



THE BEGINNING

THE STORY BEGINS IN a quiet Tokyo suburb at past midnight on January 14, 1949. Odano Sanae, age forty, sits alone, in an unheated second-story room lit with a single candle, facing her father's casket.

The house, of pre-war wood-frame and tile-roof construction, is the one that I frequent half a century later. Whereas the house I know, however, is dwarfed by apartment buildings on three sides and never sees the sun, at the time of this “beginning” it proudly overlooks the Tama River from a knoll that is decked in cherry blossoms each spring, and on clear mornings, a window at the head of the stairs frames Mt. Fuji.

Odano, on the other hand, but for the difference of years, appears much the same as when I first meet her. She wears no makeup and keeps her hair neatly cropped above her ears. The haircut, a habit adopted in her twenties, advocates simplicity in the interest of time. And while in assuming this plain demeanor she also meant to soften public scrutiny, its effect has been, to the contrary, to further distinguish her from other women of her generation.

Odano has never married. I had no interest in marriage, she would explain. And furthermore, I never had the time.

Born Odano Haruko—she assumed the name Sanae in her early twenties—on March 13, 1908, Odano belongs to the last generation of Meiji, the era of imperial reign during which Japan emerged from four hundred years of feudal insularity to embrace the industrial

revolution. An age in which old met new and tradition and traditional values incorporated invention and innovation, Meiji produced many of the architects of the new Japan—larger-than-life visionaries of extraordinary energy, unyielding principles, and intense national pride. Needless to say, these figures were predominantly male. And even as they charted a public course of radical transformation, they reaffirmed their conservatism at home; in the Confucian tradition, conventional wisdom of the day described the duty of woman as “to obey first father, then husband, and then son”.

The Odano I know looks back on her early life with detached wonder as to how her intellectual independence not only survived this repressive cultural milieu but thrived in spite of it. Hardly could this have been so but for her impetuous curiosity. Mine has been, she says, a life of *nani* ‘what?’

Rarely satisfied with answers given her as a child, and to the chagrin of her elders, she unabashedly asked questions to no end. On the other hand, she says, I have never known what it is to be bored. Sometimes I would stand outside and look into the sky. Just the idea that there was nothing between me and the open infinity of space would make me tingle with excitement.

At the age of three, when an uncle told her of an underpass nearby that was inhabited by a goblin who came out after dark, she demanded to be shown. The uncle, foiled in his ploy to elicit a shriek, became irate: Little girls should be afraid of goblins, he instructed her. But Odano would have none of this; how could she know whether or not a goblin was scary until she had seen one? And besides, how was she to know what fear was until she had been scared?

Meiji and the subsequent Taisho that coincided with Odano’s school years, if repressive of women, were also preoccupied with the assimilation of new information and ideas and thus host to an intellectual renaissance. The young Odano fed voraciously on the books she was given both in school, where the Taisho curriculum stressed the classics, and at home, where a favorite aunt passed on to her an eclectic stream of modern literature.

While consistently placing first in her class, the young Odano was nevertheless impervious to the significance of grades. When friends asked to see her report card, she could not understand why—for were not all report cards the same? Then one day on the way home from school a group of her peers chided her for always scoring perfect tens on her arithmetic tests. You mean, she asked, you are not receiving the same grade? Given that mathematical problems yield only one correct answer, the possibility that anyone could achieve anything less than a perfect score had never occurred to her.

And indeed, the uncompromising honesty of numbers and the immutable consistency of mathematical rules endeared this subject to her above all others. When told that a girl who spends her time learning numbers would never secure a husband, she was only given more cause to wonder: How could the prospect of marriage possibly compete with the fascination afforded her by mathematical process?

To Odano, the honesty of numbers, more than an intellectual pursuit, was indicative of the integrity of nature—and that, an integrity that permeated her own character. For as long as I can remember, Odano would say, I have been incapable of telling lies. Once, during her early teens, friends prevailed upon her to skip class with them to see a movie. The film was one I had been eager to see, she says. Yet to this day, I remember nothing of the story line. I spent the entire time agonizing over how I could possibly explain where I had been when I got home.

When the theater let out, Haruko ran home ahead of her friends and surprised her mother by bursting through the front door. After first blurting out the full story, she then collapsed on the floor in relief. Her mother, looking at her with astonishment, commented only, You foolish child.

