

Introduction

The Snows of Tsugaru

Powdered snow

Grainy snow

Cottony snow

Wet snow

Packed snow

Crystalline snow

Icy snow

(from *The Eastern Ou Almanac*)

For the first time in my life, I spent three weeks one spring touring the Tsugaru Peninsula at the northern end of Honshu. It was the most important event of my thirty plus years of life. I was born and raised my first twenty years in Tsugaru. I was only familiar with the towns of Kanagi, Goshogawara, Aomori, Hirosaki, Asamushi, and Owani, and knew next to nothing about the other towns and villages.

I was born in the town of Kanagi. It is located almost in the center of the Tsugaru Plain and has a population of five or six thousand. This town boasts of no special features but puts on airs as if it were a city. On the good side, it is plain and simple like water. On the bad side, the town is shallow and conceited. A little over seven miles to the south along the Iwaki River lies Goshogawara. As the distribution center of local products, its population surpasses ten thousand. With the exception of the two cities of Aomori and Hirosaki, no other towns in the area have a population over ten thousand. On the good side, those towns are bustling. On the bad side, they are noisy. They lack the smells of farming towns, but the dreadful loneliness, a characteristic of cities, is already creeping

into these small towns. I admit the comparison may be a bit exaggerated, but Kanagi could be likened to the scenic Koishikawa in Tokyo and Goshogawara to the entertainment district of Asakusa.

My aunt lives in Goshogawara. As a child, I was more attached to this aunt than to my birth mother. In fact, I often stayed at my aunt's home. Until my middle school days, you could say I was ignorant about any town in Tsugaru other than Goshogawara and Kanagi. When I traveled to Aomori to take the entrance exam for middle school, the trip lasted a mere three or four hours but felt like an expedition to me. I chronicled the drama of my excitement at that time in a novel. That depiction was not necessarily true and filled with fictional buffoonery, but, for the most part, my feelings were as written.

My lonely chic known only to me grew richer in design year by year. When I graduated from the village grammar school, I rode in a swaying horse-drawn carriage board a train to the small city of the prefectural capital in order to take the middle school entrance exam. My boys' clothes at that time were eccentric. My white flannel shirt was, by far, the most pleasing article to me. Of course, I wore it. The large collar attached to this shirt resembled the wings of a butterfly. The shirt collar stuck out far enough to cover the collar of my kimono in the way the collar of an open-neck summer shirt covers the collar of a suit jacket. It may have looked like a bib. But the youthful me was pathetically nervous and my custom was to think I favored a young nobleman.

I wore short *hakama* trousers made from a white-striped Kurume-kasuri fabric, long socks, and shiny black, high-laced shoes. I also wore a cloak. My father was already dead, and my mother was sick. As a result, this

youth was cocooned in the compassion of my older brother's kind wife. The youth took advantage of this sister-in-law and forced his shirt collar to be larger. She smiled but was actually angry. The youth's grief nearly brought him to tears because no one understood his sense of beauty.

"Chic. Elegance." The aesthetics of the youth were exhausted. No, every living thing, the entire purpose of life was exhausted. I didn't button my cloak on purpose and wore it so that it slid off my narrow shoulders. I believed that was stylish. Where did I learn that? I had no model to follow and may have naturally developed this instinct for style.

The reason I presented my tasteful appearance for once in my life was my debut at a real city for the first time in my life. The moment I arrived in this small city on the northern edge of Honshu in a state of overexcitement, the drastic change left my young self speechless. I taught myself to speak the Tokyo dialect from boys' magazines. But when I went to the inn and heard the maids speak, they spoke in the Tsugaru dialect, exactly as they did in my hometown. The experience was a little anticlimactic.

Twenty miles separated the town where I was born and that small city.

This small coastal city was Aomori. Here are some facts you may not know. As the premier seaport in Tsugaru, the Sotogahama magistrate began administration of this port in the first year of the Kan'ei era (1624), roughly three hundred and twenty years ago. In those days, one thousand houses already existed. The most successful ports were located in Sotogahama. Departing boats traveled to places like Omi, Echizen, Echigo, Kaga,

Noto, and Wakasa, and its prosperity steadily grew. Aomori Prefecture was established by the order abolishing feudal domains and creating prefectures in Meiji year 4 (1871). The city of Aomori became the prefectural capital, now protects the northern gate to Honshu, and has a railway ferry service to Hakodate in Hokkaido.

Today, Aomori boasts more than twenty thousand households and a population exceeding one hundred thousand. Probably, no traveler finds this town friendly. The houses are unavoidably shabby because of frequent fires. The traveler hasn't the slightest clue about the location of the city center. Bizarrely sooty, expressionless houses line the streets and do not welcome the traveler who, feeling uneasy, dashes through town. However, I lived in Aomori for four years. I am writing about those pivotal years of my life in what will become a novel about my early years to be titled *Omoide* (Memories).

My grades weren't good, but that spring, I passed the entrance exam to middle school. I dressed in new hakama trousers, black socks, and lace-up shoes. I replaced the blanket I had been using with a cloak stylishly left unbuttoned and open in front to travel to the small city on the sea. I took off my traveling clothes at a dry goods shop in town as a guest of distant relatives. At that shop with the old *noren* curtain falling off at the entrance, they took good care of me.

