

TOKYO

Michael Mejia

FC2

TUSCALOOSA

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Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487-0380
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Book Design: Publications Unit, Department of English, Illinois State University;
Director: Steve Halle, Production Assistant: Sanam Shahmiri
Cover image: YAMAGUCHI Akira, *Raigo*, oil, sumi (Japanese ink) on canvas,
181.8 x 227.3 cm; photo by MIYAJIMA Kei, courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery
Cover Design: Lou Robinson
Typeface: Avenir Next Condensed and Baskerville

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication

Names: Mejia, Michael, 1968- author.

Title: Tokyo / Michael Mejia.

Description: Tuscaloosa : FC2, [2018]

Identifiers: LCCN 2017045231 (print) | LCCN 2017049872 (ebook) | ISBN
9781573668774 (ebook) | ISBN 9781573660662 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Interpersonal relations—Fiction. | Tokyo (Japan)—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3613.E444 (ebook) | LCC PS3613.E444 T65 2018 (print) |
DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017045231>

This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for
the Arts.



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I.
Report of Ito Sadohara,
Head of Tuna, Uokai, Ltd.,
to the Ministry of Commerce,
Regarding Recent Events
in the Domestic Fishing Industry

Minister:

In accordance with my initial offer to do so, and your office's subsequent demands, I recount here, in detail, my role in what has come to be known as "The Tuna Affair." You will find, in many instances, I have exceeded your instructions by not only narrating those actions of mine directly related to the affair—including the names of all those to whom I have spoken of this matter, as well as those who might now, at the prompting of daily media revelations, realize their unwitting role in the scandal's concealment from the general public—but also by describing parallel events that affected my personal life during the past year.

I know that much of this latter narration is highly irregular in Ministry reports. I also recognize that the recent calls from the public for the government's resignation make lengthy explanations worth somewhat less than the time and materials used to give them, and that, correspondingly, my tale should only encompass those facts necessary to determine the magnitude of my crime and to assess an appropriate punishment. Nevertheless, this rare opportunity to speak without inhibition—if only in a whisper, and in the ear of a deaf executioner—has invested me with the transcendent fearlessness required for truths such as these.

I have no hope of, nor any desire for, an opportunity to explain myself to our nation or the world at large, and I do not intend this document to serve as a justification for my thoughts or actions. I expect no degree of exoneration from the Minister or the government, no quarter in my punishment.

Finally, if I might be granted one request, I respectfully ask the Minister that, for the sake of what remains of my dignity and the dignity of those involved in the personal affairs disclosed here, this report not be reprinted or passed on to others in any form.

Submitted with the deepest humility and sincerity,

Ito Sadohara

My first encounter with what has come to be known as “The Tuna Affair” occurred in the early morning hours of 21 April this year, a Thursday, only moments after I received word that my wife, Sato, had collapsed in the frozen foods aisle of her local market and commenced labor. I was sitting at my desk, staring at a framed photograph that had not left its place in a little-used desk drawer for nearly two months, when my secretary, Miss Onazaki Hideo, entered my office for the second time that morning. The photograph, in fact, was a portrait created in a studio in America: my wife, Sato, in front of an abstract, autumnal backdrop, festive but also melancholy under soft lights, so that her pale, plum-like face glows around the thin crescent light of her smile, around her small black eyes, the sticky child’s candy of her lips; Sato, a small, white softness, giftwrapped, as it were, in a knit motley of orange, pink, and green neons, the girlish hues of a lost season’s boutiques. This portrait was my wife’s gift to me on my thirty-sixth birthday, not quite six months after we were married, before she first saw Tokyo, before I became Head of Tuna, before our difficulties.

As of that morning, Thursday, 21 April, my wife had, in fact, been gone for several months, and I’d had no contact with her since she’d faxed me, while I was at lunch, her desire to separate. Until that morning in April, I was not aware that Sato had left Tokyo, that she had, in fact, left Japan altogether. I did not know where she was. Not until that first day of “The Tuna Affair,” when the news of Sato’s collapse came to me by way of a transcribed telephone message from her mother, Mrs. Daisy Kamakura, did I know that Sato had returned to her parents’ home in America. San Francisco, California, to be precise. And exactly how long she had been there I still did not know.