To speak one's mind and live one's conscience, especially within early and mid twentieth century Japan, carried enormous risk. Odano however, relying solely on clarity and precision of expression, maneuvered so astutely through social minefields that, contrary to even her own expectations, she was always surrounded

by friends; for her friends, if not her elders, found her lack of duplicity refreshing, and despite her abhorrence of title and position she would invariably find herself shoed into leadership positions in their clubs and associations.

Odano was also endowed with exceptional powers of concentration. She was able from an early age to focus body and mind on a single object until she had grasped its essence, or on a single project until it was completed.

At the age of six or seven, she persuaded the favorite aunt, under strict agreement that she was to sit perfectly still, to take her to a performance of noh drama. Noh is a uniquely Japanese and highly refined classical art form composed of slow, minimalist movements performed to archaic phrasing in obscure tones and rhythms—hardly material known to excite young audiences. Yet, Odano recounts, I sat spellbound without so much as budging throughout the entire performance. Noh was to leave her with a lasting impression that movement and stillness can occur at the same time.

The paper facings on the sliding *shoji* partitions that line the corridors of traditional Japanese houses are both fragile and subject to discoloring with age, and in the Odano household, repairing and replacing these facings was an annual event. The paste used in this application, although made from ordinary cooked rice, was strong enough when prepared properly to adhere for decades. This preparation, however, was both tedious and exact: It required mashing the cooked rice one grain at a time to the same consistency and at the same speed until the entire batch reached a state of translucency. The amount of water added was also critical, for if too dry it would lump and later detach, and if too wet, it would mold and then stain the paper. Odano proved such proficiency at this task at the age of six that her mother gave her exclusive domain over it from then on.

This aptitude for focus and precision also gave rise to her other greatest passion, second only to her passion for numbers. From the age of three, while her friends played, Odano would sit under the

eaves at the edge of the garden, paper and pencil in hand, and sketch. Upon graduating from high school, acknowledging that higher studies in science and math were not an option open to women, she decided to become an artist and went on to graduate from the Tokyo Women's College of Fine Arts. Odano's paintings during these years drew attention for their simple honesty; they were said to be exquisite in their plainness and to insist upon the object over the artist—assessments equally true of the way that Odano lived.

To that art, the art of living, Odano brought uncommon energy and such sense of purpose as to put her in a league of one. Acutely sensitive to appropriations of time and space, she forever sought to accomplish more using less and to squeeze more hours and minutes out of the day. One morning at the age of eighteen, she left the house for school without her lunch box—an oversight, the improbability of which would cause her, in her later years, to ascribe to provident intervention. For to her delight, the afternoon came and went without any signs of her usual after-lunch drowsiness. Taking this as her cue, she did away with lunch from that day forward. After enlisting the confidence of the family maid—for her mother, she knew, would not approve—she hid her lunch box deep in a kitchen cupboard.

By habit, and under cover of the morning flurry of activity, Odano was at this time already skipping breakfast. Furthermore, since the great Tokyo earthquake five years earlier, her father had, in the interest of honing their physical and mental survival skills, placed the household on a dietary regime consisting mainly of unpolished rice. Heavier and more filling than white rice, brown rice is also indigestible unless thoroughly chewed—a period song promoting this practice, similar in tune to “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” goes “let's chew, let's chew, let's chew well”—and while Odano never developed a liking for brown rice, she permanently adopted the practice of chewing her food to a liquid state. When chewed in this way, a single bowl of rice, she found, was all her stomach would hold—with the consequence that the substance of her diet was reduced to, aside from the soup and assorted

condiments that were its compliments, this single bowl of rice at the evening meal.

During those same, late teenage years she also systematically undertook to exercise control over her sleeping habits. After all, she reasoned, time asleep is time wasted. With practice, she eventually succeeded in reducing her nightly slumber to just two hours, and by her early twenties, two-hour nights had become so integral to her routine that she was scheduling twenty-two hour days in her notebook.

For all of her wilfulness, however, Odano could not foresee, nor was she prepared for, the upset that was to occur in her twenty-third year. The most important person in her life, her mother, suffering the effects of a chronic heart condition, and after a prolonged convalescence, died. During this ordeal, Odano kept vigil at her mother's bedside for eleven days without even once dozing.

