

## *A Short Story*

# Lavish are the Dead

Ōe Kenzaburō

**A**RMS intertwined, head nuzzling head, the dead rise to the surface of the tea-brown fluid, then sink slowly back. They are swaddled in softened, pale-brown skin, their independence is tough, impervious; each seems turned in upon himself yet clings tenaciously to the others. The bloat of their bodies, just perceptible, bestows a look of opulence on their faces: all eyes are tightly shut. A volatile stench rises, saturating the air in the closed room. The viscid air ensnares every sound: echoes grow ponderous, solemn.

The dead are whispering; their mingling voices, heavy and thick, are hard to understand. At times they all stop talking and a hush falls over the room, but soon the murmur resumes, sluggishly mounts, subsides and fades to silence. A corpse rolls over slowly and sinks into the depths of the fluid. For a minute only stiffened arms thrust above the surface, then it quietly rises again.

The girl and I followed the superintendent down a dark flight of stairs to the basement below the med school auditorium. Our wet shoes kept slipping on the abraded metal rims of the steps; every time she slipped, the girl

raised a little cry. The winding concrete corridor at the bottom led us beneath the low ceiling to a door marked with a black wooden plaque: *Embalming Room*. The superintendent, thrusting a large key into the keyhole, turned and stared at the girl and me as if to inspect us. A small, thickset man, he wore a large gauze mask over his mouth and nose, and a pair of black rubber coveralls that laced at the back. He was saying something in a muffled voice but I shook my head and looked down at the rubber boots encasing his thick legs. I should have worn rubber boots myself, I'd have to remember to get some after lunch. The girl had borrowed a pair at the office but they were too large for her and she seemed to be having trouble walking; framed between the locks of hair strayed on to her forehead and the upper edge of the mask, her eyes burned brightly as a bird's.

Light pale as the dawn and air smelling strongly of alcohol billowed into the hall from beyond the open door. Lurking beneath the alcohol was a stronger odor, a ripe heavy stench that clung to the mucous membranes in my nose. I was disturbed for the first time, but I managed not to turn away from the whitish light flooding the room.

"Better put your masks on," the superinten-

dent said, pronouncing the words too precisely.

Fumbling in the pocket of the coveralls a nurse had given me, I took out the mask and quickly put it on. The smell of dry gauze was fierce. With one hand on the inside doorknob, the superintendent turned and said, thrusting his chin at me, "What's the matter—lose your nerve?"

The girl looked at me with taunting eyes and I felt my face flush hot as I stepped into the large room. My shoes clattered on the tile floor, the noise echoed intricately off the walls, opening a jagged crack in the saturated air.

The walls were sprayed with white lime, and spotless, but the unnaturally high ceiling was dappled with fat-yellow stains. Poised on the tile floor in curious two dimensionality were four dissection tables. I walked over to one; the marble surface was sweating beads of moisture, softly gleaming. Resting my palms on the table, I stared at the long tank which ran the length of the wall in front of me and extended midway into the room. It was nearly three feet high, the rim was tiled to match the floor. The inside was partitioned into sections of which some were open and others covered with wooden lids. The dead, immersed in dark-brown alcohol solution, crowded the tank from wall to wall.

I stood there, staring. Embarrassment had passed but the flush lingered deep beneath my skin, knotted and hot as a sore muscle. I put my hands to the mask that covered half my face and pressed my cheeks. The girl, scarcely breathing, was peering over my shoulder; she shivered agilely.

"The light in here's not so good, but I think we can get by without turning on the lights," the superintendent said. "The office starts raising hell if you keep the lights on all day long. Must be the same over in the Lit. Department?"

I nodded and glanced up at the long, narrow

skylight in one corner of the high ceiling. White, watery light was seeping through the dirty glass. It reminded me of an overcast winter morning. I'd walked through foggy morning like that lots of times. The fog would slink into my mouth like an animal, swell up and tickle my throat, and I'd laugh and cough. I felt my nerves steadying and turned back to the tank. The dead were still, silent. I watched the milky light from the skylight communicate to their naked skin a resiliency rife with subtle energy. I wondered if it would offer resistance to a prodding finger. Or maybe just collapse, like the calf of a man with beriberi?

"It's like the light you get in winter," I said.

But on the other side of the skylight were torrents of brilliant light, a blue sky, and bright limpid air. Luxuriant ginkgo trees lined the stone-paved morning street which I had walked to the med school office.

"It's this way all year round," the man said. "It stays damp even in the summer; there are students who bring chairs down here so they can cool off while they study."

With a sense of pleasure, I felt the flush beneath the thick skin of my cheeks begin to cool.

"Make sure you pull those gloves up over your elbows and fasten them tight. You'll have a hell of a time if any of that solution leaks in."

I laced the red-ochre gloves as tightly as I could. Water droplets adhering to the rubber wet the backs of my hands and my wrists.

"They're supposed to dry these things out after they wash them—those nurses are so damn lazy—" The superintendent rammed one thick, hairy hand into a glove.

"But I expected it to smell a lot worse," the girl said.

"What's that?" he said, looking around at her. "Just wait a while...."

The girl seemed to be having trouble lacing her gloves so I helped her. She had large, soft hands.

"What about your shoes?" the man asked.

"I was going to change after lunch."

"You'd better get some boots. If that alcohol splashes you, you'll stink of it forever," he threatened. "It gets in between your toes and turns to mold."

Pretending not to have heard him, I walked over to the tank, rested my hands on the slightly discolored tile rim, and scanned the crowd of corpses soaking in the alcohol. The man in the office had told me when I applied for the job that there would be about thirty bodies, but there were obviously more than that just floating on the surface.

"Are there other layers underneath?" I asked.

"Those floating on the surface are all fairly new. The older ones always sink to the bottom. And then the anatomy students like to take the newer corpses floating at the top."

"How long have the older ones been here?" the girl said.

"Those under that lid over there came in about fifteen years ago," the superintendent said, gesturing with one short arm. "And there must be some on the bottom much older than that. This tank hasn't been cleaned since before the war."

"Why are they being moved to a new tank all of a sudden?" I asked.

"The Education Ministry budgeted some money for it, I guess." He sounded indifferent. "Not that changing tanks is going to make any difference to them."

"Who?"

"Our dead friends here."

"I guess not," I agreed. "Not a bit of difference."

"It's just a nuisance, that's all."

"It really is, you know. Just a nuisance."

