

## Before Ryūnosuke, After Ryūnosuke—

David Peace

O you Doppelgänger! you pale comrade!  
Why do you ape the pain of my love  
Which tormented me upon this spot  
So many a night, so long ago?  
—Heinrich Heine, “Der Doppelgänger,” 1828

It was in the Age of Winter,<sup>1</sup> after the death of Sensei.<sup>2</sup> Ryūnosuke was in the corner of a café, chatting with a friend. The friend was the editor of a literary magazine to which Ryūnosuke sometimes contributed articles and stories. The friend was eating a baked apple and talking about the works of Edgar Allan Poe. Ryūnosuke interrupted him. And Ryūnosuke said, “The other day, I bumped into my friend K., and he said, ‘I’m sorry I didn’t have a chance to speak with you at the Imperial Theater the other night.’ I was confused because I had not been at the Imperial Theater that night. But K. was absolutely convinced he had seen me. So I believe he must have spotted my second self in the lobby of the theater. And that was not the first time: there was the time that one-legged German translator, the one who is now dead, saw my second self in a Ginza tobacco shop. He was offended when this second self ignored him. But I was staying in Kamakura at the time. And when we finally discussed what had occurred, I realized this second self had been wearing exactly what I had been wearing that day. A raincoat.”

“So you believe in what the Germans call a doppelgänger,” said his friend. “But then, do you also believe the doppelgänger is a harbinger of bad luck? Even death?”

Ryūnosuke sighed. Ryūnosuke squeezed the bridge of his nose between two of his fingers. And then Ryūnosuke said, “I don’t know. But I hope not. Because I do feel as though my second self is getting closer and closer to me.”

“If that is what you believe,” said his friend, “then you should see someone. Someone who might be able to help you.”

Ryūnosuke sighed again. And Ryūnosuke said, “Like who?”

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<sup>1</sup> *Fuyū no jidai*; the name given to the 1910s for the decade’s lack of political activities in the aftermath of the Great Treason Incident of 1910.

<sup>2</sup> Sōseki Natsume, who died on December 9, 1916.

“A private detective,” said his friend.

Ryūnosuke shook his head. And Ryūnosuke said, “I hate detectives. Detectives cannot even pass for human beings. Detectives are only important as machines.”

“But detectives and writers surely have much in common,” said his friend. “In different ways, both search for the truth . . .”

Ryūnosuke snorted. And Ryūnosuke said, “Nonsense. It is extremely rude to compare a writer and a detective. Theirs is a profession whose essence is to search for the truth in the most vulgar of senses. And if there are writers who only profess truth, and do not care what happens to other ideals such as beauty and morality, then such writers must be people with a defect. Perhaps not as individuals, but certainly as writers. And I would say they are unhealthy. Akin to pickpockets and thieves.”

“On what unfortunate personal experience are you basing such a rant?” asked his friend. “Has something happened?”

Ryūnosuke shook his head. And Ryūnosuke said, “No. Luckily, I have never had the misfortune to meet a detective.”

“So these are simply your observations?”

Ryūnosuke smiled at his friend. And Ryūnosuke said, “Not simply observations, no. Simply observations would make me no better than a detective. These are my opinions, based on my knowledge, formed by my observations.”

“But you have had no personal experience with detectives,” said his friend. “You say yourself, you have never met one.”

Ryūnosuke shook his head again. And Ryūnosuke said, “As far as I know. But more than likely, I have been tailed. In fact, I am certain I have been followed by a detective. As have you, no doubt. Such is modern life in the modern city. So who can actually say?”

“But then, perhaps you should meet a detective,” said his friend, with a smile. And his friend took out his wallet. And a business card from the wallet. And he placed the business card on the table before Ryūnosuke. “Know-your-enemy, so-to-speak.”

Ryūnosuke looked down at the business card on the table. And then Ryūnosuke looked back up at the room. The mirrors set in the café walls reflected him in endless numbers. Coldly, menacingly.

