

A Tale of Tomatoes「トマトの話」 宮本輝

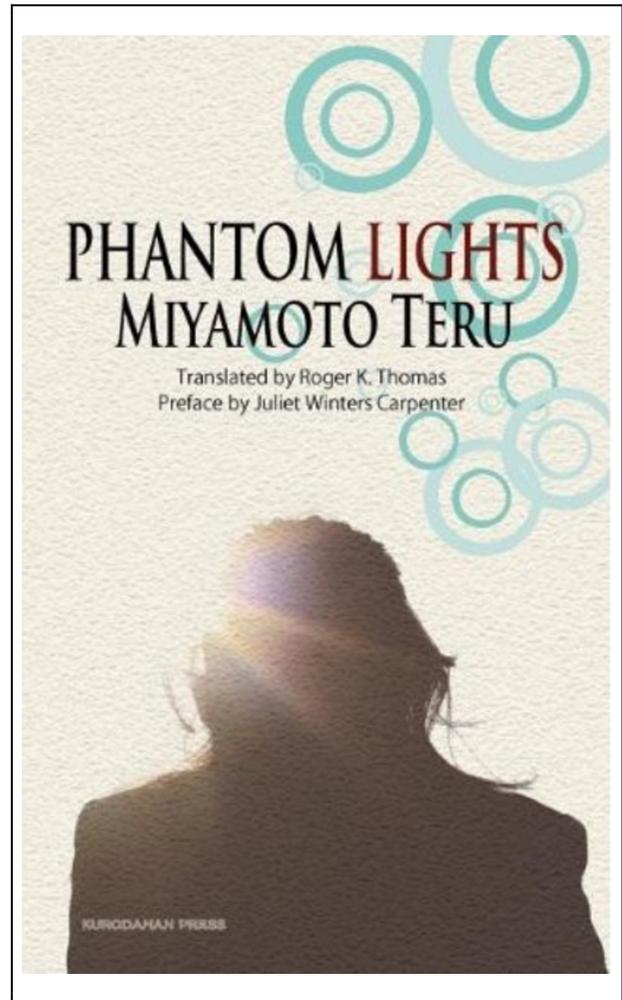
Miyamoto Teru, Robert K. Thomas

A Tale of Tomatoes

Miyamoto Teru

Translated and introduced by Roger K. Thomas

Miyamoto Teru (b. 1947), whose large and devoted readership is characterized by its social and geographical diversity, is admired for his uncommon ability to weave absorbing narratives out of the warp and woof of ordinary life, his working-class characters from the Kansai region evincing a universal appeal. Miyamoto's world is one neither of the traditional aesthetics that once mesmerized large audiences nor of the otaku culture that now holds such fascination for the young (and not-so-young)—nor does one encounter in his works the surprising flights of fancy typical of Murakami Haruki—but for those very reasons his fiction reflects with fidelity the reality experienced by the great majority of Japanese. "A Tale of Tomatoes" (Tomato no hanashi) first appeared in the literary journal Bungakukai in 1981, and the present translation is taken from the recently published collection Phantom Lights. It shares with Miyamoto's other short stories an evocative recounting of an incident from the narrating character's past—in this case an incident that closely parallels one of the author's own experiences. A part of every reader's psyche remains buried under the asphalt along with that urgent letter. RKT



At twelve o'clock on the dot, everyone set aside their various tasks, some opening their lunch boxes, others heading out to nearby cafés catering to office workers. For the past week, Onodera Kōzō had not had much appetite, and his lunches had been a fixed fare of udon noodles, delivered from the Kisaragitei noodle shop. When he called at 11:30 to place his order, he would ask colleagues in the Planning and Production Department, "While I'm at it, shall I place an order for anyone else? If it's only one item, they'll put it off to the very last,

and I won't get it until after one."

Usually one or two others would say, "Well, in that case ..." and order something like a rice bowl with beef or tempura. If a certain number of items could be ordered together, they would be delivered around noon as requested, but in some cases after only about ten minutes a delivery man would show up with his carrying box and boom, "Thanks for your order." At such times, those who had ordered would have to wait until noon, resigned to eat a cold meal.

