

Home Ground

SPECIAL ISSUE

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Yūko Tsushima, Translated by Geraldine Harcourt



I, short-story collection that includes “Home Ground” (Shinchōsha, 1999)

Mother,

How are you getting on there?

It's been five months since I moved here. Long enough for winter to turn to spring, and now the blazing days of summer have arrived.

At first, I was too busy unpacking and tidying to spare a glance outside. It took me a good week just to sort your things. With the place unoccupied for five whole years since you went into the hospital, I was not at all sure what the chests of drawers and cupboards might harbor, but all that emerged were endless dead cockroaches and roach droppings; I never did see a live one, nor any mice. I guess in an empty house the cockroaches breed initially, then die out in due course as the food supply runs low. But goodness, what a mass of things! There were four kitchen scales alone, and *three*

rice cookers.

Although the house had been empty, Ken and his wife (your grandson getting married is another thing that's happened since you've been in the hospital, isn't it?) had checked on the place from time to time, since they live here in Tokyo, and thanks to them the plumbing was still in more or less working order. But now the old toilet and bathroom and kitchen have all vanished and I'm making do with temporary facilities. The new ones will be ready for use next month, when the work will be finished at last.

Everyone, including Sis and Ken, was very opposed to my moving in during the remodeling, but I could hardly expect my nephew and his wife to take on the sorting and organizing, and I needed to sell my own apartment without delay, and besides, I couldn't help thinking that to have the builders start work with the house still empty would be an open invitation to burglars. Also, we have put the northern part of the property, where the well and the shed used to be, up for sale. Since I arrived, Sis has been over two or three times to see how things are going. Ken and his wife have set aside part of the house for this happy-go-lucky aunt of theirs, who has given up her office job and plans to enjoy her freedom, and they are building a new house for themselves on the remainder of the site. They show up once a week, though they sometimes go home without dropping in.

The place was so overgrown that, for a while there, it was a struggle to reach the front door from the gate. With the gutters and windows overrun with sorrel vine, the weeds first had to be tackled before any work could start. The moment signs of life fade away inside a vacant house, outside, grasses and leafy plants spring up and set about crushing it, attempting to tear down the artifact that stands between them and a return to the wild.

Once the weeds were cleared, the demolition

work started. Trucks and a small bulldozer came and went daily, the ground was trodden hard by the carpenters, and it looked as though the wildness had simply been trampled underfoot. But the five years the house had stood empty could not be so lightly ignored.

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Mother, these five years, in the hospital, you've been keeping watch over your old house, haven't you? Confirming that the plum and flowering hazel trees blossom each spring, sniffing the daphne's scent, gazing at the red oleanders, catching the faint sound of the loquat's yellow fruit hitting the ground. You were listening all along to the chorus of cats and frogs that swelled as the weeds grew.

The first to draw my attention was the black cat that appears after dark by the temporary entrance that opens off the parlor. It tips over the garbage pail, forages through the scraps I've put out, and goes on its way. Then there's the tabby that stakes out a position on the roof over the front entrance, where it keeps a close eye on my comings and goings. Late at night, a white, a gray, and a brown cat frequent the garden. Never all three at once; the white one seems to have right of way. For cats, while it lasted, this spot on a city block near the heart of Tokyo must have been a precious "wilderness." For frogs and lizards, too—here they can still breed. I'm used to seeing baby toads, but I was startled to find them rivalled in numbers by the tree frogs. During the rainy season, their croaking was downright noisy.

That reminds me. One night in May, when the weather took a sudden warmer turn, I was sitting down alone to my meal and had just picked up my chopsticks when I noticed a black speck on the rice. As I leaned in for a closer look, black specks multiplied before my eyes. They were tiny winged insects. Not so unusual, I thought, and I wasn't especially perturbed

until I glanced at the plate that held the fish. The white dish was strewn with dead winged ants, like a heavy-handed dash of peppercorns. Now I saw that the miso soup, and the spinach, and the tabletop itself were black with their remains. I got up, feeling a sudden chill. What was happening? I crossed to an open window to look out, but the mesh screen was misted over and completely opaque. It was only as I was about to slide it aside that I realized its surface was teeming. How many insects would it take to cover an entire window? I have no idea. The other windows were equally thick with them. And, one by one, insects were slipping inside through the tiniest of cracks. The plastering was not yet finished where some old lathing had been torn out to put in a new wall, and the insects were issuing from there, too.

