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Tracking Down Silence, a Fragment

Not the sounds of water lapping the dock
 but the pause between ripples
 not the whisper of paddle and prow
 separating the water
 but the glide away from shore

Knowing it can't be found in a house
 (the plumbing wheezes, creaks creak)
 yet thinking it might be found at home
 when we grow old, deaf, and live alone

A hush at symphony hall—the conductor's arms
 uplifted, holding the moment
 after a crescendo's climax
 the pause before a burst of applause
 when the final curtain falls

Nothing like the absence of talk after a quarrel
 itself a kind of solitary confinement
 but the pulsing of sound and silence
 like the beating of a heart

Michael Bourdaghs

Memoirs of a Geist

You will excuse my English if it contains errors. Because you cannot speak my language, I must write to explain myself. If you had learned Japanese, I could rely on what a reviewer of my latest book, *The Orientalist Cybernetics of Marxism*, called my "incisive yet lyrical prose style" (translation mine). But you do not know Japanese, so I must resort to your language to tell you about the unfortunate incidents that have befallen me.

I am forty-six years old—that is, I was born the last year of the American Occupation of Japan. I live in the western suburbs of Tokyo and lecture regularly at a number of universities in my city. I co-edit one of the most prestigious intellectual journals in my country; it has no counterpart in your country. I know, because I have visited your country more than twenty times to lecture and teach.

What I want to tell you about happened to me last month. I was sitting at the counter of Neko Jidai (Cat Era: translation mine), a tiny bar in a basement fifteen minutes' walk from the south entrance to Shinjuku station. It was early in the evening and I was the only customer in the bar. The only other person there was Kumamoto, the owner. I often stop at Neko Jidai on my way home to eat supper and to chat with Kumamoto and other customers. Kumamoto played professional baseball in the 70s until he was banned for leading a violent protest against the Narita Airport. He now spends his days reading existentialist philosophy and his nights tending bar. He is also a brilliant cook.

Kumamoto stood behind the counter, slicing pickled vegetables and occasionally stirring the contents of two kettles that sat on gas burners along the back wall. A cassette tape of jazz music, early Cecil Taylor, was playing. We were discussing the Hanshin Tigers baseball team.

When the bar door opened, both Kumamoto and I turned to see who it was. A man, a European, walked in. His eyes were bloodshot, the skin around them purple and deeply creased. But except for his eyes, he looked quite youthful, perhaps twenty-three or twenty-four—he walked with a lively step. His face was narrow with a pointed nose, and he had uncombed blond

hair that hung down past his collar in back. He wore a knee-length velvet coat, a white ruffled shirt, leather breeches, and brown boots with large brass buckles—which is to say, he was dressed very much in Shinjuku style. That is a joke, but since you have never been to Shinjuku, probably it does not seem funny to you.

The Westerner nodded to me with an inexplicable familiarity. He seemed to have been drinking, and he wobbled as he sat down on the barstool next to mine. I detected a faint odor. It was what you smell on a hot summer night when you ride the train home: standing with one hand hooked through the overhead strap, you shift your weight and, suddenly, on the updraft from inside your suitcoat, you catch a faint whiff of your own body. That was the odor I smelled on him. I lit a cigarette, a Marlboro. He smiled at me. Two of his front teeth were rotting away.

The man asked Kumamoto whether he stocked any wine. He spoke remarkably fluent Japanese, much better than anyone from your country I have ever met. Kumamoto explained that he sold only Nihon-shu—what you would call sake. The man nodded and asked to see the house list. He selected a little-known private label brewed in Niigata Prefecture, sweet but not cloying. By coincidence, it was the brand I drink.

Kumamoto placed a *tokkuri* serving bottle and a small cup on the counter in front of the Westerner. He poured out his first cup. He held it up, first toward Kumamoto, then toward me. I lifted my cup in answer. He sipped the liquor and sighed with pleasure.

“Achhh! Delicious,” he said.

I nodded. “I am drinking the same,” I told him. I refilled his cup from my bottle; he returned the favor to me. I introduced myself. He nodded, as if to affirm that he already knew my name. And then he introduced himself.

