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Fragments of Struggle:
Five Short Stories by Kobayashi Takiji

by

Benjamin Robert Burton

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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in

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and

Japanese

Thesis Adviser

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Portland State University

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I. Overview

Perhaps it was hearing about the 2009 blockbuster adaptation of *The Crab Cannery Ship* (*Kanikōsen*, 1929) that first brought my attention to Japanese proletarian author, Kobayashi Takiji (1903-1933). Or maybe it was the coincidence of landing in Japan for the first time during the height of the “*The Crab Cannery Ship* boom” in Fall 2008. Nevertheless, I was excited and impressed by Takiji after reading Frank Motofuji’s 1973 translation, *The Factory Ship*. Unlike the figures of Japanese literature I had been acquainted with—Mori Ōgai, Natsume Sōseki, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, and the like—here was an author that adopted a simple and realistic style, meant to be read and understood by the common person. Frank Motofuji keenly observes that Takiji’s approach to his craft helps “round out our view of modern Japanese society” (x). This made me very eager to explore another one of the author’s works in a Japanese literature survey course I was attending in 2010. However, the only story of Takiji’s oeuvre offered in the course turned out to be an anonymous and incomplete English translation of “The Fifteenth of March, 1928” (“1928 nen 3 gatsu 15 nichi”, 1928). Despite having nearly forty of his works anthologized in Japanese, with several available online for free, it was immensely disappointing to learn that the most important writer of Japanese proletarian literature—an author that died for his writings—had been severely under-translated into English. Then again, two years may have not have been enough time for the aforementioned boom to inspire many non-Japanese readers to take a closer look at a proletarian writer from prewar Japan.

It is certainly impressive that Takiji’s old novel about the dangerous working conditions aboard a crab-canning factory ship made such a stir in 2008, eighty years after

its initial publishing. Norma Field and Heather Bowen-Struyk have written extensively about this event, the “*The Crab Cannery Ship* boom.” By Autumn 2008, *The Crab Cannery Ship* became a best-seller in Japan. New phrases such as *kanikō suru* (to do degrading labor) and the like were in fashion, and the following year saw two stage adaptations and the above-mentioned film adaptation (Bowen-Struyk 1). However, what makes the resurgence of Takiji’s old novel so significant was its utter improbability (Field 2009, 1). Field writes that Takiji’s party affiliation and intellectual camp alienated him from middle-aged leftists, and that “Takiji’s name awakened an all but forgotten reconciliation with a retreat from politics. It registered as a dull, irritating reproach” (2009, 1). Field traced the origin of this boom to two liberal newspaper articles, a small bookstore order of 150 copies, and a conservative newspaper article. Somehow, it was in this “largely commercial process” that journalists reporting on the boom began to recognize themselves in the story and started to publish their own desires (2). As a result, Takiji’s novel, which had been selling approximately 5,000 copies per year on average, jumped to over 500,000 in 2008, not including the sales of four manga versions “which may have reached many more readers” (Bowen-Struyk 2009, 1). *The Crab Cannery Ship* boom reached its peak in late 2008 and early 2009 (Cipris 9). During this time, several activist groups that had previously campaigned separately banded in unison to create the “Anti-Poverty Network.” Together, they organized the “Dispatch Workers’ New Year Village,” a tent community of unorganized workers in Hibiya Park right in front of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. Here, temp workers that had been laid off and rendered homeless as a result received food and legal advice. Most importantly, “the New Year was greeted in company of others before the eyes of the nation” (Field 6). Komori

Yōichi argues that the way this “village” worked together to demand the constitutional right to life exemplified Takiji’s theory of collective action and its validity in the twenty-first century (10).

Three English translations of *Kanikōsen* have been published: *The Cannery Boat* (1933), *The Factory Ship* (1973), and *The Crab Cannery Ship* (2013). The former two are both currently out of print, leaving Zeljko Cipris’s excellent reworking as the only English translation currently in circulation. Other works of Takiji’s available in English are Cipris’s *Life of a Party Member* (*Tōseikatsusha*, 1932) and *Yasuko* (1931), both included with *The Crab Cannery Ship*. *The Absentee Landlord* (*Fuzai jinushi*, 1929) was included with Motofuji’s translation, *The Factory Ship*. An originally anonymous translation of “The Fifteenth of March, 1928,” Takiji’s first major story, was published with *The Cannery Boat* in 1933, however it has recently been determined that this edition was translated by Max Bickerton¹ of New Zealand (Cipris xii).

This project’s aim is to increase accessibility and exposure to Takiji’s body of work by translating five pieces of his lesser-known short fiction. Although by no means as robust as the stories mentioned above, these works still possess many of the qualities that make Takiji such a compelling writer. Furthermore, these short examples of his writing show a surprising breadth of style, which brought Takiji criticism and praise from different sides of the proletarian literary movement. Perhaps this will also generate more interest in research on a unique subgenre of Japanese proletarian literature, wall fiction (*kabe shōsetsu*), which will be discussed at greater length below.

¹ Bickerton may have been the only Westerner to be arrested, interrogated, and tortured by the Secret Police (Giles).

II. Biography

Kobayashi Takiji was born on October 13, 1903 to a poor farming family in Akita prefecture, one of the colder areas of the Tōhōku region in the outskirts of northern Japan. Difficult financial circumstances forced the family to emigrate even further north to Otaru, Hokkaido in 1907, where they could earn a living helping out with his uncle's bread manufacturing business. Takiji worked at his uncle's bakery in exchange for help with tuition. In this way, he was able to enroll in the municipal Commercial School where he began to take an interest in literature and the arts (Cipris 2). When Takiji enrolled into Otaru Higher Commercial School in 1921, the spirit of revolution was emerging all over Japan. It was during Takiji's years in high school that the All-Japan Students' Association, a "mouthpiece for student radicals" was formed, along with the founding of the Japanese Communist Party and Japan Communist Youth Alliance. Another notable event was the first mass arrest of leftists and roundup of radicals and Koreans after the Tokyo earthquake of 1923 (Motofuji xii). It seems only natural, then, that upon his graduation in 1924 Takiji "had become gripped by a revolutionary fervor, held in check only by the need to earn a living" (Lewell 184).

