



# the elephant girl

excerpt from *of forests and clocks and dreams* by TAKATSU

I DIDN'T REALLY notice it until I had sat there in the bookstore in Daikanyama, reading, for a good half an hour. It was an ordinary phone, black, touchscreen covered in fingerprints like paint daubs, and a cheap made-in-China plastic case. The case had this strange image of a white elephant. It stood on an island, which I then realized resembled the shell of a turtle: a prophetic reminder of the flat earth and the World Tortoise. Perhaps one day we would fall off the edge of the world. But I looked around and no one was here; I was mostly alone. There was this girl in a grey cardigan with brown hair tied up like a fountain browsing through the popular books section. It couldn't be hers. In her right hand was a large white phone, big enough to be a book itself. Further away, a couple talking and laughing and nodding at one another but maybe not to each other; one carried a volume on civilization by Lewis Mumford and the other, H.D. Every now and then their faces would fade behind the shelves and return washed with yellow ochre glows under ceiling lights. There was no one else as far as I could see. I had deliberately chosen a quiet corner among the philosophical dispositions of Borges, Chomsky and Nietzsche. Around me, the spines of these books like trees and letters dancing with virtuosic synchronicity - strange cryptic runes and ancient chants.

I must have examined the phone case for a long time before I returned to my book. It was about people who never slept and someone who couldn't wake up. I had to wonder what people could possibly do at night when all the trains stop running and each hour seems to wind to a halt, the movements of a sloth. The phone began to ring about five chapters in. It wasn't set on silent mode so an undulating pulse sound resonated through the couch I was sitting on. Someone turned to look, and in return, I turned around as if to say it wasn't my phone. Of course, no one was going to answer and I watched a

string of arbitrary numbers dangle. No name, no caller ID, no real meaning. I debated whether to pick it up or not, but by then the caller had stopped.

The same number called again a few minutes later. In the novel, Komugi, Korogi, Kaoru were sifting through security camera recordings for the man who had beat up a Chinese call girl in the love hotel. I picked up the phone this time.

I didn't say anything and the other end of the line was quiet.

Then, "hello," I said, "this isn't my phone."

A woman's voice spoke. "Hey, I know, it's my phone, I've left it behind—where are you right now? I'm coming right over to get it, as soon as I can. I apologize for the inconvenience but there are a lot of important things in there, so I must get it back, and I can't trust someone else—I mean a guy who answers the call can't be that bad right?—I can pay you for your time if you want, but I'll be there soon."

I sat there and swallowed the mouthful. "Don't worry," I said, "I'm not going anywhere yet. I'm at the Tsutaya bookstore in Daikayama."

"The one fancily designed like a museum or art gallery or something by Klein..."

"Dytham," I said. I happened to know such things.

"Yes, that group in the architectural pitch right? With the lounge and restaurant and everything. Outside, the white walls look like pixelated interlocking optical illusions and are as thick and dense as a bank vault. As if secrets don't go in or come out. You have to dig for things. Nice place."

"Yes, weren't you here before? When are you getting here?"

She paused. Her voice was hushed and quiet, a nice, pleasant voice, soft and soothing to listen to and cultured and intelligent sounding, but rather talkative. I might imagine a woman with a short bob, hair pushed back exposing her ears, glasses, a ball-point pen clicking, and red lipstick. "I don't know for sure," she explained, "because I'm right in the middle of something, but I will be there as soon as possible today."

"Today? There's probably no other option really," I joked.

She didn't seem to take it as a joke. "I know, I know. Just give me some time."

I told her it wasn't a problem.

She hung up after a moment of silence.

I set the phone down, stretched my neck and settled back in my couch.



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OF FORESTS AND CLOCKS AND DREAMS

BY TAKATSU

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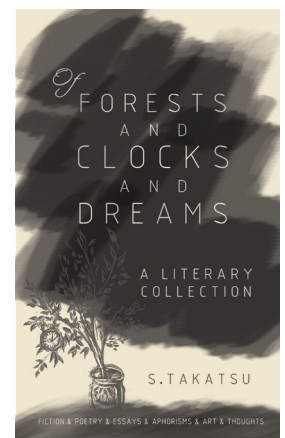
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The ambient lighting around descended like oozing warm paint. The couch I had chosen was rust-red and scaly and if I ran my fingernails over it, little strings would pull free. But it was soft and I sank and felt drowsy. You had to dig in this place, she said. That for the most part was true.

During these summer days, I had nothing better to do than to browse for new material like scavenging for bottle caps and tin to sell. It wasn't that I found a particular solace or liberation through the pages, but it was the well-practiced motions that gave me some sort of comfort. Early in the morning, I would find a good book, find something, whether it was an interesting title or the look of it or the smell or the weight, sit there flipping pages, listening to the museum murmurs of people meandering and stopping and thinking (or not thinking). When I felt thirsty or cold, whichever came first, I'd pick up a coffee. Sometimes, it was as if I could just soak in the air-conditioned coffee-stained air, the ambience, the whispers, the smell of the pages, the scent of dead trees and hot ink and laminate. I used to believe in finding illumination in artifacts and the objects and tales I could pick up in my hands. But they remain silent now.

Just a few years ago, when I was still writing, I might flip through some pages of a new author to see if I could enjoy the style, maybe read an excerpt from the middle. To me then, even if its entire premise and structure, character and narrative development, philosophical stance and persuasive discourse was well constructed and addressed, a good house built on rocks, there was nothing that disengaged me more than an unattractive voice. A good one would say something to me, open up the windows of perception so to speak. So most books I'd pick up at random and set back down, forever searching. Now, the cover or strange details about the form were more important. Minimalist design appealed to me, as did typography and texture. Nothing with vivid photos or people in narrative. Less is more. The more obscure the better. Something I wouldn't understand right away. Just like literature, if I couldn't understand it at face value, it would drive me deeper to root out the source.