But as far as I was concerned, the job was not just a nuisance. I had seen the poster the day before—it offered part-time work handling corpses to be dissected in anatomy class—and gone straight to the med school office. I was afraid being in literature might be a disadvantage, but the man in the office rushed me to the superintendent without even examining my bursar's card, and explained that the job would probably be completed in one day. On my way out, I met a girl whom I had seen occasionally in English classes and we said hello; she seemed to be waiting her turn to go in, but it didn't occur to me that she might be applying for the same job.

"We might as well start at nine," the superintendent said, glancing up at the clock set deep into the high wall. "There's just time for a smoke first." He hoisted himself up onto a dissection table and lit a cigarette.

"I wonder who that clock is supposed to be for?" I said. "I have a feeling it must be for the corpses that are brought in here."

"Seems like coming down here the first time makes everybody start talking nonsense," the man said, drenching the cigarette hanging from his thick, pouty lips. "But I've been working here for thirty years."

The girl shrugged her shoulders and laughed silently; I looked around the room. Hanging on the door at the entrance and on another which led to an adjoining room were wooden plaques neatly lettered in red: *NO ADMITTANCE—NO SMOKING*. And in the tank the clustered dead were jostling to the surface, slowly sinking back. When I looked at them, words swelled inside my throat and rose into my mouth.

"Holding together for years and years while you float in the med school basement must be sort of an unsettled feeling, you know, for them."

"They're more settled than you think. Besides, soaking in that tank for years probably isn't such a bad feeling. Just having your own body is a damn fine thing."

"I might end up in this tank myself."

"I'd sink you down near the bottom so fast you wouldn't know what hit you."

"I'm only twenty, though, so it wouldn't be for a while yet."

"We get plenty of young ones too. But the first-year students grab them up as fast as they come in. They ought to make a regulation about that."

I worked my arm through a hole under the sleeve of my coveralls and took out my watch: nine o'clock. According to the clock on the wall, I was five minutes fast.

"Do you think we'll be able to finish the whole job today? It looks like it might take quite a while just to move the bodies floating on the surface."

"We won't get to the ones at the bottom until the orderlies from the hospital have drained the tank. They're probably too old to be any good anyway and we're only supposed to move the ones that can be dissected in the classroom. There's no telling what you might find lying on the bottom."

"I wonder how deep it is," the girl said, peering between corpses at the tea-brown alcohol. "It looks awfully deep."

Ignoring the question, the superintendent got off the table and clapped his thick hands together; the rubber gloves made an unpleasant, flaccid noise.

"The rubber gets sticky when they don't dry these gloves out after they wash them and that's one thing I can't stand." He lowered his thick, sunburned neck and became absorbed in wriggling his fingers inside the rubber gloves.

I realized with a mild sense of relief that working with this man wasn't going to be so unpleasant after all. His meager brow was

deeply creased, and every time he laughed the wrinkles quivered. He must have been about fifty, with an ageing wife just like him, and maybe a son who worked at a factory. Probably he was proud to be an employee of the medical school at a national university. And every once in a while he liked to dress up in a clean, pressed suit and go to see a movie at the neighborhood theater.

"I'll get the cart," he said, spitting saliva and tobacco.

"I'll go with you," the girl said.

"You can bring the tags and the record book—and you better go next door," he said, turning to me, "and have a look at the new tank."

They left, and I went over to open the door to the adjoining room. The door opened without creaking, powdered white paint sifting off it to the floor, but there was no hook or jamb to hold it open. I found a scrap of paper in the hall and used it as a wedge. A new tank had been installed in this slightly smaller room, and filled with cloudy-white fluid. The tile glistened white as mist in the light from a high window, the deserted tank seemed vast. I thought I would be able to see to the bottom but the fluid obstructed the light like an opaque membrane. Uncomfortably aware of the noise my shoes were making, I returned to the other room.

The superintendent and the girl hadn't come back yet. For the first time, I was confronting the countless dead all by myself. I leaned for a minute on one of the dissection tables, then approached the tank.

The dead poised motionless in the tea-brown fluid. I noticed that they were male and female: the smallish corpse with its face in the alcohol, buttocks and back exposed to the air, was a woman; the arms twined around a lid-post belonged to a body with a man's strong chin; the corpse arching almost out of the fluid because its thighs were thrown

over his close-cropped head had a mount of Venus studded with shriveled pubic hair. But sex barely distinguished them at all. They were all the same shade of brown, all folded tightly in upon themselves. Their skin was utterly without luster, thick as saturated sponges.

There was a tremendous difference between these dead and bodies that were cremated immediately after death. The corpses floating in the tank possessed the solidity and the independence of consummate "objects." But those others were still moving slowly away from consciousness, traversing an ambiguous middle-ground, when they were incinerated: they didn't have time to become perfect objects. I stared at the "objects" crowding the tank, at the dead who had completed the perilous transition. There was nothing uncertain or temporary about them, they were solid, stable "objects" just like the floor and the tank and the skylight; the thought made me shiver with excitement.

Of course we're objects. And pretty ingeniously put together at that. A man who's cremated as soon as he dies never knows the sense of volume and weight, or the feeling of solidity you get when you're an object.

It sounded right to me. Death was an object. But I had only comprehended it as an aspect of consciousness. Death as an object began where consciousness ended. And death off to a good start, enduring for years in a tank of alcohol, was waiting to be dissected.

I drummed lightly on the fleshy thigh of a middle-aged woman who was pressed up against the side of the tank. The flesh had no resiliency yet it offered supple resistance to my fist.

I had very shapely thighs when I was alive but I suppose they look a little drawn-out now.

Like sturdy oars, I thought, trying to imagine what she had looked like walking down the street in a cotton dress. I had a feeling she must have stooped a little.

I did if I'd been walking a long time, but

usually I kept my head up and my shoulders back.

The girl shoved open the door and stepped into the room carrying a small file-box; I leaped away from the tank as though I'd been caught in a shameful act. The superintendent, who was right behind her, wheeled a white enamel cart into the room.

The cart was amply wide and long enough to accommodate a large man. It reminded me of the rolling table I had ridden to the operating room when I had my appendix out, but it was more starkly bare, whiter, more mechanical. The cart rolled smoothly across the room on seven small rubber tires and stopped alongside one of the dissection tables. The superintendent was carrying over his shoulder a slender bamboo pole fitted with a rubber tip.

"What's that for?" I asked, as he carefully leaned the pole against the wall.

"For dragging the bodies in where you can reach them. I've been using it for years; it's just right for the job."

He picked up the pole again and, balancing it lightly in his hands, turned to confront the tank; I noticed with surprise that he had an air of confidence, as though he were a skilled technician. You could tell that he was proud of his work, he probably got special passes for his children so they could come and watch sometimes. There seemed to be no limit to the things a man could take pride in. The girl had taken the file-box into the other room but she seemed confused about where to put it.