The event of her mother's death caused Odano to question the phenomenon of life in ways that she never had before. Overriding even her profound sense of loss was her perplexity over how and why such tragedy should occur. The mother who, just that morning, had been breathing, warm, and verbally responsive to Odano's determined attempts to nurse her back to health had become, by evening, motionless, cold, and silent. From these observations, and relying on the logic that she had assimilated in the course of her mathematical studies, she hypothesized that vitality is an essence or form of energy—that which differentiates “non-living state” from “living state”, and the characteristics of which are motion, heat, and sound. This conclusion would prove seminal to her later work.

With the death of her mother, Odano—the second of three siblings; however the eldest, a sister eight years her senior, was long since married and maintaining a household of her own—became woman of the house. Any vestiges of adolescence thus abruptly terminated, she assumed domestic responsibility for her father and became mother surrogate to the sister, seven years her junior, still in high school. As with everything else she has ever begun, Odano

assumed these responsibilities—the least, she reasoned, that she could do to honor her mother’s spirit—with total presence and purpose, bringing to the role her full energy and attention. She saw her sister through high school and music school, and then through marriage to a graduate of the elite Tokyo University (the husband would, in his later years, become headmaster of Gakushuin, an exclusive educational institution attended by, among other nobility, the children of the imperial family).

Odano’s mother had been a devout patron of the Jodo Shinshu sect of Buddhism. And although this religious persuasion had not rubbed off on Odano, she took it upon herself to perform the memorial recitation of the *Hanyashingyo*, the Heart Sutra, the prescribed 108 times each day for one year terminating upon the first anniversary of her mother’s death. Written in *kango*—archaic Chinese script—and read directly from this script according to Japanese readings of the characters, the *Hanyashingyo* is approximately as accessible to persons uneducated in Buddhism as Latin mass is to most Catholic laity. And composed of 261 characters, each of which has a reading of one to two syllables, it is comparable in length to three back-to-back recitations of the Lord’s Prayer. As that length was then to be multiplied by 108, the challenge presented was how to fulfill this task within the confines of Odano’s already full days.

Instructions from the priest who conducted the funeral rites, she observed, did not preclude silent recitation; this she could effect more quickly than mouthing the syllables out loud. And with practice she mastered the ability to complete one recitation on a single out-breath. Thus, at the rate of one breath every fifty seconds—sustainment of which demands a level of control normally only accessible after years of ascetic training—she was able to complete the entire daily task in an hour and a half.

At the age of twenty-seven, Odano managed a household, pursued her art and continuing studies in classical literature, and was three

years into—as explained later—a five-year plan to financial freedom; all this accommodated by her twenty-two hour schedule and her rationing of sleep to two hours and food to a single meal. One day, seated in her living room, she felt a surge of liquid gush from the top of her head like, she imagined, water spouting from a whale. Next, a damp blanket of moisture crept from her crown to down around her ears; yet when she put her hand to her head, it was completely dry. The next moment, the room went black.

When she came to, Odano found herself detached and watching from the ceiling as her sister and the household help gathered around her prone body in alarm. Even as she observed this commotion, however, the floor beneath her body split open, and the opening sucked her from the ceiling into a dark abyss.

Now suspended in subterranean space, she noticed a cord dangling beside her. Then following the path of the cord into the depths with her eyes, she came upon, far below, a stick-like figure with his hands on the cord and reeling it in.

Wondering what purpose this cord served, she retraced its path from the bottom of the pit past her current position and looked up. Above, she was surprised to see, it extended to her own prone body, where it attached to the small of her back. The act of looking up, however, also caused her to levitate. Rising out of the abyss, she reunited with the body on the floor and returned to waking consciousness.

Odano's response to this near-death experience was one of curiosity; where had she been and what had happened? When the doctor, a neighbor called in by her family, refused to give her an explanation—Leave the diagnosis up to me and just follow my instructions, he said—she sent him away. Only some months later, when another doctor on a social visit listened to her tell her story, did she learn that the incident could most probably be attributed to hemorrhaging beneath the cranial membrane.

For the next twenty years Odano was to endure continuous headache. Only six years after the “beginning,” during her transmission of the *amekagami*, as described in the last chapter of this book, did this pain disappear.