In 1924, Takiji accepted a position at the Hokkaido Colonial Bank in Sapporo, whereupon he was immediately transferred to the Otaru branch. During the same year, Takiji and some friends founded the literary magazine *Kurarute*, named after the novel *Clarté* by Barbusse. 1927 saw Takiji actively participate in demonstrations for the first time. Over 3,000 people took part in Otaru's second May Day celebration, making it the largest turnout north of Tokyo. This energy followed into June and July, where the Otaru harbor strike, "the first general strike by an industrial union in Japan" (Komori 5),

concluded with great success. Takiji participated in these movements by writing, designing, and distributing leaflets and posters.

The proletarian parties won 8 out of the 466 seats in the general election of 1928, causing anxious government authorities to implement a mass roundup of leftists associated with the Communist Party and Labor Farmer Party on March 15, 1928. About 1,600 suspects were arrested under accusation of violating the Public Order Law², with approximately 500 ultimately being prosecuted. Seeing a number of his friends arrested, Takiji used this experience to write a short story called “March 15, 1928.” It was published the same year in the November and December issues of *Battle Flag (Senki)*, selling 8,000 copies before being banned. As a result, Takiji’s notoriety as a writer grew along with increasing surveillance by the secret police.

He immediately followed up that story with *The Crab Cannery Ship*, which became a huge hit, selling 15,000 copies before being banned as well. Shiga Naoya “privately praised” (Lewell 185) the novel, citing only that its major weaknesses lied in its expounding of a conscious ideology (Keene 1984, 619). Takiji’s next novella, *The Absentee Landlord*, did not receive the same acclaim as his previous work, as he largely abandoned the style of *The Crab Cannery Ship*. Donald Keene writes, “Far from heeding Shiga’s advice to stay clear of ideology, Kobayashi filled this story with such gobbets of ideology that it does not rise above the level of propaganda” (1984, 620). Furthermore, this story would result in Takiji’s dismissal from the bank, as he mentioned some of the bank’s best customers by name and clearly described the bank’s role in the absentee landlord dispute with the farmers. It may seem unusual that the bank kept such a

² This is Bowen-Struyk’s translation of *Chian ijihō*. Although most commonly translated as the “Peace Preservation Law,” I find Bowen-Struyk’s translation to be more accurate.

prominent Marxist employed for so long, but Motofuji speculates that the police most likely had a hand in keeping him employed. Having him at the bank would make it much easier to maintain surveillance on him and his friends, as well as prevent them from going underground (xxv). Nevertheless, it was a fortuitous move for Japanese proletarian literature on the bank's part, as Takiji was able to complete two significant works on company time.

In March of 1930, Takiji left for Tokyo. Only two months passed before he was arrested in Osaka, suspected of financially assisting the Communist Party. He was released after two weeks of interrogation and torture. In Tokyo, he was again arrested and imprisoned for six months. This time, he was charged with *lèse-majesté* under the Public Order Law due to a passage in *The Crab Cannery Ship* where a worker contemplates mixing some gravel in with crabmeat that will be delivered to the emperor. Within a year after his release, the Manchurian Incident took place, causing increasing repression of the proletarian arts. In the end, Takiji formally joined the Communist Party and, along with Miyamoto Kenji and other prominent writers, went underground to work for the movement.

During this time, despite constantly having to evade authorities and change locations, Takiji's output was prolific. It was underground that he wrote many works of great interest, including *Yasuko* and *Life of a Party Member*, the latter of which deals with much of Takiji's own personal experiences. Unfortunately, both works, and several others, remain unfinished. On February 20, 1933, Takiji, with poet Imamura Tsuneo, was lured into a trap by an undercover police officer that had infiltrated the Party the previous year. The two went to a designated meeting spot in a public place, but, realizing

something was amiss, both took off running. Then, members of the Special Police yelled “Thief! Thief!” and passerby grabbed at Takiji, whereupon he was taken to the Tsukiji Police Station. As he refused to divulge any information regarding the Party activities, Takiji was beaten and tortured until he lost consciousness. He died less than six hours after his arrest at a nearby hospital.

The police formally stated that Takiji died of a heart attack, but the bruises and lesions that adorned his body told a different story. The following is Shea’s description of the body:

An examination of the body revealed a hole in Kobayashi’s temple “large enough to stick one’s finger in,” laceration marks around the neck and wrists (the right forefinger had been bent back and broken), a bruised black and blue area on the back and from the abdomen down to the knees, both thighs swollen and purple from internal bleeding, and over twenty needle-like punctures on the same area. It seemed more plausible that Kobayashi had died from an internal hemorrhage (339).

Furthermore, requests for an autopsy were refused by three different hospitals. It was only until the postwar period that pictures of Takiji’s brutally disfigured body were made public (Bowen-Struyk 2011, 311).



Relatives and acquaintances surround Takiji's body on February 22, 1933.
From *Kobayashi Takiji zenshū* vol. 7

Takiji's death is significant because, "unlike similar cases in Germany, Italy, or the Soviet Union, no one was condemned to death in Japan for his belief" (Keene 1976, 227). Takiji became a martyr for the proletarian literature movement, and perhaps this is one reason why he remains the most outstanding literary figure from the time (Keene 1984, 616). Although the movement may have collapsed with his death, its sudden revival in 1945, the Takiji memorials that continue throughout this day, and *The Crab Cannery Ship* boom of 2008 make it clear that Takiji still occupies an essential and undeniable place in Japanese literary and cultural history.

III. Takiji's Literary Style

Takiji himself has explained that a successful proletarian novel must depict political relationships, have an emphasis on class viewpoint, and a positive character (Shea 329). Modern scholars often describe Takiji's literary style as simplistic, realistic, and cinematic (Cipris xiii; Lewell 184; Motofuji x). All the stories translated in this project exhibit these qualities to varying degrees. However, Takiji was also known to experiment and attempt to innovate within his genre, and some of these experimentations come close to what the modernist writers of Japan were doing at the same time. This is of great interest because, while Japanese proletarian literature was experiencing its "heyday" in the 1920s (Keene 1984, 644), the modernist literary movement—championed by the New Sensationalists (*Shinkankakuha*)—was also on the rise, firmly in opposition to the ideology of the proletarian literature movement.

