An Introduction to Arishima Takeo with an Examination and English Translation of the Short Story *Hikyōmono*

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This paper is divided into three parts. Part one is an introduction to the life, and work of the author Arishima Takeo. In defining and discussing his socialist writing, and his benevolent leanings toward the proletariat which culminated in his decision to hand over his father’s estates in Hokkaido to tenant farmers, I have aimed to examine, and appraise the short story, The Coward (*Hikyōmono*) which he wrote just prior to making that decision, in order to gauge the significance of these two coinciding episodes on the last years of his life. In part two, I have aimed to produce a polished English translation of The Coward (*Hikyōmono*). The appendix contains the original Japanese version of *Hikyōmono*.

**Part 1:**
**An Introduction to Arishima Takeo**

Arishima Takeo’s (1878-1923) life spanned both the Meiji and Taishō periods. It was during this time, characterized by rapid modernization and westernization, which produced dramatic social changes that helped to cultivate a rich ferment of creativity, where a number of artist-intellectuals became inspired to find a new direction, and expression for their voices. This new emancipated direction was in stark contrast to life before the Meiji Restoration,
the culture that evolved under the constraints of the era, and how it was expressed. This schism of old against new, would bring about intense and conflicting personal struggles that remain voiced in the expression of the art of the day.

Arishima Takeo was born in Tokyo in 1878, the eldest of seven. His father Takeshi was originally a Samurai retainer from the Shimazu (Satsuma) clan. He was brought up and educated in Samurai traditions. The Satsuma education system was designed to inculcate traditional Samurai virtues and Confucian scholarship. In Satsuma at the time military training took on a new urgency because of the importance of ‘new learning’ from the West. Having demonstrated his capabilities, and loyalty to the clan, while serving for the Satsuma forces during the Meiji Restoration, he eventually used his Satsuma connections to obtain a post in the Taxation section of the Ministry of Finance. In 1882, he was appointed head of the customs office at Yokohama, which was to become Japan’s gateway to all foreign trade. This appointment was to have far-reaching implications for his eldest son Takeo, and the younger siblings too.¹

However, before this, on 12 May 1877 Takeshi married his third wife Yamanouchi Yuki, after his two previous marriages ended in divorce. Yuki was also from a samurai family. However, she was from the Northern Honshū Nanbu clan in Morioka. In 1865, when she was eleven, Yukiko, as she became known, was trained as a maid-in-waiting to the wife of the head of the Nanbu clan, Toshihisa Akiko, daughter of the famous Tokugawa Nariaki (1800-
Yukiko resided in the women’s quarters at Morioka castle, and it was in these elegant surroundings that she was instructed in the Chinese classics, the tea ceremony, and the incense ceremony. However, as a result of the civil war, and the Nanbu clan having sided with the Shogun, and having to pay large sums of money in reparations, her tenure only lasted three years. She subsequently had to endure financial hardships until at 23, she moved to Tokyo, and married Takeo, who was twelve years her senior.

In 1882 Yokohama was a treaty port open to foreign trade and commerce. At the age of four, Arishima Takeo’s father Takeshi was appointed head of the Yokohama customs office. Western powers had changed this once small fishing port into a huge metropolis, and it was here where Arishima Takeo would spend his next ten years. Yokohama would leave a deep impression on the young Takeo. His father, a modern Meiji man, emphasized the importance of a Western education which he envisioned as a necessity for the future of an integrated Japan, and consequently, he made his son attend a foreign school staffed by foreign teachers, and he also encouraged his son to associate with foreigners, and learn Western customs. However, Takeo would also have his first encounters with Christianity, something his father failed to foresee how much of a divisive impact this would have later on in his son’s life.

Yet his home education was much more conventional, since it embraced traditional Samurai disciplines such as swordsmanship, horse riding and archery which were taught with regimental
precision and discipline. In addition, his mother maintained that the young Arishima should study from the Confucian Analects and The Book of Filial Duty too. The traditional “samurai education” advocated by his mother, and the Western education under the new Meiji era endorsed by his father, would cause him to spend his whole life trying to reconcile who he wanted to be and what direction he wanted his life to follow. An emotional conflict was inevitable, due to a clash of ideological opposites, since his Confucian upbringing could not withstand the impact from Western ideas, and began to break down as a result, and this would leave him betwixt and in-between two very different cultures.4

The Gakushūin, or the Peer’s school, was established in 1842 in Kyoto as a school for court nobles. In 1884 the school was controlled by the government under the Imperial Household Ministry, and was relocated to Tokyo. Its chief aim was to educate sons of the higher aristocracy, mainly former nobles and feudal lords. The Peer’s school had a military slant with a curriculum emphasizing military discipline and physical exercise. Takeo was enrolled in October 1887, and in education at least, his father wanted him to regard himself as an aristocrat. Then in 1888 he was appointed companion to the Crown Prince, later the Emperor Taishō, and this would bring him into contact with many prominent people, an affiliation he would sever only in his final years. However, an inner conflict would reveal itself in his writing which represented a divided personal struggle between his elite education and background, and his socialist leanings that he later
developed towards the proletariat.

The next most striking event that had an impact on Takeo was the assassination of the Minister of Education, Mori Arinori on the day of the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution in 1889. Arinori was accused by ultranationalists of imposing Western ideas on the Japanese education system to the detriment of Japanese culture and tradition. He supported the use of English, and he was also a prominent Christian. It was alleged that Arinori had failed to follow religious protocol on a visit to Ise Shrine by not removing his shoes, and pushing aside a sacred veil with his walking stick. Arishima states in his ‘chronology’ he was profoundly shocked, “At this time, I abandoned any ambition to become a naval officer, and began to feel a vague desire to try my hand at agriculture. Perhaps it was my strong sense of being a coward whenever I had to appear in public.”

Many of Takeo’s fellow Gakushūin graduates in the White Birch literary group disliked the school. He abandoned the traditional path of finishing high school, and going on to Tokyo Imperial University in order to enter the Sapporo Agricultural College. This must have been of great disappointment to his father, together with Takeo’s interest in children’s literature at a young age, something of a novelty at the time, as novels were severely prohibited, which would lead him further away from the direction he was expected to take.