By nature, I easily become enthusiastic about anything. After I started school, I'd put on my school cap and hakama trousers to go to the public bath. When I saw my reflection in the window glass along the way, I smiled and gave myself a slight bow.

However, school wasn't the least bit interesting. The school campus was at the edge of town, and the buildings were painted white. Right behind the school was a flat park

facing the strait. I could hear the sounds of the waves and the rustling pine trees during class. The halls were wide, and the classroom ceilings were high. All of that made me feel good, but the teachers persecuted me.

Beginning the day of the school entrance ceremony, I was belted by some phys ed teacher. He said I was a smart-aleck. This teacher was in charge of my oral exam when I took the entrance exam. He was kind to me and said I probably hadn't been able to study well because my father had died. I only hung my head. My heart hurt because he was the lone compassionate teacher. Later, I was smacked by various teachers. They'd punish me for a variety of reasons, among them were grinning and yawning. I was told the teachers concluded in the staff room that I yawned too much during class. I found it strange they discussed such nonsense in the staff room.

One day, another student who came from the same town called me over to the shadows of the sand dunes on campus. He warned me that my attitude came off as cocky and would result without fail in beatings. I was astonished. After classes were dismissed that day, I rushed home along the shore and sighed as I walked while waves licked the soles of my shoes. As I wiped the sweat off my forehead with the sleeve of my Western-style uniform, a surprisingly large gray sail passed unsteadily before my eyes.

This middle school is on the eastern end of Aomori today, unchanged from the past. That flat park is Gappo Park. It was close enough to the middle school to be considered its backyard. Except during winter blizzards, I cut through this park on the way to and

from school and walked along the beach. This backstreet was used by few students and energized me. Mornings in the early summer were the best. The dry goods shop where I stayed was owned by the Toyoda family of Tera-machi and had a long-established, preeminent store in Aomori for close to twenty generations. The father died a few years ago. I was more precious to this man than his own children. I'll never forget that. I visited Aomori two or three times over the past few years, visited his grave each time, and always stayed with the Toyoda family.

One spring morning when I was a third-year student, on the way to school, I felt lightheaded for a short time and grabbed onto the cylindrical handrail stained red. A river wide like the Sumida River slowly flowed under the bridge. I never had the experience of feeling dizzy in the past. I felt I was being watched from behind and struck certain poses for some time. To each of my actions, he was bewildered and stared at his hands or watched while scratching the back of his ear but soon concocted an explanation. He was not convinced my actions were spontaneous or instinctive. After my senses returned on the bridge, I was unsettled by loneliness. When I had those feelings, I thought about my past and my future. Stumbling over the bridge, I remembered various events and dreamed. In the end, I sighed and thought, Maybe, I'll be a great man.

...

I had intimidating thoughts like, You must surpass the masses, but, in fact, I studied. After entering my third year, I was always at the top of my class. It was hard to be first in class without being called a grade grubber. I did not accept this ridicule and learned techniques to tame my classmates.

Even the captain of the judo team, nicknamed Octopus, obeyed me. A large pot for wastepaper stood in the corner of the classroom. Occasionally, if I pointed to it and said, "Octopus, can you get in the pot?" Octopus stuck his head inside and laughed. His laughter echoed to produce bizarre sounds. The good-looking boys in class hung around me, too.

I stuck spots of adhesive plaster cut into the shapes of triangles, hexagons, and flowers on the pimples on my face, but nobody laughed. These pimples plagued me. Their number kept growing. When I opened my eyes each morning, I checked the state of my face by patting with the palm of my hand. I bought different medicines and dabbed them on my face, but they had no effect. When I went to buy medicine at the drugstore, I wrote the name of the medicine on a slip of paper and pretended I was asking if they sold that medicine for someone else. I thought pimples were a sign of sexual desire and was so ashamed everything before my eyes went black. I even thought about dying. The bad reputation of my face reached a peak among my family. My oldest sister who lived in another house warned no woman would become my bride. I diligently applied the medicines.

My younger brother worried about my pimples, too, and often went to buy the medicine in my place. This brother and I hadn't gotten along since we were small. When he took the entrance exam for middle school, I hoped he would fail. But being far from home, I gradually discovered his nice disposition. As my brother got older, he

became bashful and quiet. Once in a while, he and I published short literary works in our fanzine, but they were all timid compositions. Unlike me, he constantly fretted over his bad grades. And my sympathy only put him in a bad mood. He was annoyed by a growth the shape of Mt. Fuji swelling on his face into a part of a woman's physique. He was convinced he wasn't smart because his forehead was narrow. I forgave this brother anything and everything. In those days, I either hid everything from people or confessed everything to them. That brother and I confided everything to each other.

One moonless night at the beginning of fall, we went out to the pier of the harbor and commented on a fluttering red thread in the breeze blowing across the strait toward us. A Japanese language teacher at school once told this story in class. An invisible red thread was tied to the little toe of your right foot. The string smoothly stretched with one end tied to the same toe of a girl. No matter how far the two of us were separated, the thread would never break. No matter how close we were, even if we met on the street, that thread would never become entangled. This determined the girl who would become your bride. When I first heard this story, I got very excited and immediately told my brother when I returned home. That night, we talked as we listened to the sounds of waves and the calls of seagulls. When I asked my brother what is your wife doing now, after shaking the handrail along the pier a few times with both hands, he awkwardly said, "Walking in the garden." I thought the young woman wearing large garden *geta* clogs,

holding a fan, and gazing at the primrose seemed perfect for my little brother. It was my turn, but looking off at the black sea, I only said, "Her *obi* sash is red." A ferryboat crossing the strait floated out unsteadily from the horizon and looked like a huge inn with its many rooms lit by yellow lights.