Odano's father was stern, disciplined, and of few words. The Odanos were of *bushi*, or "samurai", lineage, and his favorite pastime was *kyudo*, traditional archery. He once told his daughter that, upon drawing the bowstring, if he allowed his mind and body to settle and became perfectly still and clear, the distance between him and the target would disappear. And when this occurred, he said, the arrow, when released, would unfailingly travel to the target's center.

As a child, Odano was circumspect in the distance she kept to this austere patriarch. After the death of her mother, however, and as she began to relate to him with more mature acuity, she also came to know him as if for the first time. In his person she discovered a man bound by arcane social institutions who had sought the freedom he coveted through the lives of his children: Her own license to pursue art and learning over marriage, she realized, had only been possible through his concessions. And that realization spurned a new-found affection.

Odano senior was engaged as an educational advisor to the house of Hosokawa, a branch of Japanese nobility. In this capacity, he was responsible for overseeing the upbringing and education of the Hosokawa heirs consistent with the demands of their social status. A position that had been handed down within the Odano lineage for several generations, it came with a lifetime term and constituted a form of indentured servitude.

The position has no modern equivalent and the constraints under which he operated are difficult—even within the context of Japanese society—to imagine. His daughter, however, found in his situation, a new mission. She decided that, on behalf of her father, she would achieve the measure of financial independence necessary to retire him from active service and to allow him to enjoy the later years of his life pursuing his own interests. After carefully assessing the family resources, consisting at that time of her father's income and her own, she constructed the equivalent of a modern business plan, complete with benchmarks and objectives leading up to her goal. The total duration of the plan was five years.

Flushed with enthusiasm, she took this plan to her father. His response was abrupt: You are so fresh out of the nest that I can see pieces of eggshell attached to your rear-end, he told her.

Odano, however, was undaunted. One year later she came to her father again and proudly presented him with a twelve-month report demonstrating her to be right on target. To her consternation, her elder refused to even look at it. Instead, he looked her squarely in the eye and asked, Whose daughter are you, anyway? Sanae, fumbling for words, replied to the effect that she had always presumed to be his daughter, but that if he was now telling her something different she would have no choice but to believe him.

That is not what I mean, he responded. Of course you are my daughter. However, I can claim no responsibility for your stubborn persistence. That you have succeeded is hardly a surprise—in my sixty years, I have never known anyone to exhibit such tenacity. After watching you for the last year, I can only expect you to achieve any goal that you set for yourself.

From that day forward, the elder Odano relinquished, unconditionally, the reins of the household to his daughter, and for the remainder of their life together, she says, he never voiced so much as a single word of either praise or criticism regarding her handling of their affairs.

Odano executed her plan with characteristic precision, completing it slightly ahead of schedule. As part of this project, she managed the construction of eleven houses—ten to serve as rental properties and the eleventh to become the house in which this story “begins”, the house built for her father in a peaceful Tokyo suburb. In March of 1937, her sister graduated from college; in April, upon her insistence, her father announced his retirement; in May, the family moved to temporary quarters pending completion of the new residence; in October, her sister was married; and in April of 1938, just weeks after Odano’s thirtieth birthday, she moved with her father into the new abode.

World events, however, were not to allow her father the quiet retirement she had planned for him. Since the 2-26 Incident two years earlier, the military had retained virtual governmental power; Japanese troops had moved into China; and a wider confrontation with the Western powers loomed ever more imminent. Her father's qualifications were quickly recognized within the new neighborhood, and his days became consumed with meetings of the local civil defense league that he had been nominated to lead. Four years later, war began—and with it, civilian deprivation on behalf of the troops abroad.

In the final year, the war reached Tokyo and bombs began falling almost nightly, decimating much of the city. As the location that Odano had chosen for their dwelling near the Tama river was a couple of kilometers northwest of an industrial zone given over to armaments manufacturing, it caught fallout from American raids. Odano participated in the fire brigades, and on one instance at the height of such a raid, while others cowered indoors, she climbed onto her roof to stamp out the fires started by still falling incendiary bombs with wet rags beneath her feet.

Recognizing their vulnerability after this experience, Odano decided that contingencies were in order. Behind the house she proceeded to dig, by herself, and with an ordinary spade, a ground-cellar in which to store essential provisions and belongings. Digging deep enough to ensure that the roof would hold, she worked this hole, complete with a sloping entrance, to a perfect cube, allowing enough headroom to stand, space along each side for storage, and a passageway down the center.