Exploration in Hokkaido had only begun in the late eighteenth
century, so when Arishima Takeo arrived in Sapporo in September 1896 it was a small city with a population of only 33,710 people. It was this last untamed frontier where Arishima could develop his intellectual independence. In an essay entitled ‘Impressions of Hokkaido’, he states, “…A bleak, rough, free feeling may frighten strangers, but for those who have grown used to life, Hokkaido has a powerful fascination. When one lives there, one’s ‘self’ becomes clearer. A certain courage in the face of hardship is born.”

The Sapporo Agricultural College was established in 1872, and to raise its profile, William Smith Clark (1826-1886) was invited in 1876 to become head teacher. Clark insisted on using the Bible as a basic moral text, and together with his educational values which he set about teaching with military efficiency, since he had been a colonel in the Civil War, he had a revolutionary effect on the newly founded school.

When Arishima entered the Agricultural College, Dr Nitobe Inazō was a member of staff, and had been a graduate, trained in Clark’s methods, and became one of the first converts to Christianity. When Arishima first arrived, he lodged with the Nitobe family, since Nitobe had known Arishima’s mother since childhood in the Nanbu province, and it was this spiritually charged encounter that would oversee Arishima’s introduction to a combination of Quakerism, and Transcendentalism, through the study of Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) and his lectures on Sartor Resartus. It was only from his studies of Quakerism that he would be able to reconcile Christianity with Oriental thought.
because of the belief in the existence of an inner power not our own.

However, as one scholar Sasabuchi Tomoichi\(^8\) argues, Arishima failed to reconcile different interpretations of Christianity that eventually led to his apostasy. In Quakerism, the notion that ‘all sin is forgiven’, is seen as a contradiction when contrasted with the importance of sin and guilt, concerning the danger of eternal damnation. Yet, Christianity led him to a new-found sense of independence. In 1899 Arishima’s views on politics and international affairs became more radical, condemning British and American imperialism in South Africa and the Philippines. His growing concern for the plight of the working classes is also evident. He highlights the slum problem and working conditions referring to the silk worker’s song at Suwa Shinshū, where they plea for recognition as human beings.\(^9\)

In July of 1897, Arishima finished his first year of studies, and it was later that year that his father decided to purchase extensive agricultural estates in Hokkaido, in Makkaribetsu, south-west of Sapporo, later known as the Kaributo estates. This was not only to guarantee material security for the Arishima family’s future, but it was also a practical move in view of Takeo’s study of agriculture.

In July 1901, after submitting his graduation thesis, ‘Agricultural Policy at the Beginning of the Kamakura Bakufu’, Arishima graduated from the Sapporo Agricultural College as a Bachelor of
Agricultural Studies. Christianity and the Sapporo Agricultural College helped Arishima to define his sense of self. Clark established an educational tradition placing an importance on moral autonomy and self-respect. It forged a bond between the Western obsession with the self, and the Meiji search for new moral values that replaced those of a previous authoritarian age. However, his newly defined self was to become a radicalized and alienated self, and this intellectual quest would have important implications for his view of society.

By 1903, Arishima had his first encounter with socialism which would cause him to be critical of political change in Japan that he thought was for the worse. He was immensely impressed by the socialist author, Kinoshita Naoe (1868-1937). Kinoshita, also a lawyer, was in addition a convert to Christianity, and he was an ardent advocate of social causes such as, universal suffrage, and abolishing licensed prostitution, and he was also outspoken in his criticism of the devastating pollution that resulted from the Ashio copper mine. In a speech on the Imperial Rescript on Education, that was terminated by the monitoring police, he wrote:

‘Imperial Rescripts have always been a source of trouble, and contention. They are not always what the Emperor thinks—I am sure of that—they are meaningless claptrap of ambitious people, cheap politicians, and smug-faced Taoists.’

By questioning the validity of the Imperial Rescripts, the implication is to challenge the validity of the Meiji state’s
authority. In this new era the people were beginning to find their voices that began to challenge an authority that was once beyond question, and now they demanded to be heard.

Arishima was determined to leave Japan, having no interest in using his connections to become a member of the ruling classes, something that would disappoint his father, a relationship already damaged with his conversion to Christianity. Despite being offered to be tutor to the Crown Prince, and secretary to Kodama Gentaro (1852-1906), the then Minister for Home Affairs, the Army and Education. On 25 August 1903, Arishima sailed from Yokohama on the *Iyo* Maru bound for Seattle. He wrote:

‘In the summer of 1903 I set out on a journey to the United States. The main reason behind my trip was my desire to be freed from all those circumstances in which I had been entangled until then...’¹¹

However, if Japan had become too repressive for Arishima, the United States would also be a disappointment, especially in regard to Christianity. Arishima’s disillusionment with the United States emanated from the attitude of Americans towards the Russo-Japanese war. The church itself, seemed hypocritical, tainted by an imperfect society which surrounded it. His experience in America would lay the foundations of Arishima’s future apostasy. The hypocrisy he experienced at this time in America made him question his belief in Christianity itself, not the Christian nation. However, he regained his faith to some extent through writers like Tolstoy, who argued against the unnecessary brutality of war.
This would prelude Arishima’s deepening interest in socialism, emphasizing his anti-war stance, and his harsh views of the state. Before moving onto Europe, Arishima took up residence in Washington and at the Library of Congress steeped himself in writers, Ibsen, Tolstoy and Kroptotkin, and it was here he wrote the short story, *Rust-Chippers*, his first attempt at fiction. It was Arishima’s deepening interest in socialism that was the impetus for *Rust-Chippers*, a story that anticipates the coming revolution in Russia, and highlights the plight of the miserable conditions of the workers.¹²

Arishima boarded a German passenger ship on 1 September 1906 bound for Europe. His meeting with Prince Peter Alexeyevich Kropotkin (1842-1921), geographer, anarchist, and social reformer, was the foremost event of his stay in London. It was here that they discussed Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid* (1902), which would later be the basis for his decision to give up his family’s estates in Hokkaido, and turn ownership of them to tenant farmers.