Two or three years later, my little brother died. At that time, we enjoyed going to the pier. On snowy nights in the winter, we carried umbrellas and went to the pier. In the sea of a deep harbor, the silent falling snow was spectacular. Lately, Aomori Port has become congested with ships. This pier is buried under ships and no longer a scenic location. Tsutsumi River, a wide river like the Sumida River, flowed on the eastern side of Aomori and into Aomori Bay. The river flowed slowly like a reverse flow at a spot right before pouring into the sea. I gazed absent-mindedly at that sluggish flow. If I were a pretentious man, I'd liken my youth to that point immediately before the river flowed into the sea. Those four years in Aomori were times I found hard to forget. For the most part, those were my memories of Aomori. Another unforgettable place is the seaside Asamushi Hot Springs, nearly seven miles east of Aomori. The following paragraph appears in *Memories*:

Autumn came, and I left the city with my brother to go by train to the hot springs on the coast about thirty minutes away. After my mother fell ill, my youngest sister rented a house there to take the hot-spring cure. I stayed there the whole time and continued to study for my entrance exam. My troublesome reputation of being a prodigy required me to display it from my fourth year in middle school until entering high school. During that time, I came to hate school. It was horrible, but as a person being pursued by something, I studied with single-minded

determination. I took the train from there to school. Every Sunday, my friends came to pass the time. I always had a picnic with them. On flat rocks at the shore, we enjoyed meat stew and drank wine. My brother had a nice voice and knew many new songs. He taught us these songs, and we all sang together. We wore ourselves out fooling around and fell asleep on the rocks. When we woke up, the tide had come in. The rock, which should have been part of the shore, was an island. We felt as though we had not awakened from our dreams.

In the end, my joke is my youth was poured into the sea. The sea around Asamushi was cool and clear and not too bad. However, the inn could not be said to be good. The charm of a desolate fishing village in Tohoku was to be expected and not a flaw. Was I just a little arrogant like the frog in a well who knew nothing about the big ocean and was confused? I am bold and scoff at the hot springs in my hometown but am not bothered by the anxiety I felt when in the countryside far away. I haven't stayed at any hot springs in this area recently. Fortunately, the costs of staying at the inns have not become exorbitant. Clearly, I'm saying too much, but I haven't stayed here recently and gazed through the train window at the houses of the hot spring towns. These are only the words of the shallow intuition of a poor artist and have no foundation. However, I don't want to force my intuition on the reader. Rather, the reader may prefer not to believe my intuition. I believe Asamushi is starting over as a humble town for convalescence. For some time, the passionate, stylish crowd of Aomori City was electrified by this chilly hot springs area and became the proprietresses of inns to become like those in Atami and Yugawara. A fleeting suspicion crossed my mind that I may be intoxicated by an unwise illusion from my thatched cottage. The story tells of a warped, poor man of letters on a journey who never leaves the train but journeys back and forth by the hot-springs area of his memories.

The most famous hot springs in Tsugaru are Asamushi Hot Springs, perhaps, followed by Owani Hot Springs. Owani is close to the southern edge of Tsugaru and close to the prefectural boundary with Akita. More than hot springs, Tsugaru is known throughout Japan for its ski resorts. The hot springs are in the foothills of the mountains where the faint scent of the history of the Tsugaru clan lingers. My immediate family often came to this hot springs region to take the hot-spring cure. Although I also played there as a child, no memories as clear as those of Asamushi remain. I have many vivid memories of Asamushi but, at the same time, can't easily convey those memories. Nevertheless, my recollections of Owani are dear to me despite being hazy. Is it the difference between the sea and the mountains? I have not seen Owani Hot Springs for close to twenty years. Looking at it now, does it feel like a town ashamed of being given the leftovers of a city like Asamushi. I cannot give up on that town. Compared to Asamushi, traveling from Tokyo to Owani is a pain.

First of all, Owani is my last hope. The closest town to this hot springs is Ikarigaseki. It was a checkpoint between Tsugaru and Akita in the age of the former fief. Thus, this area has many historic landmarks. The way of life of the people of Tsugaru remains, has deep roots, and will not be easily brushed aside by city ways. Furthermore, the great last hope is Hirosaki Castle, which is seven miles north of here, and, even now, the castle tower remains. It is surrounded by cherry blossoms every spring and boasts of excellent health. I'd like to believe that as long as Hirosaki Castle remains, Owani Hot Springs will not sip the drippings of a city and descend into a drunken frenzy.