Three months before there had been a reshuffling of personnel; the new director of the department was a man named Araki, under whom every aspect of office life was subjected to strict discipline. The advertising agency where Onodera worked was regarded as a company of medium standing, but in reality it was more like third-rate. Its attitude toward young employees in the department—including designers, illustrators, photographers, and copywriters, a group not adept at asserting themselves in dealing with the company organization—differed considerably from other leading agencies in its attempt to enforce conformity to established standards. In spite of that, the previous director had possessed a good understanding of such matters and would pretend not to notice if employees were a bit late or if they did not return from lunch until around three o'clock. He was of the opinion that as long as they got the work done, that was all that mattered; after all, designers and copywriters work better if given a degree of free rein.

But the new director, Araki, would sternly demand an explanation from anyone coming in even one minute late and remind those showing up in sweaters that the appropriate office attire was a jacket and necktie. As if perversely convinced that such discipline was all his job consisted of, he never eased up on his faultfinding, and in time even the members of our department—who, in all the company

tended to conduct themselves as privileged exceptions—had completely assumed the veneer of white-collared workers, never daring to get up from their seats before noon rolled around and never failing to return to the production room by one.

Onodera slurped the udon noodles that had been sitting on his desk for nearly a half hour getting cold. Over a bowl of rice topped with tempura, Crow started up a conversation with another designer, Mitsuko, about their experiences with part-time work back in their student days. Crow's real name was Akagi Jun'ichi. His jet-black hair with a sheen like the wet feathers of a crow hung to his shoulders, and everything he wore—his jacket, his sports shirt, his necktie, his sweater—were all of the same raven hue whether in summer or in winter, so everyone just called him Crow. He possessed a quick wit behind his thick, rimless glasses, and even his minor quips bespoke a peculiar depth. Yet in terms of personality there was something almost pathologically careless about him. Especially when it came to money there was constant friction between him and his fellow designers.

Those who had been taken advantage of monetarily had harsh things to say about Crow and advised Onodera to have no serious dealings with him whatsoever. But Onodera liked Crow, who deliberately pretended foolishness and played the wag. He actually demonstrated a surprising sensitivity and intelligence that made him a good partner for Onodera's work as a copywriter. The conversation between Crow and Mitsuko piqued his interest, and, slurping his noodles, he sat down on a nearby chair. With a mixture of his characteristic facetiousness and comedy, Crow was telling about his work during a high school summer vacation for a company that sealed roofs against leaks, saying that he quit after a horrible three days he would never forget.

“Before pouring concrete onto the roof, we would spread layers of tar to prevent leaks. There were kerosene cans filled to the brim with boiling hot tar, and it was my job to carry them two at a time suspended from a bucket yoke. Since even the slightest contact could cause a serious burn, we wore thick rubber boots that came up to our thighs and long rubber gloves on both hands. You should try walking in that kind of getup carrying buckets of tar on top of a high-rise building under the blazing sun. After ten minutes of it, your head is already spinning. I don’t know how many times the boss clobbered me with a bucket yoke because I spilled some tar. My contract was for ten days, but I chucked it after three. Those three days were hell.”

Crow asked Onodera if some part-time work experience stood out in his memory. Only three of them were left in the production room: Crow, Mitsuko, and Onodera. Even Araki, who was usually sitting at his desk keeping vigilant watch over everyone’s coming and going, was nowhere to be seen. Colored pencils of every hue, cutting knives, and cans of adhesive for pasting on the block copies were all lined up on the desk. Scattered about were the hundreds of sheets of positive film that the photographer had pretended to be hard at work examining only moments before.

When Onodera answered that he had held countless part-time jobs both in high school and in college, both Crow and Mitsuko pressed him to tell about the one that was most memorable. Onodera finished eating his noodles and looked at the clock. Forty minutes remained. He declined, saying that he didn’t think he could finish telling about it in that much time, but the other two would not relent. Onodera lit a cigarette and inhaled the smoke deep into his chest. The last glint of the morning sun was magnified in his mind, and for some reason he felt that he had to talk. He began his account intending to wrap it up succinctly, but as he became absorbed in the various images

projected in his brain, he was goaded by a strange excitement and continued talking with a most uncharacteristic smile.

My father died when I was a junior in college, leaving a lot of debts from his failed business. My mother and I evaded bill collectors by skipping out and moving to a little town on the outskirts of Osaka, where we rented an apartment with one six-mat room. Through the newspaper, my mother found an opening in the employee cafeteria of a business hotel within the Osaka city limits. I had resolved to quit college when my father died, but then reconsidered; since I had only two more years, I might somehow be able to graduate if I took on part-time work. One summer afternoon, I went to the Student Counseling Center near Ogimachi Park in Tenma. It was more like an employment security office and was packed with students seeking work. A friend had told me that I’d be sure to land some kind of job there.