On 5 December 1907, Arishima accepted an English teaching post at the Sapporo Agricultural College. However, his involvement in socialism after his return from abroad led to a number of problems that culminated in the Hokkaido authorities warning the principle that Professor Arishima was a dangerous person. In *Death, and Its Course* (*Shi to Sono Zengo*), written in 1917, the main character, a husband who resembles Arishima in many respects, is put under surveillance by the police as a suspected socialist. This is testament to the persecution prevalent in Japan at the time.
Arishima’s relationship with his father was one of constant strain, and parental pressure to marry would add to the burden to conform to his parents’ wishes.

‘Father repeated his sermon, that I should not desire to select my bride exclusively according to the Western custom, and must content myself with a kind of lottery business.’

Yasuko (1889-1927), 19 years of age and a college graduate, was the third candidate put forward as a match. She was proposed by an old friend of Arishima’s father, despite being 11 years his junior. Initially, Arishima’s opinion of Yasuko was that she was childlike, and immature, but because she was undefiled and had a loving heart, and although she was not aesthetic, he thought her tenderness could fill its place. However, he soon grew tired of her straight-forward nature, and he began to complain of her not having opinions of her own, so it soon became clear that she could not satisfy him intellectually. He thought about training her to cultivate more will, so that she might learn to judge things from her own viewpoint. Ultimately, the relationship had transformed itself from one of intense infatuation to teacher and student, and once they were married, and after she gave birth to their eldest son in 1911, their marriage continued to deteriorate to such an extent that they both eventually considered divorce.

However, it was his American experience that initially weakened his faith, and these doubts lay hidden or were suppressed, until the disappointment and frustration in his marriage which left
him totally disillusioned with Christian love, that would mark the beginning of his apostasy. Many Japanese scholars maintain that Arishima always had reservations about certain cardinal tenants of the Christian faith. His chief reservation they argue concerns the doctrine of atonement, and the paradox of free will and obedience. If man has free will then is he not responsible for sin? However, his failure to comprehend the doctrine of saving grace is implicit throughout, and eventually the central paradox of the Christian faith proved too much for him to bear.15

In September 1914, Yasuko contracted tuberculosis, and after unsuccessful treatment she finally died two years later, in August 1916. In December of the same year, Arishima’s father died of stomach cancer which took the family by surprise, since the diagnosis was made one month before. In a short space of time, the two people, father and wife, who were obstructing his future career as a writer, were taken away from his life, and although he mourned them dearly, those feelings would be mingled with a vague sense of freedom.

It was at this time in his life, but not for the first time, that he again contemplated suicide which held a strong romantic attraction for him. Socialist sympathies made it increasingly difficult for him to accept the establishment role of a land proprietor that his father had thrust upon him. Arishima’s struggle with his father is representative of many artists in Taishō Japan. His struggle with his father, a successful business man and government official, was similar in many respects to other members of the Shirakaba group,
such as Shiga Naoya. Although, he lived on wealth accumulated by his father, Arishima regarded his father as a greedy insensitive philistine. However, Arishima could not escape his aristocratic heritage, and he came to believe that unless one lived the life of a worker, one could not appreciate or understand what the life of the workers was like. Therefore his art, he thought would end up appealing to those outside of the proletariat. Although he chose to reject his family’s wealth, and to live by the fruit of literary labors, he was never able to repudiate his aristocratic heritage. He would never be able to reconcile the burden of this dilemma as a bourgeois intellectual, and escape his class origins.16

In a similar vein to Rust-Chippers, The Descendants of Cain, first published in 1917, is a bitter story of peasant misery, and exploitation in the harsh winter climate of Hokkaido. It was an expression of sympathy for the lot of the tenant farmer. Those farmers who worked on the desolate reclaimed lands in Hokkaido, were always facing difficulties, and this moved him some three years later to make a gift of the lands which he had inherited from his father to the tenant farmers. Then in 1922, he published Manifesto, in which he announced he would turn over his estates to those who actually farmed the land.17

Four days before Arishima wrote the short story, The Coward (卑怯者) in October 1920, he wrote to Asuke Soichi, a close friend, informing him of his intention to hand over his estates in Hokkaido to tenant farmers. The closeness in timing between Arishima’s decision and the composition of The Coward illustrates
a crucial connection, and its significance cannot be ignored. Arishima, unlike the cowardice of the protagonist in his story, was prepared to become involved in the struggle of the proletariat, even though he is not one of them. It is at this time in his life that he attempts to make a positive moral choice, dictated to by his conscience, despite the strain that this decision would put on his family’s financial position and social status.¹⁸

The allegoric story, told in a third person narrative, is full of elaborate metaphors and symbolism, which is something that gave Arishima his reputation for writing largely in a foreign style. The story itself, involves an incident concerning a child, barely six years in age, who is most probably a poor street urchin, a milkcart, and an unnamed protagonist, who witnesses the unfortunate events that unfold for the child, and is tormented by a sense of moral responsibility, and guilt at his cowardice for not coming to the aid of the poor, helpless child.

The protagonist is hurrying through the busy streets of Yamanote, Tokyo, crowded with children, on an autumnal evening. A short distance from his destination, the protagonist, notices a solitary child, whose companions are playing across the street, and as he walks closer, he sees the child’s legs between the shafts supporting a milkcart which is on an incline. After passing nearby the cart he is alerted by the sound of a latch being loosened, and he hears the front door which the child is leaning against, click open. In the next scene, the child tries to keep the door shut by pushing against it, but his strength is insufficient, and milk bottles
cascade out, smashing on the road, and splattering the child with milk, until the entire cargo of bottles lie broken on the road.

The child at first attempts to run away, but hasn’t the courage to do so, and stays only to be jeered by his companions. The crowd that congregates around him automatically assumes his guilt, and glare at him with looks of cruel condemnation. The protagonist thinks of remonstrating with the crowd, in defense of the child, by insisting it was an accident, but keeps silent. The milkman, a rough looking character arrives, and is of course furious at what has transpired, but the protagonist is powerless to save the child from a thrashing, saying ‘forgive me, forgive me’, as he hastens away as fast as he can, wrestling with his conscience.