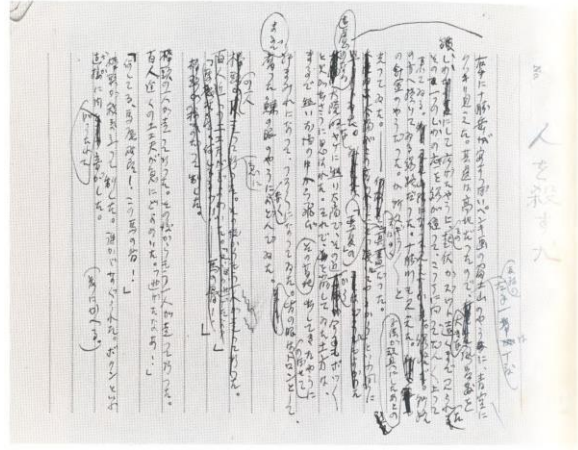
Donald Keene narrows down the dispute between the proletarian and New Sensationalists to a debate over the relative importance of form (New Sensationalist

literature) as opposed to content (proletarian literature) (1984, 650). The literary style of the New Sensationalists is characterized by short sentences, jumps from one statement to the next, third-person narration, and sense impressions. Furthermore, the New Sensationalists followed in the modernist tradition by consciously attempting to “import an unmistakably non-traditional quality to their writings, usually by the use of experimental techniques” (Keene 1984, 630). In the end, the New Sensationalists did not win out against the proletarian literature movement, with many of its writers eventually switching sides. Even Yokomitsu Riichi, the most conspicuous writer of the New Sensationalists, treated material in his novel *Shanghai (Shanghai, 1931)* that was often found in proletarian literature (Keene 1984, 655). Thus, it was not uncommon for the modernist and proletarian literary genres to borrow ideas from each other during their respective heydays.

The foremost figure of the proletarian literary movement, Takiji, was also no stranger to experimentation. One major example of this can be found in his greatest novel, *The Crab Cannery Ship*. In the letter of intent he sent to his publishers, Takiji writes, “There are no heroes in his work—no leading characters or persons such as you would find in works dealing with the lives of individuals” (qtd. in Motofuji xvii). The fishermen of the novel are only referred to by nicknames, with no physical details provided to help the reader imagine each individual character. Furthermore, the only character given a name is Asakawa, the villainous captain of the crab cannery ship. Takiji believes that this was the first time a collective hero was written in a longer work. Despite his confidence that “proletarian literature would advance on the trail he blazed” (Keene 1984, 618), Takiji would not make significant use of this narrative device in later

works. Instead, he would further experiment with narration and characters, while still attempting to incorporate the elements necessary for creating a successful proletarian novel.

The stories in this project feature several unique characters and narrative styles. However, these distinct stories all share a common device: the revelatory moment. There is always an instance in each piece where a character becomes cognizant of the oppressive forces surrounding them, and recognizes the need for collective resistance. Furthermore, this awakening is invariably manifested through an act of linguistic expression, either verbal or written. In a way, Takiji is laying out the blueprint for readers on how to become activists. Each individual must first find their own voice of resistance and then synchronize that with a greater whole—this becomes formula that leads to successful collective action. But Takiji does not just limit this voice to his characters. A proletarian meta-narrative is at work in several of these stories. That is, Takiji utilizes formalistic devices that exhibit the same revelatory moment and work as expressions of the ideology so important to the genre. It can be argued, then, that Takiji's style of proletarian literature is indeed very concerned with form (as the Modernist writers were). These instances of experimentation show Takiji's skill as a writer, as he was able to subtly insert complex elements into what at first appear to be "simple" stories.



Original manuscript of "The Dogs That Kill Men".
From *Kobayashi Takiji zenshū* vol. 1.

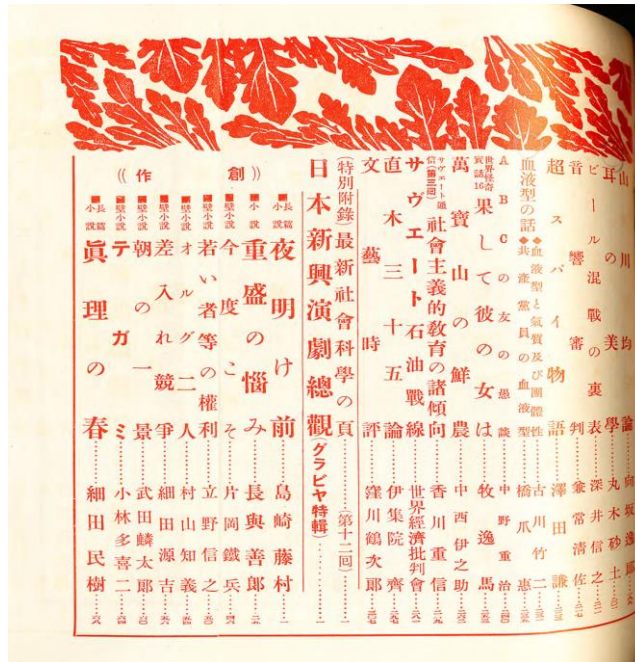
“The Dogs That Kill Men” (“Hito wo korosu inu”, 1928) is brimming with surprising narrative techniques. Later revised into an unpublished story called “Prison Room” (“Kangokubeya”, 1929) and rewritten into a scene in *The Crab Cannery Ship*, this short piece exhibits a number of Modernist literary devices by way of an inconsistent narrative voice. The beginning of the story is told from a camera-like perspective. The vantage point pans from right to left, bringing to life the expansive Tokachi plateau in Hokkaido, with its rivers and railroads winding their way through the landscape. But this description of the scenery suddenly jumps from the landscape to the blistering heat of the sun beating down on the backs of weary, sweaty laborers. As mentioned above, short sentences, jumps, and sense impressions are all traits characteristic of modernist literature. However, it is the narrative voice that is most conspicuous. It initially appears to be situated in a detached third-person perspective. Yet, the voice goes back and forth between calling Genkichi, the main character, by his name or by “runaway” (*tōbōsha*). At the story’s end, it appears as though the narrator can no longer remain a simple observer. As the laborers finish burying Genkichi’s corpse, the narrator stops calling them laborers

(*dokata*) and suddenly refers to them as comrades (*nakama*). In this way, form and content synchronize ideologically, as they both awaken a spirit of resistance not only in these characters but also in the readers. Thus, this experimental meta-narrative successfully embodies the qualities essential to proletarian literature.