Ryūnosuke had reserved a room at the Imperial Hotel in order to finish the story. Ryūnosuke shut himself up in the room. Ryūnosuke sat down at the desk by the window. Ryūnosuke lit a cigarette. The square window, framed in tufa stone, looked out on a frozen pond and a daphne bush. There

was snow on the ground but the snow was soiled by the smoke of the city. Ryūnosuke thought about the notebooks and the unfinished stories he had burned in a pinewood close to the sea. Ryūnosuke forced himself to stop daydreaming. Ryūnosuke put out his cigarette. Ryūnosuke picked up his pen. Ryūnosuke tried to get his pen moving again. But Ryūnosuke could not write a single line. Ryūnosuke put down his pen again. Ryūnosuke picked up a book from the desk. Ryūnosuke got up from the desk. Ryūnosuke walked over to the bed. And Ryūnosuke stretched out on the bed to read the book. The book was a collection of stories by Edgar Allan Poe. Ryūnosuke began to reread one of the stories. This particular story was based on a brief article by Washington Irving. Ryūnosuke was familiar with that article, too. Ryūnosuke recalled the tale of a young man who finds himself followed and thwarted at every turn by a masked figure. Finally, the young man stabs the figure with his sword. But when the young man looks behind the mask, he finds only “his own image—the spectre of himself.” Ryūnosuke had even copied out that line into one of his own notebooks. One Ryūnosuke had burned in the pinewood. But now as he read Poe’s retelling, Ryūnosuke began to feel ill. In all of Poe’s tales, Ryūnosuke felt the weight of the past. Smothering and suffocating, nothing stayed buried. And now Ryūnosuke hurled the book into the corner of the room—

“Die, damn you! Die!”

Ryūnosuke collapsed back onto the bed. Ryūnosuke stared up at the ceiling. Ryūnosuke began to see a set of translucent, spinning gears. Ryūnosuke knew the number of gears would gradually increase until half his field of vision was blocked. This would last only a few moments, and then the gears would vanish, to be replaced by a headache. Ryūnosuke closed his eyes. But Ryūnosuke began to hear the sound of beating wings outside the door. Ryūnosuke knew the sound of the wings would increase, too. And then the headache come. Ryūnosuke dreaded the onset of another such headache. Ryūnosuke knew sleep was the only thing that could save him. Ryūnosuke got up from the bed. Ryūnosuke walked over to his bag. Ryūnosuke opened the bag. Ryūnosuke took a bottle from the bag. Ryūnosuke took eight-tenths of a gram of Veronal. Ryūnosuke put the bottle back in the bag. Ryūnosuke closed the bag. Ryūnosuke walked back over to the bed. Ryūnosuke lay back down on the bed.

And Ryūnosuke closed his eyes—

Ryūnosuke was in a garden. A garden which looked like his own garden. Three children were playing in the garden. Three children who looked like his own children. The children now ran inside a house. A house which looked like his own house. Ryūnosuke followed them into the house. The children disappeared down a corridor. Ryūnosuke chased after them. Ryūnosuke turned into a bedroom. A bedroom which looked like his own bedroom. A man was sleeping in the bed.

A man who looked like him. The eldest child came into the bedroom. The child woke the man in the bed. The man in the bed sat up. And the man said, "I have been having such an odd dream. I dreamed we were playing in the garden. But you and your brothers ran into the house. I followed you, but I lost you. And when I came into this room, I saw myself lying senseless on this bed, like an old raincoat."

Ryūnosuke could not contain himself. Ryūnosuke cried out to the man on the bed, "I came to look for you, and here you are!"

The man on the bed rose. Naked, he came toward Ryūnosuke and embraced him, "So you are Ryūnosuke. And it was not a dream."

"No," cried Ryūnosuke. "It was more true than truth itself."

But hardly had Ryūnosuke finished speaking when another boy came to the bedroom door, crying, "Pa-pa, Pa-pa! Please come to Ma-ma's room at once . . ."

The man rushed from the room as Ryūnosuke called after him, "Please come back soon, Ryūnosuke! Please . . ."