Naturally, I found the news from America rather shocking. Not because Sato was apparently living with her mother or because she had collapsed at her local market. No, Minister, I found the news rather shocking because not until that moment, after Miss Onazaki had entered my office for the first time on the first day of “The Tuna Affair” and handed me her transcription of Mrs. Kamakura’s transmission, after I had laid down my morning paper (the previous day’s late edition of *Asahi*) and taken two sips of coffee (a beverage that I had begun, during my time in America, to appreciate more than tea), after my wife had been gone for months without a single attempt at communication, not until that moment, Minister, was I aware that Sato had been pregnant.

As I have stated, Sato had been gone for some time. Nearly eight months, in fact. In addition to this, the demands of my position as Uokai’s Head of Tuna had limited our sexual relations prior to her departure, by which I mean that those few encounters I could recall having occurred during the second and third quarters of last year were either nonprocreative or were halted prior to any immediately apparent positive result. These were the unpleasant calculations that drifted through my mind after learning of Sato’s labor.

But perhaps, I thought, I have been too hasty. Perhaps, I thought, I am simply misinterpreting Mrs. Kamakura’s meaning, misreading her use of the term *labor*. Yes. Simply misreading. Repeatedly misinterpreting. In fact, had I not just been perusing an article in my morning paper about a scientific study suggesting that persistent melancholy, such as that accompanying divorce or separation or a failed attempt at self-annihilation, even melancholy existing on a deeply subconscious level, may cause chronic hallucinations and errors of distraction? (I had.) I reread the message and I reread it again and I reread it again, aloud, but each iteration seemed to further obscure the characters on the slip of paper handed to me by Miss Onazaki, to erase them one by one, until only a single pair—rendered in Miss Onazaki’s impeccable,

artless kanji—remained: *labor*—two sounds silencing all the rest, overwhelming syntax, inflection, meaning.

But were there not other ways the term *labor* might apply to Sato?

- physical and/or mental toil
- the pitching of a ship
- left-leaning political parties
- workers' unions
- great effort in motion
- expression of a point in minute, even unnecessary detail
- the production of goods and/or services
- production effected by difficult or forced means

Labor

- childbirth

I could not excise the possibility.

My next thought in reaction to this news was (and I am embarrassed by it now): *bitch* (a word whose use by myself is, like my affinity for coffee, a result of my time in America; to explain my adoption of it, as opposed to numerous other, softer, Japanese epithets, I can only say that its undiluted violence gives me pleasure). That bitch was having an affair. She'd left the country with her lover, and now she'd had his child.

(At a later time, after revisiting the calculations I have already mentioned, I came to believe, I had to believe, that the cause of Sato's collapse was in fact some complication from a premature birth. There was no indication of good or ill health in Mrs. Kamakura's message, regarding mother or child. I had no choice but to assume that a birth at that particular time was wholly unexpected. Why else would a woman so close to term go into labor at a market? But at the moment I have just described, time meant nothing. Sato was gone, she was pregnant, she had fallen down in San Francisco, she was the mother of a child

that could not be mine. At that moment I knew for certain that she was a faithless bitch.)

In order for the Minister to understand why I came to such a conclusion, I must explain that, directly after Sato's departure, I experienced a rather difficult period of transition back to unmarried life, which was coincident with a general downturn in profits at Uokai, Ltd. For months I faced not only the shame of having lost my wife—of sleeping and eating in a silent home, of existing without intimacy, of having to choose, when others asked about Sato's health or whereabouts, whether to lie—for a moment feeling the hopeful balm of that untruth, only to feel in the next moment my anguish redoubled—or to tell the truth and risk the equally degrading possibilities of another's display of sympathy, a distasteful and embarrassing melodrama, or respectful silence—but also, it seemed at the time, not just to me but to much of Uokai's upper management, the very likely possibility of my dismissal. Daily memos made it quite clear to every department head that, despite the tradition of lifetime employment, any drop in the productivity of our individual departments would result in global termination.