The project took her a full month to complete. In the cellar, she planned to deposit winter clothes for her father and survival rations to serve in the event they lost the roof over their heads. No sooner was she done, however, than she found it filled with the belongings of her older sister, then weathering the war with her children under the same roof. Stoically, Odano took to digging a second cellar.

One August afternoon another month later she carried the last bucket of earth out of the second hole, washed her hands, and joined

her father and sister in the living room just in time to listen to an announcement on the radio read by the emperor.

Japan's unconditional surrender was an unprecedented moment in its history and marked the end of a way of life. Odano's reaction to the news, she says, was one of relief: At least it would mean an end to the air raid sirens. To her father, like those of his generation, however, the loss was beyond comprehension. As they listened together to the emperor's announcement, Odano watched the disciplined person of her father age before her eyes; his back, conditioned by years of martial training and until then always ramrod straight, began to bow. For the first time in her life, she watched him cry.

Thus, when Odano seats herself in front of his casket that chilly January night in 1949, it is the casket of her last parent, the person to whom she has been closer than any other, and the object of her devotional affection during her prime years. As she had during her mother's infirmity, she kept vigil for the twenty-one days leading up to her father's death, remaining sleepless the entire time—My mind, she says, would go completely blank for periods of time, yet I never lost consciousness.

Since his passing two evenings earlier, she has been preoccupied with all that accompanies a death in the family—official proceedings, contacting family, friends, and associates, and funeral arrangements, now to take place in the morning. Just moments earlier, she has spread futons for relatives and other guests in the room below. Satisfied that the arrangements for the morning are in order and that the guests have been put away for the night, she takes a moment to herself to be alone with her father one last time.

My account of the story that begins here, a story that begs the limits of my narrative abilities, is only possible through Sensei's generosity. She relishes the story, telling it each time as if for the first and as if reliving it in the telling. Furthermore, her extraordinary access to memory invariably brings out new details with each rendi-

tion. What follows is a condensation gathered from among the renditions to which I have been present, including several caught on tape.

Seated now in front of the casket, Odano confronts her own, profound grief. This last month she has wished and prayed with her every fiber for her father's return to health; now, even this lone wish gone unanswered, she wonders if it is not better not to wish: After all, she thinks, if I hold no hope, then I should not need to suffer disappointment.

But, on the other hand, is a life without hope worth living? The focus of her existence for the last twenty-seven years now removed, life holds no promise but the bleakest darkness. Could she join her father in his casket, she thinks, she would gladly avail herself of the opportunity.

Even in her despair, however, her questioning continues. What then, she wonders, is behind this extraordinary bond? What constitutes the relationship between parent and child?

In response to this question, she is suddenly and unexpectedly presented with an image. The image is of two spheres: The first, enormous and brilliant, is the sun. The second, tiny and translucent, is a drop of water—consistent with her predilection for analytical thinking, she calls it by its molecular designator, H_2O .

The relationship of parent to child, she acknowledges with a gasp, is like that of the sun to a molecule of H_2O . In a process repeated over and over, the molecule falls to earth as rain and then rises again into the atmosphere as vapor; furthermore, as an entity, the water molecule performs this dance as if by its own volition, while to an observer, its every movement occurs as a simple function of physical cause and effect. If the dance is effect, then the cause of that dance is the sun's radiation.

Had not all of her actions and undertakings occurred in similar response to the fact of her father's presence? Her five-year plan and its fulfillment; her artful rationing of resources during wartime

deprivation; the digging of the underground storage cellars—would she have undertaken any of these but for his tacit radiance?

Furthermore, not only had that radiance now been extinguished but—far worse—it had been extinguished in the absence of any acknowledgement from her of its importance. The sun had given her a reason for living; it had been the source of her vitality. That sun now gone out, she has only ignorance to show—an ignorance, in her current assessment, so severe that it precludes any hope of redemption. She has seen her destiny unfold and the form that it has taken is the life of a fool.

In this realization, the last vestige of her demeanor collapses; her despair is now complete. She envisions herself as the lowest of lowly creatures wallowing in stupidity. And this, no ordinary stupidity but one that cannot be undone, that is final and permanent. Not only has she no hope, but she has no hope of finding hope. Her predicament is without possible redemption.