Wanting to find something that would pay well even if a bit hard, my eyes immediately went to those parts of the listings indicating the daily wage. Jostling and pushing among people all about my age, I moved back and forth in front of the bulletin board. On slip number sixty-five was written “3,500 yen per day (with additional allowance for transportation).” Since the going rate for student work at the time was never more than 2,500 yen per day, I stared at slip number sixty-five thinking, “This is it!” The job was “traffic controller at a road construction site,” and the hours were from eight in the evening until six o’clock the following day. It was scheduled for only ten days, not the lengthier three to six months I had hoped for, but during that week and a half I would make 35,000 yen. And when that job was finished, I could just find something else. With that in mind, I went to the clerk and conveyed my desire for job number sixty-five. Only five were needed, and four had already been hired, so I was the final applicant. After writing my name,

address, and university affiliation on some documents, I was given a slip with the address of the job site, a simple map, and the name of the person in charge at the site, which was near the airport at Itami. It was in the Koya area of Itami City, the intersection between highway 71 and the national highway that goes to Takarazuka.

At a restaurant in the subterranean mall in Umeda, I ate ramen noodles, dumplings, and rice. Since it was an all-night job, I thought I had better eat a hearty meal before going. I took the Hankyū-Kobe line to Tsukaguchi, transferred there to the Itami line, and then from Itami station boarded the bus designated on the map and headed for the site. As I walked from the bus stop in the direction of Kobe, a large intersection came into view, countless blinking red lamps indicating that it was a construction zone. Two bulldozers were moving about. I asked one of the drivers where a certain Mr. Itō was, the one in charge.

“I saw him in the canteen.”

With that, the driver—stripped to the waist and with a dirty towel as a headband—whirled the bulldozer around to the direction where I was standing and yelled, “Hey, get out of the way! If you don’t watch out you’ll get flattened!” Startled, I jumped aside to see another bulldozer pressing in on me, and I was treated to a string of invective such as I had never been subjected to before. It was not yet eight o’clock, but the work had already begun. Laborers in hardhats with pickaxes and shovels were collecting the scraps of asphalt that the bulldozer had spilled. A large searchlight trained on the worksite illuminated their grime- and dust-smearred faces and shirts.

On the top of a slope not far from the intersection stood the canteen, which consisted of two prefab buildings. The closer, oblong one was actually the dining area, and served as kitchen, cafeteria, and as a place where the workers could sleep. Tatami mats had been

placed to the side of the cafeteria space, and several futons were left spread out. A thirty-ish, fat woman appeared to be busy in the kitchen, and I asked her where Itō was.

“In the office next door. You here for part-time work?” Her tone of voice was rough. When I answered in the affirmative, she said, “Did you eat before you came? If not, we have tons of rice balls here, so have as many as you like.” She pointed to a large plastic container crammed with provisions the size and shape of softballs. Answering that I had already eaten, I hurried up the steep steps to the office next door. A man with a wild beard and an armband designating him as the site manager was on the phone shouting about something. Inside, four students who had, like me, been hired for part-time work were standing there looking quite helpless. I handed the documents I had received at the Student Counseling Center to a young man in work clothes. Apparently he was Itō. He shouted to the man with the wild beard, “Hey, all five are here now.” The site manager was short but had a stocky build of about ninety kilograms. After hanging up the phone, he approached us with a large diagram in one hand.

“This construction project will repair the asphalt right in the middle of the intersection. Your job will be to stop cars in all directions. The police have shut down the traffic lights, so in effect you’ll be traffic signals. Until morning, it will be one-way traffic through the intersection. You’ll have to stop either the east and west or the north and south cars, allowing only one-way traffic to pass through.”

With perspiration dripping off his double chin, the site manager explained the job in a surprisingly calm tone. Since I had found his face so menacing, I felt a bit relieved, and cast a glance at the four other students whose names I didn’t know. All of them were staring at the diagram with tense expressions.

“If your timing is even a little off, it can cause a

major traffic jam, and then you can't get it under control again." Drawing a map of the site on a blackboard, the manager assigned us to our respective posts and explained how to direct traffic. First, you stop traffic in all directions. Next, you take care of cars that are headed east, at which time the person at that post has to signal to everyone asking if the way is clear by swinging both arms in big circles using the red flashlights. The signal that it's okay is made by swinging one flashlight left and right. Until you get that confirmation, you should never let any cars go. Once you've taken care of a certain number of eastbound cars, next you let westbound traffic pass through, observing the same points. Then when you're finished with the east-west traffic, you take care of the north-south cars." The manager went over the signals again and again, and had each of us rehearse them in turn.