If this is what transpires in this rather shocking and miserable tale, then what can we really read into Arishima thinking at the time? In the autobiographical and confessional genre, one assumes there is a need by the author to probe the self, and it is likely, in this case, that the protagonist in the story, reflects Arishima in some way. Arishima lived his life torn between two cultures that were irreconcilable, and as a consequence, not only was Arishima, the author himself divided, but so was the nature of his work. His fiction is therefore capable of being explored from two very different angles, West and East, mirroring the divisiveness he struggles to come to terms with, from his Western education, and conventional upbringing at home, to his conversion to Christianity, and his later apostasy.¹⁹

The protagonist appears fervently trying to reach his
destination, without anything good to say about the unruly children, who are constantly under his feet and in his way, yet sympathy towards the plight of a lone child, a symbol of the crusade for justice of the condemned, is to be the main focus of the story. The behavior of the other children is on a par with the adults’, if not worse. This is his view of society, and there is no respecting the self, as an individual, and nor is it conceivable to stand up against the group. In the East, the group must win, and as the protagonist, he is forced to not get involved, since we can only surmise that there is a risk of some kind of danger to do otherwise. Ironically, it is not shame, synonymous with the culture of the Orient, that he feels, but Western notions of sin and guilt, by describing his cowardice as morally unconscionable.

It is as if the protagonist is in a dream while describing the first part of the incident, since he seems intoxicated by his own curiosity which is aroused by a situation full of tension and suspense. It is only when he gauges the severity of the situation that his Western sense of self is awakened, and he begins to feel terribly guilty about what he thinks he should, at the least, try to prevent. The child too, is unable to prevent the disaster, despite his valiant efforts, and is overpowered and outnumbered by the milk bottles, as he is by the group. Both the author and victim, who seem to be separated by social class, are powerless to prevent an imminent catastrophe. For Arishima that catastrophe would result in hopeless despair which may have been a factor in causing him to end his life, just three years later.

The milk bottles begin to take on a power of their own, and
with furious intensity, they strike the child, almost as if it is divine punishment. In the years following the 1920's, divinity would soon play a pivotal role in controlling the masses, and Japan’s political direction which would crush the Taishō dream of emancipation in favor of strict state control. It seems Arishima is pessimistic towards the direction society has taken. In the story the masses are hypnotized by their fascination for destruction, and even the astonishing cacophony from the sound of breaking glass cannot awaken them from blindly following one another in condemning the poor child. The devilish exhilaration they feel at observing the destruction, soon turns to cruelty. They see the child as having to be sacrificed to ease the frustration they feel as a result of their miserable and squalid lives. The protagonist is beginning to feel more and more agitated and alienated, as he realizes the child is going to suffer, and the guilt he feels for the sin of not intervening, makes him beg for forgiveness in an attempt to absolve his guilt, in exactly the manner his Western education has taught him.

Arishima's persuasions clearly identify with the red of socialism, and the poisonous red writing found on the box in the milkcart, indicates his cynicism of how socialism has been packaged and produced by those outside the proletariat, without successfully liberating or enlightening the working class. He is equally disillusioned and cynical towards the blotted-over blue of capitalism, exacerbating the divide between rich and poor. The pure white milk cannot remedy the sickly state of Japanese society, or invigorate it, only the people themselves can, as Arishima states, helping the proletariat begins from within, and
neither the author, nor the protagonist, seem to identify with the social class of whom they are describing. Even the delivery boy cannot escape his origins of social class, despite his efforts to try to better himself with his studies, because of his “pure working class skin”, just as Arishima cannot escape his privileged heritage.

The child meanwhile tries to cover up what has happened, but it is a fait accompli, and in the next moment he accepts his fate, trembling he cannot cry, as if his will is not his own. It is as if he experiences some kind of enlightenment, in the manner of the Buddhist notion of Satori that makes him aware of the true nature of this broken-down society. The onlookers taunt and denounce the child to try to make him lose his resolve which is reminiscent of a sacrifice, in the manner of the story of Christianity. The story shows the author is betwixt and between two cultures. The furious milkman, a symbol of indiscriminate punishment of the Meiji state, arrives to mete out retribution, even “knocking two or three children over in the process”. The downtrodden working class appear to have no rights whatsoever, and are treated with contempt.

It is clear, nobody wants to get involved to save the child which would be too troublesome, and even dangerous, and there is certainly no compassion felt by the onlookers. This is what society has become. In a last gasp effort at mustering courage, the protagonist thinks of blistering a verbal attack to vindicate the child, but he realizes he is a part of that society, and is powerless to remonstrate with the group. Almost as if his body has a
power of its own, he moves further and further from the scene, directionless, and disillusioned. The nihilistic conclusion can only represent the protagonist’s inner feelings of hopeless despair of a society in peril.

On the morning of 9 June 1923 Arishima committed suicide\(^{20}\) with the famous beauty Hatano Akiko at his villa in Karuizawa. Hatano Akiko, a journalist on the magazine Central Review (\textit{Fujin Korōn}), had a reputation as a great beauty and a feminist intellectual. At the time, there was much controversy and recrimination in the aftermath of what seemed an impulsive love suicide that shook the intellectual foundations of Taishō Japan, in an age of once shining idealism and optimism, when Japan began to open its doors to the outside world and embrace new ideals and ideas. It is clear however, that at many times in Arishima’s life he contemplated suicide, and his unattainable idealism and beliefs may have been an intractable problem. How much was his decision motivated by deep psychological needs, since he exhibited many signs of a manic depressive, or the self-conscious need to act in the manner of a literary hero? We can only guess at the answer, nonetheless, Arishima will always be remembered as an immensely appealing and intriguing figure, whose brand of fiction made a brave and insightful statement on the imperfections of a society in transformation, and as such he deserves his place in the history of Japan’s literary canon.
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A lone banner cloud floated on the horizon across a clear blue evening sky, lit up serenely by a pink setting sun. Autumn had begun in Yamanote town.