"Let's get started," the superintendent said when she came back, handing her the bamboo pole. She threw it down on one of the tables.

Though we had to spend considerable time with each corpse, I learned gradually that it wasn't necessary to keep alert every minute. The work was really very easy.

When the cart was wheeled into position against the tank, the loading surface was just

flush with the smooth tile rim. Standing at either end of the cart, the superintendent and I would bend over the tank, single out a corpse, grab hold of the shoulders and thighs, and lift. The stiff, dripping bodies handled as easily as lumber. When we had a corpse lying face up on the cart, we wheeled it slowly between the tables into the new room, positioned the cart alongside the new tank, lifted the body and slipped it into the cloudy-white solution. The body would sink deep into the tank, then rise to the surface with silent speed. Then the girl would grasp an ankle and fasten a wooden tag to the big toe of whichever foot was not already marked. A series letter and a number were burned into each tag. When the girl released the ankle with a slight push, the corpse would glide toward the center of the tank, head and shoulders submerged, one leg jutting into the air. Finally, she would write the old and new numbers in the ledger with a soft pencil.

This simple operation we repeated again and again, working steadily and silently. A wet, liver-colored band gradually formed on the tile floor as the cart, slipping from time to time or skidding with a groan, moved slowly back and forth between the tanks. Occasionally we encountered a terrifically heavy corpse, and some were very light. One of these, the body of a middle-aged man, weighed practically nothing. I didn't notice until it was bobbing in the new tank and I saw the girl's consternation as she fumbled for a hold on it that there was only one leg. I hadn't looked at the body carefully when we were wheeling it in on the cart. They looked so much alike and so lacked individuality that it was difficult to get interested in any one of them. Besides, the strong smell of alcohol and the viscous stench of death precipitated beneath it grew unbearable at times, even with the mask, so we kept our faces turned away as we wheeled them

through the room. Several times, a protruding limb caught on a table leg and the cart almost overturned.

We lifted a young woman whose arms had stiffened akimbo, but the body was unstable as a sphere and threatened to slip off the cart. The superintendent grabbed the woman's arms as she lay on the rim of the tank and bent them in; they resisted, making a noise like splintering wood, then folded on top of the naked belly. He wiped his sweating brow on the sleeve of his coveralls, thrust his chin at me, and wheeled the cart away.

As we were lowering her into the new tank, I lost my grip on the thighs and the body splashed into the alcohol.

"Why don't you watch what you're doing," the superintendent said angrily. "Look, some of it got in under my boots."

The girl had been splashed too; she was wiping alcohol off her coveralls with a rubber glove, looking at me with eyes full of censure.

"It slipped right out of my hands—and I had a good grip on it too."

"The newer ones are generally more slippery," the man said, peering after the corpse, which had sunk out of sight and was taking a long time to reappear.

When it finally rose to the surface, he seized an ankle, deftly fastened the tag he had taken from the girl and said, releasing the body with a magnanimous gesture, "If the tag slips off it means a lot of trouble afterwards. You just can't handle them roughly."

"I'll be careful." It was a funny choice of words—"roughly." He probably didn't see anything rough about twisting an arm until the bones creaked as if they were going to break. Because that wouldn't damage or dislodge the wooden tag wired to the bloated big toe.

"I'll try not to be rough," I said, feeling much better as I pulled the cart along.

"It's an important thing to remember."

We had moved only ten bodies to the new tank when the clock on the wall struck twelve. As we listened to its languorous chiming we loaded a small, stocky body on the cart.

"This is the only clock on campus that strikes the hours," the superintendent said.

"That's funny, isn't it."

"What?"

I was terrifically hungry. But I had a feeling I would lose my appetite if food were set in front of me.

"This fellow was a soldier," the superintendent announced when we had reached the new tank, looking down at the body on the cart. "They say he tried to desert late in the war and a guard shot him. There was supposed to be an autopsy but then the war ended and they called it off. I still remember the day they brought him in."

The soldier had slender wrists and thick, tough hands. And like all the others, his head looked very small. Compared with living men, the heads of the dead seemed small and inessential; they didn't attract attention as compellingly as the chests and swollen bellies. But I willed my imagination awake and decided the soldier must have looked like a gentle, brooding animal when he was alive. And late one night ten years ago, resolve had seized violent hold of him.

"We'll stop for lunch after this one," the superintendent said. "You can meet us upstairs when you finish tagging him."

The girl hesitated, as though she were afraid to stay alone in the room.

"I'll do it," I offered.

"Would you?" She thrust the hard, wooden tag into my hand and hurried after the superintendent.

I was feeling irritably for the soldier's ankle when the tag slipped through my fingers and sank into the fluid: already the alcohol was beginning to discolor. I groped among the

clustered bodies with my left hand, holding on to the soldier's leg with my right. He stiffened in my grip.

I bet you'd like to escape right about now—this time you really have been imprisoned.

Not really—of course, we get one every once in a while that does just that.

I couldn't believe it.

"Do you want sandwiches for lunch?" the girl asked, peeking around the door.

"I'll decide when I get upstairs. The tag slipped into the tank and I'm trying to find it—I'll be up in a minute."

Whether you believe it or not, we've had guys with brown, glossy skin climb right up those stairs. You get ideas when you're in a place like this. But I stay put.

The tag was floating between the soldier's arm and side. When I pushed down his arm to get it, his shoulders tipped deep into the fluid; then he rolled over slowly and floated back to the surface.

Nobody can be as convincing as I am, no matter how clear his thoughts on war are. Because I soak here without moving, just the way I was when they killed me.

I saw the bullet wound in the soldier's side; it was shaped like a withered flower petal, darker than the skin around it, thickly discolored.

Do you remember the war? You must have been just a child?

I was growing up, I said to myself—a/l during that long war. I grew up at a time when the only hope from day to unhappy day was that the war would end. And the air was so thick with signs that hope remained that I was suffocated and felt that I was dying. The war ended, the adults digested its corpse in minds like stomachs, the indigestible solids and the mucus were excreted—but I had nothing to do with all that. And before we even realized what had happened, our hopes had faded away

like mist.

What it amounts to is that I was carrying your hopes on my shoulders. I guess you'll be the ones that dominate the next war.

I lifted the soldier's right ankle and fastened the tag to a thick big toe that must once have been well-shaped.

The one that's about to start now has got nothing to do with us, and this time we really are drowning in a futile flood of hopes.

Don't you youngsters like politics? It's all we ever talk about?

Politics?

You're the ones that are going to start the next war. We're qualified to evaluate and judge.

