

Summer Vacation

By Hiromi Kawakami

As I was picking pears in Harada's field, something tiny ran about my feet. I only noticed when Harada said, "Oh, them again?" There were three of them, covered in white fur.

"They show up every now and then," said Harada, and put a pear on the ground, one of those too misshapen to sell. Two of the three little creatures scurried up and bit into the pear. Their bodies were roughly twice the size of the fruit. The pair devoured the pear with gusto. But the third one stayed where it was, unmoving.

"Here you go," said Harada, picking a pear from a tree and placing it before the third creature. But it remained frozen to the spot, trembling.

Harada went to fetch a shipping crate. While sorting through the pears, I watched the two eating creatures. They gobbled up the discarded pear before my eyes, and then went for the pear Harada had picked from the tree. The third was still trembling, making no effort to move.

"That one's hopeless," said a voice, making me jump. One of the two eating creatures had talked.

"Hopeless."

"Totally hopeless."

"Missing out on these tasty pears."

"Such big pears."

Their voices were sharp and shrill.

When Harada returned with the crate, I asked him about the creatures.

"They appear from time to time," he answered. "I'm not quite sure what they are, but they seem to show up wherever there are pears. I wouldn't worry about them—they'll go away soon enough."

When I told him they talked, he nodded, looking somewhat annoyed. "They do, but that's about it." Then he started packing the crate with pears.

After our day's work was finished, I picked up one of the three creatures loitering at my feet and held it on the palm of my hand. It was warm. I felt a stretching sensation in

my tired palm. I asked Harada if I could take the creatures home with me.

He raised his eyebrows. “Whatever for?”

I said I didn’t have a reason, I just felt like it. He shrugged, but didn’t say anything else. Cradling the creature that hadn’t tried to eat any pears in my palms, I walked back to my apartment. The other two bounced along behind me.

The creatures showed no interest in my leftovers from dinner, so I gave them some more pears instead, which they attacked vigorously. They ate them peel and all. This time, the third creature joined the feast. They went through the fruits at an astonishing pace, devouring six pears in the blink of an eye.

“Pears!”

“More pears!”

“More! More!”

The two energetic ones made such a racket I gave them some more pears. The timid one didn’t eat any more. Watching the creatures mangle the pears, I put a wet compress on my back. It had been about ten days since I started working in Harada’s pear field.

I had recently been troubled by a feeling that something began to slip away when night fell. As for what that “something” was, I couldn’t say for sure. It felt as though time was slipping, or maybe the air, or sound, or maybe everything was slipping all at once. That was why I asked Harada to let me work in the pear field during the daytime.

I held out my hand, and the timid creature climbed up it. It reached my shoulder and touched my neck with a tiny paw covered in white fur. As it touched me, it spoke.

“I’m hopeless,” it said, its breath blowing on my neck. “Everything is hopeless” It curled up into a ball.

“Why do you feel so hopeless?” I asked. The little creature started talking with surprising eloquence, passionately explaining how it felt.

“I can’t stand how the pears disappear when I eat them. I hate how moving hollows me out. I don’t like it when day turns to night. Then I don’t like it when the sun rises again. I can’t stand the way a place changes whether I’m there or not.”

The two energetic creatures had finished their extra pears, and lay flat on the floor with their legs in the air. It wasn’t long before they started snoring. I asked the one who was still awake if it was sleepy. The creature shook its head.

“Can I stay up with you?” it said. “Can I stay up all night?”

I said that was all right, and the creature dropped from my shoulder and sat down on the desk, where it watched me wash my dishes.

When I checked in again, the creature had fallen asleep, snoring even louder than the other two.

The next day, as I prepared to go to the pear field, the three creatures ran for the front door. It was going to be a hot day. The moment I opened the door, the creatures rushed outside. When they were all together like this, I couldn't tell apart the timid one from the others. Sweating from the heat, I walked to the pear field. The three creatures followed, darting back and forth around my feet. They were talking to each other in their squeaky voices, but I couldn't make out what they were saying.

I picked pears all day long. Harada showed up in the afternoon to apply pesticide. The three creatures took refuge in the trees while he worked, watching his movements with interest.

“How did it go?” he asked me. “Did those little fellas do anything interesting last night?”

I told him they just ate some pears and went to sleep. Harada laughed.

“Maybe you should leave them here today,” he said.

As soon as he said that, the creatures raised their shrill voices in protest.

“No!”

“No, no, no!”

“We want to go.”

“We want to go home.”

“We want to sleep at home.”

Harada laughed again. “They really seem to have taken a liking to you,” he said, and sprayed some pesticide on the ground with the brass nozzle mounted to a hose. The chirring of cicadas filled the air. Harada wiped the sweat off his brow with a towel slung around his neck.

I wanted to ask Harada what the three creatures were, but I was reluctant to do so in their presence. When he had finished his work, Harada soaked his head under the faucet. He cupped his hands and drank a few mouthfuls.