He hurried along with single-minded determination, while small groups of children irritatingly hustled and bustled as they came and went. What little time there was before supper was precious, as darkness grew quickly under the setting sun. The children flew fluttering amongst the passersby, paying them no heed, like a squawking legion of bats. He couldn't count how many times it made his body flail forward from having to break his momentum to prevent himself tripping forward when he came to a sudden halt. The street urchins wouldn't get out of his way, and neither would they even give him the time of day. This made his footsteps all the more inhibited, while his mind became distracted from the children pressing upon him. He particularly detested this sort of self-interested and self-gratifying treatment. In a maelstrom of unruly children, he literally weaved his way as he walked, anxiously hurrying along.

When he came from one house to another he was headed for, it was with as much effort as if he had come from another town. Quite suddenly, he came upon a place that he thought was quiet, and when he looked around for a moment, he noticed by chance, a group of children nebulously entwined. The children here, numbered about twenty boys and girls in all. This group, were not running around, but were chatting amongst themselves, in a single
lump beside a hedge at the side of the road. They were quietly absorbed in a game. He gave them a long lingering look as he passed by, but none of them turned in his direction, or gave him any attention. He felt grateful that they weren’t bothering him, as he hurried ahead, walking on the toes of his Japanese sandals on the hardened surface of a road that had been sprayed with water to keep it cool.

There was a milkcart parked in front of a lattice door of a bungalow diagonally opposite to where the children were playing. His eye was drawn to the side of a box blotted over with pale blue paint, where “Invigorating Milk Company” had been written in poisonous looking red writing. However, despite being in a hurry, he allowed himself sufficient time to glance over his shoulder for a moment to give the box with poisonous red writing another glance. At the same time, he thought it looked as if a child’s feet were resting against the box at the rear between the milkcart’s shafts.

However, thinking nothing of it, he quickened his step, and immediately returned his gaze forward focusing on the next house in his direction. About four or five minutes later, he heard the kind of sound made by the jerk of a shifting latch, so he hastily glanced over his shoulder once more. Instinctively, he stopped dead in his tracks, disbelieving what he had just observed.

In two or three minutes, from the instant he came to a halt, the whole story of this interminable commotion would all be very quickly clear to him, although at first he hadn’t really observed what was happening. When he walked past the milkcart, all that could be seen was the child’s legs resting against the front door...
between the two shafts, and this child was definitely no different from the other children who were usually horribly mischievous, discourteous and sullenly introverted.

This child, who was isolated from the pack of children playing in the group, was holding his body against the milkcart, staring vacantly at the children across the road, who looked like they were enjoying themselves. All by himself, and perhaps feeling hungry as it would soon be time for dinner, the child inadvertently lifted his bottom from the milkcart and was about to stand up. In that moment, the latch of the front door holding the milk boxes inopportune came unfastened, causing the child to press his back against the weight of the door. The child turned around in surprise, and with small hands strained to thrust the opened door closed by pushing it with all his might. That was the very instant where he had seen the child hold the door closed with his feet.

The children were barely six years old, and were dressed in navy-blue, unlined short-sleeved summer kimonos, that were dirt-stained and had lost their creases, so they looked thin and drafty. The sight of the child propping himself up against the door, and leaning against it, his teeth clenched, his face bedraggled, stained and inflamed was ridiculous to him. At first he gazed with mild curiosity that arose his interest.

The door looked as if it was being pushed open by a whole mass of milk bottles, that were placed on three tier movable shelves which had been held inside by the weight of the door, and all of the boxes on an incline containing the milk bottles all fell out at once. The child earnestly put all his might into pushing the door back. It was interminably bad enough having no choice
but to ask for help, while nobody saw, or noticed the need to establish a cause for the accident that made his spirits sink. The boy’s expression was one of a child before bursting into tears, and this momentary situation, full of suspense, continued for half a minute. However the child’s strength was no match for the very heavy door. The way this was going, he could not help thinking something colossal was about to happen.

His mild curiosity began to waver, and in retrospect, he thought about helping the child shut the door, but by that time the milk bottles lay scattered and rolling all over the place. When they heard the shattering sound of breaking glass, faces protruded out of windows from inside the closest houses, and the children who had been coming and going, all looked in the direction of the incident to see what had happened. The two of them, both the child and the man who saw everything, were aware of the onlookers’ inquisitive eyes, making fun of the situation which didn’t help.

If he had turned those thoughts of coming to the child’s aid into actions, however remotely feasible those musings were, it would have been a good opportunity to offer help, without hesitation or reserve, because the door was already ajar, though by only several inches. No sooner than the thoughts had crossed his mind, the glass milk bottles relentlessly, one after the other, as if they were living things that aimed for the space in between the gaping door, began to roll out.

Falling to the ground with a clanking and clanging crash, more and more bottles fell on top of those already on the ground making a shattering cacophony of bottles breaking, bursting open,
and rolling all over the place. He observed the child with all the
strength he possessed try with effort and conviction, and begin
to lose his composure because of the nature of this awkward
situation. The child put remarkable power into thrusting out
his hands, so that his body was positioned forward to bear the
weight of the door. However, this would be the cause of his
failure. It was because of the child’s posture which broke down
so wretchedly, that in an instant the door stood half open, and it
was at this point that the milk bottles eventually began to spill
out. As the milk bottles fell to the ground, they cascaded furiously
striking the child from the chest downwards. The white liquid
flowed, spreading over the ground, and over the outer folds of the
child’s kimono.

After that happened the child’s disposition changed once
again. Onlookers stared with nothing more than amusement as
milk bottles clanked and clanged, crashing ceaselessly, like the
cascading flow of a waterfall, and without realizing it, any feelings
of empathy they had vanished for the child who was in a position
of isolation. In fact, the chaotic cacophony and motion induced in
them a devilish exhilaration. Destruction is something that people
embrace with a bizarre fascination. A trivial spectacle like this
would hold nothing but the power of soaring fascination. The
more furious it became, and soon every single bottle lay scattered
on the ground, smashed to smithereens.

Sure enough it happened. The front door opened with a click
revealing a large mouth. Simultaneously, the three tier shelf
slipped out lengthways to the ground, like a protruding tongue.
The milk bottles were wearily loaded on the shelves which became
a pile that spread out on the ground, and as they broke and shattered they made more of an alarming sound than you would think.

