

Summer Break

by Hiromi Kawakami

Three small creatures skittered around my feet as I picked pears in Mr. Genda's orchard.

I noticed them when Mr. Genda remarked, "Oh, they've come out."

"Those things show up sometimes," he said, tossing a scrap pear that couldn't be shipped onto the ground. Two of the creatures went over and began gnawing at it. They were both about the same size as the pear. They munched away with gusto, but the third just stood there. "Here," Mr. Genda said, picking a pear off a tree and placing it in front of the third creature. It stared at him, trembling.

After watching it for a moment, Mr. Genda left to get a packing crate. I watched the creatures while I sorted the pears Mr. Genda picked from the trees. The two that devoured the first pear continued on to other scrap pears as I watched. The third was still trembling. It didn't seem as if it were going to move.

"That one is no good," a voice said, startling me. One of the creatures voraciously chewing through the pears had spoken up.

"That one is no good."

"That one is pretty bad."

"Even though the pears are delicious."

"Even though the pears are big."

The two creatures spoke in high, squeaky voices.

When Mr. Genda came back with a box, I asked him about the creatures.

"They show up every once in a while. I'm not sure why, but they seem to come around the same time as the pears. They disappear before too long, so you can just ignore them if you want."

When I mentioned that one of them had spoken, Mr. Genda gave a brusque nod.

"They'll speak, but don't expect them to say anything," he told me as he began to pack the sorted pears into the box.

The creatures were still milling about around my feet after the day's work was finished. I picked one up and held it in the palm of my hand. It was warm. I felt as though my tired hands had somehow grown bigger.

Mr. Genda's eyes widened when I asked if it was okay to take it home.

"What are you going to do with it?"

Nothing, really. Mr. Genda shrugged, but he didn't say anything else. I cupped the one that hadn't eaten any pears in my hands and walked back to my apartment. The other two bounced along after me.

* * * * *

The creatures didn't eat the leftovers from dinner that I set out for them, so I gave them pears again. They scurried over and ate everything from the skin to the stalks. This time the third one gnawed at the pears too. Between the three of them, they demolished the pears in a flash. Just like that, six pears were completely devoured.

"Pears!"

"More pears!"

"More, more!"

Since the two lively ones made a fuss, I put a few more pears in front of them. The withdrawn one didn't eat any this time. I wiped my back with a towel while watching the creatures munch away at the pears. Almost ten days had passed since I started working in Mr. Genda's pear orchard.

Recently, after night falls, I've been getting a feeling like something has started to slip. When I wonder what exactly it is that's slipping, I start to think that time is slipping, and space is slipping, and sound is slipping, and probably everything is slipping away altogether. That's why I asked Mr. Genda to let me work in the pear orchard during the day.

I held out my hand, and the withdrawn one climbed onto it. It climbed up to my shoulder and touched the nape of my neck with its tiny hand, which was covered in white fur.

"I'm not okay, you know." I felt its breath on my skin.

"Nothing is okay." It scrunched up its body.

When I asked what was wrong, it began to chatter away. Once it started to speak, it was unexpectedly loquacious.

"It's not okay that the pears disappear when I eat them."

"It's not okay that I become less of me no matter what I do."

"It's not okay that everything will turn black."

"It's not okay that everything will change and become bright."

"It's not okay that everything will change no matter what I do."

It explained this to me with an intense fervor.

The two lively ones had completely consumed the extra pears, and they slept on the floor stretched out on their backs. At some point they'd started to snore. I asked the one that was still awake if it was sleepy, but it shook its head.

"Is it okay if I'm awake? Would it be okay if I'm always awake?" I told it that I didn't mind. It climbed down from my shoulder and plopped itself on top of my desk, where it watched me clean the plates from dinner.

When I looked at it again after washing the dishes, it was sound asleep and snoring louder than the other two.