It was almost evening; the bats were swooping low above the ground. The three creatures shouted incoherently at the bats, stamping their feet.

When my work was over, Harada gave me more discarded pears than usual, and added a few eggplants and ears of corn for good measure. "Take these too," he said.

I went home and fed the pears to the creatures. I boiled the corn Harada gave me and offered it to them, but they would eat nothing but pears. The two energetic creatures seemed more at ease in my apartment than yesterday; they climbed on my bookshelves and played with the phone, picking it up and pressing it to their ears. Eventually, they fell asleep on the floor.

The timid one sat wide-eyed on my desk. When I told it about its loud snoring the night before, it frowned.

"Don't say that, it's embarrassing. Never mind the snoring. Forget about it."

The creature yelled angrily at me again and again. I found it rather annoying.

As the hour grew late, I felt the slipping sensation coming on. Although I'd been sleeping better since I started working in the pear field, I was unable to sleep this night. Maybe having the three creatures around made me edgy. Whatever the reason, I felt things slip even worse than usual. I tried to distract myself by washing dishes, but it didn't help. I decided to go outside and walk to the pear field.

I got the feeling that the creature who had stayed awake was following me, but because of the darkness and the slipping sensation, I wasn't sure if it was there or not. I walked quickly. The sultry heat of the day still lingered in the air. My body seemed to cast several layers of shadows in the gloom.

I got to the field and began to till the soil. Now that my eyes had accustomed to the dark, I could see clearly the little creature following me. The moonlight lit up its white fur. With every swing of the hoe, the creature flinched.

Chop! I tilled the soil with all of my strength. Chop! Chop! I swung the hoe as hard as I could.

"Why are you digging?" asked the creature after a while. I kept on digging without answering. The creature repeated its question. I remained silent, and the creature asked over and over. Eventually I lost my temper and yelled at it to go away.

The creature gaped at me, then spun around and disappeared into the night.

The timid creature did not come back the next day, nor the day after that. I worked even harder than before in the pear field. The two remaining creatures ran circles around the pear trees all day long. When the sun set and my day's work ended, the two creatures and I went home. They ate pears like usual. When I asked them where the third creature might have gone, they answered with indifference.

"Who knows?"

"No idea."

"He'll come back."

"Yeah, he'll be back."

"He might be crying somewhere."

"Yeah, he's probably crying."

Three days passed, then four, but the third creature still didn't come back. I put even more effort into my work, and Harada gave me a raise.

"You don't have to work so hard, you know. Plants always grow at the same rate," he said, adding another thousand yen to my daily pay. "By the way, I only see two of your little buddies. What gives?"

I looked down. The two energetic creatures were frolicking below me.

Harada didn't press me any further. "Why don't you take a day off?" he said.

I told him I didn't need to rest. Besides, if I took a day off, I wouldn't get any pears.

"You've really become their caretaker," said Harada and laughed. The two creatures ran around at a blinding speed.

I woke up at midnight with a tightness in my chest. A ray of moonlight shone through a gap in the curtains. The two creatures were sleeping on the floor. The contours of everything in the room were awfully sharp. I saw everything—the lampshade, the basket of pears, the empty bottles on the desk—as nothing but silhouettes. There was something painfully heavy on my chest.

When I tried to put a hand over my heart, I felt something there. I leapt out of bed, and the missing creature jumped off my chest.

I let out a gasp. The creature nibbled on my pillow.

"I'm home. I came back. Are you angry with me? Are you still angry?"

I gently picked it up and rubbed my cheek against its tiny face. The creature bore it

gracefully. Its white fur tickled me.

“You’re not angry anymore? That’s a relief. I’m really sorry.”

It apologized again and again, and I told it everything was all right. The creature hit my cheek with its hand, which was about the size of a chickweed leaf. When I said it was I who should apologize, it hit me a little harder.

“I was a little sad, actually. I cried a little,” it said, its words punctuated by blows. It had stopped pulling its punches by now.

I told the creature it was hurting me. It stopped, and whispered, “I’m hungry. Give me a pear. Pear! Pear!”

I pointed out the pear basket. The creature leapt to it in one bound and started making a mess of the pears.

“I think it’s about time,” said Harada. It was the end of August. “The busy season is almost over, so I’ll be fine on my own now. There’s still a while before strawberry season.”

Harada was leaning against a pear tree, smoking a cigarette. He watched the three creatures running around, narrowing his eyes.

“Can’t believe those guys are still alive,” he said. Feeling as though I had just been slapped, I looked up at Harada, whose face was a mask of surprise. “Oh, didn’t I tell you? These things go away at the end of the season.”

Even though it was the middle of the day, I felt myself begin to slip. I felt as if a life-sized version of myself might slip right out of my body and walk off somewhere.

“They’re kind of like bugs, in a way,” said Harada. “Haven’t you ever had a pet stag beetle? You know how they die at the end of the summer? It’s like that.”