"The most important one is the guy who stands in the middle of this intersection." That was my post. The manager said to me, "Bulldozers will be moving around in the intersection, and dump trucks will be coming and going one after another, so you need to use caution in directing the cars. Today, we'll be replacing the asphalt on the south half of the west side of the intersection, and so you'll have to divert all the east-west traffic through the north side. The same points hold true for the north-south traffic. If you mess up in directing them, the cars will run into dump trucks, and ..."

Having said that much, he was silent for a while, then finally added with an air of gravity, "And that's not all: You, too, could be flattened by a dump truck or a bulldozer."

"Will I be standing in the intersection all ten days?" I asked timidly.

The manager thought for a while, and then perhaps concluding that it was the most dangerous and exhausting post, said, "Let's rotate positions on a daily basis. At any rate, you'll get the hang of it tonight, and then it'll

be easier after tomorrow. But if you're standing in the middle of the intersection, you can't let your mind wander. Two or three guys have been killed or seriously injured through inattention."

I began to think that maybe I wanted to quit if the work was that dangerous. As I was just about to say so, a worker came rushing in, "Sir, we're ready to start!" We took the flashlights that had been provided for us, put on our hardhats, and were sent running to the site. After the manager and Itō yelled out commands for us to take our posts, the policeman who had arrived to turn off the traffic signals waved his arm. There was no escaping now. The traffic signal was turned off, and vehicles in all directions were halted by the orders of students doing part-time work. Just then, the bed of a dump truck raised and deposited an enormous pile of hot asphalt right next to me.

"Hey, d'ya wanna get killed?" the manager shouted at the top of his lungs. The eastbound traffic had begun to pass through, and so, dodging bulldozers and dump trucks and hissing hot mounds of asphalt, I furiously waved the red guide lights in both hands, sending the passing cars one after another in an easterly direction. Then at a different signal the westbound cars began to move, and when they had finished passing through, next the southbound, and so forth. Long lines of halted traffic began to flow at the direction of the guide lights waved about by mere students doing part-time work. Dodging bulldozers and the roughneck driving of huge dump trucks, I ran back and forth, continually waving the flashlights to show endless lines of vehicles the path through the chaos. Before an hour had passed, the smell of the asphalt and the exhaust fumes of the passing cars were making my throat sore. I seriously thought I might die if I kept at this for ten days. Streams of perspiration flowed from under my hardhat into my eyes, which I wiped with the backs of my hands. But the volume of perspiration only

increased, and so I took off the hardhat and tossed it to the side of the road. At that, Itō came running up with a furious look on his face.

“If you don’t keep your hardhat on, you’ll end up with a serious head injury. Trucks will be leaving with huge loads of the old asphalt, and if any of that falls and hits your head, it’ll be curtains!”

I hurriedly picked up my hardhat and fastened it on my head, then asked if I could go get the towel I had left in the office. Seeing my perspiration, Itō clicked his tongue and agreed. While I was away, he would direct traffic in my stead. I ran to the canteen and asked the fat woman for some water.

“There’s chilled barley tea over there that’d be better than water,” she said, taking out a teacup with a chipped rim and pouring from a large teapot. Gulping down three cups of barley tea one after another, I went to the office, got my towel, and returned to the dining area, where I drank three more cups of tea while wiping off the perspiration.

“Would you like some barley tea, too?” the woman asked. She was facing the oblong tatami room where the quilts had been left spread out and which I had thought was empty. As I wiped my face, I cast a glance toward the farthest part of the canteen where the lights had been extinguished. Someone was lying on a futon in the corner. He didn’t respond but just rolled over and groaned slightly.

“Take this tea over to him.” I took off my shoes and carried the cup to the dark corner, where an emaciated middle-aged man was sprawled out on a futon. When I placed the cup by his pillow, he opened his eyes and looked at me for a moment, then closed them without saying a word, ignoring the tea. As I was about to move away, he said something.

“Huh? What was that?” I asked.

“I want some tomatoes.” the man said in an indistinct voice.

“Tomatoes?” I relayed the man’s request to the woman in the kitchen.