Sleepless nights, Minister. Tardiness. Comments made out of turn. Deadlines very nearly missed. Important documents creased. How many times in those first three weeks of my loneliness did I lead my department to the brink of the abyss, only blind fortune and the furious industry of Miss Onazaki holding us back?

Then came "The *Matsuo* Incident."¹ Despite the generosity of the international press in blaming the Spaniards for the violence of the final confrontation, and implicitly for the incident as a whole, I knew straightaway that the dispute had, in fact, started with me. My misreading of a minor stipulation in the most recent amendment to our trade

1. No doubt the Minister will recall the general details. In any case I refer him to document 30001592 in Uokai, Ltd.'s archive, *Report of Maruyama Kato, Captain of the Matsuo, on the Recent Incidents in Cadiz*.

agreement with Spain led directly to the shots fired over the freezer trawler *Matsuo*'s bow.

Nevertheless, when, in the course of his investigation, the Minister examines my company record—assuming he has not already done so—he will find no reprimand, no censure, not a single mention of “The *Matsuo* Incident.” Why? I said that after Sato left me I existed without intimacy, but, as the Minister knows well from his own career, truth, like a little dog, always finds its way out into the street. At best, one can only pretend not to know it; one can kick it, treat it as the cur of rumor, and hope others will follow suit.

A few hours after the climax of “The *Matsuo* Incident,” I was leaving for home and found myself in one of Uokai's normally crowded elevators alone with two colleagues whom I barely knew. They were newer, younger department heads: Hitotsume Kazunoko, a lifelong roe man whom I perceived as wholly unserious, and Kanata Hiyayaka, a rather surly fugu specialist, hired away at great expense from a company in Nagasaki, a friend of celebrities and a celebrity himself, of sorts, for whom all the younger men have great respect. At first, the three of us rode in silence, but as we descended past the fifteenth floor, Hitotsume, in the midst of a grotesque yawn, clapped me on the shoulder and shook me in an overly familiar but unthreatening manner. He leaned his head close to mine, so close I could smell the earthen scent of the tea he had drunk in an unsuccessful attempt to hide the smell of the roe he had sampled earlier that day. He said that he was very sorry for my troubles, sorry for their timing, because—I remember his words exactly, his disrespectful words—“who among us at Uokai, Ltd. suffers more at this difficult time than you, Ito, struggling with your two-headed demon.” Then he patted my shoulder, again with an affectation of friendliness. He removed his hand. He smiled. Kanata said nothing, only watched the numbers changing above our heads. Hitotsume saw me look over at his friend and emitted a hissing laugh, sniggering at my speechlessness, and then goaded me with insincere exhortations to come get drunk with them. Of course, I demurred.

I went home instead and remained there for two days, knowing that no one would call for me, that I would not be dismissed for delinquency. I have been with Uokai, Ltd. for the whole of my professional life, Minister, and I have developed a deep understanding of the company's ways. In spite of the gracelessness of Hitotsume's performance, I could see that I was being given leave for the purpose of settling my personal affairs. It was my duty to honor the company's generosity.

And on the second day I did indeed regain something of myself, not slowly but all at once. I had spent nearly the entire time in bed, only a glass of water and a small bowl of sushi rice at my side, as I contemplated the nature of the demon I was supposed—by Hitotsume, in any case—to be wrestling, searching for his weaknesses, when suddenly it struck me that my demon was not one with two heads, but two demons, and, thus severed, these two, while still formidable, were rendered significantly less powerful. My initial judgment of Hitotsume had been justified after all. He was a fool, a flamboyant obfuscator.

The necessary course seemed clear: I would make one of my demons disappear. I accomplished this by choosing to believe Sato no longer felt any love for me. No doubt this will not sound like much of a solution at all, seeing as it would, and in fact did, augment the anguish and shame already plaguing me. But termination in some form, personal or professional, was clearly unavoidable. A choice had to be made. And as Sato was not present to protest my intended decision, the choice seemed quite clear.

