

Kenzaburo Oe was born in 1935 on Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four main islands. Now recognised as the most important Japanese writer since the Second World War, Oe spent the sixties in Paris where he came under the influence of Sartre. His experiences in Hiroshima after the Second World War gave birth to *Hiroshima Notes*, his non-fiction account of the aftermath of the nuclear bombing, and made him one of Japan's most outspoken anti-nuclear campaigners. Winner of the 1994 Nobel Prize for Literature and twice listed for the Man Booker International Prize, Kenzaburo Oe is one of the great writers of the twentieth century. *The Silent Cry* is recognised as his masterpiece; his many other translated works include *A Personal Matter*, *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness* and *Death by Water*. He lives in Tokyo.

Praise for Kenzaburo Oe

'A writer who with poetic force creates an imagined world where life and myth condense to form a disconcerting picture of the human predicament today ... at first glance [*The Silent Cry*] appears to concern an unsuccessful revolt, but fundamentally the novel deals with people's relationships with each other in a confusing world in which knowledge, passions, dreams, ambitions and attitudes merge into each other' Nobel Prize for Literature citation

'Though thoroughly Japanese, Oe, in the range of hope and despair he covers, seems to me to have in him a touch of Dostoevsky' Henry Miller

'A new pinnacle in postwar Japanese fiction' Yukio Mishima

'An extraordinary work' Kazuo Ishiguro

'Somehow – and this is what gives his art such unquestionable stature – Oe manages to smuggle a comic thread in all this tragedy' *Independent*

'Oe piles copious and inventive misery onto his hero before allowing him enlightenment and redemption' *Sunday Telegraph*

'A formidable scholar and intellectual whose novels express the moral soul-searching of postwar Japan' *Boston Globe*

'A major feat of the imagination' *The Times*

THE SILENT CRY

KENZABURO OE

Translated by John Bester



A complete catalogue record for this book can
be obtained from the British Library on request

The right of Kenzaburo Oe to be identified as the author of this work
has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988

Copyright © 1967 Kenzaburo Oe
Translation copyright © Kodansha International Ltd, 1988

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a
retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publisher.

First published as *Man'en Gannen no Futtohoru* in 1967 by
Kodansha Ltd, Tokyo

First published in this edition in 2016
First published in 1988 by Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London WC1X 9HD
www.serpentstail.com

ISBN 978 1 78125 565 0
eISBN 978 1 84765 773 2

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2



THE SILENT CRY

In the Wake of the Dead

A WAKENING in the predawn darkness, I grope among the anguished remnants of dreams that linger in my consciousness, in search of some ardent sense of expectation. Seeking in the tremulous hope of finding eager expectancy reviving in the innermost recesses of my being—unequivocally, with the impact of whisky setting one's guts afire as it goes down—still I find an endless nothing. I close fingers that have lost their power. And everywhere, in each part of my body, the several weights of flesh and bone are experienced independently, as sensations that resolve into a dull pain in my consciousness as it backs reluctantly into the light. With a sense of resignation, I take upon me once more the heavy flesh, dully aching in every part and disintegrated though it is. I've been sleeping with arms and legs askew, in the posture of a man reluctant to be reminded either of his nature or of the situation in which he finds himself.

Whenever I awaken I seek again that lost, fervid feeling of expectation, the ardent sense of expectation that is no consciousness of lack but a positive actuality in itself. Finally convinced that I'll not find it, I try to lure myself down the slope to second sleep: *sleep, sleep!—the world does not exist*; but this morning the poison tormenting my body is too virulent to permit retreat into slumber. Fear threatens to engulf me. Sunrise must be at least an hour away; till then, there's no telling what kind of day it will be. I lie in the dark, knowing nothing, a fetus in the womb. There was a time when sexual habits were useful on such occasions. But now at twenty-seven, married, with a child put away in an institution, I feel shame welling up at the idea of masturbation, stifling the buds of desire. *Sleep, sleep!—if you can't sleep then pretend you're asleep*. Suddenly, in the darkness, I see the square hole the workmen dug yesterday for our septic tank. In my aching body the desolate, bitter poison multiplies, threatening to ooze out

slowly, like jelly from a tube, from ears, eyes, nose, mouth, anus, urethra. . . .