[...]

"Why are you going to Greece so urgently, if I may ask?"

"Business, business."

"And what exactly do you do?" I figured I had a right to inquire if she was asking me to do favours for her.

"I'm something like an archaeologist, you can say."

"Something like an archaeologist," I repeated.

"Yes, something like that. There's something of great interest over there, as you can imagine. The land of the gods and titans."

"And the polis of Homer, Sophocles, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, all that."

"Yes, all that, it's great isn't it?" she said, "those breathtaking green cliffs and vistas upon which houses with red roof tiles are attached haphazardly like barnacles clinging to rock. And then you stand on top of one of them looking out at sea. It's deep blue, a million glittering jewels under the sun. In the distance,

multitudes of other islands, some small, jagged and uninhabited, on others you could almost make out people waving back—probably my imagination. The smell of the sea salt and a warm breeze gently caressing you the right way. Ah, it's exquisite. Sit by the harbour in your shades with a martini or a nice brandy, or if you want to try local flavours, grab an ouzo, perfect for the summer."

I recalled the smell of the sea and a kind of perfume that reminded me of eucalyptus. "You sound like a tourist brochure."

"Have you been there?"

"Yes, once. A few years ago. Around the same time of the year."

"It's magical, isn't it?" There was a brief pause. "What were you there for?"

"It was a vacation, needed to get something off my chest. I was young and innocent and in depression. Who isn't right? Eager to grow up, wake up, but unable to. So I took a retreat, left everything behind kind of thing. Return a new man."

"Hmm," she said. "So the trip helped you?"

"I met this aspiring poet living in a cottage there and we got off to a good start. I didn't make much of it then but I suppose her words did change me. Whether for better or worse, I can't tell." I took a sip and cradled my cup. The elephant on the case watched me. "It's a long story but she was four years older than me, wore these orange floral summer dresses and carried an old leather bag full of notebooks and tattered pages and crumpled wrappers—she had lots of Lindor chocolate bars—always squinting and looking up, looking out across the water in search of something. And every now and then, she would look completely startled, like what she had spotted was strange and new. When I asked her what it was about, she'd say she found it but wouldn't tell me what it was. Only thing I understood was that she felt the need to come to Greece because it's like the edge of the world where it converges the very roots of Western literature, history and myth into the modern mindset constructed on its geography. Something about Axis Mundi and the collective landscape of all human intelligence and imagination. Crazy words to me as a freshman, but I was intrigued. I even left behind my meager luggage. Just threw it away. I didn't need it anymore. However, with it, I had left behind something important."

"Something important?"

At that time, we would perch on high stools at the bar that had an

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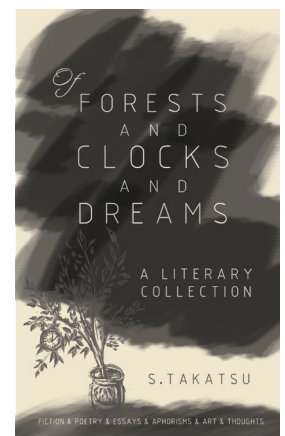
  
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outdoor pavilion that faced the sea at night and count the bobbing lights in the distance that could have been boats or spirits or something else and far in the background, there would be the strumming of classical guitars. She would talk and I would listen. I watched her lips move and her hair drip on her shoulders. She was like a conduit through which ancient goddesses would speak. The Aegean breeze seemed so laden with whispers and stories and myths, and she was just plucking these things out of the air, laying them down in words like paint strokes and sketches. Meaning was still alive in the air, in the moments and in her, not in a literary text or old buildings. After a while, we slept together once and she left without a trace, as if she had never existed. With her, all the stories I once wrote vanished. Suddenly, her ability was unattainable arcane knowledge and the substance I once had remained as distant as the mythic she was looking for. I had since been sitting in her shadow. "She was beyond me, I felt, so beyond that she must have been a glimpse of the new world I couldn't quite reach yet. I felt empty then. Empty as a newly made bowl."

"And now?" she asked.

"Now I still can't decide if meeting her was good or bad. I'm still waiting and searching for what I'm meant to hold."

"Hmmm," she said again. There was a long silence. I truncated it with a clink of my coffee cup against its saucer. She continued, "I wish I could do the same.

I'm always running around searching for other people's things. Not my own."

"Well don't search too hard, sometimes you get lost, searching for other people's things."

"Yes, it becomes your own search and you forget what you were looking for. You look so intently for things that they become your definition."

[...]

"What exactly are you looking for?"

She didn't reply for a long time. "It's hard to say. You don't really know me and I don't know you. I don't really know myself either. You just happen to have my phone and are helping me with all these, I know, extremely bothersome requests, I would pay you back if you want. But my line of work is kind of, for the lack of a better word, dangerous. It's hard to explain. There's a chance, probably near certainty, that we would never meet again. Best not to say too much."

"Archaeology can be dangerous I assume. Especially in Greece."

"Yes, especially in Greece. Sometimes finding things isn't so easy, there are all kinds of blockages you must clear away first before you can find it."

"Blockages huh?" I said.

"Blockages between two worlds, yes. Being an archaeologist is something similar to a time traveler, we are the channel, the conduit through which an ancient world and its once mystical powers can transfer. I never know which world I'm closer to. The poet girl was right about that. It does feel like convergence now that I think about it. But she was always looking up. Like there's something greater than us out there. To me, the harder we dig down and unearth deeply buried secrets, the more we learn about ourselves. At least that's what I used to believe. Anyway, I think I have to get off the phone. I'm running out of minutes. I'll be reaching soon, I promise."

I returned to my coffee which was now lukewarm and realized I forgot to mention the White Elephants.



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