The sound as one might expect even startled him. He glanced at the children, who dashed recklessly to the truck from ten or twelve yards away. Children further away dashed about convinced they should seek sanctuary inside their house, even before the frightening sound reached them, but there was definitely no escape.

He looked back in the direction of the milkcart, and in that instant he stared wide-eyed at the sea of milk and mountain of bottles that suddenly appeared over the ground. The collective clamor created by the group of children drew a crowd of people from over the other side of the street, and as one might expect, there wasn’t a single sole who didn’t jump with astonishment. Children about to flee came to a dead stop, cowering with fear after hearing the shrill sound from afar. Perhaps they held the notion that there was nowhere to hide.

Once again, by some means or another, the child attempted to gloss over the blunder by dashing to the front of the milkcart in a half run, and there he came to a halt without a word. He turned back to look over at the pile of bottles, and hesitantly, he glanced around goggle-eyed at the other children. Even though he doubled back, he still didn’t have the faintest idea of what to do for the child.

A crowd of children gathered, making a wide circle surrounding the solitary child. The children’s faces betrayed expressions of unreserved cruelty for the isolated child, as only children can.
For a good while they exchanged something amongst themselves before one of them shouted, “He’s to blame”, “He’s the culprit”, in the tone of a person denouncing someone. The children continued shouting at the top of their lungs, their spiteful voices in unison, “He’s to blame. That boy is the culprit. It wasn’t us that did it.” Moreover, the voices of this inquisition gradually grew more and more impassioned, and in this town at dusk, the agitated and rambunctious atmosphere masked the hot-tempered shouting voices.

After some moments the hesitant child finally let himself be dragged over to where the milkcart stood. It looked as if the child had resigned himself to his fate as there was no way to escape. With a heavy heart and without a tear, he stood up straight, while each and every one of those around him stared maliciously, and one by one each child streamed close to cruelly eye him being flogged. This minor transgression for a six year old child would undoubtedly be unimaginably harsh. The child unwittingly brought the back of his hands to his eyes, yet still the tears wouldn’t come, even though he began to tremble violently.

He stood there rooted to the spot, and even his heart froze. But he felt like he couldn’t bear to keep silent anymore. He was unconscious of the power he put into his shoulders all the way to his hands, and swallowing, he gulped heavily. He compared the two of them; the dismayed face of the milkman, and, the pitiful child. Even the adults came running out from the nearby neighborhood, yet it seemed no one even attempted to consider what to do about the incident, as to become involved seemed far
too troublesome. He became more and more exasperated as he became aware of the child’s plight. All of a sudden the milkman rushed in, and the people closest too, striking the child wherever their hands fell. He stood there totally dumbfounded and astonished at the compassionless faces of adults and children.

“Fools! You lot are wooden dummies! Cowards! Just because children are often mischievous, you think this child was this time? Could this child have done this mischief, or not? Think about it? It’s pitiful. Mistakes come from spur of the moment impulses. I just saw it all, from beginning to end. It’s absurd! Call the delivery company owner!”

He wanted to mount a blistering verbal attack without reserve. He stood up straight, pale faced, and arms quivering, hesitating he was almost on the verge of jumping in. “Hey step aside!” said the delivery boy who you would not have thought was moonlighting as a student because of his pure working class skin. The milkman had pushed his way through the crowd, knocking two or three children over in the process.

He was conscious of the distress he felt at the nonsensical commotion that had occurred. As he suspected, the milkman was truly enraged. The crowd had triumphant looks on their faces when they pointed out the child, who although shaken could not cry. The milkman grabbed the child by the scruff of the neck, and rouged him around, since the child had no power of resistance, but to yield to the milkman’s anger. The child, all of a sudden with a desperate cry, like it was his last gasp, burst out crying. The crowd of people who gathered around the child seemed in jubilant spirits, as they watched the spectacle. He had to intervene.
Intervening for the sake of the child, he somehow had to say something to appease the milkman.

On the contrary, he couldn’t bear to watch any more as the situation became a solemn show. He involuntarily averted his gaze. And simultaneously, despairingly his power drained away, and hurriedly, he left and walked off down a deserted street. Yet from the bottom of his heart, he repeatedly asked for forgiveness. “Please forgive me, please forgive me” he said over and over again, putting his hands together in supplication. He walked straight past the house he should have gone to without even noticing. Although, he felt there would have been only one way to come to the aid of the child, without a single reason, he had rushed off at a furious pace, panting and puffing as he walked. His intense fit of rage brought about by this incident persisted. “Fool! Coward! This is what I am. If I was a man, I’d hurry straight back there. Only I can vindicate that child can’t I? So, why don’t I go back there?”

And so he went on admonishing himself. Despite the fact, he continued walking in the same direction. And at that very moment the child was probably being slapped with adult hands, beaten and thrown around, but without knowing he closed his eyes, and clenched his teeth with a grimace. He paid no mind to the people coming and going. Folding his arms in a tight embrace high across his chest, his body almost stumbling forward with a leaning gait, he felt like he wanted to cry, his path undecided, he moved farther and farther away from the pitiful child.
卑怯者
有島武郎

青黄ろく澄み渡った夕空の地平近い所に、一つ浮いた旗雲には、入り日の桃色が静かに照り映えていた。山の手町の秋のはじめ。

ひた急ぎに急ぐ彼には、往来を飛びまわる子供たちの群れが小うるさかった。夕闇前のかずかな時間を惜しんで、釣り客としに暮れてゆく日ざしの下を、彼らはわめきたてる蝙蝠の群れのように、ひらひらと通行人にかけかみて多く飛び立ちがっていた。まとめに突かかって来る勢いをはずすために、彼は急に歩をとどめねばならなかったので、幾度も思わず上体を前に泳がせた。子供は、よけてもらったのを感じしない風で、彼の方には見向きもせず、追って来る子供にばかり気を取られながら、彼の足許から遠ざかって行った。そのことごとく利己的な、自分ばかりいなうがままな仕打ちが、その時の彼にはことさら憎々しく思えた。彼はこうしたやんちゃ者の渦巻の間を、言葉どおりに縫うように歩きながら、しきりに急いだ。