I have a feeling those same qualifications are going to be forced on me. But while I'm busy evaluating, I'll be killed. I guess only a chosen few of those dead end up floating in your tank?

I stared at the soldier's well-shaped head; it was terse and muscular as a gymnast's, the close cropped hair was shriveled, kinky. I imagined him speaking in a strong voice that seemed to rise from the pit of his stomach, the dense stubble of beard around his mouth trembling like the lips of a rabbit munching lettuce. But his eyes may have lacked conviction, he may have been a coward, a sneak. I made sure the F-5 tag was securely fastened around his big toe, and gave the body a strong push. With the balanced poise of a large ship, the soldier slowly sailed the tank, his small prow of a chin jutting into the air.

The superintendent was alone in the office, sprawled on a couch; the girl's coveralls and rubber gloves lay in a heap on the floor.

"Where did she go?" I asked.

"Out to the fountain to wash up."

I took off my coveralls, rolled them up on a wooden chair, and went out the door. Racing beneath the dome over the dark stone pavement, I burst outside into a flood of new light.

The work had exhilarated me, I felt alive. The breeze stroking my palms and fingers filled me with a sensuous delight. It was good to know that my fingers were breathing their fill of the bracing air.

I descended the wide, gray-brick road past the university hospital. Ranged in front of low, closed classroom windows, the soft-leaved trees were a dazzling green lushness, the lower branches brushed my shoulders. Hospital patients in pajamas and thick slippers moved slowly along the street. They were like carp swimming the cold water of early spring. I threw my chest out as I walked along, drawing the air deep into my lungs. Health sent shivers of pleasure through me. I bent over to tie my shoe and thought with satisfaction that I was far away from the dead. The suppleness of my own body was so thrilling and new it seemed to rise into my throat. I was sure that my eyes above my flushed cheeks were bright as shiny wet acorns.

A middle-aged nurse came down the hill and passed me; the boy in the wheelchair she was pushing was wrapped in a cast from foot to throat. I brushed the dust off my pants and stood up. The nurse's shoulders jogged up and quietly down, the boy's well-brushed hair shone like pale gold. I caught up and fell into step alongside the nurse, wanting to say something full of bright sounds to them. She smiled in a friendly way and I replied by smiling back and lightly resting my hand on the shoulder of the boy's cast. I would remind him of his elder brother, the affectionate one, and he would lose himself for long minutes in quiet remembrance.

We walked that way for a minute, then I glanced down at the boy's face. It wasn't a boy. A middle-aged man with swollen blood vessels in his forehead, his neck rigidly held upright by the cast, was glaring angrily at me. I looked into eyes darkly steeped in hatred, eyes rolled



as far to the right of his face as they would go in order to fix me with their awful gaze.

I stopped short; the nurse and her charge proceeded through the bright, light-washed air. I stood there stupidly while a great weariness bloomed, mushroomed through my body. That was a living person. And the living, who were equipped with consciousness, wrapped themselves in thick, mucous membranes and rejected me. I had stepped into the world of the dead. And when I returned to the midst of the living, everything became difficult, I had just taken my first fall. Maybe I had become too deeply involved in this work and wouldn't be able to get out: it was an ominous feeling.

But I had to finish the job, because I needed the money. I began to run in the direction of the fountain and kept running even after my sides began to ache. The girl was standing barefoot on the wet concrete, washing her feet and ankles.

"Why did you run?" she asked as I panted up to her.

"I'm young and sometimes I just feel like running."

"You really are young," she said without smiling.

I noticed that the thick skin of her broad face had a sallow look. She seemed exhausted and terribly run down, her face was slack as though paralyzed. She must have been two years older than me.

"See how dull my skin is?" she said, meeting my gaze with strong, unblinking eyes. "It's because I'm pregnant."

"What?"

The girl calmly continued running water on her thick insteps. I pulled my socks off, stepped down onto the concrete, and opened the faucet next to hers; the water jetted onto my toes and ankles.

"Should you be doing stuff like this in your

condition?" I said in a restrained undertone. "I mean, it might not be so good for your health...."

"It might not."

I rolled my sleeves up and carefully washed my arms and hands, rubbing my palms together. The girl handed me a bar of soap, then stepped up onto the dry concrete rim and began drying her feet in the sun.

"No man can understand how I feel," she said.

I couldn't think of anything to say. The girl wiped her thin, tightly closed lips with the back of her hand and said: "You can't understand how it feels to get pregnant and then watch yourself looking more and more like a hag every day."

"I guess not," I agreed in a kind of panic.

"When you get pregnant, life fills up with disgusting expectations. My life is so full now, it must weigh a ton."

I took a large handkerchief out of my pocket and wiped my feet. "I suppose you're going to have an operation?"

"Yes. That's why I'm working now, to earn the money."

"If you made a lot, you could go into the best room in the whole hospital."

"A friend of mine told me she rode home on a bicycle as soon as it was over."

We both giggled in embarrassment and started back toward the med school.

"What do you think would happen if I let things go as they are?" the girl said. "I'd be assuming a terrible responsibility, just by doing nothing for nine months. My feelings about my own life are uncertain enough as it is, yet I'd be giving birth to another new uncertainty. It would be just as serious as murdering somebody. All I'd have to do is wait without doing anything and it would be just as serious as that."

"But you plan to go to the hospital and do

what's necessary, right? And you're working right now so you can earn the money," I said without confidence. "So there's no reason to feel that you're not doing anything."

"I'll be responsible for having destroyed a human life. For all I know, he might have the right to grow as big as a wrestler and I wonder if I'm qualified to decide that that would be a meaningless thing. I might be making a mistake."

"You have no intention of having the baby, right?"

"Yes...."

"Then it's simple."

"Sure, for a man," she said savagely. "Whatever happens to it, whether it gets killed or keeps on growing, happens in my belly. It's sucking on me right this minute as hard as it can, to keep alive. And the scar it leaves, like it was a wound, it leaves on me."

In silence I brunted her irritation, which rushed at me as though it were a thing you could hold in your hands. The part I couldn't understand would remain rooted in her consciousness. And it had nothing whatsoever to do with me.

"The whole thing turned out to be too much for me, like a deep pit I've fallen into. And there's no way to crawl out without getting hurt. I'm not free any more to choose a way just because I happen to like it."

"It's a real problem," I said, biting down on a yawn and feeling my eyes begin to itch.

"It's a problem, all right." Suddenly her voice was stale. "And you get awfully tired."