“Geist,” he said. “Hegel’s Geist.” From the pocket of his velvet jacket, he produced a business card. On it was written the name, spelled out in the katakana script we use for foreign words, and below that, where we Japanese would list the employment rank, the card read: Universal Spirit of World History. It listed no address or telephone number.

I decided to play along with the joke. If you read my books, you would know that I am beloved for my bubbly sense of humor. Besides, if the game with ‘Geist’ became too tedious, I thought I could easily expose the fraud, trap him in a misstatement. Naturally I reject Hegel and the imperialistic universalism he represents, but I know my Geist. I have read the *Phenomenology* five times, twice in German. Familiarity with Hegel is an

indispensable first step in the critique of Western logocentrism. I have published a number of articles on the topic.

“I am surprised to see you here in Tokyo, Geist,” I told him. “Surely you would feel more at home in Washington or London than in Shinjuku. We Japanese intellectuals have long since outgrown your sort of universalism. Yes, I acknowledge the tremendous advance Hegel’s system achieved in shifting Western thought from theism to humanism. But, no offense intended, it’s still a European particular masquerading as the universal.”

The man smiled quietly. Before answering, he sipped at his liquor with evident pleasure. When he did speak, it was with a quiet, unshakable confidence.

“Oh, you haven’t outgrown me,” he said. “Read the *Phenomenology* again. You are written into it, my boy. Hegel knew all along that you were coming. You have completed the System, and I congratulate you. May I offer you some more Nihon-shu?”

I accepted the drink and poured again from my bottle into his cup. All the while, of course, I was formulating my answer to his challenge. It appeared to me that this ‘Geist’ was sadly unfamiliar with our Japanese intellectual traditions.

“Of course, in a sense you are correct,” I began. “In the nineteenth century, as Japan modernized in order to avoid colonization, we accepted Hegel’s thought as our blueprint for achieving Civilization and Enlightenment. I cannot deny it: at that time, as the first Asian nation to modernize, we in a sense demonstrated a generality, perhaps even a limited kind of universality, to Hegelian ...”

With a good-natured wave of his arm, he cut me off. “I was not referring to the past. I was speaking of the present day. I was speaking of you. You are the final synthesis [*Aufhebung*, *shiyō* in Japanese; there is no accurate English translation]. All through World History, I have been working inexorably toward my final awakening into pure self-consciousness, and the moment I walked into this bar tonight, I felt it down to my bones. You are the final triumph. Not Japan in general: you in specific. You are the last great World Historical Individual.”

It seemed that he was familiar with my work. Still, this ‘Geist’ obviously remained trapped in the discourse of Enlightenment. Could I pry him loose, open his mind to new possibilities? A lethargy that had plagued my mind for weeks, even months, began to clear. I felt a charge of excitement.

"You must understand," I began slowly, "that Japan is not a Western nation."

He smiled beatifically and nodded. "Perfect," he muttered.

I continued. "Yes, the Meiji period was marked by a strong Westernizing tendency, grounded in Hegel—read through Spencer, of course. But in the 1930s and 1940s, our intellectuals..." Here, I cited several Japanese philosophers, but their names would mean nothing to you, so I omit them. But Geist nodded with pleased recognition at each name, as if I had summoned up long dormant memories of schoolyard friends. I began to suspect that winning this point was not going to be so easy. I continued. "Those philosophers sought what they called 'overcoming the modern.' Of course, their activity was implicated in Japanese imperialism, there is no denying that. But even with the limitations of the 'overcoming the modern' school, we intellectuals in Japan have come to recognize unique cultural structures that distinguish Japan from the West. With all due respect, there is no single Spirit guiding all of history. Of that we are quite certain. No European history can encompass the reality of the non-West."

Geist clapped his hands in delight. "Bravo. Well done. I appreciate your efforts, you have no idea! Without Japanese particularity, without a Japan as distinguished from the West, a gap remains in World History, a flaw in the fabric. Your discovery of the antithesis to the West is the necessary step that leads to the final synthesis, the End of History. I thank you, sir, with all my soul!" He grabbed my hand and shook it vigorously. He then poured out cups for us. "Drink up. We must celebrate!"

"But Japan does not fit into your Westernizing narrative."

"Japan by definition is already included in my system. When you use the word Japan, you are speaking in my tongue and I recognize you as a brother—no, no, I recognize you as my own Self."