* * * * *

The three creatures fidgeted in the foyer as I got ready to head out to the pear orchard the next day. They scrambled outside as soon as I opened the door. When all three were together like this, I couldn't tell which of them was the introverted one. I made my way to the pear field while wiping the sweat that coated my face. The three creatures walked at my feet, sometimes in front of me and sometimes behind. They chattered in small, squeaky voices, but I couldn't catch what they were saying.

I picked pears all day. Mr. Genda came in the afternoon to spray pesticide. The three creatures climbed up the trunks of the pear trees and stared at Mr. Genda's hands.

"How did it go?" Mr. Genda asked. "Did anything happen when you took them home?"

He laughed when I answered that they just ate pears and went to sleep.

"Why don't you leave them here tonight?" he suggested, and the three of them immediately started chirping.

"No!"

"No, no!"

"We're going!"

"We're going home!"

"We're going to sleep at home!"

Mr. Genda laughed again.

"They've really gotten attached to you, haven't they?" he said, spraying pesticide onto the ground from the tip of a brass pole fitted onto a hose. He wiped his face with a towel he'd hung around his neck.

I wanted to ask Mr. Genda what the creatures were, but I hesitated to say anything in front of them. When he finished spraying pesticide, I stuck my head under the faucet of a water tank and poured water over myself. I scooped handfuls of water and gulped them down one after another. It was evening before I knew it. Bats flew close to the ground, and the three creatures yelled words I didn't understand at the bats while stomping their feet.

When the day's work was done, Mr. Genda gave me a few more scrap pears than he usually did. "You can have these, too," he said, handing me an ear of corn and an eggplant.

I returned home and put out the pears for the three creatures. I boiled the corn Mr. Genda had given me, but they wouldn't eat anything other than pears. The two lively ones seemed to be more comfortable inside my apartment than they were yesterday. They leapt up onto the cupboard and picked up the phone, holding it against their ears, but eventually they fell asleep on the floor. The introverted one sat on top of my desk with its eyes wide open.

When I told it about how loud it snored last night, its face twisted with anger.

"Don't embarrass me like that!"

"It's okay if I snore."

"It's fine!"

The creature repeated "it's fine" over and over in a shrill tone of voice. It was quite annoying.

The feeling that everything was slipping crept up on me as the night drew on. It had become easier to fall asleep since I started working in the pear orchard, but I couldn't sleep tonight, probably on account of the three creatures. I got the sense that things were slipping a little more than usual. I couldn't stand it. I stood up and dried the dishes, but the feeling still didn't pass. I went outside and began walking to the pear orchard.

I had a feeling that the third creature was following me. Maybe it was because it was so dark, or maybe it was because of the slipping, but I didn't know if the creature was really there or not. I walked at a brisk pace. The daytime heat lingered in the air, and the night was tepid. I gradually started to feel as if I had several shadows that were overlapping each other in the darkness.

When I got to the field, I began digging in the ground with a hoe. My eyes got used to the dim light, and I could see that the one creature had followed me. Its white fur shone in the radiance of the moon. Each time I swung the hoe, the frightened creature scrunched its body into a little ball.

Heh! I punched into the ground with the hoe, putting force into each stroke. *Heh! Heh!* I dug for all I was worth.

"Why are you digging like that?" the creature asked after watching me for a few minutes. I kept digging without answering, so it asked the same question again. I didn't say anything, and it just kept asking. I eventually yelled at it to go away.

It looked up at me, its mouth hanging open in a little circle of surprise. Its body trembled, and it disappeared into the night.

* * * * *

The introverted one didn't come back the next day or the day after that. I worked harder than ever in the pear orchard as the two remaining creatures ran through the pear trees. When the sun went down and work was over, I accompanied them back to my apartment. They ate a mountain of pears, as always. When I asked what had happened to the other little creature, they answered in an indifferent tone.

"Well now."

"I wonder."

"That one probably went back."

"That one went back."

"That one is probably off crying somewhere."

"That one must be crying."

A third and a fourth day passed, but the creature still hadn't come back. Since I had been doing more work, Mr. Genda increased my daily wage.

"You should take it easy. The pears aren't going to grow any faster," he said, adding a thousand yen to my usual pay.