“You think we’d have anything like tomatoes here now? I’ll buy some for you tomorrow,” the woman shouted to the man in the dark recess. I stuffed the towel into my back pocket and rushed back to my post.

After midnight, the traffic finally decreased. By then the students had the knack of the work down, so almost no trouble occurred from miscommunication with signals. After about three a.m. it cooled down a bit, and in any direction there were never more than about seven or eight vehicles waiting for our signals. But lots of dump trucks were still moving in and out one after another, the same as before. They’d enter the site with ferocious speed and leave the same way. Heavy machinery for digging up the old asphalt and the bulldozers collecting the rubble were moving about under blazing floodlights. The four other students were able to sit on the side of the road and rest while the traffic was stopped, but being out in the middle of the intersection, I couldn’t let my attention wander even for a moment. My legs felt leaden and the arches of my feet began to ache with a burning sensation. From the sloping path in front of the canteen the manager shouted something to me. Between the noise of the rock drills and the bulldozers, I couldn’t make out a word he was saying. Then a worker came up to me and yelled into my ear that the manager was calling me, and that he’d fill in for me. I went to the manager, who motioned for me to go inside where he pointed to a chair.

“Sit down. The guys at the other posts can rest now and then, but you’re left standing until morning. Take it easy here for a while.” Then he pulled a cigarette out of his shirt pocket. “You smoke?” I accepted the manager’s offer, and lit up. “It’s tough work, but if you stick it

out and don't quit, we'll pay you a little extra at the end."

The manager smoked too as he sipped his chilled barley tea. I peered into the back of the canteen and asked, "Is that guy sick?"

"The day before yesterday some recruiter for day laborers brought him by. He was fine then, but last night he collapsed in the middle of the road. Just when we were thinking of calling a doctor, he came to and said he'd be able to work again if he could only rest a day or two. That's why he's in bed. If he doesn't work he doesn't get paid, so it doesn't really matter as far as we're concerned, but if he's sick, he needs to see a doctor."

He added that the company couldn't pay for medical treatment for day laborers. And since he didn't belong to any company or organization, workmen's compensation wouldn't apply in his case. A lot of them don't give their real names, or conceal their ages and birthplace, and that makes it even more difficult to take care of them. The manager looked at his watch and returned to the site, reminding me to go back to my post in fifteen minutes. Several large flies were buzzing around me annoyingly, and the interior of the canteen was stifling with the stench of food and the lingering heat. I poured some barley tea into a cup and went to the man's side. This time he heard my footsteps and watched me approach with his eyes wide open.

"Won't you have some tea? You must get thirsty in this room." Without rising, the man nodded and thanked me in a weak voice, but made no move to drink the tea.

"Shouldn't you go see a doctor?" The man responded to my suggestion with a smile but just closed his eyes without saying a word. It was dark, and I couldn't see his face clearly, but I sensed that his condition was very serious. About five days before my father died, I had a premonition that he would only last

another five or six days. In the gaunt frame of the man lying on the futon there was a shadow peculiar to the sick facing their final hours.

"I'd like some tomatoes. Won't you buy some for me?" The man spoke with his eyes closed. It occurred to me that he must be from Kyushu. One of my college friends from Kyushu had a similar accent.

"The lady in the kitchen said she'd get some for you tomorrow."

"She just says that. I asked her yesterday too, but she just said she forgot and didn't buy any."

"Well then, I'll get some and bring them tomorrow."

With that, I returned to the site. The time passed quickly until six o'clock. The sky was bright before five; by six, the sun was already out and it was a bit hot. At six on the dot, the work ended and the traffic lights came on. We dragged our exhausted bodies back to the canteen. On the way, we students talked to each other for the first time.

"These next nine days are going to be hell," a student named Ōnishi muttered, addressing no one in particular.

"Then the guy who stands in the middle of the intersection is right in the center of hell," I said.

The short one, Nakatani, who was scheduled to be in the middle the following night, remarked, "It scared the hell out of me to watch you run around out there. You probably didn't notice it, but several times you were almost hit from behind by a dump truck." Since the construction was scheduled for ten days, I'd be out in the middle one more time.

Breakfast for dozens of people was ready in the canteen. After a night's work I had no appetite, but I forced down some tofu, *miso* soup

containing slices of potato, and rice with egg. Then I went to the lavatory that had been set up in front and washed my face. A young guy, probably a day laborer, told me there was a makeshift shower. Behind a barrack was an enclosure made out of tinsplate with a hose suspended into it. After shedding all my clothes, I turned the spigot and let the water wash the perspiration off my body. But my underwear, trousers, and shirt were still full of sweat and dust, and when I put them back on I felt grimmer than before. After finishing their meal, the laborers slept like logs until evening in the inner room of the canteen, where there was neither air conditioning nor even a fan.