There are other pieces of Takiji's where form becomes more than just an aesthetic concern. "A Letter" ("Tegami", 1931) was written almost entirely in *katakana* (phonetic) script, with minimal use of Japanese *kanji* (ideograms). Kurumisawa suggests that this stylistic choice was made under the consideration that the ideal readers—factory workers—may not have been able to read well due to lack of sufficient education (187). However, there is a surprising narrative device that emerges in this story, reminiscent of "The Dogs That Kill Men." Approximately the first two-thirds of "A Letter" are told from the first-person, yet it is difficult to determine who exactly is telling the story. The narrator appears to know very intimate details about the family life and emotional state of Kimi, the main character, which would suggest a certain type of omniscience. However, a startling shift occurs when the narrator suddenly begins telling the story from that of the "I" (*watashi*). We can infer that the narrator was perhaps a resident of the same tenement house Kimi lived in, and attended the funeral service for her mother. The story remains in the first person mode until its conclusion. One must ask why would Takiji eschew the extensive use of *kanji* for the sake of simplicity, yet utilize an experimental narrative device? Perhaps Takiji was writing for two audiences: the worker and the intellectual.

Takiji was a part of both worlds. The proletariat needed a literary genre that represented the working class. Yet there was still the necessity for proletarian works to also be impeccable works of literature (Keene 1984, 599). As mentioned above, many of

the modernist writers eventually moved over to the proletarian literature movement, and perhaps that is one reason why these two antagonistic genres happen to share many similarities. It must also be noted that a number of the leaders and writers of the proletarian movement, including Takiji, were originally intellectuals, not factory workers or farmers. Thus, there is often this balancing act between preserving the tenets of proletarian literature while still trying to generate superior literary works. Being an intellectual, Takiji himself initially hesitated in his shift towards socialist ideologies. But there was a turning point where he decided, “I must know Marx in the same way that I know Goethe, Dostoevsky, and Strindberg” (qtd. in Shea 310). Unfortunately, it is difficult to please everyone. There were occasions where Takiji was simultaneously praised by proletarian critics like Miyamoto Kenji and Kubokawa Tsurujirō and criticized by others like Kurahara Korehito (Shea 329). Takiji and the movement never stopped experimenting, and the proletarian literary subgenre wall fiction (*kabe shōsetsu*), is an example of that continuous pursuit of the perfect literature for the proletariat.



"A Letter" along with other pieces of wall fiction found in the table of contents from the August 1931 issue of *The Central Review*.

"A Letter", "Father Returns" ("Chichikaeru", 1931), and "Scars" ("Kizu", 1931) are all pieces of wall fiction. "Mother and Daughter's Way" ("Hahaimōto no michi", 1931) is an expansion of a previous piece of wall fiction entitled "Undeniable Truth" ("Arasowarenai jijitsu", 1931). This genre was a brand new style of proletarian literature proposed by the prominent proletarian literary magazine *Battleflag* in 1930 (Tezuka 634). The movement itself lasted primarily from 1930 to about 1933, with its height in 1931. In its May 1931 issue, the prominent intellectual magazine *The Central Review* (*Chūō Kōron*) published a call for submissions of wall fiction. However, one wonders if they were seeking original submissions in the wall fiction style, which would preclude them from being true pieces of wall fiction, or actual pieces found in public spaces. But what exactly is wall fiction? According to Kurumisawa, wall fiction is "literature for the labor class, posted up on the walls of the workplace" (182). These stories, rarely exceeding ten

pages, would be posted up in employee cafeterias, hallways, and assembly rooms; anywhere there was a high concentration of workers. Wall fiction could also be found on the streets, in public squares, or on telephone poles. Unlike normal books, stylistic choices such as layout, design, font, and printing methods are all important aspects of wall fiction. Even the location where a piece of wall fiction is posted has an important effect on its content. The genre of wall fiction thus encompasses content, form, space, and, as we will find out later, time.

What is most important about this genre, however, is its collective aspect. Reading is a typically solitary activity. For normal readers, once the book is finished, the act of reading is over. So long as one is not enrolled in a literature course or some sort of reading group, a normal person does not even have to think about the work they have just spent a significant amount of time with. Everything ends when the book is closed. However, wall fiction is much different. Most notably, it is meant to be read in a group. Then, those who are reading together can discuss the story together. Wall fiction also has the ability to cross over boundaries of literacy, as those with reading abilities can tell the story to those without. In this way, it promotes fraternity, as readers support each other in understanding and interpreting the story in front of them.

But it does not just stop at reading. Kurumisawa argues that time is one of the most important aspects of wall fiction. By time, he means “the continuation of the story, the developments that are to come after” (187). Wall fiction demands a response. For instance, “A Letter” throws out the question: why did you leave one of your own behind? This ripple effect—from reading to responding—is an essential part of wall fiction. If there is no response after reading then “the story cannot conclude” (188). These further

developments can become “responses” or even “answers,” that could be compiled and posted up on walls in a serial manner. Kurumisawa writes, “wall fiction is an attempt to create the opportunity for participation in the work by connecting reading to the act of writing with each reader” (189). It is thus a collective form of literature that is read in a group, thought over in a group, and written in a group.

In addition to asking questions and demanding responses, wall fiction also attempts to guide readers towards their own revelatory moment. As mentioned above, all the stories in this project feature some sort of awakening to resistance, either through its characters or through the form of the text itself. In the final line of “The Dogs That Kill Men”, one of the men transforms from a laborer into a comrade when he speaks of his desire to kill the dog that their boss uses to publicly mutilate their fellow workers. In “Scars”, Nakayama’s mother finds a public outlet for her anxieties at the Red Aid meeting by speaking about her daughter who has been arrested multiple times, beaten by the police, and finally imprisoned for Party activities. In “Father Returns”, the main character Okimi’s revolutionary spirit is revitalized when she sees a flyer for Party activities posted on a telephone pole. “A Letter” ends with Kimi, bedridden and not long for this world, vowing to join the Party once her strength returns. Lastly, at the end of “Mother and Daughter’s Way”, Oyasu writes to a member of Red Aid announcing her own involvement in Party activities during a strike in her home village. In all these stories we find the acts of reading, writing, and speaking as empowering individuals in their acts of resistance or first-time engagement in Party activities. Furthermore, “Scars” and “Mother and Daughter’s Way” teaches readers about the systems of support available for those who end up in prison due to helping with the socialist movement.