At this juncture, Odano makes a critical choice: She chooses what she has been given. If this is the way life is to turn out, she reasons; if she is to be consigned to a life of darkness; then she will at least have the satisfaction of knowing darkness at its extreme. Not only will she resign herself to darkness, but she will choose darkness. Nor will partial darkness suffice: The darkness she will have must be absolute.

This final condition, the condition that the darkness she chooses be absolute, makes the difference. In the same instant, she finds herself weightlessly suspended in a sea of light.

Also in the same instant, her emotional state is transformed from despair to ecstasy. Her face is stretched into a smile so wide that it hurts, and tears—those of grief now replaced by those of joy—flow in such torrents from the corners of her eyes that they drench her blouse.

The light, as she describes it, is mist-like and of a golden tint. It is composed of the finest of particles, each of which is a radiating source—that is, the light radiates, not from a single source, but from the very texture of space, thus casting no shadow and permeating into every corner. Within this fabric, darkness is not even a possi-

bility. Even the room's definition is absorbed in its brilliance—the outline of her father's casket erased, she can no longer even see the tatami beneath her knees. All is light and light is all.

As remarkable as these circumstances are, even more remarkably, they persist. This is no moment of insight or passing lapse of her senses: The experience continues, and she has no idea whether or not it will ever end. She even begins to speculate as to what her guests will think when they come up in the morning, the morning of the funeral, to find her with a smile glued on her face from ear to ear.

By Odano's calculations later, she entered this extraordinary state sometime after one o'clock and remained there until the first light of dawn. Dawn in January comes to Tokyo after six, so by the most conservative of estimates the experience lasted for somewhere between four and five hours. Yet while four hours of heightened awareness is a very, very long time, she also says that she had no sense of the passage of time. The experience was one of continuous presence; one extended now.

Furthermore, her response to the experience was anything but passive: From beginning to end, in attempts to authenticate the experience's reality, she engages and challenges her own perceptions. To be sure that she isn't dreaming, she pinches herself so hard that the bruise she leaves is to remain with her for a week. Scratching at the tatami with her fingernail, she dislodges a straw-fiber and brings it in front of her eyes: As she is able to see it, she reasons that she has not left the room. She attempts to brush the light away with her hands; then blows on it with her mouth; and in turn tries every means available to break out of its envelope and return to the dark January night—all to no avail.

A fragrance, she notes, exudes from the same radiant fabric. This she later describes as a condensation of every good smell into one—the closest smell that she can compare it to is that of a freshly ripened peach.

She also notes the apparent absence of temperature. Not only has the January chill disappeared but, as she prods at this reality and attempts to both brush it away and cut through it with her hands, she registers no sensation of atmosphere against skin.

Later, she will attribute to this experience the conditions of absolute dryness and absolute temperature. The absence of hot and cold, she deduces, is similar to what a fetus must experience inside of its mother's womb—this since our bodies register hot and cold relative to body temperature, and since, presumably, in the womb, the temperature of the fetus and that of its environment are approximately the same.

Absolute reality, Odano will conclude, has a temperature, and that temperature is an absolute mean, the standard to which relative temperature is held and against which hot and cold are differentiated. She will name this temperature, after the approximate centigrade value of human body temperature, “absolute thirty-six degrees”.

The experience eventually does end. As the first signs of morning filter in through the window, Odano notices the light begin to recede. It continues to fade in inverse proportion to the light of day, and the weight of her body—all forty-some kilograms (ninety-some pounds)—returns, causing her to feel as though she has suddenly taken on the mass of a sumo wrestler. Once again she is seated on an ordinary tatami floor in an ordinary second-story room.

Thus ends her story's beginning. While descending the stairs, Odano thinks, If this current state is reality, then what I have just experienced is a second reality—one transparent but every bit as real and existing simultaneously with, or even encompassing, current reality.

Harboring little affinity for conventional religion, Odano-sensei was not inclined to assess her experience then, nor has she ever described it since, in religious terms. But if it did not fit religious constructs, neither did it fit physical ones. If returned to the world of the known forever changed, she was also returned not with answers but, rather, more and larger questions. In deference to sibling expectations with regard to candor, she described the experience briefly to her sisters

later that evening but then did not speak of it again for months. The months were to become years before she would begin to grasp definitively the event's implications.