We took the bus to the Hankyū Itami Station. From there it was nearly another two hours to my home. I was so exhausted that I wondered if I shouldn't just sleep on a bench in the station until evening. After saying good-bye to the others at Umeda, I managed to drag myself onto a car on the Osaka Loop Line and changed to the Katamachi Line at Kyōbashi station. Collapsing into the soiled seat of the ancient train car, I made a point of staring out the window at the blindingly bright sky so as not to fall asleep. It was about a half-hour ride to the station where I got off, and after making the long walk from there to our apartment, it was just before ten when I finally arrived. Entering the room I found that my mother had scrawled a note in pencil and left it on the small dining table. She told me to be sure to get plenty of sleep when I got home and to eat a good dinner before setting out for work that evening. I opened the window, changed into my pajamas, collapsed onto the futon and fell asleep with the fan on. It was five in the evening when I awoke. After using a damp towel to wipe down my still exhausted and heavy body, I got dressed and left the apartment. At the same Chinese restaurant in the subterranean mall at Umeda, I consumed the same food as the day before, and then boarded the Hankyū train.

Near Itami Station, I bought five tomatoes. As

soon as I arrived at the site, I went to the man lying in bed in the back room of the canteen. I set the tomatoes by his pillow and was about to say something when I perceived the quiet breathing of his sleep.

The work that night was far easier. I stood directing vehicles in the road extending north from the intersection. The other students had also gotten the hang of the job, and it went pretty much without a hitch. As we became relaxed around each other, a feeling of camaraderie grew among us, and we even took turns spelling the one assigned to the middle of the intersection in order to let him rest once every hour. Or one of us would steal into the canteen and, while the cook had dozed off, pilfer some rice balls to share with everyone, or secretly buy some canned drinks for the others. Several days went by like that.

It was just two days before the completion of the project. As I was in the canteen drinking barley tea as usual, the bedridden man staggered to his feet and called to me. He looked as if he could not stand without holding on to something, so I supported his arm and took him back to his futon, where I gently laid him back down. From under his pillow, the man took an envelope containing a letter and asked me if I would post it after work the next day. I thought it a simple request and, promising to do so, stuffed it in my back pocket. I glanced at the side of his pillow and noticed that all five tomatoes were still in the bag, the same five I had bought six days before. Puzzled, I asked, "You didn't eat the tomatoes?"

The man nodded weakly and, with a faint smile, took one of the tomatoes out of the bag, placed it momentarily on his chest, and stroked it with both hands.

"If you just leave them there, they'll rot." They were already overripe and beginning to lose shape. He didn't respond but, cradling the tomato on his chest, just reminded me to be sure to post the letter. I repeated my promise

as I stood up. After taking a few steps, I glanced back and saw a wistful look in his eyes, which were full of tears as he wrapped both hands firmly around the tomato. I realized that he hadn't had me buy the tomatoes out of a desire to eat them. But then why did he want them so badly? I went back and advised him to see a doctor as soon as possible.

"I don't have much longer," the man said as he turned away.

I returned to the kitchen where I drank some barley tea. I cinched the strap of my hardhat and took the letter out of my back pocket to look at it. In a childish awkward hand written with a ballpoint pen it had been addressed to a Ms. Kawamura Setsu in Kagoshima Prefecture. The sender's address was missing; only his name appeared: Emi Hiroshi. Only then did I know what his real name was. The site manager bellowed at me to get back to my post right away, so I stuffed the letter back into my pocket and rushed back to the intersection. That day it was my turn to stand in the middle of the intersection. Unlike the first day, there were fewer dump trucks going in and out, and only one bulldozer was moving about. The old surface had all been dug up and there remained only the task of laying down new asphalt. The work proceeded smoothly. The air had usually been still, but that night a cool westerly breeze was blowing, and I didn't even perspire much.

It must have been past two a.m. when I heard the siren of an ambulance approaching from the distance. We had been instructed in such cases to stop traffic in all directions and let the ambulance pass, and so we gave the appropriate signal. When the ambulance reached the middle of the intersection, it stopped. The cook waved to it from the entrance to the canteen, and Itō and the site manager came rushing out.