For some weeks, however, this concession to weakness brought me even lower, to the most vile depths of self-loathing a man can know, but in proportion I applied myself ever more forcefully to the needs of my department and soon began operating with such renewed vigor that I successfully drove my self-loathing back into that dark region of forgetfulness we all possess and which allows those of us willing to ignore its existence to find ourselves capable of perfection, of nobility, perhaps even of heroism. In the month following my brief convalescence I received two commendations for my department's improved sales.

III. Backstage

He'd sometimes imagined her—Yoko—his wife—in her former life—living in Tokyo—still married to the Japanese—taking the occasional course at Waseda—sitting by the library window one late autumn afternoon—watching the sun set over the western suburbs—

What is it?—her friend Yumiko asks—playing with her hair—as if distracted—as if it's nothing—natural—as if she isn't aware of the traces of white powder there—

She's married too—this woman—her man always coming home late—or not at all—even on weekends—working, he says—which means drinking—which is work—Yumiko explains—and bedding hostesses and secretaries—and taking it in the ass from his boss—Takahashi—for all she cares—in some cozy little condo in Shinjuku—*while I'm to stay at home and cater to his son—another generation of him—so why should I just stand by and take it?*

Nothing—it—what?—it's nothing, the woman who is not yet M's wife says—Yoko—oh Yoko—

She's thinking of the warmth of the hand of the man beside her—another gaijin—like her—but Caucasian—like M—(who's still not yet in this picture)—how the back of that hand might feel against her palm—his open palm on her—his flat wide wedding ring pressing into her thigh—her neck—as he squeezes—and their lips parting—and how they seem to become one as they suck each other's tongues—such a mysterious flavor!—a faraway place that she still recognizes—oh, it hasn't been so long really—a lovely memory of home that makes her shudder—*Hm?*

I said aren't you the lucky one—Yumiko eyes the gaijin—who just sits there—smiling—pretending to read—but she isn't talking about him—she means M's wife-to-be's not-yet-former husband—the Japanese—the executive—the workaholic—*he doesn't drink*—

There had been a boy—once—a beautiful young Japanese—M—not long after she'd arrived—who'd acted so surprised when he realized she was Sansei—or *not Japanese* as he put it—

He kept saying it—*oh, but you're not Japanese*—as if having to remind himself—as if to excuse her—

She'd been eating alone at some place—an izakaya in Shimokita—and he had a girlfriend with him—wasn't her name Yumiko, too?—who understood English—he said—but wouldn't speak—

The girlfriend shook her head when he said that—smiling—and there was something about it—that refusal—or compliance—obedience—that she didn't like—detested really—something about those two mutually positioning themselves in a hierarchy that she couldn't stomach—learned—taught—embedded in them—evidence—he might have argued—of a cultural necessity—of Japanese-ness—that the American—the Sansei—could not understand—

But then—M—that face!—his sense of humor—and so much more dynamic than her husband—the first one—the Japanese—funny and fair-skinned and charming—M—impeccably styled—young—appetizing—consumable—and she could imagine—

He'd given her his card—and his Yumiko showed no response to that—just smiling—just normal—just a gesture—the girl might have told herself—just a courtesy—a kindness—her comely young M befriending a woman alone—an older, foreign woman—a lonely looking gaijin pretending she's Japanese—her Japanese hair—Japanese mask—that face—but she didn't even know how to eat, did she?

The night of the morning of the sarin gas attack—the woman who was not yet M's wife had been home alone again—her husband having already left for his office close to Tsukiji—

She hadn't gone out all day—watching the news—waiting for him to call—to check on her—but they'd been arguing again—so she didn't expect—it was that she needed more to do than—nothing—to become a full person—more than the mask—the doll—ningyō—that she'd reduced herself to—had allowed herself to be reduced to—and why?