Hirosaki Castle lies at the center of the history of the Tsugaru clan. The founder of the Tsugaru clan, Oura Tamenobu, supported the Tokugawa clan in the Battle of Sekigahara. In Keicho year 8 (1603), by proclamation of the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, he became a noble with forty-seven thousand *koku* under the Tokugawa shogunate and immediately began to plot the boundary of the castle moat in Hirosaki-Takaoka. Hirosaki Castle was finally completed at the start of the reign of the second generation daimyo Tsugaru Nobuhira. Successive generations of daimyo were based in Hirosaki Castle. At the time of the fourth generation Nobumasa, Nobuhide was made to form a branch family

in Kuroishi. The family was split into the two clans of Hirosaki and Kuroishi, and ruled Tsugaru. Despite Hidemasa's reputation gained in Tsugaru of the good governance and his being a star among the seven wise rulers of the Genroku era, which has been sung about, great famines during Houreki and Tenmei during the seventh generation Nobuyasu transformed all of Tsugaru into a gruesome hell. And the clan's finances plunged into extreme poverty. In the midst of dire prospects, the eight generation Nobuaki and the ninth generation Yasuchika desperately planned the restoration of the clan's power. At the time of the eleventh generation Yukitsugu, catastrophe had been narrowly avoided. In the age of the twelfth generation of Tsuguakira, the daimyo's fief was auspiciously restored to the emperor and gave birth to the present-day Aomori Prefecture. That is a brief overview of the circumstances of the history of Hirosaki Castle and the history of Tsugaru. I intend to describe more about Tsugaru's history later. For now, I will write a bit about my recollections of Hirosaki and tie them to this introduction of Tsugaru.

I spent three years in the castle town of Hirosaki. During those years, I studied the literature course at Hirosaki High School. At the time, I suspected the course mainly consisted of *gidayu* recitations for puppet theater. It was very strange. On the way home from school, I'd stop by the home of a woman teacher of *gidayu*. The first time, the puppet theater play was probably *The Diary of the Morning Glory* or something like that, I can't remember. Other plays like *The Village of Nozaki*, *Tsubozaka*, and *Kamiji* are burned into my memory. Why do I begin with something so strange and out of character? I don't think the full responsibility lies with the city of Hirosaki, but I'd like Hirosaki to accept a speck of responsibility.

Gidayu was mysteriously popular in this town. Sometimes amateurs held *gidayu* recitals in the town's theaters. Once, I went to listen, but the town patrons wore *kamishimo* ceremonial samurai dress and gave solemn recitations of the *gidayu*. Not one of them was adept but they spoke from their hearts without being the least bit pretentious and gave thoughtful recitations. From long ago, few men of refined taste seemed to inhabit Aomori City. However, they were cunning men who practiced the short love songs only to elicit, "Oh, you are so good," from the geisha or to use their refined

behaviors as weapons of government and business policies. I think these pitiful patrons, who easily broke into heavy perspiration to study a vapid traditional art, often appear in Hirosaki City.

In other words, true dummies still live in Hirosaki. The following words are written in the ancient writings of war chronicles called *Eiki Gunki*.

The hearts of the people of the two provinces of Mutsu and Dewa are foolish and do not know how to submit to a strongman. He becomes an enemy of the ancestors. He becomes vulgar. His strength simply came from the fortunes of war at the time. He boasts of power and influence but will not be obeyed.

The people of Hirosaki possess this truly foolish willpower and do not know how to bow to strongmen despite being defeated over and over. A defense of conceited aloofness tends to transform into a joke to the rest of the world.

Thanks to my three years there, I am struck by nostalgia and zealously watch gidayu. I express my romantic nature below. The following passages are from an old novel of mine but, I confess with a wry smile, they are only quirky fabrications.

I have fond memories of drinking wine in a coffee shop. One time, I brazenly went to eat at a restaurant with a geisha. My younger self did not consider that to be particularly bad. I always believed behaving like a stylish yakuza was a lofty hobby. By going to eat two or three times at the quiet, old restaurant in the castle town, my instinct for style made heads snap up. Then I found my purpose. I wanted to dress in the clothes of the fireman seen in the play *The Quarrels of Megumi*, sit cross-legged in a tatami room overlooking the inner garden of the restaurant,

and say things like, "My, my, you are too pretty today." Still enthused, I started to prepare my outfit.

I shoved my hands in the big pocket of my dark blue workman's apron. An old-fashioned wallet was inside. When I walk with my arms folded in my kimono, I looked like a full-fledged yakuza. I also bought an obi sash. This sash made from Hakata cloth squeaked when tightened. I ordered an unlined kimono made of *tozan* cloth from the kimono shop. Unfortunately, these clothes were indecipherable. Was I a fireman? A professional gambler? A shop boy? They lacked a unifying theme. However, if my clothes gave the impression of a man who frequented the theater, I was satisfied. Summer began and I wore hemp sandals on my bare feet.

That was good, but a strange thought flashed through my mind. It was long underwear. I considered wearing long, formfitting, dark blue work pants like the fireman in the play. I was called, "Clown," and I rolled up the hem of my kimono ready to fight. At that time, the dark blue work pants looked so much better, like they pierced my eyes. Short underpants were forbidden. I tried to buy the work pants and ran around from one end of the castle town to the other but found none.

I'd breathlessly explain, "You know, what plasterers wear. Do you have those tight, dark blue work pants?" I asked at dry goods shops and *tabi* sock shops, but the shop workers smiled and shook their heads no. It was already hot, and sweat poured out of me as I ran around on my quest. Finally, the proprietor of one shop said, "We don't

carry them, but there's a specialty shop for firefighters in the alley around the corner. Go ask there. They may have them." Of course. Firefighting never crossed my mind.