The boy looked at Ryūnosuke. And the boy laughed, "Where is this Ryūnosuke you are calling to, Pa-pa?"

Ryūnosuke pointed at the door. "He has just gone out."

"Why, you are still dreaming," said the boy. "Don't you know who you are talking to? It is your own reflection in the mirror."

Suddenly, the telephone by the bed rang. Ryūnosuke sat up. And Ryūnosuke picked up the receiver—

"Who is it? Who is it?"

"Mole . . ."

"Who?"

"More . . ."

"What?"

"Mort . . ."

Ryūnosuke put down the receiver. Ryūnosuke walked over to the mirror. Ryūnosuke stared at his reflection. His face in the mirror revealed the bone beneath the skin. Ryūnosuke turned away from the mirror. Ryūnosuke looked around the room. Ryūnosuke saw his hat and coat hanging on the wall. The coat looked like his own standing figure. Ryūnosuke threw the coat into a wardrobe. Again, Ryūnosuke looked around the room. Electric lights made the room as bright as ever. Again, one at a time, translucent gears began to block his field of vision. And again, beating wings filled his ears. Ryūnosuke ran over to the desk by the window. Ryūnosuke stuffed his papers and his

pens into his bag. And Ryūnosuke left the hotel room. Ryūnosuke walked down the deserted corridor. The corridor looked more like that of a prison than a hotel. But in a corner where the corridor joined the lobby stood a tall lamp, its green shade brilliantly reflected against a glass door. This sight gave Ryūnosuke a peaceful sensation. Ryūnosuke sat down in a nearby chair. Ryūnosuke took out a cigarette from his packet. But Ryūnosuke did not light the cigarette. There was a raincoat draped over the back of the sofa next to him. Ryūnosuke dropped the cigarette. Ryūnosuke jumped up. Ryūnosuke walked into the lobby. A man was arguing with a bellboy. The man was wearing a raincoat. Ryūnosuke dashed out into the street. Blue skies were reflected in pools of snowmelt. But across the street, in the Hibiya Park, all the branches of the trees were black. And each tree had a front and a back. Just like human beings do. Ryūnosuke recalled the souls of Dante's *Inferno* who had been turned into trees. And Ryūnosuke decided not to walk through the park. Ryūnosuke stayed on this side of the streetcar line, where only buildings edged the street. But here where there were no trees, there were people. People all wearing raincoats.

Thick layers of cloud and smoke hung over the Sumida River. Ryūnosuke watched the Mukōjima bank drawing closer. The barren cherry trees looked like burned corpses standing in a row.

Ryūnosuke disembarked from the small steamer. It was now twilight. It was still raining. And Ryūnosuke could smell his own rubberized coat. Ryūnosuke began to walk toward the Tamanoi district. An overhead trolley line was sending purple sparks up into the air. Ryūnosuke followed the cable and its sparks until he came to a junction. To his left was the river with its banks of trees, to his right was Tamanoi with its houses of prostitutes.

Ryūnosuke walked straight on, into the darkness. And here, just as his friend had described, among numerous old graves, standing in the middle of a bamboo grove, Ryūnosuke found a small, Western-style house. And there, on its narrow porch, with its peeling paint, was a porcelain nameplate—

*A., Detective.*

Ryūnosuke rang the bell below the nameplate and waited. Presently, the door opened and a little old woman appeared.

“Is Mr. A. home?”

“He is, sir. And he is expecting you.”

The old woman led Ryūnosuke into a room directly opposite the front door. The room was only partially illuminated by the weak light from the hallway. And when the woman closed the door behind her, momentarily Ryūnosuke was left in complete and utter darkness until, gradually, the flame of an oil lamp began to grow and reveal the face of a man—



“Well, well,” said the man. “Here you are. And I am honored, sir. Please, sit—”

The man was standing in the center of the room. Holding the oil lamp in one hand, gesturing at a chair with the other.