Harada stubbed out his cigarette against the edge of an empty can and gave one of the running creatures a light kick. The creature tumbled over. It seemed to find this amusing, and tumbled over again by itself. The other two followed suit, bouncing and rolling.

“Don’t worry about it. That’s just the way it is,” said Harada. He picked out ten big, juicy pears from the crate of good ones and gave them to me. “These are for you. You’re welcome to work for me again if you like. You’ve been a great help.”

I received my final pay and went home. In my room, I opened the envelope, and

found three thousand yen more than usual. I put the pears on the floor, and the three creatures swarmed them. They tore into the pears, spattering juice all over their own fur.

That night, the slipping sensation came on in force. It wasn't the usual creeping feeling, but an intense sense of displacement, much like I had felt at Harada's field earlier in the day. It wasn't the air or the Earth's axis slipping away, but myself—as though my whole body was slipping out of place.

And it did. There I was, standing beside my own body. The three creatures were hopping around the sleeping husk. I thought they had all gone to sleep early, snoring away, but here they all were, bouncing around in the dead of night.

“Let's go!”

“Come on, come on!”

“To the pear field!”

“The pear field!”

They chittered and chattered, shaking my inert form. I told them I had left my body. They all looked up at me.

“You're out!”

“Out!”

“Let's go!”

“Come on!”

All three of them scrambled up my legs and pointed to the door. Leaving my sleeping body behind, I went outside with the three creatures perched on my shoulders. The summer air drifted sluggishly past me. The pear trees loomed at regular intervals in the night.

“Let's go!”

“Go!”

“Hurry up!”

The two energetic creatures dropped to the ground at once. They scurried up a pear tree and clung to the very top, where they waited. The timid creature was still on my shoulder.

“Don't you want to go, too?” I asked.

The creature shook its head. “I can't do it. I'm scared. I can't.”

The two creatures in the tree had started eating the few pears still left, not in their usual frantic way, but slowly, quietly, relishing the taste. I asked the creature on my shoulder one more time if it wanted to join them.

“I can’t,” it said. “I don’t want to. I don’t want to lose myself.”

“If you don’t want to, then how about we go back home?” I said. The creature fell silent.

“You’d rather stay here?” I asked. The creature nodded.

“Well, what are you going to do, then?”

It didn’t answer. The two energetic creatures had polished off all the pears in the tree. Clinging closely to the tree trunk, the two creatures looked like white knots in the bark of the pear tree.

My body grew lighter and lighter. I felt that if I didn’t watch out, I might get sucked up into space—like a dust kitten in a vacuum cleaner—to some unknown place, never to return. The creature on my shoulder was trembling, just as it had been the first time I saw it. The vibrations warmed up my shoulder and loosened it up. Gradually, my muscles relaxed, from my shoulder, to my chest, my stomach, my arms, and down to my feet. It felt like soaking in a hot bath.

“Take me to the tree in the back,” said the creature, so I carried it there on my shoulder.

The creature hesitated for a moment, then leapt onto the tree trunk and started eating the last pears in a hurry, trying to catch up with the other two. It ate with its usual blank, unthinking expression.

“I’m still not ready,” it said to me when it had finished eating.

“Then why don’t you...” I said, and stopped myself. I wasn’t ready myself. Who was I to give advice to anyone else?

“I’m not ready, but I’ve got to go,” said the creature after five minutes of silence. It looked unusually serious. Its tiny nose and eyes glimmered in the moonlight.

“Are you leaving already?” I asked, and a sudden anxiety came over me. I didn’t want to be left behind. The words “please don’t go” almost slipped out of my mouth.

“Bye,” said the creature and quietly closed its eyes. I watched it turn into another knot in the bark. I reached out and touched it, but the knot didn’t move. It was just another knot in the bark. As I touched it, lamenting the creature’s transformation, my

body grew even lighter. I almost expected to be sucked into the knot.

I'll get sucked in, I thought. I'll be taken away.

In that instant, I reflexively struck the knot, trying to distance myself from it. I thought I could hear the voice of the creature inviting me to tag along, but I shouted in protest. The moment I shouted, my body lost all sense of weight, and I flew back to my apartment with tremendous speed.

I returned to my body still sleeping in my room. I was drenched in sweat.

The next day, I paid Harada a visit. I was not wearing my usual farming clothes, but was instead dressed for a night at the town. Harada let out a surprised "Oh!" when he saw me, and offered me some tea.

While drinking the tea, I thanked him for hiring me, and told him I was going to look for another job.

"September's almost here," said Harada as he lit a cigarette and looked up at the sky. "I thought there were fewer children out playing lately. I guess they're all at home doing their homework. They must have put it off until the end of their summer vacation." He gazed at the sky.

I passed the pear field on my way back, but I couldn't tell which trees had the little white knots.

"Thanks for everything," I mumbled and patted one of the pear trees. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw the three creatures playfully running around. I turned around, but there was nothing there. Just a small dragonfly whizzing low above the ground. I caressed the pear tree one last time, and then I set out.