Leaving the girl behind to clean up after lunch, the superintendent and I went back downstairs and found two students from the medical school and a middle-aged professor grouped around one of the dissection tables. The

professor stopped us when we tried to approach, so we stood with our backs to the tank and stared at the new arrival on the table, the body of a twelve or thirteen-year-old girl. The corpse was facing me, and one of the students, under the professor's watchful eye, was working between its spread legs with a syringe full of formaldehyde and some kind of liquid pigment.

When he straightened up with the syringe in his hand I got my first look at the corpse, which the back of his white gown had hidden: directly in front of me was the girl's gaping sex. It was taut and fresh, replete with life, vitally healthy. I stared enchanted; it was like being in love.

That's some erection you've got there.

I looked away in shame and turned back to the corpses in the tank. I sensed that their eyes had been boring into my back and they made me ashamed. I prodded the superintendent into action, and when we had lifted a body out of the tank, I loaded it onto the cart a little roughly.

As we were passing the dissection table, my elbow jarred the student's hip. A man with pale fleshy cheeks who had ignored me until that minute, he wheeled around and reproached me in a sharp voice: "Why don't you look where you're going! Somebody might've gotten hurt." I lowered my eyes without a word and looked at the syringe in his pudgy fingers.

"Did you hear what I said?"

I looked up at the student. A touch of panic appeared in his face, and as quickly faded. Having finished scolding me, he bent back to the corpse, self-consciously intent. I caught a glimpse of the little girl's flower-bud of a clitoris.

I began pulling the cart again, wondering why he had panicked and averted his eyes from my face. His reaction had something to do with an evasively unpleasant feeling deep in-

side me. He had looked at me with loathing, as though I were a pariah. I purposely lowered the corpse very slowly and took my time fastening the new wooden tag, re-tying the cord again and again without worrying about the superintendent, who was staring irritably in my direction. Looking at me had made the student as uncomfortable as if he had been looking at a leper. And he had lost the desire to reproach me and bent over the corpse, trying to ease his discomfort as quickly as he could; posing with his syringe like a paragon of diligence, as if to force the others to acknowledge that he was justified in feeling as he did. But what made him feel that way? What did it mean?

I knotted the cord tightly and stared into the small face capped with graying, close-cropped hair. It looked like some kind of amphibious animal.

That student probably considered you one of us, or at least someone on our side.

Because I'd loaded you on the dolly and was wheeling you in here?

No, because you look like one of us: you've tainted your whole body with something like a stain. Just think about how superior you felt to the superintendent at first.

I felt too dirty ever to be clean again, as if particles reeking of the dead were clinging to every mucous membrane in my body: I wanted to leap out of myself.

Someone opened the door in the next room and I heard footsteps leaving. I leaned away from the tank and went back to the other room.

The professor was standing alone next to the dissection table, which was shrouded in a wet, hemp cloth. Beneath the cloth, the girl with the sex so vitally alive was beginning her transition into an "object." And soon, like all the other women in the tank, she would be swaddled in cringing, brown, impervious skin, and her sex, as though it were part of her side

or back, would no longer be of special interest—I felt a pang of regret plunge into the depths of my body and clot.

The professor was standing in front of the tank with the superintendent, peering into it. He turned and looked me up and down with the same eye he had leveled on the dead.

"Are you a new employee?"

"He's a student working part-time," the superintendent explained. "He'll only be here until we've finished moving them into the new tank."

I mumbled a word of thanks, annoyed to see a look of curiosity come into the professor's eyes.

"Is that right? Just here for the day?" the professor said, wiggling his pink floppy ears. "Are you a student here?"

"Yes, in the Literature department."

"Studying German?"

"No, French Literature."

"Aah" He sounded satisfied. "What are you going to write your thesis on?"

I hesitated for a minute and then spoke up boldly: "Racine—Jean Baptiste Racine."

The professor laughed uncontrollably, like a child, wrinkling up his whole face.

"A student of Racine hauling corpses around—really!"

I bit my lip, said nothing.

"What made you take a job like this?" He was trying to look serious but still wheezing with laughter. "Work like this."

"What?" I said, surprised.

"Do you have an academic interest in corpses?"

"Actually, I need the money," I said, trying to sound frank.

With that, just as I had expected, something tangled inside the professor and he couldn't set it right again. His face grew hard.

"And you're not ashamed to be doing work like this? Don't you young people have any

pride?"

I wondered why talking with the living was so difficult? Why did the conversation have to develop along unexpected lines, and why did it always seem like wasted effort? Piercing the mucous membrane which enfolded the professor and seizing his well-larded body would be difficult, I was sure. I stood in bewildered silence while fatigue flooded through me.

"Well? What have you got to say for yourself?"

The professor's face was swollen with irritation and hatred; behind him, the superintendent was staring at me with undisguised contempt: I was seized with a violent feeling of helplessness. It was impossible to untangle this baffling snarl, weightless but for its ponderous resistance. Not with one of the living as a partner, not a chance.

Taking the pole, I bent over the tank. A man with a thick neck was floating half submerged beneath the lid nearest the wall, and I tried to pole the body toward me but I couldn't budge it. Conscious of the men's eyes on my back, I slipped the pole under the body and tried to pry it up; it was limitlessly heavy. What was wrong, maybe something had caught, why was it so heavy?

The superintendent came over and took the pole from me, worked it under the corpse's side and lightly shook it a few times. The body bobbed to the surface like a cork and rolled over, returning the bamboo pole.

"You can't do anything right, can you. Students these days are all the same."

I remained bent over the tank, doggedly waiting for the corpse to come within reach, aware of the professor's eyes persistently drilling my back and the nape of my neck. When the body drew near, chin jutting into the air and muscles flexed as though it had been carrying a heavy load, I seized its plump shoulders, splashing the alcohol.

"You be careful how you do that," the superintendent threatened.

But compared with the morning, I had become fairly proficient at the work. When the girl came back and we got fully under way, we were able to move the bodies more efficiently than before. The superintendent used his pole with great skill to haul in corpses lying half submerged against the far wall and to push clustered bodies away from the rim of the new tank so that we could more easily slip in the next corpse. By three o'clock I was beginning to sweat beneath my coveralls and the backs of my hands were itching against the rubber gloves. Every so often we went out into the hall, took off our coveralls, and wiped our sweating bodies. But as soon as the straps were loosened, the damp cold seeped inside from the nape of the neck and made you shiver as though you had a chill. I took off my mask frequently despite the lurking stench and inhaled air through my nose.

We made good headway, working steadily and silently, stopping now and then to go to the bathroom. We took off our gloves and coveralls and went out to the hall together. The girl always took the longest and was the last to return. At one point she came running up to where I stood waiting self-consciously in the hall and whispered: "You boys are really lucky."

