Aftershock

For the last three weeks Takashi has woken amongst rocks. Against the low sun, he can see that there is still dust in the air and it makes him feel unclean. All the time, he thinks about luxury and when it might come. To have a bath or a decent meal or just to lie on something soft.

 “Do you think this is worse than the war?” says Park, who has just woken and is stretching and rubbing his head.

 “No,” says Takashi.

 He is irritated by most of the questions which Park asks him, by the banality of the conversations which fill the days as they walk. But he thinks for a moment about this one and he accepts that the answer is in fact yes. It wasn’t obvious at the time, but now, in 1923, he can look back and see that the war was good for him. He is a successful businessman, an exporter. Japan is a good place to be an exporter and he has been able to take advantage, through luck and foresight and hard work. Is he still a successful businessman? A month ago he was, now he doesn’t know.

 There has been an earthquake and they cannot specify exactly where they are. They have a compass and are fleeing the epicentre, that is as much as they can hope to do. There have been aftershocks and they have no idea how much of the country has been destroyed. Right here, it is a catastrophe. He tells Park that they have walked hundreds of miles when he asks, which he does often, but he doesn’t believe it himself. The going is hard. They have met others, but no-one has reliable information and there seems to be no sense of unity. There are rumours and there is fear, but no unity.

 “I woke up too early,” says Park. “It was getting light already and I just couldn’t get back to sleep. How do you get back to sleep when it’s light?”

 “I don’t know,” says Takashi.

 Park complains when he doesn’t get eight hours of sleep, even if he misses just half-an-hour. Takashi doesn’t sleep more than three hours each night, but still Park complains, expecting sympathy.

 “You were sleeping,” says Park. He says it accusingly.

 “No I wasn’t. I was trying to. I just had my eyes closed.”

 “I wish it didn’t get light so early. Or we had some eye patches or a mask.”

 Takashi tries to ignore him. Park will ramble on, full of these childish ideas, as if they might find eye patches or make a mask. Though Park irritates him, Takashi wishes that he could share in some aspects of his foolishness and be so distracted by trivialities as to be unaware of the seriousness of their situation. They don’t know where they are or how to get to safety or even if safety exists. The quake may have gone all the way across the Pacific, it could be the end of almost everything. Better to worry about your sleep being disturbed by the rising sun.

 They sit and eat breakfast. They have a haversack each but they don’t carry much. They have taken food from the destroyed villages which they have passed, there is no choice. One of the most common rumours they have heard is that there has been a lot of looting, not of food- which it is accepted has to be taken- but of money and jewellery and all kinds of possessions. It is implied, and not always unspoken, that the Koreans are behind this. Park is Korean, so he has to act dumb. Takashi warns him every time they meet another group that he mustn’t speak, because everyone can tell by his accent that he is Korean. Takashi uses the excuse that Park has been traumatised. It is plausible. Park is young and wide-eyed and his hair sticks up. He has the look of someone in permanent shock.

 In fact this is how he has always looked. He is an employee of Takashi’s and was with him in a storeroom when the earthquake took place. The other employees, Takashi is fairly sure, are all dead. They have passed thousands of other bodies since then and many more will be buried in the rubble. It was harder at first when there was the possibility of there being survivors, who they could do nothing to help. Now, the shock is almost over.

 They eat the food which they retrieved from the ruins of a village yesterday. It was an obscure village even before the earthquake, one which Takashi has never seen on a map, and now it is almost destroyed. They took a bag of small cakes, dried fish, crabmeat patties and some kind of cabbage dish. Park delights in the cakes which are sweet and decorated with coloured sprinkles. When he has eaten four of them he takes the paper cups in which they came and folds them into the shapes of flowers. For a minute Takashi watches him, letting himself be distracted by the fluttering of thin white fingers, the chewing of the lip, the frown of concentration.

 “Do you want me to show you how to do it?” says Park, smiling.

 “No,” says Takashi.

 He scolds Park for wasting time. They need to get on. They don’t know where they are or where they are headed apart from away from the epicentre, but they need to get on.

 They pick up their haversacks, check the compass and walk. The landscape is dull. It is familiar now and the dullness is its overwhelming feature. Nature has been dismissed. Takashi is tired but he will make sure that they walk until the sun sets and maybe an hour beyond that. The weather is warm, good weather if this was just a normal walk. They have food and water and there will be villages where they can get more. Things could be worse, that is the only consolation Takashi can find. But it is intensely dull and when they see a roadblock in the distance, the sudden fear is almost a relief. He immediately starts to warn Park about speaking.

 “Remember, say nothing even if they speak directly to you. I’ll explain to them. Don’t even make a sound, don’t be tempted.”

 “Yes,” says Park, angrily. Even as an employee, he was never careful. Always ready to complain and talk back when he was upset.

 They have heard about the police and the militias. Nobody knows who is in charge or who the militias are or how they can be distinguished from the police. They have heard this along with the talk about the Koreans. Takashi has no idea if any of it is true and who has started the rumours, but he knows that the truth is not the most important issue. If people have heard these things, they will believe them. Park is a liability. Takashi tries not to think in these terms but it is unavoidable. Park is slowing him down and putting him in danger. But that is how things are and nothing can be done about it. It would be unthinkable to do anything about it.