Ryūnosuke sat down in one of the two chairs at a table in the center of the room. Ryūnosuke looked around the gloomy room. In the shadows, there were piles of books and papers. On the walls, crucifixes and paintings. A large desk in front of a small window. All the furniture worn and shabby. And even the gaudy tablecloth, with its woven border of red flowers, was threadbare and looked as if it might disintegrate at any moment.

The man placed the oil lamp on the table. He looked across the cloth at Ryūnosuke. He smiled but said nothing. And Ryūnosuke found himself listening to the sound of the rain falling in the bamboo grove outside. The wind in the trees and the waves on the river.

Presently, the same old woman returned with the tea things. She set them down on the table and then retreated again. The man opened a box of cigarettes on the cloth. He turned the box toward Ryūnosuke and smiled again. “Will you have one?”

“Thank you,” said Ryūnosuke.

The man leaned forward across the table. He held out a flame toward Ryūnosuke. Ryūnosuke bent forward to light the cigarette from the flame. Ryūnosuke felt the man’s eyes upon him. Ryūnosuke looked up from the flame at the man. And now, for the first time, Ryūnosuke could clearly see the face of the man. He appeared to be of a similar age to Ryūnosuke. Possibly slightly older, maybe over thirty. But the man was completely bald. Or perhaps his head was shaved, like a priest. It was hard to tell in the dimly lit room. Ryūnosuke looked away.

“You are a bundle of nerves,” said the man. “And narcotics are not going to help you.”

“Why not?”

“Because you are bewitched,” said the man. “Your whole being is wrapped in an evil aura.”

Ryūnosuke looked up from his cigarette. And Ryūnosuke said, “I can see only shadows. Only darkness.”

“If you believe in the darkness,” said the man, “then surely you have to believe in the light as well.”

Ryūnosuke smiled, sadly. And Ryūnosuke said, “There is such a thing as darkness without light.”

“Momentarily, yes,” said the man. “But light always follows darkness. Just as day always follows night. Miraculously.”

Ryūnosuke shook his head. And Ryūnosuke said, “I do not believe in miracles. Not these days.”

The man smiled. He raised his hand. He held it over the oil lamp. Then he placed his hand on the table. And he plucked one of the red flowers from the pattern woven into the border of the cloth. The man held the red flower out toward Ryūnosuke. His eyes blinking, his hands shaking, Ryūnosuke took the flower from the man. Ryūnosuke brought the flower up to his face. And Ryūnosuke felt its petals against his skin. Ryūnosuke smelled its scent. His eyes still blinking, his hands still shaking, Ryūnosuke dropped the flower onto the table. Immediately, the flower resumed its place in the woven border of the tablecloth. And try as he might, Ryūnosuke could not pick it up again or move even one of its petals.

Ryūnosuke shook his head again. And Ryūnosuke said, “I do not understand . . .”

“It is not a question of understanding,” said the man. “It is a question of believing. You stopped believing and so the flower died.”

Ryūnosuke looked across the table at the man. And Ryūnosuke said, “Can you help me? Can you save me?”

“I will try,” said A.

Ryūnosuke and an elder colleague<sup>3</sup> sat at a café table, puffing on cigarette after cigarette, listening to music from a gramophone on the other side of the room. Ryūnosuke said very little but he paid close attention to his companion’s every word—

“I spent half the day riding around in an automobile.”

“Was there some research you needed to do?”

His cheek resting on his hand, the elder colleague replied with complete abandon, “No, I just felt like riding around the city.”

Ryūnosuke envied the older man’s freedom. And his eyes must have betrayed his jealousy because now the other man asked, “Are you busy working on something at the moment?”

Ryūnosuke sighed. And Ryūnosuke said, “I have promised to write a detective story for *Chūō kōron*<sup>4</sup> . . .”

“Me, too,” exclaimed the older man. “How funny! And I must say, I am relishing the challenge. What is your story about?”

Ryūnosuke sighed again. And Ryūnosuke said, “Well, I have hardly started. But I’m planning something about doubles . . .”

“Me, too,” exclaimed the older man again. “How funny! Mine is the tale of two artists, Ōkawa

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<sup>3</sup> Jun’ichirō Tanizaki (1886–1965).