"He still has a pulse," the manager said to the ambulance crew, and then went back inside.

They took out a stretcher and headed for the building. It had not occurred to us that this construction site might be the destination of the approaching ambulance, and the students raced from their respective posts to where I was to discuss what to do about the halted traffic. Except for the cook, the only person in the canteen was the guy named Emi; there could be no doubt that something had happened to him. I told the four others that someone had fallen ill and that the only thing we could do was to apologize to the driver of each vehicle for the delay and explain that they would need to wait until the ambulance left. The four dispersed all at once and walked about explaining the situation to every head poked out of a window venting displeasure, asking, "What's going on?" or "Let us go already!"

The stretcher bearing Emi was loaded into the ambulance, and the site manager got in to accompany him. They set out to the north, and as soon as the halted traffic began moving again, I handed my flashlights to a nearby worker saying that I would be right back. I rushed inside where the corpulent cook was standing, staring blankly at the place where the man had been lying. I turned on the light in the room where the futon had been spread out for so long. The area was awash in blood in which were lying five rotting tomatoes.

"What happened? Hey, what happened to that guy?" I asked, grabbing the shoulder of the cook, who was backing away in horror.

"I don't know. Just as I was making rice balls I heard groaning. When I turned on the light and looked in the back, he was vomiting blood like a whale spouting."

The tomatoes in the blood spreading over the tatami looked like blood clots, as if the man had spit them up. I had to remind myself that they were indeed tomatoes. I returned to my post in the intersection, thanked the man who had stood in for me, and got back to work. I

recalled the site manager saying Emi still had a pulse and thought that he was sure to die. Perhaps he was already dead. As I was directing the passing cars with practiced gestures, his words and his attempt to hide his tears came to mind: “I don’t have that much longer.” He must have realized that the end was near.

Just then, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around to see Itō standing there. “I’ll take over here. Why don’t you go to the canteen and help out there.” He said they were burning the blood-soaked futon and pulling up some of the tatami mats to wash them. The cook was too spooked by the whole thing and refused to enter the room, so two or three workers and I were asked to burn the futon, take up the tatami mats, and hose the blood off them. As I was about to head to the canteen to do as instructed, Itō added, “He died immediately after arriving at the hospital.”

“He died?”

Itō nodded silently then motioned with his chin for me to go right away. Two trucks entered the intersection and began to dump steaming fresh asphalt to pave over the last remaining area.

We poured lamp oil on the futon and ignited it. Then we took up the tatami mats, carried them out to the vacant lot in front of the canteen and, using a hose and scrub brushes, washed off all the gore that was beginning to harden and blacken. While we were engaged in that task, the manager returned from the hospital.

“They told me to come by tomorrow morning and pick up the remains.” Muttering to no one in particular, he went to the room where the man had been lying and began collecting his belongings, which consisted only of a simple sewing kit stuffed into a small soap box, several changes of yellowing underwear, a passbook for a savings account with a balance of only eighty-six yen, and his seal. With those items in his hands, the manager stood next to me as I

was washing the tatami. He stared at the characters on the seal.

“He said his name was Egawa, but his seal says Emi,” he said, clicking his tongue. “Even if I retrieve his remains, I have no idea where his family is or where he’s from.”

Intending to mention the letter Emi had entrusted to me, I set the hose down and reached into my back pocket. I gasped as I groped around. It wasn’t there. I felt the inside of all my trouser pockets, even the small shirt pocket over my breast. The letter had fallen out someplace. I searched everywhere I had been, including the intersection that had been my post that day, but with no success. I ran back to the canteen at full speed and asked the cook if a letter had been found. Answering in the negative, she continued to make rice balls with a stiff expression such as I had never seen. Seeing how panic-stricken I was as I kept going back and forth over the same ground, the manager asked what was wrong. I checked the words that nearly came out—“a letter from Emi”—and just said, “I’ve lost a letter.”

“A letter? An important one?”

“Yes.” I was on the verge of tears. The characters for “Ms. Kawamura Setsu,” awkwardly written with a ballpoint pen, came to my mind. I took off running again, and when I got back to the place in the intersection where I had been standing not long before, I ran about scanning the ground, all the time being yelled at by bulldozer drivers. The wide, shallow hole that until not long before had been littered with excavated rubble was now neatly filled in with fresh, pitch-black asphalt onto which workers were sprinkling water. With a feeling of horror, I stared at the road and its new asphalt. The letter must have fallen out of my pocket here. I couldn’t think of any other possibility. It had been buried forever under the hot asphalt. Surely that was the case. Half-sobbing, I shouted at a bulldozer driver, “Please take up this asphalt. There’s a letter

underneath it.”