"What?"

"You have an easy time. It's such a nuisance for a girl, I get disgusted."

I nodded vaguely and went back into the room to avoid the superintendent, who was approaching as if to join the conversation. But the girl persisted, pressed against me and said, bringing her mouth to my ear: "When I squat down in the toilet, I feel as if those dead people are supporting my bare buttocks for me, like they were all heaped in a pile behind me, staring."

I looked at the deep rings under her eyes and the rough skin of her cheeks and sensed fatigue enfold her like a wet, heavy overcoat. But I managed a feeble laugh.

"And you know what . . ." she said, laughing only with her voice and lowering her unkempt lashes, "...I start thinking that the lump of mucousy flesh and soft bone in my belly must look like the people in the tank; isn't that something, that fat little lump at the end of a cord of flesh. . . ."

"You must be exhausted," I said, wishing she would leave me alone.

"They're both human, but there's no real synthesis of body and consciousness, is there? They're human, and yet they're nothing more than connected bones and flesh."

They were "objects," she was trying to say, and human at the same time. But I pretended not to have understood what she meant, and began getting into my coveralls. I knew it was fatigue that made her so talkative, but she was being too familiar and I was annoyed.

"It was just an idea," she said, thrusting her arms into the sleeves of her coveralls; she seemed to have lost interest.

"Just an idea," I said indifferently.

"Hey, is this all the new tags that are left?" the superintendent shouted from the other room. "You'd better come in here and take a look."

The girl ran toward the door, the too-large boots flapping noisily on her feet, but halfway across the room she slipped on the wet, liver band and took a thudding, ungainly fall to the floor. She got up without a word, biting her lip, the fear racing through her body reflected in her face. The laugh climbing into my throat instantly died.

By five o'clock we had transferred all the corpses floating on the surface to the new tank

and we decided to rest in the office upstairs until the orderlies came to drain the alcohol solution. It had started to rain. Wrapped in mist, the clock tower on top of the auditorium loomed through the dusking air like a castle turret. To the red brick walls of the library too a translucent membrane of mist clung like thriving mold. The superintendent and I wolfed some jelly doughnuts in place of dinner but the girl hardly ate at all. We sat silently when we had finished eating, watching the rain fall. I could feel my stomach beginning to digest.

"Do you have any children?" the girl said unexpectedly.

"What?" the superintendent flustered. "Yes, I do, what about it?"

"Is it dangerous to receive a violent mental shock in the early stage of pregnancy? To see something grotesque, for example?"

"I guess that might be pretty bad. I couldn't say for certain, though. Why?"

"I just wondered, that's all," the girl said quickly.

"Is there something funny about me having children?" he said in a weary, disgruntled voice. "My oldest boy's married and has kids himself."

Though the girl had affected interest in talking about the superintendent's children, she seemed to be pursuing her own thoughts without even listening to him.

"I felt weird when my first child was born. I mean walking around inspecting dead people, seeing dozens of them every day and receiving new corpses is my job. And for me to be bringing a new life into the world seemed weird, as if I was doing something useless. When you're looking at corpses all the time you get to know the uselessness of lots of things. I never took my boy to the doctor, not even when he got sick. But he grew up big and strong just the same. And then when my son had a child of his own, another new life—sometimes I don't know whether I'm

coming or going...."

The girl was silent. The superintendent yawned, moistening his eyes with tears, and turned to me with terrible dejection on his face.

"You see what I'm getting at? When you're looking at dead people all the time you just can't get enthusiastic about your kid growing up."

"Really?"

"I mean there are bodies floating in there right now that I tagged the year my oldest boy was born, and they haven't discolored that much either. You just can't get enthusiastic."

"About which?"

"Either one! Of course, there are times when I feel that it does mean something to be alive. What's it like for a young student like you, working down there? It must be a funny feeling?"

"It is, kind of."

"No matter what kind of hopes you have, you must get pretty shaky, don't you? When you look at them?"

"I don't have any hopes," I murmured.

"Then why are you going to school," he sputtered, his face going red. "The competition is fierce at a place like this and it must be hard work. Why bother getting in, why bother taking a job like this so you can keep on with your studies?"

The man fixed me with his eyes, his wan lips trembling and flecked with a froth of spit, and I looked back into his tired face and thought now I was really in trouble. Whenever I stumbled into this corner, things became horribly tangled. I knew I wouldn't be able to convince him: it was particularly difficult to make a man like him understand. And even if I succeeded, what good would it do? Besides, after arguing in order to persuade him until my brains were parched and scratchy as a tired throat, I would have to return to myself. I would realize that the job of convincing my-

self had been left unfinished, I was far too uncertain, and an unbearable feeling, like chronic indigestion, would beset me again. As always, I was the only one who stood to lose.

"Well—can you give me one reason? A fellow your age talking about losing hope! Now stop sounding like a damn schoolgirl and make some sense."

"You misunderstood me," I said diffidently. It's just that there's no need to have hope. I want to live a well-ordered life and study hard. And I manage to fill up every day with one thing or another. I'm not lazy, and keeping up with school work properly takes a lot of time.

"I'm dizzy every day from lack of sleep but I get my studying done. And leading a life like that, you don't need hope. I've never lived with hope except maybe when I was a child, I've never needed it."

"There's something nihilistic about you."

"You can call it whatever you like," I snapped, annoyed because the girl hadn't said a word and didn't seem to be paying any attention to us.

"I study as hard as any student at this university. I haven't got time for finding hope and despairing and looking for it again."

"I just don't understand you," the superintendent said.

I stopped talking and slumped back into the chair, deflated. I hadn't been able to say it convincingly, but that wasn't really the problem: it just wasn't the sort of thing you could talk about.

The girl stood up abruptly, hurried to a corner of the room, and vomited into her handkerchief. When she began to retch, I went over and patted her back, but she twisted away and said, looking up at me with wet eyes, "I feel kind of funny. I think it might have something to do with falling down in the basement a while ago."

"What?" My voice seemed to stick in my throat.

"I have a pain below my stomach, like it was being squeezed."

"You'd better get one of the nurses," the superintendent said. While the superintendent was helping the girl to the couch, I hurried out of the room and raced up the stairs toward the nurses' office. My tongue was dry, fluttering against my gums, I felt my back begin to sweat. The middle-aged nurse who had given me the coveralls that morning was kneeling on the floor, rebinding a disheveled mop. I stopped running, but I couldn't check the mucous squeal of my rubber boots on the stone floor. A vague feeling which I couldn't control was lunging up from some depth inside me.