眼ざして来た家から一町ほどの手前まで来た時、彼はふと自分の周囲にもやもやとかみつくような子供たちの群れから、すかすかと静かな所に步み出たように思って、あたりを見廻してみた。そこにも子供たちは男女を合わせて二十人くらいはいるに違いないのだった。だがその二十人ほどは道側の生垣のほとりに一塊りになって、何かしゃべりながらも飛びまわることはしていなかった。興味の深く静かな遊戯にふけているのであろう。彼がそのそばをじろじろ見やりながら通って行っても、誰一人振り向いて彼に注意するような子供はなかった。彼はそれで少し救われたような心持ちになって、草履の爪さきを、上皮だけ取水でうんざりした堅い道に突かす突っかけ先を急いだ。

子供たちの群れからはすかいにあたる向こう側で、格子戸立ての平家の軒さきに、牛乳の配達車が一台置いてあった。水色のペンキで塗りつぶした箱の横腹に、「精乳社」と赤々と書いてあるのが眼を釘いたので、
彼は急ぎながらも、毒々しい箱の字を少し振り返り気味にまでなって読むほどの余裕をその車に与えた。その時車の柵棒の間から後ろ向きに箱に倚りかかっているらしい子供の脚を見たように思った。

彼がしかしだすぐに顔を前に戻して、眼ざしている家の方を見やりながら歩みを早めたのはむろんのことだった。そしてそこから四、五間も来たかと思うところ、がたんとかげがねのはずれるような音を聞いたので、急ぎながらもう一度後を振り返って見。しかしそこに彼は不意な出来事を見いだして思わず足をとめてしまった。

その前後二、三分の間にさくらがして騒ぎの一伍一付を彼はいつも見落とさずに観察していたわけではなかったけれども、立ち停った瞬間からすぐにすべてが理解できた。配達車のそばを通ぎた時、柵棒の間に、前扉に倚りかかって、彼の眼に脚だけを見せていた子供は、ふだんから悪戯が激しいとか、愛子がないとか、引っ込み思案であるとか、ほかの子供たちから隔てをおかれていた子に違いない。その時もその子供だけは遊びの仲間からはじれて、配達車に身をもたせながら、つくねんと皆んなが道の向こう側でおもしろそうに遊んでいるのを眺めていたのだろう。一人坊ちになるとそろそろ腹のすいたのを感じだしでもしたか、その子供は何の気なしに車から尻を浮かして立ち上がろうとしたのだ。その拍子に牛乳箱の前扉のかけがねが折り悪しくもはずれたので、子供は背中から扉の重みで押さえつけられそうになった。驚いて振り返って、聞きかかったその扉を押し戻そうと、小さな手を突っ張って力んでみたのだ。彼が足を停めた時はちょうどその瞬間だった。ようよう六つぐらいの子供で、着物も垢じめて折り目のなくなった緋色の単衣で、それを薄寒そうに裾短に着ていた。薄ぎたなくよせられた顔に充血させて、口を食いしばって、倚りかかることに前扉に憑たれている様子が彼には笑止に見えた。彼は始めのうちに軽い好奇心にそそられてそれを見眺めていた。

扉の後には牛乳の瓶がしだたましまってあって、抜きさしのできる二段の棚の上に乗せられたその瓶が、傾斜になった箱を一気にすべり落ちよう
とするので、扉はことのほかの重みに押されているらしい。それを押し返そうとする子供は本当に一生懸命だった。人に救いを求めることすらし得ないほど恐ろしいことが次々と上がったのを、誰も見ないうちに気がつかないうちに始末しなければならないと、気も心も顛倒しているらしかった。
泣きだす前のようならその子供の顔、……こうした suspense の状態が物の三十秒も続けられたろうか。

けれども子供の力はとても扉の重みに打ち勝てるようなものではなかった。ああしているとやがておお事になると彼は思わずにいたいわけになかった。単なる好奇心が少しごらつきして、後戻りしてその子供のために扉をしめる手伝いをしてようからとふと思ってみたが、あすこまで行くうちには牛乳瓶がもうごころごろと転げ出しているだろう。その音を聞きつけず、往来の子供たちはもとより、向こう三軒隣の窓の中から人々が顔を突き出して何事が起こったかどこかを見る時、あの子供と二人で皆んなの好奇心がなぶられるのもありがたい役割ではないと気づかたりして、思ったとおりを実行に移すにはまだ距離のある考えをしていたが、その時分には扉はもう遠慮会釈もなく三、四寸がた開いてしまっていた。と思う間もなく牛乳のガラス瓶があとからあとから生き物のように隙を眼がけてごろげ出しはじめた。それが地面に響きを立てて落ちると、落ちた上に落ちて来るほかの瓶がまたからながらんと音を立てて、破れたり、はじめたり、転がったりした。子供は……それまでは自分の力にある自信を持って努力していたように見えていたが……こういうのはめになるとかっ
とあわてて始めて、突っ張っていた手にひとりわ力をこめるために、体を前の方が持って行こうとした。しかしそれが失敗の因だった。そんなことをやったおかげで子供の姿勢はみじめにも崩れて、扉はたちまち半分が開いてしまった。牛乳瓶をここを先途とこばれ出た。そして子供の胸から下をめった打ちに打っては地面に落ちた。子供の上前にも地面にも白い液体が流れ拡がった。
こうなると彼の心持ちはまた変わっていた。子供の無援な立場を懸んで
やる心もいつの間にか消え失せて、牛乳瓶がらりがらりとめどなく澹
のように流れ落ちるのをただおもしろいものに眺めやった。実際そこに惹
起（じゃっき）された運動といい、音響といい、ある悪魔的な痛快さを持っ
ていた。破壊ということに対して人間の抱いている奇怪な興味。小さいな
がらその光景は、そうした興味をそそり立てるだけの力をもっていた。もっ
と激しく、ありたけの瓶が一度に地面に散らばり出て、ある限りが粉微
塵になりでもすれば……

はたしてそれが来た。前扉はばくんと大きく口を開いてしまった。同時に
三段の棚が、吐き出された舌のように、長々と地面にずり出した。そ
してそれらの棚の上にうんざりと積んできた牛乳瓶は、思ったよりもけ
たましい音を立てて、壊れたり砕けたりしながら山盛りになって地面に
散らばった。