The driver shut off the engine and stared at me blankly. I clambered up to the driver’s seat and repeated my plea, the tears finally spilling over. The driver exchanged glances with Itō.

“Are you some kind of idiot? You’re asking me to take up this asphalt? It’s seven square meters. Just to redo it would take a hundred times your wages!”

“But I lost a very important letter here. I’m sure it’s under this.” Grabbing his thick muscular arm I pleaded frantically.

“Hey, Itō, this guy’s lost his marbles.” The driver lightly shook his arm free from my grasp and, starting up the engine, refused to give any more ear to my appeals.

“What’s going on here?” Hearing the commotion, the manager came up, his hefty body swinging with each step. Itō explained the situation to him as I stood there rubbing myself to calm my trembling. The manager rapped my hardhat with his slide rule and said, “You really dropped it here?”

“Yes.”

“You’d better just forget about it and stop spouting such idiocies as ‘tear up the asphalt.’ What a blockhead!” Then he said to Itō, “Emi Hiroshi seems to be his real name. That’s what appears in his savings passbook.”

“What kind of ailment was it?” Itō asked.

“They said a blood vessel in his esophagus burst. It seems that’s what happens eventually when the liver’s no good anymore.”

“So, his liver was bad?”

“The doctor said he was in the final stage of cirrhosis, and that in any case he wouldn’t have lasted much longer.”

The morning the construction was completed, all of the workers, student part-timers, and employees of the construction firm gathered in the canteen to toast the occasion with beer. Just as the manager had promised, in addition to our ten-day wages he added a gratuity of ten thousand yen for each of us, along with thanks.

“Thanks for your hard work. You can go home now. All that remains to be done here is to dismantle the canteen.”

With that, he drained the beer in his paper cup and hurried up the stairs to his office. The students I had worked with those ten days invited me to go along to Itami Station, but I stayed behind to make one more search, checking the grass by the canteen and the edge of the neatly paved intersection to see if, by some remote chance, the letter might be lying somewhere. The midsummer sun was beating down on my exhausted body. Knowing that his end was near, Emi Hiroshi had mustered his last reserve of strength and written a letter to a woman named Kawamura Setsu. I don’t know what kind of relationship they had, but what had been jotted down in those awkward characters was no doubt very important to them. I tried to recall the parts of the address other than Kagoshima Prefecture, but absolutely nothing remained in my memory. And even if I had been able to remember, how could I possibly explain to Kawamura Setsu about the letter? Long after my coworkers had left, I was still wandering around the construction site, staring alternately at the ground and the blazing morning sun.

Even after graduating from college and starting work at this advertising agency, I still have moments when, for some reason, I call to mind the figure of that man squeezing the tomato with both hands, his eyes welling up with tears. When I’m making arrangements with a sponsor, it will suddenly rise up in my mind. When I sit down in the last train at night looking at my drunken face reflected in the

window, the image of those five rotting tomatoes lying in a pool of blood will flash before my eyes. At those times, the characters for “Kagoshima Prefecture” and “Ms. Kawamura Setsu” inevitably rise like specters from somewhere deep within me. Then, as if it had been my own illness, I become lost in thought wondering what the tomatoes could possibly have meant to him and what things of importance were written in that letter. I’m convinced that even now that letter lies buried beneath the asphalt in a major intersection in Koya at Itami. It isn’t that I am repelled by the image of the five rotting tomatoes that looked like blood clots, I haven’t eaten so much as a single slice of tomato since then.

This story appears in Miyamoto Teru, *Phantom Lights* (Kurodahan Press, 2011) translated by Roger K. Thomas.

Miyamoto Teru is one of Japan’s most popular writers. A winner of the Akutagawa Prize for “Firefly River” (Hotarugawa), his work has been translated into multiple languages. His [Kinshu: Autumn Brocade](#), was also translated by Roger K. Thomas.

Roger K. Thomas is a Professor of East Asian languages and cultures and director of the program in East Asian Studies at Illinois State University. His primary area of research is early modern poetics and kokugaku.

Recommended citation: Miyamoto Teru and Roger K. Thomas, 'A Tale of Tomatoes,' The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol 9, Issue 42 No 1, October 17, 2011.