<sup>4</sup> A magazine which, in 1918, published a special issue of “new artistic detective stories,” titled “Himitsu to Kaihō” (Secrets and Liberation).

and Aono. They are bitter rivals. But Ōkawa comes to see Aono as his doppelgänger and he even cites the famous story by Edgar Allan Poe . . .”

Ryūnosuke felt ill. Ryūnosuke got up from the table. Quickly, Ryūnosuke walked toward the bathroom door.

On the way back to the table, Ryūnosuke stopped by the gramophone. The music had ended. And Ryūnosuke leaned over the gramophone to read the label on the record—

*Schwanengesang—Schubert.*

Ryūnosuke felt afraid. Ryūnosuke looked across the room for his older friend. But his friend was not there. And at their table was only one coffee cup. His own coffee cup. Ryūnosuke put a silver coin on the counter and started out of the café—

“That will be twenty sen, sir.”

The coin Ryūnosuke had thrown down was copper, not silver.

Ryūnosuke stood outside the hotel waiting for a taxi, but not many came that way. The only cabs that did come by were, without exception, yellow. For some reason, the yellow taxis Ryūnosuke took were always having accidents. Before too long, Ryūnosuke found a lucky green one and decided to take it to the mental hospital near the cemetery in Aoyama. Ryūnosuke stared at the driver’s back. In spite of the cold weather, the driver had nothing but an old raincoat draped over his shoulders. Ryūnosuke found the coincidence unsettling and tried not to look at him, instead keeping his eyes trained out of the window. But Ryūnosuke began to feel that anything and everything was a lie. Business, politics, science, even art: all seemed just a mottled layer of skin covering over this life in all its horror. Ryūnosuke felt more and more as if he was suffocating. Ryūnosuke opened the taxi window as wide as possible, but the constriction around his heart would not give way.

Eventually, the green cab reached the main intersection of Jingū-mae. The cab should have been able to turn down an alleyway leading to the mental hospital, but today, for some reason, Ryūnosuke could not find it. Ryūnosuke had the taxi go back and forth along the streetcar tracks, but soon he gave up and got out.

Finally, Ryūnosuke did manage to find the right street, but after dodging its muddy puddles for a while, he missed the turn again and ended up at the Aoyama Funeral Hall. Ryūnosuke had not once passed the front gate of this building in the ten long years since the memorial service there for Sensei. Ryūnosuke had not been happy back then, either, but at least he had been at peace. Peering in at the graveled courtyard and recalling the delicate *bashō* plants at the Sōseki Retreat, Ryūnosuke could not help feeling that his own life had come to an end. And Ryūnosuke also felt “something” had drawn him back to this crematorium today, after all these years.



After leaving the mental hospital, Ryūnosuke took another cab back to the hotel. But when Ryūnosuke stepped out at the entrance, a man—the same man?—in a raincoat was arguing with a bellboy again. The idea of going into the hotel now seemed like an ominous prospect. And so Ryūnosuke turned on his heel and went back down the street he had just come up, toward the Ginza.

The sun was beginning to set as Ryūnosuke reached the Ginza. But the shops lining both sides of the streets and the dizzying flow of people only made Ryūnosuke more depressed. Ryūnosuke was especially bothered by the way people were casually strolling along as if they had never known the existence of sin. Ryūnosuke walked on northward, through the confusion of the day's fading brightness and the light of the electric lamps. In the windows of the Western tailor shops, Ryūnosuke passed mannequin after mannequin. But what soon caught his eye was a bookstore piled high with magazines and such. Ryūnosuke walked in and let his eyes wander upward over several shelves of books. Ryūnosuke picked out one volume from the collected works of Dostoyevsky to browse through. But the page at which Ryūnosuke chanced to open almost knocked him over: it was the title page of the novella "Double."