We have kept two rooms of the old house, the parlor and the tatami room, plus the entrance hall. I'm living in the parlor; the tatami room is full of your things. With the new wall going in on its western side, the two rooms are separated by a corridor. First I sprayed the tatami room with insecticide, then I closed the parlor windows and gave those areas a thorough spray, and then, after a pause for breath in the corridor, I gave the entrance hall and parlor door a squirt and finally hurried to switch off the TV and the light in the parlor. After that, there was nothing more to do. I didn't much feel like going back to my meal, and as I holed up listening to music on the radio, I soon grew drowsy in the dark, hot room, until I eventually fell asleep and woke to find it was morning.

Six A.M. The white cat was lounging in the middle of the garden, as usual, catching the early morning sun. The windows were clear again. I opened one gingerly. Not an insect to be seen; only a few dead on the sill. The sound of the opening window sent the white cat scurrying. The morning was so gloriously bright, it was almost as if I had been befoxed.

Even now, I'm half-inclined to wonder whether I was really surrounded by such a horde of tiny insects.

Aphids. Ladybugs. These I saw by the light of day, which made the outbreak surprising only in its numbers. Ladybug larvae creep up tree trunks before changing into adults, you know. But in such droves!

Countless praying mantis hatchlings, light brown and fresh from their spongy nest, go prancing about the garden. And whenever it rains, big earthworms crawl up onto the concrete in the shoe-changing area.

In the spring, swallowtail butterflies, both the black and the yellow kinds, were another sight I hadn't been treated to in a long while.

Since the work on the house began, every night I hear the blue plastic tarpaulins flapping in the wind, making a sound like another living creature. We buried a good many here, didn't we? Five dogs, two cats. Fewer cats because you never did like them. Birds. Goldfish, rabbits, guinea pigs.

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But I wonder why you hated cats, Mother? Because they act as though they own the place?

In the rainy season, about the time when the overripe plums tumble to the muddy ground, there was a cat dead inside the front gate. It was the gray one I sometimes used to see. A Persian, quite thin, but with its fur unruffled and no sign of injury. I could only think that, knowing its time had come, whether from sickness or starvation, it had somehow made its way to the front door of this house and there met its death with composure.

But why is the corpse of a strange cat such a fearful thing to a human being? I was

altogether incapable of dealing with it myself. I couldn't consign a cat that wasn't my own pet to the earth in the garden; I couldn't even summon the courage to touch it. The Persian cat had died in the place of its choosing with complete dignity.

It was no use waiting for the builders as it was a Sunday. In desperation, I phoned Ken and asked his advice, my voice low so the dead cat wouldn't hear.

Ken, who was clearly disgusted at the fuss I was making, had a ready solution: he would contact the metropolitan sanitation department and I should just leave the body where it was and wait. Three hours later, two men appeared and swiftly carried off the dead Persian. Its body stone cold, the cat was borne away quietly, without so much as a growl.

I thought of you then, Mother. I thought how, ever since you went into the hospital five years ago, you must have been keeping an eye on the house and its grounds, in company with the cats. You would never chase them away now.

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Around the same time, we held the celebration to mark the completion of the house frame, with Ken making the arrangements. We wanted to keep it informal, but in the end, what with ordering the box lunches, discussing the drinks, and so on, I was quite busy myself.

And then, the night before the ceremony—you know this already, don't you?—footsteps sounded on the ceiling and I sat up in bed. I was sure I heard footsteps. It couldn't be the builders at that late hour. Maybe it was a cat. Or a bird. There was nothing to be alarmed about, I told myself, and did my best to ignore the sounds and go to sleep. But it was no good, my heart was pounding uncomfortably. Reluctantly, I decided I really should take a

quick look around, if only to locate their source.

It was a quiet moonlit night, without rain or wind. On the other side of the garden wall, a mercury lamp lit up the street all night, and cars passed by. On such a bright city night, even a coward like me could venture outside alone, in my pajamas. Softly I opened the door, crossed the few yards to the gate, and looked up at the roof. Nothing was visible from there. To get a better view, I went around to the building site beyond the front entrance. The living room portion of the old house had been reduced to a skeleton and half-converted into the new kitchen and bathroom. Immediately next to it, the outline of Ken's family's brand-new house loomed clearly in the moonlight. Its first floor was surrounded with blue tarpaulins, and the same sheeting covered the part of the old house that was being remodeled. I ducked under the nearest sheet and tried switching on the lamp that the builders used. The pillars and floor beams of the old house were revealed, darkened with age and rotted in patches. The floorboards had been ripped away, exposing the shaving-strewn ground beneath.