A shop for firefighters made sense, and I sped to that shop in the alley. Large and small firefighting pumps were lined up in the shop. Clothes were displayed, too. I felt helpless, but my courage was inspired. I asked if they had work pants, the prompt response was yes. They were dark blue, cotton work pants, but thick, red stripes ran down both sides of the pants to indicate a fireman. I didn't have the courage to walk around in them and, sadly, had to abandon the work pants.

Even at the home of stupidity, there is little of this level of stupidity. As I copied this passage, I sunk into a little melancholy. The red-light district where the restaurant I dined with the geisha stood was probably Enoki Alley. This event happened nearly twenty years ago and has faded from memory. I do remember Enoki Alley at the foot of Omiyasaka Hill. The area I walked around drenched in sweat to buy dark blue work pants was the most lively shopping district of the castle town and called Dote-machi. In comparison, the red-light district in Aomori is called Hama-machi. That name is missing a personality. The shopping district in Aomori corresponding to Dote-machi in Hirosaki is Oo-machi. I feel the same about that name. Next, I will list the names of towns in Hirosaki beside those in Aomori. The differences in the personalities of these two small cities become stark. The names of towns in Hirosaki are Hon-cho, Zaifu-cho, Dote-machi, Sumiyoshi-cho, Okeya-machi, Douya-machi, Chabatake-cho, Daikan-cho, Kaya-cho, Hyakkoku-machi, Kamisayashi-machi, Shimosayashi-machi, Teppou-machi, Wakadou-cho, Kobito-cho, Takajou-machi, Gojitsukoku-machi, and Konya-machi [Capital Town, Government Town, Embankment Town, Good Living Town, Cooper Town, Coppersmith Town, Tea Field Town, Locally Administrated Town, Silvergrass

Town, One Hundred Stones Town, Upper Sword Sheather Town, Lower Sword Sheather Town, Gun Town, Foot Soldier Town, Dwarf Town, Falconer Town, Fifty Stones Town, and Dyer Town]. In contrast, the names of the towns in Aomori are Hama-machi, Shin Hama-machi, Oo-machi, Kome-machi, Shin-machi, Yanagi-machi, Tera-machi, Tsutsumi-machi, Shio-machi, Shijimi-machi, Shin Shijimi-machi, Ura-machi, Namiuchi, and Sakae-machi [Beach Town, New Beach Town, Big Town, Rice Town, New Town, Willow Town, Shrine Town, Embankment Town, Salt Town, Clam Town, New Clam Town, Inlet Town, Shoreline Town, and Prosperous Town].

However, I never thought of Hirosaki City as the superior town and Aomori City as the inferior town. Old-fashioned names like Takajou-machi and Konya-machi are not unique to Hirosaki but towns bearing those kinds of names are found in castle towns throughout Japan. Of course, Mount Iwaki in Hirosaki is more beautiful than the Hakkoda Mountains in Aomori. But the master novelist from Tsugaru, Kasai Zenzou, gave this lesson to this junior author from his native land, "Don't be conceited. Mount Iwaki looks magnificent because no high mountains surround it. Go to other countries and look around. A mountain like that is commonplace. With no high mountains in the area, it appears blessed. Don't be vain."

Although countless historic castle towns are spread throughout Japan, for some reason, the inhabitants of the castle town of Hirosaki seem to take pride in the feudal nature of their stubbornness. This is not defiance, but compared to Kyushu, Shikoku, and Yamato, the Tsugaru region can be said to be almost entirely a frontier. What kind of history is there to be proud of throughout the province? During the recent Meiji Restoration, what kind of loyalists emerged from this clan? What was the clan's attitude? To be blunt, wasn't their course of action to merely follow the lead of the other clans? Exactly where is this proud tradition? What is the source of the stubborn swagger of the people of Hirosaki?

A man with power was no good. He had pride in power that came from very good luck. I heard when His Excellency Ichinohe Hyoe, the general who hailed from this region, returned home, he always wore serge hakama trousers when wearing Japanese

clothes. If he returned home wearing military dress, the people of his hometown would glare at him in anger, square their elbows, and wonder aloud what he had turned into because, at best, he had a stroke of very good luck. Wisely, when he returned home, he wore serge hakama trousers with his Japanese-style clothes. While not entirely true, this fable is plausible because the inhabitants of the castle town of Hirosaki have a baffling vicious rebelliousness.

What is being hidden? The truth is I have a bone with that kind of bad behavior in my body, too. That's not the only reason, but thanks to that bad bone, I am unable to rise above living day and night in the attic of a tenement house. Several years ago, a magazine company solicited me to write for *A Few Words to My Hometown*. My answer was *I love you, I hate you*.

I have slandered Hirosaki. However, this does not arise from a hatred of Hirosaki but is a reflection of me, the author. I am a native of Tsugaru. Generations of my ancestors were farmers in the Tsugaru clan. In other words, I am a pureblood native of Tsugaru. Thus, I badmouth Tsugaru holding little back. If a native of another land heard my ridicule and was prompted to underestimate Tsugaru, of course, that would trouble me. No matter what I say, I love Tsugaru.