Ryūnosuke left the bookstore and plunged back into the crowd. But as he walked along, Ryūnosuke felt a relentless gaze upon his rounded back. But still Ryūnosuke walked on. And as he walked, on and on, Ryūnosuke thought and thought about the story he was trying to write. Ryūnosuke had hoped to make it more autobiographical. But it had not come as easily as he had imagined. Ryūnosuke knew this was because of his own pride and skepticism. And Ryūnosuke despised these traits in himself. But at the same time, he could not help feeling, "Remove a layer of skin and everybody is the same." Equally, Ryūnosuke tended to think that Goethe's title *From My Life: Poetry and Truth* would suit anybody's autobiography. But Ryūnosuke also knew that not everyone was moved by literature, and his own works were unlikely to appeal to anyone who was not like him. And had not lived a life like his—

Ryūnosuke stopped before a secondhand shop. In the window was a stuffed swan. It stood with its neck erect, but its wings were yellowed and moth-eaten. Ryūnosuke felt both laughter and tears welling up inside him. All that lay before him was either madness or suicide. Ryūnosuke turned away from the stuffed swan and the shopwindow. And in the twilight, Ryūnosuke walked down the darkening street, alone.

Among the crowds, from the shadows, A. watched the two figures part. The one without a coat headed south, the one in the raincoat went north. And so A. walked north, too. The man always at length, but his raincoat always in sight. The crowds thinning, the shadows lengthening. Now the

man stood in a queue, then the man boarded a trolley. And so A. boarded the trolley, too. Between the red lettering of the advertisements hanging from the ceiling, before the ashen flecks of the dirt staining the windows. The man sat among the passengers. And A. two seats behind him. The carriage moving out of the lights, the trolley heading into the darkness. Now the man got up from his seat, then the man alighted from the trolley. And so A. alighted, too. The crowds now absent, the shadows still present. The man in the raincoat walked up a slope. And A. walked up the slope, too. Now the man turned right, then the man turned left. And so A. now turned right, and then turned left, too. The man pushed open a gate in a wall around a house. And the gate swung shut behind him. In the night and in the rain. A. did not open the gate. A. walked on past the wall of the house. In the night, in the rain. The wall became a corner. And A. stopped. And waited. In the night, in the rain. A. now hoisted himself up onto the top of the wall, A. then dropped over the wall into the garden. In the night and in the rain. Among the stone lanterns, behind the tall trees. A. waited and A. watched. Despite the hour, despite its lateness. There was a light in the house and there were children's voices from a bedroom. Then the light was gone, now the children were silent. In the night and in the rain. Among the stone lanterns, behind the tall trees. A. now heard footsteps walking from the main house and A. then saw a light growing in a separate study. In the night and in the rain. Carefully, stealthily. A. edged toward a window in the study and A. peeped through the window into the room. The study was lined with books, the floor covered in papers. On a table were pots, in the pots were brushes. Now the man took off his raincoat. The man hung up the coat. Then the man took off his skin. The man hung up his skin. And the thing that remained stood in the center of the room. Smaller than a man, maybe just over three feet. Lighter than a man, perhaps but thirty pounds. Its pallor green, its sheen reptilian. The thing had webbed hands, the thing had webbed feet. And an oval-shaped saucer on top of its head, beneath short, coarse brown hair. Now the thing picked out a fine brush. Then the thing walked over to the skin. The entire pelt of a human body hanging from a peg. And the thing began to touch up the skin with its brush. A dab here, a spot there. Now the thing stepped back from the skin on the peg. Then the thing put back the brush in its pot. The thing walked back to the skin on the peg. The thing lifted up the skin from the peg. Now the thing shook the skin out like a cloak. Then the thing wrapped the skin around itself. And now the thing was a man again. And then the man turned to the window. And in the night, and in the rain. The man smiled at A.

Ryūnosuke was in the corner of a café, chatting with a friend. The friend was eating a baked apple and talking about the works of Edgar Allan Poe. Ryūnosuke interrupted him. And Ryūnosuke said, "Don't worry. Because I promised to write a detective story for you, I have grudgingly almost

finished the piece. And despite feeling like I have been prostituting my talents, writing it as a detective story, it seems like it will not be a detective story. But I must confess, I like it. And I have called it ‘Murder in the Age of Enlightenment’<sup>5</sup> . . .”