"One of the students working part-time doesn't feel so good," I said, looking down at the nurse's smudged though shiny, small face.

"What? What's the matter?" She craned her neck as she spoke, bared her bloodless gums. "One of the students—is it that girl?"

"Would you come and take a look at her?"

As we were descending the stairs, I whispered: "She told me that she's pregnant. And she took a nasty fall this afternoon on the tile in the basement—that might have started her ..."

"There's no telling what some of these girls will do," the nurse said. "What a horrible thing!"

She was right, I thought, a horrible thing. Being snared this tightly was too much to take. The girl was doubled over when we came into the room but she managed to straighten up. The wings of her nose were gleaming with sweat, her face looked spent, dazed: my chest felt tight.

The nurse placed her small, white, dry palm on the girl's brow. "How do you feel? Are you in pain?"

"It's sort of a funny feeling." Her voice

cracked, she sounded young.

"Let's go upstairs to the office," the nurse said, turning to me. "I'll have the doctor come and take a look." She darted past the superintendent and left the room.

"Can she walk?" he said, still leaning against the door, awkward, worried, watching the girl. I shook my head and moved slowly into the hall with my arm around her shoulders; she sagged and I tightened my grip. When we started up the stairs, I sensed that she was clenching her teeth to keep from moaning. I let her slump forward and she vomited a little bile. Then she straightened up, dropping the soiled handkerchief on the lowest step, and winced at me.

"You know, I've just about decided to have the baby after all. Looking at those people in the tank, I had a feeling that if the baby was going to die, it would have to be after he was born into the world and had real skin of his own or things wouldn't be right."

"It's a tough spot to be in," I said. I knew she had fallen into a trap.

"Like a pitfall," she gasped. "I had a feeling it would be like this."

The nurse was waiting in the doorway of a small room opposite the office. I stood in the hall, watching her lead the girl inside. Then I closed the door and went back downstairs.

When I got back to the office, two orderlies in hospital uniform were sitting on the couch, smoking cigarettes. Next to the window, the superintendent was deep in conversation with a young man who seemed to be an assistant professor at the med school. I thought they must have come to drain the alcohol out of the tank, but the orderlies were squirting smoke as though at a loss for what to do, and the two men at the window were

arguing irritably so I suspected something must be wrong. I walked over to the superintendent.

"Then the office has made a mistake," the professor was saying emphatically. "It was decided that the old corpses would be cremated, an official decision made at a medical school faculty meeting. And your job was to get the bodies ready by this evening and then load them onto the crematorium truck. I had these people come because I assumed you'd be finished by now."

The superintendent was distraught, his face had paled. "Then what are they going to do with the new tank? Just let it sit there after getting it all ready and filling it up with solution?"

"It'll be used for new corpses—just think about it for a minute: going to all that trouble transferring old corpses that can't even be used any more—it doesn't make any sense."

The superintendent was glaring at the professor like a small animal at bay, savage, despairing hostility in his eyes. Then he clenched his fists and bellowed, saliva drooling into the corners of his mouth: "You talk about the corpses being too old to use but I'm the one who's been in charge of that tank for thirty years!"

"When I say too old to use, I'm speaking medically. They could be dissected all right, but we couldn't count on worth-while results." He had turned to me, as though to ignore the superintendent. "Besides, we can get as many new corpses as we need. That's why we decided to dispose of all the old bodies now and asked the Education Ministry to budget some money for the job."

The superintendent stood silently, brooding, his eyes on the floor.

"Anyway, shouldn't we be getting started," the orderly said, grinding a cigarette under his heel. "I mean even if they're not ready here, they've got a schedule over at the crematorium,

and we brought the truck and everything...."

"Yes, please do get started," the professor said and, turning to the superintendent: "Well what else can we do? The office has been closed for hours and an inspector from the Ministry will be down here in the morning."

The superintendent picked up his gloves and coveralls without a word and we all went down to the basement. The orderlies were carrying hand pumps and rubber hoses which thumped and thudded against the railing as we descended the stairs. The way it looked now, our work had been for nothing. But if it were really the office's mistake they'd have to pay us anyway—or would they? I didn't like the way things were going: if it turned out that we were to be paid by the hour, the rate might go down. I caught up with the professor and said:

"I've been helping moving the corpses into the new tank today, and that's what they told me the job would be when I applied at the office...."

"I don't know what they told you, but you've just been wasting your time so far. The decision to cremate those bodies tonight was made a long time ago."

"But they still have to pay us as agreed, don't they? Since it's their mistake and not ours?"

"For doing an absolutely unnecessary job?" the professor said coldly. "I have nothing to do with it—you'd better ask the superintendent."

I turned back to the superintendent, who was coming very slowly down the stairs, but he looked away irritably and didn't say a word.

"How do you like that!"

"You can at least help move the bodies upstairs. Then it will be up to you to negotiate with the office about getting paid."

"But the original agreement was that I would work until six, and I don't imagine they'd pay me extra for overtime...."



The professor turned away without answering me, swiftly put on his mask, and flipped the light switch at the entrance to the embalming room. Beneath the bright bulbs in the ceiling, the skin of the dead floating in the new tank looked flaccid and puffy. They were much uglier than they had been in the light from the skylight, more forbidding.

Approaching the tank, the professor bent over it and exclaimed: "Just look at this, will you! The new solution is already discolored."

He turned around, anger patching his face with red, and snapped at the superintendent: "I hope you realize this is your responsibility. It could even mean your job—if the solution in this tank isn't changed again by tomorrow morning, I'm holding you personally responsible. Did you ever think about how much this stuff costs? It isn't cheap, you know."

"With all these bodies, I doubt if we'll be able to finish by morning," one of the orderlies said.

"You haven't got time to be talking about doubts. There'll be an inspector here tomorrow morning, and both these tanks have got to be cleaned by then, and filled with new solution."

"I'll take the responsibility." The superintendent's voice sounded as if it had been mashed at the back of his throat. "As long as I do that everything will be all right, won't it?"

"Will it? I wouldn't know," the professor said coldly, with an indifferent shrug of his shoulders.

We had no choice but to get into our coveralls and go to work. We worked in pairs, lifting a corpse and carrying it into the hall, taking it upstairs in an elevator which opened inside the lecture hall, and loading it onto the crematorium truck, which was backed against a receiving window. A third orderly was standing in the truck, helping us, but it was

hard work and I was soon out of breath and sweating heavily. To make things worse, it was still raining, though only a drizzle fine as mist, and every time I leaned out of the loading window my cheeks and the back of my neck got wet. The hardest part of the operation was swinging the corpses up onto the truck-bed: one of the orderlies fumbled and a body thudded to the floor.