"No, no. Japan is outside your system," I answered. I wasn't ready to give up, even if Geist refused to listen to reason.

"It is only by being outside that Japan can at last belong to the system. Drink, drink!"

Geist once more filled our cups. He drank his off at a single go and motioned for me to do the same; he then refilled our cups yet again. The Nihon-shu had begun to taste bad, and I felt the alcohol's effect in my arms, my legs, my stomach—although my head still remained clear. Our tokkuri were again empty.

"Let's go to another place near here," Geist suggested. "They have Rhine wines there, and blood sausages too. You will enjoy it."

We paid Kumamoto, who eyed Geist with suspicion. Geist and I climbed up to street level and then walked ten minutes through the crowded back alleys of Kabuki-cho. Geist walked so close to me that our hips brushed one another repeatedly. I angled away from him, trying to open up a slight distance between us so I could see his face better, but Geist kept closing the gap. We came to the bar that Geist knew. It was decorated as a Bavarian beer hall. We sat at massive wooden tables and Geist ordered two bottles of wine, as well as two large jockey glasses of draft beer and a variety of foods.

The beer arrived. We drank it, our conversation continuing. From this point on, I confess, my memory becomes quite uncertain. I remember the wine came, and we drank the first bottle quickly, Geist holding it out to refill my cup with insistent regularity. We began in on the second bottle. I think we were discussing Spinoza.

But that is all I remember of my encounter with Geist—or whoever it was. I woke up with a terrible hangover the next day and no memory of how the evening ended or how I got home. My wallet was missing, as were my wristwatch and Marlboros. In my jacket pocket, I found a handful of dried brown leaves and a credit card receipt for the Bavarian beer hall. It was paid onto my American Express card, but the signature on the receipt looked nothing like mine. The name was mine, yet the frilly curlicues and the looping swirls underneath the letters: this was not my writing. Had Geist merely signed it for me? Or, had he swindled me—stolen my money, my credit cards, my cigarettes?

Of course, I immediately telephoned the American Express office in Tokyo. I learned then that Geist had gone on a shopping spree at my expense. So far, they had approved charges on my card for an escort service in Roppongi, breakfast at the Imperial Hotel, a seventeenth-century sword from an antique dealer in Ginza, and—just minutes earlier—admission for two at Tokyo Disneyland. I cancelled the card, of course. Geist would no longer be able to masquerade under my name.

This all happened, as I have said, last month. You may wonder why am I writing this all down for your benefit. It is because you, of all people, *you* need to know how very hard it is in this day and age to be a Japanese. You have no idea.

Yesterday I went back to Neko Jidai for the first time since the events I have recorded above. I learned then from Kumamoto that the 'Geist' returned to the bar a few nights later. It was very late; all the other customers had left. Geist drank half a bottle of Nihon-shu and jabbered incoherently at Kumamoto, something about an "H" triangle between Heidegger and Hannah Arendt and Hegel ("H" is Japanese young people's slang for "sexual perversity"). When Kumamoto had had enough and told Geist it was closing time, Geist asked to pay his bill with a credit card. Kumamoto did not know about the earlier theft yet, but he saw that the name on Geist's credit card was that of former Prime Minister Nakasone. Kumamoto told Geist that he would have to call the credit card company for authorization. Of course, he really dialed 119—the police emergency line.

But, according to Kumamoto (who is not above inventing a story, I must warn you), when he turned back around after hanging up the phone, Geist had vanished. Kumamoto never even heard the bar door open. All that was left was Geist's cigarette, a Marlboro, propped up in an ashtray, its tip glowing, its smoke rising toward the empty heavens.

 Kris Christenson

$$e=mc^2$$

Think of the voice, rippling
 From the throat's zero—where
 Does it go? Do words expand always
 Distance defined in sound's
 Hill and valley? The only part
 Listening: the ear's thin drum. Or maybe
 Green. Maybe
 Stories become hibiscus or
 Foxglove, leaf veins
 Trace our names, and
 Stamens spring forth
 Prayers and exaltations. Soil
 Cracks, pallid stems unrolling
 L's and T's, not one vowel
 Lost, crocus perfecting
 Our tiny moans of praise.