Although Takiji's most famous work features a collective hero, the author understood that it was not always necessary to bury the individual (Shea 322). Shea argues that he even possessed a special talent at depicting the individual, which must have stemmed from a deep compassion for humanity (326, 328). And, although a "positive character" is just one essential aspect of proletarian literature (Shea 329), readers cannot help but feel his optimism to be genuine. Takiji believed in the power of truly collective action, that through organized resistance we would see the demands to our right to life met. Reading teaches us not only how to say "No," but how to say it together as one united whole.

IV. Gratitude

This project would not have been possible without the invaluable guidance and encouragement I received from Professor Jon Holt. I would also like to extend my sincerest thanks to Naomi Asakura for assistance with some of the trickier areas in the translation. Any remaining errors in the English translation are entirely my own fault.

The Dogs That Kill Men

Kobayashi Takiji

On the right-hand side, like a cheap painting of Mt. Fuji, Mt. Tokachi stood out boldly against the blue sky. Here is high ground, and on the opposing left-hand side, as though it were a large wrinkled wrapping cloth spread out, one can gaze far across the rocky region. A line weaves its way through the bottom of one of those wrinkles, gradually ascending towards this direction. It is a railroad connecting to Kushiro. The Tokachi River is also visible. The river looks as though it were a wire that had been played with like a children's toy. Yet in some spots it flickered a *blinding* glare. –It was “midday” of “midsummer.” It felt like at any moment flames would spark up in the relentless continental heat of the blistering sun. The laborers that had been breaking through the plateau were staggering, smeared with sweat as though they had just jumped out from a hot bath. Their dizzy eyes were red and murky, like rotten Pacific herring.

One of the supervisors went running.

Another followed behind.

Nearly one hundred laborers immediately began to *stir*. “A runaway!”

“What the hell are you doing! Stupid jackass!”

The supervisors were seething. Someone was hit directly in the face. Bam! One could hear the sound of flesh being struck.

At this time the boss came over on horseback. After handing pistols to two or three supervisors, he ordered them to immediately pursue the runaway.

“What a stupid thing to do.”

Who was it? He'll be caught in no time. And once again, that dog's gonna be happy!

On the railroad below, the toy-like passenger train appeared to be heading up this way. One could hear the exhausted panting of the engine. Every now and then it would emit swirling plumes of white smoke, like cold morning breath.

*

That evening, as usual, the supervisors carefully watched over the laborers as they returned from the work area. The sunset on their backs drew long shadows of figures shouldering pickaxes and shovels. When they finished circling the mountain and arrived at the living quarters, they could hear the gallop of horses coming from behind. He's been caught, everyone thought, as they stopped and looked back. It was Genkichi.

Genkichi's soaking wet body was bound tightly with rope. The end of the rope was fastened to a horse one of the supervisors was riding. When the horse sped up just a little (it was already going fast), the runaway would tumble over and be drug through the gravel mountain road. His shirt was torn, and there was blood coming from his forehead and cheeks. The blood, mixed with dirt, was a dusky black.

Everyone remained silent and started walking again.

(With his body in poor condition, Genkichi often said that, no matter what, he wanted to see the mother he left behind in Aomori at least once more before he died. He was 23. Afterwards, everyone learned that Genkichi had grabbed onto a plank and jumped into the Tokachi River, raging and muddy from the rains from two days before.)

**

After supper, the supervisors summoned all the laborers to the backyard.

It's happening again!

"I really don't wanna go..." everyone seemed to say.

The boss and supervisors were in the backyard. Genkichi, still tied up, lie face down in the center of the yard. While stroking the dog's back, the boss said something in a loud voice.

"Have they all been gathered?" asked the boss.

The supervisor said to the laborers, "That look like everyone?"

And said to the boss, "Yes, it's everybody."

"Well then, let's begin! Everyone, whaddaya think will happen next!"

The boss rolled up his sleeves and gave Genkichi a kick. "Get up!"

The runaway unsteadily rose to his feet.

"So you can stand, huh?" Upon saying this, the boss suddenly struck the side of Genkichi's face. The runaway reeled just like an actor on stage. His head hung downward, crestfallen. He spat. Blood began to stream from his mouth. He spat blood two or three times.

"Look at me, bastard!"

The boss *bared* his chest. And then he signaled the supervisors, "It's time!"

One of them untied Genkichi. Then, a supervisor turned the Tosa dog, whose length was about the same as the height of an adult man, towards Genkichi. The dog growled from its gut, and looking at its limbs one could tell they were filling with power.

"Sic 'em!" he said.

The supervisor released the Tosa dog.

The Tosa bared its teeth, extended its front legs and raised its rear end high.... Genkichi shook his body but, petrified, was unable to move. There was a *moment* of complete silence. Not even a breath could be heard.

With a roar the Tosa leapt. Genkichi screamed and swung his hands wildly. He was like a blind man groping about in search of something. In a single leap the dog sank its teeth into Genkichi. The two became entangled and writhed around two or three times in the dirt. The dog let go. Blood was all around its mouth. Shaking off the dirt, the dog circled the boss two or three times. Genkichi remained on the ground, twitching, before unsteadily standing himself up. Without even a howl the Tosa jumped right back at him. Genkichi was easily sent flying into the wall cordoning off the vacant backyard land. It had attacked again! Genkichi reoriented himself towards the dog, rested his back against the wall, and slid up on to his feet. Everyone couldn't help but watch. The bloodied face looking back at them was unrecognizable. They could see the blood flowing from his jaw, past his throat, all the way to his exposed, panting chest. Once he stood up, Genkichi wiped his face with his arm, and seemed to try and ascertain where the dog was. When it roared as if in triumph, in that *moment*, as if Genkichi spat out something incomprehensible,

“I'm scared! Mom!” he screamed.

He turned around and tried to wriggle up the wall much in the manner of a cat. The dog latched its jaws into him from behind.

**

That evening a supervisor accompanied two laborers as they shouldered Genkichi's corpse to the mountain. There they dug a hole and buried him. Mt. Tokachi

was even more visible in the moonlight than in the afternoon. The dirt, tossed by a shovel into the hole, made an eerie sound as it hit the box below.

On the way back, just as the supervisor was off taking a piss, one comrade said to another, “Y’know, one day I’m definitely gonna kill that fuckin’ dog...” “

Scars

Kobayashi Takiji

Through their “group” structure, the “MOPR” (Red Aid) is establishing its presence directly inside various regional factories. The plan is to expand and strengthen the movement through a foundation of common people.