 “Act dumb,” he says to Park, as they get closer to the roadblock. “No more talking now.” Park glares at him.

 Takashi, in his good clothes, his employer’s clothes, tries to assert himself. There is a group of a dozen at the roadblock, which is makeshift: some planks of wood supported on upturned buckets, two chairs, a large ledger. At least two of the men are carrying rifles. They are in military uniforms which do not all match.

 “Where have you come from?”

 The spokesman is tanned and small but muscular. His cap is pulled low down and he has to tip back his head to look at Takashi.

 “Tokyo.”

 “Where are you going?”

 “Away from the centre, to somewhere safe, we don’t know. What information do you have?”

 “I can’t reveal our information to you. I don’t know who you are. Do you have papers?”

 “Of course not. We were at work when it happened.”

 “Then you could be anyone!” says the man with the rifle.

 The conversation continues like this. Takashi tries to impress upon the man that he is a factory owner, but this only serves to antagonise him more. The argument about papers and their destination continues meaninglessly.

 “What about him?” The spokesman, the leader as he now plainly is, points to Park.

 “He’s traumatised. He can’t speak.”

 “Can’t speak?” There is a look of vicious suspicion. Takashi wonders how believable this excuse is. It feels weak.

 “He hasn’t spoken since the earthquake. He’s in shock, his family was killed.”

 “He should be able to speak.”

 “He can’t speak!” Takashi loses his temper. Even though it is untrue that Park is dumb, it’s absurd for the man to insist that he should be able to speak. “I told you, he’s traumatised. Do you even understand what the word means? Do you have any authority? You clearly don’t know what you’re doing here. This is ridiculous.”

 The soldier raises his rifle butt and strikes Takashi in the face. Takashi steps back, holding his jaw. He gives himself a few seconds to register the shock. He presses the bone. It will only be a bruise, but it made an unpleasant cracking sound and everyone heard Park say “No!” as it happened.

 “He spoke.” The man’s eyes are gleaming.

 “He makes sounds that’s all.” Takashi’s jaw hurts when he speaks. “He can’t say anything.”

 “He can.”

 Suddenly there is chaos. The men grab Park and they grab Takashi and everyone shouts. In the panic, Park starts shouting as well. He resists, more than Takashi does. The odds are impossible, but Park tries to hit out. Takashi accuses them of having no authority and says that he will report them when he finds the police. The leader makes wild improvised claims against the Koreans.

 “They’ve been stealing, looting. They steal the food and they burn the villages and poison the wells. Maybe you’re Korean too. Why are you with him? Why are you with him if you’re not Korean too?”

 “You’re an idiot.” Takashi is tired. He is frightened but he is sick of this foolishness.

 The leader goes to strike him again but Park takes hold of the rifle. The leader wrestles it back and points the rifle at him and before anyone can begin to attempt to calm him down, he shoots Park at point blank range.

 The shot is fearsomely loud. Everyone starts at the sound. Then they look at Park, who is already on the ground, face down.

 “It was self-defence.” The leader speaks before anyone else. “He could have done anything, he was crazy. Self-defence. It was self-defence. I don’t know what he was doing.”

 Takashi begins to speak, to accuse, but he is speaking softly, into the air. The militia is packing up. He tries to think rationally. Park has been killed for no reason, he has been murdered. Takashi needs to identify the man, so that weeks or months or years from now, when order is restored, he can find him and point him out. The militia is moving away already, carrying the components of their roadblock and leaving an empty space, exposing it as an invention. Though the men were ignorant of any aspect of the law, he has taken them seriously and treated the roadblock with too much respect. It was nothing more than a mob with some planks and uniforms and he watches them leave, knowing that they will set up somewhere else a few miles away, in an arbitrary spot. They don’t even leave footprints in the dust. How will he identify the man? His teeth were very straight, his eyes were brown, he was stocky. That’s all he has to go on, yet he feels that he could recognise him at any point in the future.

 Takashi digs a grave, using the sharpest stones he can find. It takes hours and it is exhausting to dig three feet deep. He works on through the afternoon and when the sun is going down, he decides that it will have to do. He drinks water and tries to eat a cake, but he feels sick. He picks up Park and lays him in the grave. Then he takes one of the cakes and tries to make a flower out of the paper cup. It’s more difficult than it looked in the morning. It would only have taken five minutes for Park to show him how to do it.

 “Sorry,” murmurs Takeshi. He puts his own poorly-made flower on Park’s chest.

 He says some prayers and then fills in the grave. He levels off the earth and treads on it to make it firm and then covers it with small stones. He would like to mark the burial place, but he doesn’t know what people might do if they see it. Manners and decency have been turned around, the order of things is all wrong. Tomorrow he will take the compass and walk on and try not to think too hard about what is happening. The equilibrium must be regained at some point and people must become good again.