On my left, a ladder was leaning. I'd thought the upstairs had been torn down long ago, but could it still be there? Thinking it very strange, I began to climb hesitantly, a step or two at a time. I was not particularly afraid; what I felt was more like a responsibility to see the progress of the work for myself.

Mother, can you imagine my surprise?

As I climbed the ladder, the sound of voices reached me, men's voices among them. I could see a light on the floor above. I kept on climbing and stuck my head up on the second floor. It was then that a woman's familiar laugh rang out. I looked, and Mother, you were sitting there.

"...Well, there's no use doing it by half measures," you were saying, clearly in high spirits. "You mustn't take it so much to heart,

Master Builder.”

The two men laughed as they replied:

“For sure, all a man can do is cry in his saké.”

“And it’s those can-do women that drive us to it!”

“Oh, but I’m going to have a few myself, today.” You lifted the half-gallon saké bottle at your side and filled the two men’s glasses generously. “It’s not often the three of us get together like this. That makes it a special occasion.”

I climbed the rest of the ladder and stepped onto the floor. But I couldn’t bring myself to speak to you and your guests.

You had regained the vigor you had at fifty, and the master builder and the gardener were only a little older than I remembered them. It’s over forty years since we moved to this house built by the master builder. I was eight at the time. He made all the arrangements for the move. The last time I’d seen him, I guess, would have been when you had him install overhead cupboards in the kitchen. I was in high school by then, and the master builder was already in his sixties. After all this time, he still had the same red cheeks and shiny round nose.

The gardener, too, was unchanged, a slight man in a faded dark-blue workman’s waistcoat and black tabi socks. His own boss, he would come to us at certain times each year and busy himself around the garden. He requested a glass of cold saké twice, at noon and in the evening. He wore his head shaved, sometimes swathed in a hand towel, like a robber in a play. At New Year’s he would pay us a visit wearing a traditional gardener’s livery coat; once he brought a small grandchild. Then, at some point, he stopped appearing. I couldn’t have been more than fifteen at the time.

“...And what about that parquet floor?” you

said. “I never asked for any such thing, it was all your idea, Master Builder. Then you came grumbling to me about it being such fiddly work.”

“I’d always wanted to have a crack at it, but when I got the chance, it turned out to be the dickens of a job. Caused me no end of trouble, that did.”

“That’s how you dig your own grave, being a little too sure of yourself,” the gardener said. “Reminds me, it was you made me cut back that old zelkova, you were always saying the branches were in the way, and blow me down, I went and killed it.”

“But that tree really was in the way, there’s no denying it,” you said. “And it had gotten too big to move. Never mind that, though. It was such a hoot, Master Builder, when you were so proud of having built a modern Western-style house—you’d made the walls all pink and blue and what-have-you, and put in those odd ceiling panels—and then everybody who saw it said it looked like a temple.”

“You got your start as a temple carpenter, didn’t you? Can’t fight it!” The gardener laughed happily, his mouth opening wide. Not a single white tooth was visible inside. The master builder’s cheeks grew redder.

“Hah, anyone with half an eye to see could tell the time and trouble I put into this place. But I have to hand it to you, Missus, for a woman on her own to build this house, that was a remarkable thing.”

“It was nothing of the sort. I don’t know how I would have managed if my husband hadn’t left me the land. Though it did take courage to sell part of it and put up the house.”

“It was a remarkable thing, it was,” the gardener agreed. “Remarkable. That’s why I hauled over that old stone monument I picked up in Ueno—because I admired that spirit.”

“That was going too far, mate,” said the builder.

“I was flabbergasted when it arrived,” you said, and you all three collapsed with laughter. “Come on now, drink up,” you urged, “it’s party time! Oh, I almost forgot—the box lunches! What’s a celebration without something to eat?”

You stood up, Mother, with the agility of a young girl, and came toward where I was standing. Beside me was a stack of lacquered picnic boxes. You picked up the whole stack—not the usual two or three, a good ten layers—as if they weren’t even heavy. I was beginning to wonder if you were ever going to notice me, and grew so impatient that I finally spoke.