In group no. xx³ of district xx, members would increase by one or two whenever a group meeting was held. New members would give a short introduction when they showed up. —One time, a woman in her forties started coming to the meetings. The group supervisor introduced her saying,

“This is Nakayama’s mother. Nakayama is the one who ended up in Ichigaya.”

Nakayama’s mother fidgeted a little bit.

I really just feel so *dishonest*, coming to this aid meeting because my daughter was sent to prison...

When I was thinking about how she’s been gone for two or three months, a phone call came from the local police. They told me to go pick her up from the police at such and such a place. Taken aback, I headed over there already half in tears. She was brought out from some detention room below. Her face was pale and dirty, and her body, being locked up for god knows how long, buzzed with a terrible smell. —According to my daughter, she was doing something like investigating, and apparently got caught.

Even so, my daughter was at home for around ten days before suddenly disappearing again. And then, after two or three months, I got another call from the

³ Marks such as x’s and asterisks are come from the practice of self-censorship called *fuseji* (to conceal a letter). Many writers and publishers used this as a way of getting around censors in Imperial Japan (Mitchell 1983, 163-164).

police. This time a different station. I bowed countless times, bringing along apologies upon apologies for my lack of guidance as a parent. Around the second time, my daughter said how awful it was, that the cops jeered at her, saying “You’re still investigating huh?” I told her there’s no reason to fret over such a thing. I’m just glad you got out of there quickly.

Upon returning home, we talked about various things regarding our work. She said, “Mom, you don’t need to bow down like that to those cops.” My daughter just wouldn’t quit the movement no matter what. So I gave up. And then, just as expected, she disappeared soon again. As a matter of fact, I didn’t hear from her at all for over six months. At that point, I was waiting like a fool in utter anticipation every day for a notification from the police. (Laughter)

Sometimes a spy would show up, so I’d open up the house to him and offer tea. I’d carefully bring up questions about my daughter, but they wouldn’t know a thing. — And then, it must’ve been eight months by then, my daughter suddenly returned. But, *her face*, something about it was more severe than before. I felt a lump in my throat when thinking about the hardship she must’ve experienced during that time. Even so, we were able to have a nice talk.

That night, for the first time in a while—probably a year—we went to the public bath together. “Mom, let me wash your back.” What an unusual thing for her to say. These words filled me with such joy. I forgot all the troubles up until that point.

Even so, when I casually glanced at her body after we entered the bath, I immediately felt all the blood drain from my face. My daughter, surprised as I was by my

state, asked, “What’s wrong, mom?” It’s not what’s wrong with me, or wrong with this or that, or, well, it’s what’s happened to your body, I said. Even though we were in public, I was half in tears. All over her entire body were violet scars.

“Oh, this?” she said as if it were nothing, “the cops gave me those.”

Laughing, she followed up by saying, “See, this is the kind of shit they put me through. Now don’t you understand how wrong it is to give those *bastards* even one cup of tea!”—She may have been laughing while saying that, but nothing in my life has struck me in such a way. It exceeds all logic.

The next day my daughter disappeared again, and this time turned out to be the time she ended up in prison. Even now I cannot forget the *scars* that adorned her body.

Nakayama’s mother said this, and bit her lip.

—November 14, 1931—

Father Returns

Kobayashi Takiji

The baby was born seven, eight months after Okimi's husband ended up in Toyotama Prison. She had to take time off from work at the knitting mill just for the period necessary to deliver the child. The mill wanted nothing more than to quickly get rid of the wife of a man in prison, so here was the perfect chance. —Okimi was fired.

Okimi went to visit her husband in prison, for the first time in a while, to show him their baby. His face had become slightly paler, but he was in great spirits. When Okimi spoke about getting laid off, he angrily slammed his hat against the table. Nevertheless, while fiddling with the number attached to his chest, he narrowed his eyes at the child. And then, he gently poked the baby's cheeks, before laughing in a great voice.

As she was leaving, he said,

“With this, have peace of mind. I don't have to worry anymore about doing something cowardly in order to get out this place. Because I have a successor now!”

He left a space, and, as if it were nothing, said laughingly,

“—And that means your role will become even more important...”

Okimi, feeling a tear well up, firmly held it back and showed him a nod. —The baby, oblivious to everything, waved around its tired limbs, making cries of aah, aah, a...

“Give the baby lots of tasty milk, and raise it into a strong, healthy child!...

Hahaha, what, just 'cause you got fired means there's no good milk?”

Okimi mulled over this countless times during her return from the prison—If there's no good milk then so be it! I'll raise this child on "hatred" for them, she thought.

Due to Okimi's layoff, the young workers at the knitting mill would get together for discussions from time to time. With her husband gone, the factory owner no longer had anything to fear and tried to force his own arbitrary demands on the workers. And layoffs were no longer just Okimi's problem. —On the way back from the prison, Okimi went to the place where everyone was gathering, and spoke about how she had just met with her husband.

Their breaths were stolen as Okimi, looking into the baby's eyes, reached the part where her husband said, "With this, I have peace of mind. Because I have a successor!" Someone quietly turned to the side to snifle. Another attempted to say something, but their lips trembled and nothing came out. No one uttered a single word. —But inside all their breasts was a profoundly steadfast determination that bound them together.

*

Apparently there were more layoffs at the knitting mill. There were no jobs and swarms of hungry people everywhere you looked. While working on strike preparations, Okimi used her spare time walking around in search for work. At this time, the baby's belly was strangely bloated while its arms, legs, and neck were getting thinner, and it cried all the time. —Okimi was extremely worried. —No matter what happens, she thought, I must not let my baby die.

The capitalists blamed the recession on the laborers, and continued the layoffs. In order to safely get away with that, they took our vanguard and stuck them in the hole. —

By this point, Okimi understood it all very well. They used the same tactics at the knitting mill. If only her husband were to return now!

On her way back from an employment office, Okimi casually glanced at a flyer on a telephone pole that said, “The public hearings of the Communist Party are about to begin again. Through strikes and demonstrations, we shall take back our vanguard!” Through strikes and demonstrations . . . Okimi tried to repeat it in her mouth . . . we shall take back our vanguard. —If factories all across Japan started striking for that reason, of course, that’s gotta be it, she thought. Okimi suddenly started running. She felt like she couldn’t just stand there any longer. I must get to the place where everyone is gathering, she thought.

“Well boy, your daddy’s coming back. Your daddy!”

With the child bouncing on her back, Okimi took flight under the blazing sun.