“I hear K.<sup>6</sup> has gone mad,” said his friend, suddenly. “He was seen eating rose petals on the way to Karuizawa.”

Ryūnosuke said nothing. Ryūnosuke had always felt close to K. because he understood far more deeply than anyone else the loneliness that lurked beneath his jaunty mask. And Ryūnosuke had visited him a few times after the first bout of madness struck.

“You and I are both possessed by a demon,” K. had whispered, “the demon of the *fin de siècle*.”

Night gradually gave way to dawn. That morning was the ninth of the month. And so as he did on the ninth of every month, Ryūnosuke bought some flowers and set off for the Zōshigaya Cemetery. The sky still dark with rain, the air still cold with wind. Ryūnosuke entered the cemetery from the left side of a field. Ryūnosuke walked down the broad avenue bordered on each side by maple trees. And then Ryūnosuke turned off the main thoroughfare. Down the paths, between the stones. Until Ryūnosuke came to the grave of Sensei. It was a tall, gray tombstone. Grand and imposing. And Ryūnosuke always felt the design of the grave was strangely out of character with the man. His life and his work. Ryūnosuke divided the flowers into two separate bunches. Ryūnosuke placed the flowers in the two vases before the tomb. Ryūnosuke stepped back. Ryūnosuke closed his eyes. And Ryūnosuke recalled the words of the Master:

*“Approach everything rationally, and you become harsh. Pole along in the stream of emotions, and you will be swept away by the current. Give free rein to your desires, and you become uncomfortably confined. It is not a very agreeable place to live, this world of ours . . .”*

Ryūnosuke bowed three times. Ryūnosuke opened his eyes. And Ryūnosuke turned to walk away from the grave—

A man was standing in his way.

“How in the world . . . ?” said Ryūnosuke. And then again, “How in the world . . . ? Did you follow me?”

“*Ce grand malheur*,” said the man, “*de ne pouvoir être seul*.”

“Is that all you have to say for yourself?” asked Ryūnosuke. “After all this time? Your only

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<sup>5</sup> “Kaika no satsujin,” first published in 1918, in the “Himitsu to Kaihō” edition of *Chūō kōron*.

<sup>6</sup> Kōji Uno (1891–1961).

words are borrowed words?”

“No,” said the man. “I have come to say good-bye. And to give you a warning: Leave this city. Take refuge somewhere else. A great disaster is on its way. This is not a good place to be.”

And with these words the man left—

Ryūnosuke standing before the grave, *in the green grove, at the dark frontier*, in his raincoat.

Ryūnosuke could hear the sound of the rain falling in the bamboo grove outside. The wind in the trees and the waves on the river. Ryūnosuke looked down at the cigarette he was holding between his fingers. It was still lit, it was still long. Ryūnosuke shook his head again. And Ryūnosuke said, “I do not understand . . .”

“It is not a question of understanding,” said the man again. “It is a question of believing.”

Ryūnosuke looked across the table at the man. And Ryūnosuke said, “So you cannot help me?”

“No,” said the man, sadly.

“But why not?”

“Only the man who governs his mind can attain sainthood,” said A. “But the man who fails to control his mind becomes a demon.”

### **Author’s note**

This story is an extract from the unfinished novel *Patient No. 23—After Ryūnosuke Akutagawa*. It would not have been possible without the translations and scholarship of many other writers. In addition to the texts directly cited in the story, the following books were essential sources of information and inspiration:

*Detective Fiction and the Rise of the Japanese Novel, 1880–1930* by Satoru Saito, 2012.

*Rashōmon and Seventeen Other Stories* by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, selected and translated by Jay Rubin, 2006.

*Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* by Pu Songling, translated by John Minford, 2006.

“The Art of the Occult” by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, translated by Dorothy Britton, in *The Spider’s Thread and Other Stories*, 1987.

*The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story* by John T. Irwin, 1996.