"Be careful how you handle them," the superintendent shouted, his voice trembling with rage.

"Regular luxury items," the orderly muttered, "...these stiffes."

Night fell and still we worked steadily, making little progress. The professor sat on one of the dissection tables with his arms folded across his chest, watching us with a dour face. The superintendent, hesitating, approached him.

"Do you think you could telephone the hospital and have them send down a few orderlies, you know, a few extra hands?" he whimpered. "We'll never make it with just the four of us."

"Why don't you do it yourself. What goes on down here is your responsibility, isn't it?"

The superintendent was furious, but he merely shrugged his shoulders and started up the stairs toward the office. Obviously the professor had no intention of teaming up with me until he returned, so I raced upstairs to the room where the girl was resting.

The nurse was gone, the girl lay huddled on the couch, wrapped in a blanket; she turned to me as I came in.

"What was the matter?" I asked.

"I don't know yet. The whole hospital is in an uproar because someone from the Education Ministry is coming tomorrow, and apparently all the doctors are busy." The girl frowned. "The nurse has gone to see if she can get someone. It doesn't hurt any more

but I can't sit up."

"Have you been waiting by yourself all this time?"

"What else could I do?"

I pulled a wooden chair up to the couch and sat down; then I told her: "The office seems to have made a mistake and the work we did today was all for nothing. Some orderlies from the hospital came, and we're moving the corpses out of the tank."

"What are they going to do with them?"

"They'll be cremated."

"Then..." she said weakly, "then all that work we did carrying the bodies to the new tank and putting those tags on was just a waste of time?"

"Isn't that something..."

The girl squirmed, laughing softly, the sound carried to the far wall of the narrow room and briefly echoed. My laugh stuck in my throat before I could give it voice. The blanket had slipped and I pulled it up around her shoulders. Her body trembled against my arm, as though laughter were whirling beneath her skin with bated breath.

"I entered them all in that ledger, the new numbers next to the old ones, and underlined them." Her face went scarlet with a new laugh, which died before it could emerge as sound.

I stood up. "They're not sure whether we'll be able to get them all loaded on the truck by morning. And nobody's too clear about whether we'll get paid, either."

The girl scowled, her face becoming rigid as though numb with cold; not a trace of laughter lingered.

"You know, you don't smell so good," she said abruptly, looking away from me. "You smell awful." She stared perversely at the ceiling while I looked down at her muscular, grimy neck and grit my teeth to keep from saying that she smelled too. The expression on

her face was terribly old, and weary, like a sick bird. I could never stand myself when I started to look that way.

"Would you mind leaving—the smell upsets me," she said.

I felt a chill shiver through my sweat-soaked body. Wrapping the collar of the coveralls around my throat, I left the room.

In front of the anatomy lecture hall I passed the superintendent, who was hurrying along the corridor, stooped almost double. "They say none of the orderlies can come because it's after hours," he said in a tired voice, pressing against me. "It's not going to be easy finishing by morning with just the four of us."

"Everything sounds just great," I said.

"But it was that guy in the office who first told you about the job, not me—remember that, will you?"

I nodded vaguely and, removing the man's heavy hand from my shoulder, went into the lecture hall and peered through the loading window at the truck. The dead lay on tiered planks, the soles of their feet whitely suspended in the darkness; they seemed terrifically withdrawn, unapproachable. I strained through the dark but I couldn't make out the wooden tags fastened to their big toes.

The elevator whirled to a stop and the two orderlies emerged, carrying a corpse between them. They heaved it through the window as though it were a crate, muscled arms thrust out of the darkness to receive and lower it onto a plank. The body stirred, fanned apart the soles of its feet, and lay still.

"Hey, get to work," the orderly said to me.

"What's that?" called an angry voice from the truck bed.

I went into the hall. It looked like I was going to have to work all night! Difficult, irritating, back-breaking work. On top of that, I would have to negotiate with the office myself to make certain that I got paid. I descended

the stairs two at a time, I had plenty of energy left, but a thick, swollen feeling rose persistently

into my throat no matter how often I swallowed it down.

*Translated by John Nathan*

## Translator's Note

In 1957, twenty-two years old and a sophomore in French Literature at Tokyo University, Ōe Kenzaburō published *Lavish Are the Dead* and won acclaim as a promising new voice in postwar Japanese literature. In the eight years since then, Ōe has written six major novels and several volumes of short stories and essays and is currently, at thirty, the most dynamic and relentlessly modern writer on the Japanese literary scene. His theme, if one can speak of themes apart from specific books, is the dignity of man, or rather the indignity to which society exposes him. Most of Ōe's characters are young people like himself and most of them are in flight, seeking in sex and violence and the most insidious brands of self-deceit an escape from the humiliations of living in a depraved world.

In 1958 Ōe published a collection of short stories which included *The Catch* (trans. Japan Quarterly Vol. VI, No. 1) for which he received the Akutagawa Prize, and completed his first full-length novel, *Pluck the Flowers, Gun the Kids*, a bitter account of what happened to a group of reform school boys who were evacuated during the war to a small farm village, where they were brutally mistreated. Ōe spent his own childhood in a rural community in Shikoku and had ample opportunity to observe men transformed into beasts by a crisis such as war. *Our World* (1959) was censured by the critics, who objected to Ōe's nihilism in the new "bright" age and accused him of imitating to extremes Jean-Paul Sartre, whose

works have played an important role in Ōe's development as a writer. Ōe said later about the novel, "I wasn't writing about an age you could sing about with your head flung back, but a silent, brooding, eyes-on-the floor age, the only age I've ever known."

In 1961 Ōe wrote *The Pervert*, in 1963 *Screaming* and *Adventures in Living*. But the best of his four latest novels is the most recent, *A Private Matter* (1964), for which he won the Shinchōsha Literary Prize. A young man whose only positive desire is to escape to Africa in quest of adventure (Ōe joins Norman Mailer, with whom he is immensely impressed, in asserting that the pathological world we live in precludes adventure in any form) becomes the father of a nightmarishly abnormal child, an infant afflicted at birth with a "brain hernia" which makes him appear to have two heads and dooms him, if he should live, to a "vegetable" existence. The hero conspires with a doctor at the hospital to feed the child sugar water instead of milk and then staggers through four guilt-ridden days, waiting for the child to die, wondering if he is right to "save" a life by "destroying" it. The outcome is unimportant, for Ōe is primarily concerned with what happens to a man when he is confronted with abnormality and in how he degrades himself in attempting to escape degradation. A translation of this novel worthy of the original would be a significant contribution to the canon of modern world literature.