Today, Hirosaki has ten thousand households and a population exceeding fifty thousand. Hirosaki Castle and the Five-Storied Pagoda of Saishoin Temple are designated as national treasures. Tayama Katai praised Hirosaki Park as the finest in Japan when the cherry blossoms are in bloom. The headquarters of the Hirosaki Division are located there. The mountain pilgrimage *Oyama-sankei* takes place every year over three days, July 28 to August 1. Tens of thousands make the pilgrimage to the festival held at the rear shrine on top of the sacred Mount Iwaki in Tsugaru and pass through this very prosperous town while dancing all the way there and back. That's pretty much what is written in travel guides. Nonetheless, I've limited my descriptions of Hirosaki City to complaints.

Therefore, I traced the memories of my youth and wanted to depict a Hirosaki that lived up to its reputation. But each and every memory was silly, and I didn't get far. Unexpected abuse escaped from me, and I didn't know what to do. I'm too particular

about this castle town of the former Tsugaru clan. Although this place should be the foundation of the quintessential spirit of a Tsugaru native, the character of this castle town remains vague in my description.

A castle tower surrounded by cherry blossoms is not unique to Hirosaki Castle. Aren't most of the castles in Japan surrounded by cherry blossoms? Isn't Owani Hot Springs able to preserve the scent of Tsugaru because it faces a side of the castle tower surrounded by cherry blossoms? Earlier I intended to write with foolish elation that Owani Hot Springs will not slurp up the drippings of the city and fall into a drunken frenzy as long as it faces Hirosaki Castle. I had an assortment of thoughts, but I sensed they were the sloppy sentimentality of the author's ornate prose. With nothing to rely on, I lost heart. In the end, this castle town is lackadaisical. Despite being the castle of generations of feudal lords, its prefectural authority was stolen by another up-and-coming town.

Throughout Japan, most prefectural capitals are the castle towns of the former clans. However, the prefectural authority of Aomori Prefecture is not Hirosaki City but was moved to Aomori City. I believe even Aomori Prefecture was unhappy. I don't especially hate Aomori City. Witnessing the prosperity of a rising town is invigorating. While Hirosaki City was defeated, I lost patience with its apathy. The desire to support the loser is human nature.

Some way or another, I want to be on the side of Hirosaki City. Although my composition is poor, I struggled to devise different ways to write but was unable to describe the ultimate merits of Hirosaki and the power of Hirosaki Castle's uniqueness. I will say it again. This place is the foundation of the spirit of the people of Tsugaru. There should be something. There should be a brilliant tradition found nowhere else after a search of all Japan. I have an inkling of what it is, but in what form can I express it? I'm frustrated and annoyed by my inability to reveal this to the reader.

I was a literature student at Hirosaki High School and remember visiting Hirosaki Castle by myself at twilight one spring day. As I stood on the corner of the castle plot and gazed at Mount Iwaki, I was overcome with the horror of the realization that a land of

dreams was silently expanding at my feet. Until then, I only thought that Hirosaki Castle was isolated from the town of Hirosaki. But right below the castle, a quaint town I never noticed before consisted of rows of small buildings, which kept the same form for a long time, for hundreds of years. I quieted my breath and squatted down. Oh, so there's also a town here. The young me felt like I was looking at a dream and a deep sigh escaped. I sensed the *hidden pool* that often appears in the verses of the *Man'yoshu*. Why did I feel I understood Hirosaki and Tsugaru at that moment? I thought Hirosaki was no ordinary town as long as this town existed. The reader may not understand my conceited conclusion. Hirosaki Castle is a rare, famous castle because of this hidden pool. And now I have no choice but to push through.

When the flowers on the many branches open near the hidden pool, and the castle tower with white walls stands silently, the castle is, without a doubt, a famous castle of this world. For all eternity, the hot springs beside the famous castle may never lose their rustic, simple character. In today's words, I could try *optimistic outlook* as my parting words to my beloved Hirosaki Castle. Come to think of it, similar to the grueling task of describing my relatives, describing the heart of my hometown is no easy task.

I don't know whether to praise or to criticize. In this introduction to Tsugaru, as I developed the memories of my youth about Kanagi, Goshogawara, Aomori, Hirosaki, Asamushi, and Owani, my jumbled words are a collection of blasphemous criticisms by someone who doesn't know his place. As expected, I puzzled over how to accurately tell the stories of these six towns and, naturally, became depressed. I may spew violent words that deserve capital punishment.

These six towns were most dear to me in my past, fashioned my personality, and determined my destiny. On the other hand, I may have blind spots regarding them. I realized I am in no way the best person to tell the stories of these towns. In the main story, I will try to avoid writing about these six towns and write about other towns in Tsugaru.

Finally, I can return to the opening paragraph of this introduction with "I spent three weeks one spring touring the Tsugaru Peninsula at the northern end of Honshu." By

taking this trip, I saw other towns and villages of Tsugaru for the first time in my life. Until then, I knew nothing about any towns other than the six I mentioned. In grammar school, I went on several field trips near Kanagi. Today, those fond memories are lost to me.

During midsummer vacations while in middle school, I lay on a couch in the Western-style room on the second floor of my house and guzzle cider as I randomly read my way through my older brothers' book collections and never went on any trips. During my vacations while in high school, I always visited the home in Tokyo of my next oldest brother (he was studying sculpture, but died at twenty-seven years old). When I graduated from high school, I went to college in Tokyo. For the next ten years, I never returned to my hometown; therefore, I must say this trip to Tsugaru was a momentous event.