"Speaking of which, aren't there only two now?" Mr. Genda asked. I looked down and saw the two lively ones running around. Mr. Genda didn't say anything else about them.

"Would you like to take a day off?"

I replied that I didn't want to take time off since I wouldn't get any pears if I didn't come to work, and Mr. Genda laughed. "You're taking good care of them, aren't you?" The two creatures darted through the grass with surprising speed.

* * * * *

I woke up suddenly in the middle of the night. A painful weight bore down on my chest. A soft beam of moonlight shone into the room through a crack in the curtain. The two creatures were stretched out on the floor, sound asleep. The outlines of the objects in my room stood out in sharp contrast. I could see the silhouette of the lampshade and the pear box, as well an empty bottle on top of my desk. My chest was terribly heavy.

When I touched my hand to my heart, I felt something there. I sprang up, and a shadow resembling the missing creature jumped off of me.

I cried out in surprise as the creature sunk its face into my pillow.

"I'm home."

"I came back."

"Are you mad?"

"Are you still mad?"

I hugged it gently and rubbed my cheek against its tiny face. It calmly allowed me to pet its fur. Its white hair tickled my hand.

"So you're not mad."

"Thank goodness."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry."

It apologized over and over again. When I told it that I wasn't angry, it poked my cheek. Its fingers were about as big as chickweed leaves. When I said that I was the one who was sorry, it poked me harder.

"I was sad."

"I cried a little."

It kept poking me as it spoke. I didn't try to stop it, and it dug its fingers even deeper into my cheek. I said that it was starting to hurt me. It stopped poking me and whispered.

"I'm hungry."

"I want some pears."

"Pears."

"Pears!"

I pointed to the box of pears, and it jumped right inside. It devoured the last few pears, making a huge mess in the process.

* * * * *

"We're just about done here," Mr. Genda told me. August was almost over.

"The peak of the season has already passed, so I can handle the rest by myself. There's still some time before it's strawberry season."

Mr. Genda leaned against the trunk of a pear tree and lit a cigarette. He narrowed his eyes as he watched the three creatures running around.

"So they're still alive," Mr. Genda remarked. When I jerked my face up, Mr. Genda seemed surprised at my reaction.

"Didn't I tell you? They disappear when pear season is over."

Even though it was broad daylight, I suddenly felt everything slipping. I felt as though another me, just the same size as me, had flickered into existence and was starting to walk away from where I was standing.

"They're like insects. Did you ever keep a beetle as a pet when you were a kid? They die when summer is over, remember? These guys are the same."

Mr. Genda snuffed out his cigarette inside an empty can and playfully kicked at one of the creatures running in circles around his feet. It bounced, and then it bounced again. It seemed to be enjoying itself. The other two, imitating it, began bouncing as well.

"It's nothing to worry about. They're just stupid little things," Mr. Genda said, picking out ten large and especially juicy-looking pears from the shipping carton.

"I'd like you to take these. Please come work here again. You really helped me out."

I took my pay for the final day and went home. When I got back to my apartment and opened the envelope, I found three thousand yen more than usual. I put the pears on the floor, and the three creatures came squirming up to eat them. They gobbled the pears with gusto, splashing the juice on their fur.

* * * * *

That night I was struck by an intense sense of slipping. It wasn't a vague feeling of slipping like it usually was; it was a large and disorienting type of slipping like the one I'd experienced in Mr. Genda's orchard. It wasn't like space or the earth's axis were slipping, but rather as if I had slipped out of my body completely.

I was now standing beside myself. The three creatures were bouncing around my sleeping body. They had been sound asleep and snoring just a second ago, but here they were, bouncing around energetically in the middle of the night.

"Let's go!"

"Let's go! Let's go!"

"To the pear trees!"

"To the pear trees! To the pear trees!"

They shook my sleeping body, chirping in unison.

I spoke up and told them that I was already awake, that I was standing right here. All three of them looked up at me.

"You left your body."

"You left it! You left it behind!"

"Let's go!"