—September 3, 1931—

A Letter

Kobayashi Takiji

Those who enter and exit through here must read this letter.

When Kimi's Papa was sharpening a file at the **, the spinning grindstone flew off, struck him in the chest and knocked him over. He was carried home. The doctor said to cool the affected area with ice, but no one could afford it. A number of times Mama would go out of her way several blocks over to a certain well to draw water. That well has the coolest water. In tears Kimi's Mama was always saying, why can't it be winter right now?

Papa also wept and wept. Kimi asked if his chest hurt and he shook his head saying no. Later, she asked again, and he silently closed his eyes, saying there's nothing wrong with my chest. Papa was silently wiping away his tears as he looked at Kimi's face.

Mama too lost weight, her eyes sunk, and her hair fell out. Everyone was *starving*. The inside of the house was so humid that your feet would stick to the tatami when you walked around. Visitors from the factory would often say how much it stinks. But even from the beginning, people from the factory stopped by less and less. By the time Papa died, he had already been completely forgotten about. Papa spent half a year in bed and passed away when everything in the home had finally disappeared.

And so, Mama ended up in bed the day after Papa died. She was even skinnier than dead Papa, her hair had fallen out, and she could no longer get up. A little money came from the factory, but it wasn't enough. Kimi and her family eventually had to move into the smallest room on the top floor of an old, crooked, three-story house. They would

have to take many breaks climbing those stairs in order to catch their breath. Dozens of people were crammed in the house, constantly making a clatter. When a fight would break out in the night, the entire house would shake violently.

Kimi's Mama was stuck in bed, her eyes were sunken in, and when you watched over her in silence it was almost impossible to tell if the futon was moving when she breathed. One day, Mama said to Kimi, when you wake up in the night, be sure to shake me awake, because we never know when I might suddenly die. And so, Kimi would awaken during the night, shivering in fear, and without saying a word she would reach out her hand and shake Mama. Once Mama's voice broke through the darkness Kimi would feel at peace again. She wasn't dead. With a sigh of relief, Kimi would turn over, curl up her legs, and fall asleep. This happened every night.

However, Mama gradually stopped responding so quickly. As Kimi shook Mama awake every night, she noticed Mama's body getting thinner and thinner. When she finally woke her up, Mama said, aah, aah, it's not long now.

One night, Kimi was suddenly startled awake. She quickly reached out her hand towards Mama, but scared to raise her voice in the night, first shook Mama without saying anything. Only, Mama's eyes would not seem to open. Even so, still in silence, she shook Mama harder and harder. Finally, Kimi called out to Mama. But just her voice echoed through the night. Mama did not move.

With a sudden shriek, Kimi jumped up and ran outside. Missing her footing, she made a terrible noise as she fell down the tall staircase in the middle of the night. Kimi's Mama was dead.

And so, just Kimi, her little brother, and little sister were left behind. Furthermore, Kimi herself was stuck in bed from the terrible fall she took down the stairs. Lots of people from the house got together and somehow put on the funeral. Since we're all poor, they were saying, what a pity it would be if we couldn't help each other out.

However, there was a great commotion on the night of the wake. When the people who came woke up later in the night, they found that all the offerings to the deceased had disappeared. This wasn't the doing of some cats or rodents. Who on earth would do something like this?

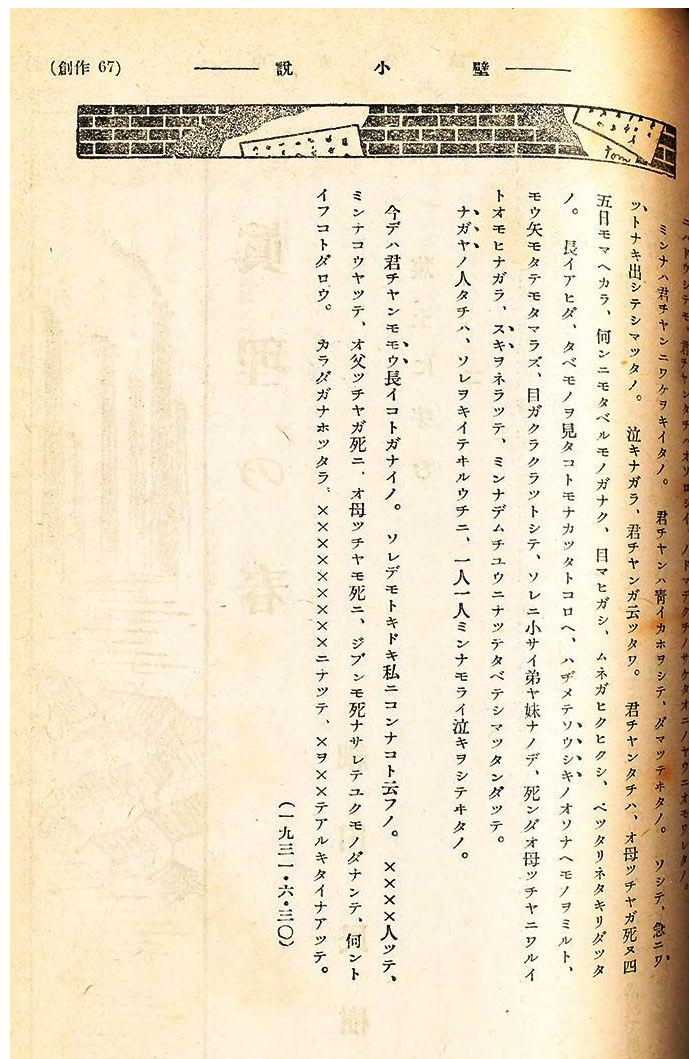
I was also at the wake. When I casually walked into the room where Kimi and her siblings were sleeping, I saw something that stopped me in my tracks. God, of all things, Kimi, her little brother, and little sister, practically in a daze, were eating the offerings to Mama. I unintentionally cried out. That's why everyone came in. What happened, what happened, they said. At that time, I couldn't help but feel as though Kimi and her siblings looked like little demons with their mouths torn open all the way to their throats.

Everyone asked Kimi what was the reason for this. Kimi turned pale and didn't respond. Then she suddenly started wailing. While shedding tears, Kimi spoke. Kimi and her siblings had had nothing to eat since almost four or five days before Mama's death. They were having dizzy spells, their chests twitched, and they couldn't even get out of bed. Seeing the funeral offerings show up in a place where they hadn't seen any food for such a long time, they couldn't take it. Their eyes glazed over, and while feeling terrible about their dead Mama, Kimi, with her tiny little brother and sister, found a chance, and devoured everything in a daze.