その物音には彼もさすがにぎっとしたくらいだった。子供はと見ると、
もう車から七、八間のところを無二無三に駆けていた。他人の耳にはこの
恐ろしい物音が届かないうちに、自分の家に逃げ込んでしまおうと思い込
んでいるようにその子供は走っていた。しかしそんなことのできるはずが
ない。彼が、突然地面の上に現われ出た瓶の山と乳の海に目を見張った
瞬間に、道の向こう側の人塀を作っておめぎ合っていた子供たちの群れは、
一人残らず飛び上がってばかりに驚いて、配達車の方を振り向いていた。
逃げかけていた子供は、自分の後に聞こえたたましい物音に、すくみ
上がったようになって立ち停った。もう逃げ隠れはできないと観念したの
だろう。そしてもう一度なんとかして自分の失敗を縫縫する試みでもしよ
うと思っていたのか、小作りに車の手前まで駆けて来て、そこに黙ったまま立
ち停った。そしてきょときょとほかの子供たちを見やってから、当惑し
切ったように瓶の積み重なりを顧みた。取って返しはしたものの、どうし
ていいのかその子供には皆目見当がつかないので、と彼は思った。

群がり集まって来た子供たちは遠巻きにその一人の子供を取り巻いた。
すべての子供の顔には子供に特有な無遠慮な残酷な表情が現われた。そし
てややしばらく互いに何か言い交していたが、その中の一人が、「わーるいな、わるいな」

とさも人の非を鳴らすのだという調子で叫びだした。それに続いて、「わーるいな、わるいな。誰かさんはわーるいな。おいらのせいじゃない一いよ

という意地悪せな声がそこにいるすべての子供たちから一度に張り上げられた。しかもその騒間の声は調子づいてだんだん高められて、果ては何処からともなくそわそわと物音のする夕暮れの町の空気が、この痴高な叫び声で埋められてしまうほどになった。

しばらく踏踏していたその子供は、やがて引きずられるように配達車の所までやって来た。もうどうしても通れる途がないと覚悟をきめたもののらしい。しょんぼりと泣きも得ずに突っ立ったそのまわりには、あらん限りの子供たちがぞろぞろと跟いて来て、皮肉な眼つきでその子供を鞭ちながら、その挙動の一つ一つを意地悪に見やっていた。六つの子供にとっては、これだけの過失は想像もできない大きなものであるに違いない。子供は手の甲を知らず知らず眼の所に持って行ったが、そうしてもあまりの心の顚倒に矢張り涙は出て来なかった。

彼は心まで堅くなってじっととして立っていた。がもう黙ってはいられないような気分になってしまっていた。肩から手にかけて知らず知らず力がこもって、唾をのみこむとぐっと喉が鳴った。その時には近所合壁から大人までが飛び出して来て、あきれた顔をして配達車とその憐な子供とを見比べていたけれども、誰一人として事件の善後を考えてやろうとするものはないにしろ、かかわり合いになるのをめんどうくさがっているように見えた。そのでいたらくを見てつけられると彼はますます焦立った。いきなり飛びこんで行って、そこにいる人間どうも手あたりしだいになくりつけで、あっけにとられている大人子供を尻眼にかけながら、「馬鹿野郎！手前たちは木偶の棒だ。卑怯者だ。この子供がたとえばふだんいたずらをするからといって、今もいたずらをしたとても思っている

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のか。こんなはずがこの子にできるかできないか、考えてもみろ。可哀そに。はずみから出たあやまちなんだ。俺はさっきから一伍一什をここでちゃんと見ていたんだぞ。べらぼうめ！ 配達屋を呼んで来て

と存分に怪我を切ってやりたかった。彼はいじいじしながら、もう飛び出そうかもう飛び出そうかと二の腕をふるわせながら青くなって突っ立っていた。

「えい、退きねえ」

といって、内職に配達をやっている書生とも思わしく少ない、純粋の労働者肌の男が……配達夫が、二、三人の子供を突き転ばすようにして人ごみの中に割りこんで来た。

彼はこれから気のつまるようなまいまいしい騒ぎがもちあげるんだと知った。あの男はおそらく本当に怒るだろう。あの泣きもし得ないでおろおろしている子供が、皆なから手柄顔に名指されるだろう。配達夫は怒りにまかせて、何の抵抗力もないあの子の襟がみでも取ってこづきまわすだろう。あの子供は突然死にそうな声を出して泣きだす。まわりの人々はいい気持ちそらにその光景を見ている。……彼は飛び込まなければならない。飛び込んでその子供のためになんとか配達夫を言いなだめなければならぬ。

ところがどうだ。その場の様子がものものしくなるにつれて、もう彼はそれ以上を見ていられなくなってきた。彼は思わず眼をそむけた。と同時に、自分でもどうすることもできない力に引っ張られて、すたすたと逃げるように行手の道に歩きだした。しかも彼の胸の底で、手を合わせるようにして「許してくれ許してくれ」と言い続けていた。自分の行くべき家は通り過ぎてしまったけれども気もつかなかった。ただわけもなくがむしゃらに歩いて行くのが、その子供を救い出すただ一つの手だてであるかのような気持ちがして、彼は息せき切って歩きに歩いた。そして無性に癖癖を起こし続けた。

「馬鹿野郎！ 卑怯者！ それは手前のことだ。手前が男なら、今から取っ
て返すがいい。あの子供の代わりに言い開きができるのは手前一人じゃないか。それに……帰ろうとはしないのか」

そう自分で自分をたしなめていた。それにもかかわらず彼は同じ方向に歩き続けていた。今ごろあの子供の頭が大きな平手でびしゃびしゃはたき飛ばされているだろうと思うと、彼は知らず譲らず眼をつぶって歯を食いしばって苦い顔をした。人通りがあるかないかも気にとめなかった。啞み合うように固く胸高に腕ぐちをして、上体をのめるほど前にかしこながら、泣かんばかりの気分になって、彼はあのきめ細かな子供からどんな行く手も定めず遠ざかって行った。

卑怯者 有島武郎 初出：『現代小説選集』1920（大正9）年11月