I want to avoid having the know-it-all opinions resembling an expert about the topology, geology, astronomy, politics, history, education, and hygiene of the towns and villages I saw on this trip. I say this, but in the end, I have an embarrassingly thin veneer of one night of study. Those of you interested in these topics should pay close attention to specialists in those fields. I have another specialty. For the time being, the world may call that subject love. This subject researches the touching of the heart of one person to the heart of another. On this trip, my investigation will focus on this subject. Regardless of the perspective taken in this investigation, if I'm able to convey life today in Tsugaru to the reader, I probably won't receive a passing grade as a record of the culture and geography of Tsugaru during the Showa era but will have found success.

Chapter 1: The Pilgrimage

"Now, why are you going on this trip?"

"I'm having problems."

"As usual, I can't believe you're having problems, even a little."

"Masaoka Shiki, thirty-six; Ozaki Koyo, thirty-seven; Saito Ryoku, thirty-eight; Kunikida Doppo, thirty-eight; Nagatsuka Takashi, thirty-seven; Akutagawa Ryunosuke, thirty-six; Kamura Isota, thirty-seven."

"What's your point?"

"They died at those ages. They dropped dead one after another. I'm creeping toward that age. To a writer, this is the most important age."

"So what's bothering you?"

"What are you saying? Stop joking. You're supposed to have a little understanding. I will say no more. If I speak, I will be showing off. Anyway, I'm going on this trip."

Aging well may be to blame or my belief that explaining my feelings was smug, but I didn't want to say anything (also because it's mostly trite literary flashiness).

A while ago, a friendly editor at a publishing house asked me to write about Tsugaru. While I'm alive, I want to explore each corner of the region of my birth and, one spring, left Tokyo looking like a beggar.

This event occurred in the middle of May. Describing myself as a beggar may be subjective. However, I am being objective when I say I did not look very stylish. I don't own one business suit. I only wear the work clothes of a laborer. And these clothes weren't made by a tailor on special order. These clothes are baffling, unfamiliar work clothes resembling jackets and pants made from scraps of cotton cloth laying around and dyed dark blue by someone in the house. Right after dying, the cloth was supposed to be dark blue, but after I wore them once or twice, they faded into a strange color resembling purple.

With the exception of a stunning woman, purple Western-style clothes are not flattering. I added green gaiters made of a staple fiber and rubber-soled, white canvas shoes. My hat was a tennis hat also made from a staple fiber. The dandy dressed like that went on a trip for the first time in his life. Surprisingly, a *haori* coat with an embroidered crest sewn in as a memento of my mother, a lined Oshima kimono, and Sendai-hira hakama trousers were hidden in my backpack. I have no idea when any of those clothes would be worn.

I boarded the express train leaving Ueno at 5:30 pm. As the night grew late, I shivered from the cold. Beneath my jacket-like clothing, I only wore two thin shirts. Under my pants, I only wore underpants. Even people wearing winter coats and prepared with lap blankets were cold and whining about the strange chill of that night. I hadn't expected the bitter cold. In Tokyo at that time, impatient people were already walking around wearing unlined serge kimonos.

I had forgotten about the cold of Tohoku. My hands and feet shriveled and I shrank like a turtle. I tried to convince myself this is an exercise for training my mind. Dawn finally came and it was cold. I gave up training my mind. We would soon arrive in Aomori. I entered the lowly state of fervently wishing for the realistic circumstance of wanting to sit cross-legged beside a fireside in an inn somewhere and drink hot sake. We arrived in Aomori at eight in the morning. My friend T was at the station to welcome me. I posted a letter to him beforehand.

"I thought you'd be wearing Japanese clothes," he said.

"This is a different age," I tried hard to joke.

T brought a little girl with him. The thought, A present for her would have been nice, sprung to mind.

"Why don't you come home with me and rest for a while?"

"Thanks. I'm thinking about going to N's home in Kanita by noon today."

"I know, N told me and is probably waiting for you. Well, you're welcome to rest at my home until the bus leaves for Kanita."

My vulgar but cherished wish to sit cross-legged beside the hearth drinking hot sake was miraculously coming true. At T's home, a charcoal fire was blazing in the hearth, and a bottle of sake rested in an iron kettle.

"You've had a long journey," said T and bowed to me again, "How about a beer?"

"No, thanks. The sake is fine," I said clearing my throat.

In the old days, T lived at my house and mostly took care of the chicken coops. We were the same age and became good friends. In those days, I remember hearing my grandmother criticize T with "Yelling at the maids has good and bad points." Later T went to Aomori to study and then worked in a hospital in Aomori City and gained the trust of both the patients and the hospital employees. A few years ago, he went to war to fight on an isolated island in the south but got sick and returned home last year. After he recovered, he began to work at the hospital.

"What was your happiest time on the battlefield?"

T's response was swift.

"That was when I filled my cup to the brim with my beer rations on the battlefield. I sipped with great care and thought about taking the cup away from my lips for a rest, but the cup never left my lips. Never."

T was also a man who liked sake. However, he didn't even drink a little with me and from time to time lightly coughed.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

Sometime in the past, T had a lung problem that flared up again on the battlefield.

