction crews went home for the day, then snuck back onto the compound under cover of night. By the flame of my lighter, I rummaged through the rubble for the white ceramic swallows, unable to shake their spell, but found not so much as a shard. They must have flown away.