“Mother, shall I carry those?”

You looked at me, gave a mischievous little shrug, and told me, “I don’t need any help from you yet, not by a long sight. If you want some party food, come over here.”

The builder and the gardener also turned toward me, but they looked away again without interest. The gardener had once made me a pair of bamboo stilts, and the builder a big kennel for my dog. But it seemed they had both forgotten these things.

I followed you and joined the party. Feeling awkward, I sat at a slight distance.

The gardener said, “It’s paradise, here like this.”

And the master builder added, “Did you ever see such a view?”

Where the second-floor walls had been (until a moment ago, I thought), vermilion clouds were streaming in an expanse of pale blue sky—whether morning or evening, I couldn’t tell. Even a range of mountains could be seen

in the distance, beyond the silhouettes of office buildings.

“There’s a nice breeze. And the cherry blossoms are falling,” you said blissfully, though the season should long since have been over. As you spoke, petals began to drift and flutter through the air.

“So we get to view the cherry blossoms as well,” said the master builder. “This is quite a party!”

“Will you look at that,” the gardener said. “What a grand show!”

A tall cherry tree I hadn’t noticed before was leaning close to the house, its laden branches swaying in the breeze. The blossoms had a silvery sheen. With each gust, silver light whirled through the air and poured over the bodies of you three. Your hair and your clothes, too, were stirring in the breeze.

Unable to speak, I just drank that cool breeze in.

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Mother,

At long last, the work on the house, with all it has entailed, is nearing the end.

Lately, my eyes have come to see that the body of a human being is lying by the gate of this house, like the Persian cat before it. The builders and Ken and his family tread over it as they come and go, but no one notices it. I have also come to think that even when the house is finished, most likely the body will remain. I too will probably go on living here and treading on the body. Mother, your body is as slender as a stem of grass, as small and inconspicuous as a piece of gravel. You will leave it here. And you will constantly murmur in a voice that no one can hear.

“...Oh dear, will you look at the child, can’t she spruce herself up a bit, at least when she goes out, if you ask me she looks like a pitiful old maid, since she’s free why doesn’t she have some men friends round and have a good time, here in my house.... Because, no matter what Kenny says, it’s my house, and if it’s all right with me, that’s enough.... My house has changed every which way, and now it seems they’re going to sell off more of the land, too, just as I thought.... Oh well, never mind, it can change all it likes, but I won’t change, couldn’t change if I wanted to, because when all’s said and done, I’m dead.... It’s a small piece of land, but a good many people have lived and died here, and I suppose it’ll go on that way, with plenty of comings and goings, I don’t know anything about the house that stood here before, or who’ll build what sort of house after this, when even Kenny has died, for all I know it may go back to a wilderness, like it was long ago, but right now my house is still here, the one house I can call my own.... I lived all of forty years in this house, though I meant it for my daughters, but wouldn’t you know, they both moved away as fast as they could, even moved away from Tokyo, and I ended up living alone a good many years longer than we lived together.... Come to think of it, there was a time when my daughters carried on about how lonely I must be, and wouldn’t I come and live with one of them?... I wasn’t sure what they meant by lonely, I told them straight, what would I do if I gave up my house, but the girls didn’t seem to know what I was talking about, I wonder if they can understand a little better now.... Ah, something small is running over me, that’d be Kenny’s child, which makes it my great-grandchild, but don’t ask me what the

youngster’s like, must be about three or four years old by now, growing up safe and sound and that’s what matters, they must be looking forward to the new house.... Oof, this time something awfully heavy is passing over me, it’s one of those dump trucks, that’s what it is.... I’m sick and tired of the racket from that construction work, can’t get a moment’s rest all day, but at least it’s quiet at night, and I can get some sleep, like when I was alive.... In the night, cats and frogs pad softly over me as I sleep.... The cats and frogs know very well that this is my house, and so I go on sleeping soundly....”

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Mother,

Next month, this place is going to be registered as my house. It’s a small house now, just a shadow of what it once was. Still, the fact that it is your house hasn’t changed—but I don’t need to tell you that.

How are you getting on there?

Geraldine Harcourt has translated five books of Tsushima Yūko's fiction. She currently lives in New Zealand.

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