"This time I'm serving on the home front. When caring for patients in the hospital, if you haven't suffered once from sickness, you lack understanding. Now, I have good experience."

"It seems you've become an adult. In reality, it's the chest illness," I said. I got tipsy and began to shamelessly expound on medicine to a doctor.

"Your disease is in your mind. If you forget about it, you will recover. And drink a lot of sake once in a while."

"Oh, well, I'm not overdoing it," he said smiling. My reckless medical science could hardly be relied on by professionals.

"Would you like something to eat? Around this time of the year, delicious fish are scarce even in Aomori."

"No, thank you," I said while gazing at the trays on the side, "Everything looks delicious. Don't go to any trouble. I don't want to eat too much."

I made one promise to myself before setting off to Tsugaru. I would be indifferent to food. I'm not comfortable saying I'm not much of a saint, but the people of Tokyo are greedy for food. I'm a stodgy man or a samurai who revels in honorable poverty by chewing on a toothpick as if he just finished a meal. But I love being amused by my idiotic stoicism that hinted of desperation.

I thought about using that post-meal toothpick, but that sort of manly pride tends to look ridiculous. Among the Tokyoites who go to the provinces lacking spirit and will, most will not die of starvation but will exaggerate and complain about their horrible plight. After the meal of white rice held out by the country people is presented and eaten, I've heard rumors of someone wearing a servile smile and full of flattery ask, "Is there any more to eat? Is this a potato? Thank you. It's been many months since I've eaten a potato this delicious. I'd like to take a little home, if you could slice it up for me..."

Everyone in Tokyo receives identical food rations. It's a miracle for only that person to be in a state of near starvation. Perhaps, they underwent gastric dilation, but the plea for food is disgraceful. Each and every time, without saying in defiance words like "For the sake of the country," they must hold on to their pride as human beings. A few exceptions in Tokyo go to the countryside and complain irresponsibly about a shortage of food in the imperial capital. I also heard rumors that the people in the countryside scorn guests from Tokyo who come to beg for food.

I didn't come to Tsugaru to scrounge for food. Although I looked like a purple beggar, I was a truthful and loving beggar and not a polished-rice beggar! In order to be the glory of all the people of Tokyo, I hid my determination to cut out the pretentious attitude in the tone of my voice. If someone looked at me and said, "This is rice. Please

eat until your stomach bursts. Is the situation horrible in Tokyo?" Even if they said it with kindness from their hearts, I would only eat a little. I imagined I would say, "I'm used to it. Tokyo's rice is delicious. When I think the side dishes were almost gone, more rations come. Without my noticing, my stomach shrinks, so I'm full after eating a little. It happens a lot."

However, this warped caution of mine was pointless. I visited the homes of friends here and there in Tsugaru. Not one said to me, "Here's some rice. Please eat until your belly bursts." My eighty-eight-year-old grandmother at my parents' home, in particular, looking ashamed said, "Since Tokyo probably has all sorts of delicious food, it would be hard to find something delicious for you to eat. Why would you want to be forced to eat pickled melons? These days, there are almost no sake lees." I was actually happy.

In other words, I only met gentle people who were not sensitive to things like food. I thanked god for my luck. No one said, "Please, take this. Please, take that," and persisted in pushing food gifts on me. Thankfully, I continued my pleasant journey carrying a lightweight backpack. However, when I returned to Tokyo, I was surprised to find small parcels sent from the amazing people at each place I visited before returning home. I digress, but T never recommended food to me, and the state of food in Tokyo never came up. We mainly talked about our memories of the times spent together at my home in Kanagi.

"I think of you as my close friend."

My words were conceited and filled with the theatricality of outrage, rudeness, and sarcasm. I squirm at having said that. Was there no other way to say that?

"But you're uncomfortable." T made a perceptive guess.

He said, "I worked at your home in Kanagi, so you're my boss. If you don't think so, I would not be happy. It's strange. Although twenty years have passed, even now, I constantly dream of your house in Kanagi. I even saw it on the battlefield. I forgot to feed the chickens. Dammit! I thought and instantly woke from the dream."

The time for the bus came. I went out with T. The weather was no longer cold but pleasant, and I drank hot sake. Was it cold? Sweat stained my forehead. We talked about

the cherry blossoms in Gappo Park being in full bloom. The streets of Aomori City were dry and white. No, I will be prudent in my explanation of the nonsensical impression reflected on my drunken eyes. Today, Aomori City is zealous about shipbuilding. We hurried to the bus depot, but along the way, I visited the grave of Papa Toyoda, who had been so kind to me during my middle school years.

The old me would have asked, "Why don't we both go to Kanita?" without a care in the world. But as I aged, I remember to be a little more reserved. No, my feelings are hard to explain. In other words, we have grown up. Being grown is miserable. Despite sharing mutual affection, we must show discretion and preserve good manners with others.

Why is so much discretion required? There is no answer because too much treachery and humiliation abound. The discovery that people are treacherous is the first theme when a youth moves into adulthood. An adult is a youth who has been backstabbed. We walked without speaking until T said, "I'll go to Kanita tomorrow. I'll take the first bus tomorrow morning and drop by N's house."

"What about the hospital?"

"Tomorrow is Sunday."

"Oh, really? You could have said so sooner."

Traces of our foolish youth remained.