Odano's search for answers to her questions regarding the essential nature of that experience constitute the story that follows on this beginning. A spiritual odyssey of epic proportion, it spans over five decades and is woven from continuing encounters with the uncommon and improbable, all within the context of the mundane.

If a magnet for the miraculous, Odano is nonetheless consistently pragmatic and refreshingly rational in her assessment of the events that have befallen her. Her laboratory is the hourglass of time, and the subject of her research, the stuff of life. Over the course of her lifetime, she has tested and refined her observations through conversations with hundreds—perhaps thousands—of individuals, without failing, at the same time, to challenging each to think for his or her self.

She has instituted no formal means for the transmission of her ideas—no systematic method or course of study—nor has she a formal following or organization beneath her. Rather, she continues to live alone in the same house where the story begins, spending most of her time during these late years in one-on-one correspondence, through the mechanism of language and written characters, with the absolute presence she first encountered that January evening, and ever eager to share with her visitors the answers this correspondence returns.

The telling of her story in its entirety is a project for another time. Before leaving this account of the story's beginning, however, I will record one later chapter, a chapter that establishes the link between Odano's 1949 experience and the characters of written language.

The calendar moves forward to the spring of 1953. The time is mid-morning, and Odano is engaged in household chores, when out of her right eye, something catches her attention. In the corner of the room, just under the ceiling, something flickers. She turns to look,

and as soon as she does so, a platinum-colored bead of light springs off of the plain wooden molding and flies directly at her, planting itself firmly on her forehead. This occurs in the course of a split second. Yet as the bead of light approaches, it also expands, assuming the form of the character 光, meaning ‘light’.

When it stands alone, as is the case in this instance, 光 is ordinarily read *hikari*. It also however carries the monosyllabic “Chinese” or ON reading, used almost exclusively in character combinations, *ko*. As a function of the suddenness and speed with which the character comes at her, Odano responds untypically, not with the polysyllabic KUN reading *hikari*, but the monosyllabic ON reading, *ko*. Furthermore, in reaction to the character’s on-coming speed, she voices the syllable out loud. *Ko!*

No sooner has she uttered this syllable than a second bead of light forms in the same corner and jumps out at her like the first. This time the character that appears is 透. Following on the path of the first, it bears down on her and implants itself in her forehead.

透 means ‘transparent’; its KUN reading is *suku* or *suki*, as in *sukitoru*, and its ON reading is *to*. Again, the suddenness of the event causes Odano to react without thinking. She calls out the monosyllable. *To!*

Whereupon, a third bead of light forms and jumps out at her in the same way as the first two. The character this time is 波 meaning ‘wave’ or ‘vibration’ and read (KUN) *nami* and (ON) *ha*. Once again she instinctively chooses the monosyllable and calls it out. *Ha!*

The entire incident is over in seconds. In the aftermath, Odano is left standing, mouth agape, the recent impact of the characters 光 ‘light’ 透 ‘transparent’ 波 ‘vibration’ still felt on her forehead and the syllables *ko to ha* ringing in her ears.

Pronounced thus in succession, these syllables form the word *kotoha*. *Kotoha* (*kotoba*)—commonly written 言葉—means ‘word’, ‘words’, or ‘language’.

Odano’s narration of this episode ends with a characteristically humorous touch. Unable to contain her excitement, she throws open the screen partitions to the larger room adjoining, a room that she has not entered for several weeks, and walks quickly in a large circle

nonstop for two full hours, finally plopping down in exhaustion. Only then does she notice that the tatami matting in the room has been mildewed by the humidity of the spring rainy-season, just then at its peak. The soles of her feet are black with mildew, and the floor is described with a large, yellow ring where her pacing has wiped the mat surface clean.

The characters 光透波 *kotoha*, she is quick to realize, perfectly describe the energy-state to which she had been witness three years earlier. Furthermore, these same characters say to Odano that this energy is not only the fabric of space but also the base substance of human language. Absolute energy equals word-energy, and words and language are direct manifestation of the universal state of being and causal principle behind current reality.

Furthermore, this realization has come to her through the written medium—through characters, 字 *ji*. Second reality has shown itself to her again; only, this time, it has assumed objective and quantifiable form. The realization that written characters have the capacity to render visible that which is otherwise hidden from normal view opens for her a new path of inquiry. And that path is the subsequent subject of this discussion.