"Let's go! Let's go!"

All three of the creatures scrambled up my leg and pointed to the door. Leaving my sleeping body behind, I went outside, the three creatures riding on my shoulders. The heavy summer air flowed languidly around me. The pear trees stood in front of me in the night.

"Let's go!"

"Let's go!"

"Hurry, hurry!"

The two lively ones jumped to the ground together. They scurried up a pear tree and stopped at its highest point, staring at something. The introverted one remained on my shoulder. I asked it if it was going too, but it shook its head.

"I hate it."

"It's scary."

"I'm scared."

"I don't want to."

The two in the tree began eating the pears that had been left on the branches as a charm to ensure future harvests. They weren't greedy or messy like they usually were. They ate quietly, as if savoring the pears. I turned my face to the one still on my shoulder and asked it once again if it wanted to join them.

"No!"

"I don't want to."

"I don't want to become something that isn't me."

I told it that that we could go back to my apartment if it didn't want to climb the tree, but it didn't respond.

I repeated that we could go back if it wanted, and it shook its head.

Well, what do you want to do?

It didn't answer. The two lively ones had finished eating all the remaining pears. They clung to the trunk of the pear tree so tightly that they looked like knotty lumps in its wood.

My body was light, and it was becoming even lighter. I felt like I would be swallowed up into the atmosphere if I wasn't careful. I would be swept away to someplace I had never been before, and I wouldn't be able to come back. The creature on my shoulder was trembling, just as it was when I first encountered it. My body grew warm and relaxed as its shivers ran through me. The feeling of looseness gradually spread from my shoulders to my chest to my stomach to my arms to my feet. It was like stepping into a pool of warm water.

"Let's go deeper into the trees."

I did as the creature suggested, walking with it sitting on my shoulder. It eventually hopped from my shoulder onto the trunk of a tree and frantically began to eat the pears left on the branches. It chomped down on the pears as quickly as it could, almost as if it were trying to catch up with the others, but it ate with a vacant look in its eyes that was no different than its usual expression.

It turned to me after it finished eating. "I'm still not okay," it said.

You keep saying that, I started to reply, but then I stopped myself. I wasn't okay either, and I couldn't say something like "you really *aren't* okay" to another living thing.

"I don't want to, but I'm going," the creature said after a long silence. There was a pained expression on its tiny face. The light of the moon sparkled on its eyes and nose and mouth.

Is it time for you to leave, I asked. I felt a crushing sense of loneliness. It felt awful to be left behind. I began to cry, and I asked it not to go.

"Goodbye," it said, gently closing its eyes. As I watched, it became a white lump in the wood of the pear tree. I put my hand on the lump, but it was no longer moving. It's already become a knot of wood, I thought. The longer I kept touching it, the lighter my body became. I felt as though I was being drawn into the middle of the lump.

I was being sucked in and carried away along with the creature.

I instinctively yanked my hand away from the tree. I could almost hear the creature saying *let's go*. No! I screamed. In that instant I became weightless, and I flew back to my room with incredible speed.

I returned to my sleeping body, which was breathing deeply in my bed.

I was covered in sweat.

* * * * *

I went to see Mr. Genda the next day. I was wearing an outfit for going into town instead of my usual work clothes. Mr. Genda was surprised to see me, but he invited me to have tea with him.

As I drank the tea he made, I thanked him for employing me and informed him of my intention to try to find another job.

"Summer will be over soon." Mr. Genda looked up at the sky while smoking a cigarette.

"I've noticed that I don't see kids playing around here anymore. Maybe they're doing their summer homework? They must have waited until the end of the break to start doing it," Mr. Genda said, still gazing at the sky.

I passed the pear orchard as I left, but I could no longer pick out the trees that had the white lumps on their branches.

Thank you for everything, I mumbled, rapping my fist against one of the pear trees. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I could see three creatures running across the edge of the field. I turned around, but nothing was there. A small dragonfly darted across the ground at the base of the tree trunks. I rubbed my hand against the pear tree once more and walked away.