Later—hungry—still alone—she'd walked to the little sushiya by their house—where the owner and his wife always treated her so well—not just because of her husband's reputation—or she didn't think so—but there was no way to know—

Where there was no television—of course—just a little recorded music—the sound of a koto—and the chef picking out the best of what he had—but the glistening flesh recalling what that young M had said that night—in Shimokita—about Tsukiji—a *fish graveyard*—and his impersonation of a dead tuna made them all laugh—and now she couldn't—

The flesh lived—pulsed—she was sure of it—and there was the man on the platform—the sarin victim—shown over and over—

The chef had been gracious about her refusal—*the day*—he said—she didn't understand what else—but she understood that he understood her lack of appetite—

When she got home and couldn't find M's card—the phone already in her hand—in their Western-style bedroom—she was crying—

She could imagine, she thought again that night—with M—she could still—

Or she could move her hand toward the other one—there—beside hers—in the library at Waseda—that other man's hand—lying palm down on the table—

Positive action—her husband—the Japanese—liked to say—

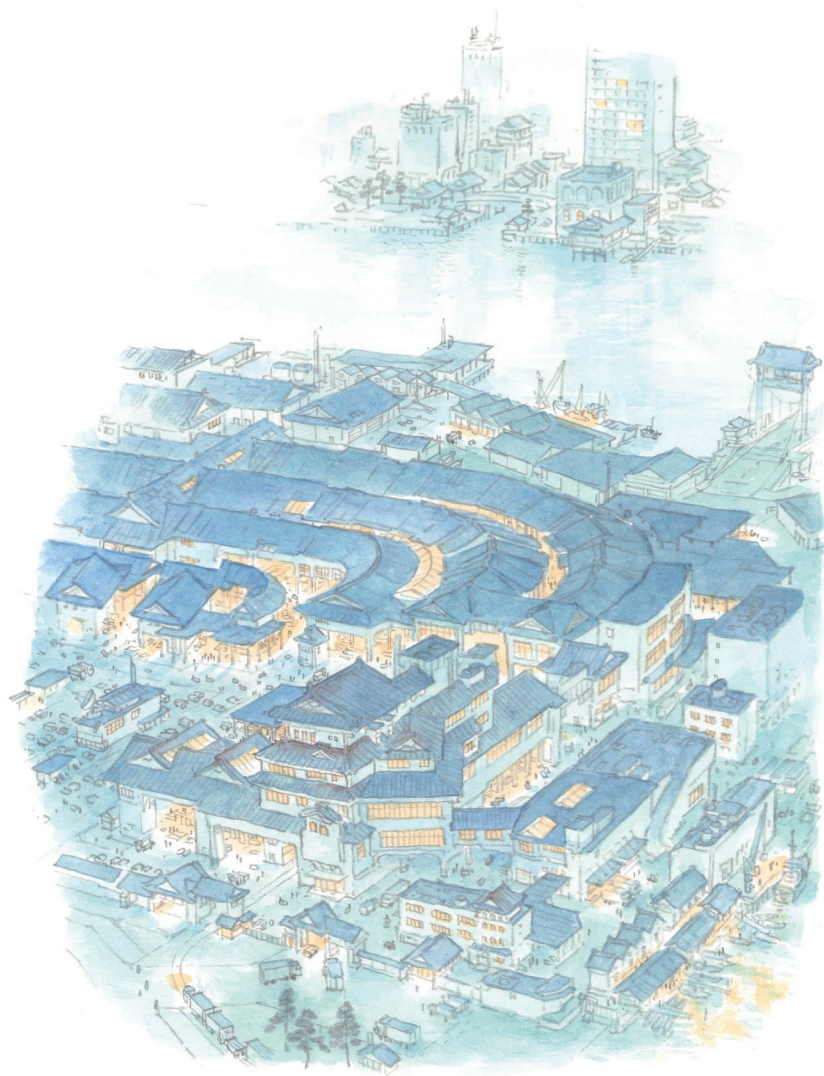
I'm hungry all of a sudden, she said—*shall we go?*



I thought he'd be at the office by now—



-but a strange power was driving him in the opposite direction.