As the people of the tenement house were listening, one by one they joined each other in tearful grief.

As of now, Kimi also doesn't have very long. Still, from time to time she says something like this to me. Us **** people, why the hell is it that our Papas die, our Mamas die, and that even we are forced to die. When I get better, I will become a *****, and will walk the path for * to **.

—July 30, 1931—



The final passage of "A Letter" as it appeared in *The Central Review*.

Mother And Sister's Way

Kobayashi Takiji

They say that Kenkichi, the most devoted, most kind, and most studious person around, committed the most dreadful act imaginable in this world —

There was just no way mother could comprehend it.

Sometimes during his patrol, the chief of the local police box, red-faced and in a good mood, would drop by for a chat—“In this world there is a terrible crime called murder. Burglary, rape, and so on are also crimes. But nothing is as terrifying as the horrific crime of attempting to overturn Japan,” he said.

Of course, it was sending him off to Tokyo where it all went wrong, thought mother.

When Kenkichi took off, he said with a laugh that all the families in our village just keep getting poorer by the day. He said that once he gets to the city he'll work real hard to make things easier for the family.....

One of mother's eyes, always filled with mucus, became red and inflamed from days without sleep, and would secrete tears for no apparent reason.

Oyasu worked at “The Shack,” the miscellaneous goods shop owned by the landlord of that region. Some spare time finally came her way since her big brother's incident.

“Oyasu, what did Ken do?”

With tears dripping from that one eye, mother asked this to her daughter who had just returned home with a single baggage.

“It was something like the *Kommenist Party*.....”

“What, *Kommen*..... *Kom-men*-what?”

“*Komm-e-nist, Party*”

“Hmph.....?”

But mother forgot that name in no time.

“To think your big brother’s stuff is starting to affect you ... Ken what on earth did you do?”

Mother grumbled this as if she were speaking to herself.

Oyasu, who had always been on good terms with her big brother, felt that she would at least visit him in prison in Tokyo this fall.

—By working at The Shack, Oyasu was able to understand just how wretched and unjust life was for common people like her, compared to the daily life of the landlord’s family. Therefore, Oyasu wasn’t nearly as bothered as mother when they suddenly became “the outcasts” of the village.

Lettercards pressed with Kenkichi’s seal would come from time to time. Because mother couldn’t read, he would write the letters in large hiragana and katakana so that a neighbor or his sister could read them to her.

When a letter came, Mother would have Oyasu read them out loud. Mother would start to look “upset” whenever Oyasu would unwittingly start to rush her reading, whereupon Oyasu would slowly read over the same part again.

She would have to read the same letter over and over until the next one came.

Once the harvest was finished, mother and daughter went off to visit Ken.

Mother had never ridden a train for that long before, and everything she saw struck her with great curiosity. Sticking her head out the window, looking at the fields as they passed by in front of her eyes, she kept saying things like “ah, it’s still not cut here” or, “now this crop sure looks nice!”

At the courthouse, the two had trouble finding their way. After getting lost and taking a few of the wrong sets of stairs, they finally obtained a permission slip from the preliminary judge before heading off to the prison.

The prison was on the outskirts of town.

On the way, at least two vehicles with iron bars covering its windows passed the mother and daughter from behind.

At first, mother looked at the vehicle in a strange, unfathomable state, before suddenly shivering.

“Oyasu, ain’t that a prison car?”

Upon arriving in front of the prison, she suddenly crouched by the side of the road and covered her face, thinking god knows what.

Despite coming all this way by train, it was simply too much. The prison’s concrete walls were thicker and taller than she could have ever imagined.

It was enough to make mother lose her head.

Furthermore, when she thought about her devout son Kenkichi wearing those “red clothes”, staring up at a window outfitted with tall thin bars, something suddenly made her chest heavy. Her eyes were spinning. —Her body could not handle it.

Reluctantly, Oyasu had her mother wait on a table at the supply drop. Oyasu was forced to meet with her brother alone.

Oyasu, her face dirtied from tears, returned with a city-style woman she didn't know. —Oyasu vigorously wiped her nose with her upper arm.

That woman talked to mother about the work she does, and said there is no need to worry about Kenkichi. Even though, as the police box chief was saying, her son committed such a terrible deed, when she thought about how there were mysterious people in this world that were looking after him, she couldn't put it all together. While Oyasu was off to the side wiping her nose, the city-woman said she worked for the "Aid Society", and that they support people who end up in prison for helping poor people like laborers and farmers. They also work to help out with the families that were left behind. —On the way back the city woman gave Kenkichi five postcards.

Mother took the trouble of coming all that way, only to leave without seeing her son in the end. Along the road, she talked about various things with the woman. When they finally parted, Oyasu thanked her many times over.

"Hey Oyasu, how was Ken...?"

In the train, mother asked timidly as if she were about to touch on something dangerous.

"He said, it's a whole lot better than the stupid village where no matter how much you work you still can't get a bite to eat, this place is piece of cake. —He said tell mother to take care of herself until I get out....."

Mother listened intently, as if not to let a single word get past her.

"That place is a piece of cake? My, what a thing to say!"

Mother pressed a hand towel to her face.

When Oyasu saw her kind brother wearing a braided hat with a number attached to his lapel, her chest welled up, and despite having prepared all the things she was going to say, she ended up at a total loss for words.

“I don’t know what the people outside are saying about what I did, but think about the kind of life you live and the work you do each day. Then make up your own mind about it. You understand.....?”

Her brother said this while fidgeting with his hat.

Oyasu thought constantly about the things the person from the Aid Society and her brother said.

Around half a year later, the woman from the Aid Society received a letter from the countryside written in pencil. —The letter was from Oyasu.

I now understand ‘loud and clear’ what it was you were talking about. Everyone’s in good health here. A *tenant farmer strike* has begun. I’m also a part of it. What you talked about really made sense. Even mother stopped resisting, and now she makes me rice balls. Despite that, she still can’t say ‘the Communist Party’ right.

Starting now, I will write letters to my brother in *prison*. This letter I’m writing will make him happier than anything. A letter about this strike will tell him that I’ve come to understand everything. Well, keep your head up. I’ll keep mine up, too.

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