A slit in the body—passage for the experienced hand—her father’s hand—

Entrance—or exit—

Are they male or female—these fish—bellies sliced open—gills cut out with a short sword—on the deck of whatever ship landed them—in whatever sea—harvested—fins and tails sliced away—sometimes also heads—

Bodies sheathed in frost—mist curling around them—arranged orderly across the auction floor—these tuna—

Buyers huddle with auctioneers—her father explains—inquiring about each one’s provenance—asking for a little more—a hint—a tip—any signs of trouble—

Reaching into that wound—that unctuous slit—to touch the fat—examining the surface for flaws—signs of a damaging struggle—hints of the internal burn that turns the thick flesh soft—watery—white—excavating the tail end with his hand tool—his single-clawed tekagi—

He extracts a chunk of flesh—rolls it between thumb and forefinger—performing for her—shines his flashlight on her face to make her smile—then on the meat—pops the scrap in his mouth—makes some notes about color—oil—translucence—

The girl—ten—maybe eleven—wearing galoshes like everyone else—standing in the wet—scuffing through blood—pink galoshes—free from school because it’s Friday—the day before Children’s Day—

Because he wants her to see this—or she wants to see this—or they have no choice—no other option—because school is out—and her mother is—where?

At work—home—away—gone—gone back to America—lost—just another body—

Or—

They wanted her—the girl—to see—to show her these bodies—to show her what takes her father away while she’s sleeping—the source—or one source—of their food—of her home—her comfort—of all that she knows—all they share as a family—all her life—for as long as she remembers—since before she was born—the watery—the bloody—

Could she know this?—the moment of her beginning?

To imagine home as a body—this maimed, half-frozen body on the floor—at her feet—to equate them—for the first time—this is that—

The dirty—the sordid—this world of buying and selling—*this is home*, she thinks—*this fish—this body—this is my jacket—this fish—my galoshes—doll—bed—book—this is me—us—*

Around noon is when it gives him back—this world—when it relinquishes him—back into light—into air—his bedtime the same as hers—even earlier—for now—*for a few more years*, he says—*before you’re up all night with me—with a tutor—cramming—*

She doesn’t want to think about it—

To imagine herself inside—at home in there—this fish—as it had been—at the beginning—

Is it male or female—this slit-open body?

Working her way out—into air—burrowing—oh—eating her way through the soft flesh—its translucence—otoro—otoro—the snap of its skin—opening its scaled surface for her—from the inside—

To imagine herself in another—as she was in Mother—the watery world—the bloody—

Little fish, they say they called her—before she was born—

Did he see her—see her coming—naked—face almost entirely covered with blood?

Or was he here—at Tsukiji—one hand inside—

Can she—could she remember it—if she tried?—that memory of being born—stored somewhere in her—in her flesh—a little fish—

Now here in pink galoshes—standing again in water and blood—

What her father knows about them—these bodies—how he sees them—as potential and defect—kilos of valuable flesh—translucent—the thing that precedes food—the perfect fish—the perfect shape—the perfect—flashing through his head—information in flesh—his strange power—strange sight—

And how he looks at her sometimes—little fish—

But also taste and texture—that fish in him—that flesh—in every part—is him—and her, too—this is that—*that flesh is mine*—that translucence—the underneath—

This room will be empty, he says—every body sold in seconds—gone—wheeled away—then back again tomorrow—but new—the same but different—kilos and kilos of flesh—

Still his little fish—for a while longer—for a few more years—until she loses her tail, he says—becomes fully herself—a young woman—ippanjin—an ordinary person—an outsider—like any other visitor—gaijin, he calls that woman—gaikokujin—not his but another man's—not Tsukiji's—not anymore—

She doesn't want to think about it—

Handbells ringing—the auctioneers step onto their footstools chanting *what'll you pay what'll you pay*—each in his own manner—the buyers—her father—making laconic gestures—the same every day—index finger and thumb—claw—fist—wagging hand—

The winning bid written right on the tuna's skin—in black ink—as if on mulberry paper—

More than ten years ago Sadohara saw that girl—

Back in early Heisei—the day before Children's Day—the first time—he's sure—that he saw himself in another—as another—not dressed in her skin—as if it were a costume—but in the very flesh—a young woman emerging unsteadily—

This is that—

And then catching his father's dark eye—Serizawa Sensei watching him watching the girl—as if making the same calculations—connecting the same points with the same lines—as if completing some complex equation in his head—



My mask was flawless—