Still in the guise of a sleeper, with eyes closed, I stand up and move sluggishly through the darkness. Each time I hit some part or other of my body against the door, the wall, or the furniture I give a painful, half-delirious moan. My right eye, admittedly, has no sight even wide open and in broad daylight. I wonder if I'll ever know what lay behind the events whereby my eye got like that. It was a nasty, stupid incident: one morning, as I was walking along the street, a group of primary school children in a fit of hysterical fear and anger flung a chunk of stone at me. Struck in the eye, I lay where I fell on the sidewalk, unable to make out what had happened. My right eye, with a split extending horizontally from the white into the black, lost its vision. Even now, I've never felt I understood the true meaning of the incident. Moreover, I'm afraid of understanding it. If you try walking with one hand over your right eye, you'll realize just how many things lie in wait for you ahead on the right. You'll collide with the unexpected. You'll strike your head and face repeatedly. Thus the right half of my head and face has never been without some fresh mark or other, and I'm ugly. Even before the eye injury I was already showing more and more clearly a quality of ugliness that often reminded me how mother had prophesied that, when we grew up, my brother would be handsome and I would not. The lost eye merely emphasized the ugliness each day, throwing it into constant relief. My born ugliness would have liked to hang back, silent, in the shadows; it was the missing eye that continually dragged it out into the limelight. Not that I neglected to assign a role to this eye: I saw it, its function lost, as being forever trained on the darkness within my skull, a darkness full of blood and somewhat above body heat. The eye was a lone sentry that I'd hired to keep watch on the forest of the night within me, and in doing so I'd forced myself to practice observing my own interior.

Passing through the kitchen, I feel for the door, go out, and finally open my eye to find the faintest whiteness spreading over the distant heights of a leaden, late autumn, predawn sky. A black dog comes running up and jumps at me. But instantly it knows itself rejected; without a sound it shrinks back into stillness and stands pointing its small muzzle at me like a mushroom in the darkness. Picking it up, I tuck it under my arm and walk slowly on again. The

dog stinks. It remains still under my arm, panting heavily.

My armpit gets hot. Perhaps the dog has a fever. The nails of my bare toes strike a wooden frame. I put the dog down for the moment, grope about to check the position of the ladder, then encompass with my arms the darkness at the spot where I set the dog down; it still occupies precisely the same space. I can't help smiling, but it's not a smile that lasts long. The dog is sick, for certain. Laboriously I climb down the ladder. There are puddles here and there at the bottom of the pit, enough to cover the ankles of my bare feet: just a little water, like juices pressed from flesh. Sitting down directly on the bare earth, I feel the water seeping through my pajama trousers and underwear, wetting my buttocks, but I find myself accepting it docilely, as one who cannot refuse.

Yet a dog, of course, can refuse to get dirty. The dog, silent like one that can talk but chooses not to, perches on my lap, leaning its shivering, hot body lightly against my chest. To preserve this balance, it sets hooked claws into the muscles of my chest. I feel the pain as yet another thing that cannot be rejected, and in five minutes am indifferent to it. I'm heedless, too, of the foul water that wets my buttocks and comes seeping in between my testicles and thighs. My body—all 154 pounds and five feet six inches of it—is no different from the load of soil that the laborers dug yesterday from this very spot and discarded in some distant river. My flesh is assimilated by the soil. In my body and the surrounding soil and the whole damp atmosphere, the only signs of life are the dog's heat and my nostrils. The nostrils become rapidly sensitive, and absorb the restricted smells at the bottom of the pit as though they were of unutterable richness. Functioning at full pitch, they assimilate odors too numerous to recognize individually. Almost fainting, I bang the back of my head (and feel it directly as the back of my skull) against the wall of the hole, then go on, indefinitely, absorbing the thousand and one odors and what little oxygen is available. The desolate, bitter poison still fills my body, but no longer seems to be seeping through to the outside. The ardent sense of expectancy hasn't yet returned, but my fear has been alleviated. Now I'm indifferent to everything; indifferent, even, to the very possession of a body. My only regret is that there is no one and nothing to observe me in my total indifference. The dog? The dog has no eyes. Nor have I eyes in my indifference. Since I reached the bottom, my eyes have been shut again.

Next, I meditate on the friend whose cremation I attended. At the end of summer this year he daubed his head all over with crimson paint, stripped, thrust a cucumber up his anus, and hanged himself. His wife discovered the strange suicide on her return, spent as a sick rabbit, from a party that had lasted into the early hours. Why hadn't he gone with her to the party? He was that kind of man: no one would find it odd that he should let his wife go alone to a party while he remained in his study working on a translation (something, in fact, that we were collaborating on).

From a point two yards in front of the dangling corpse she'd fled back to where the party had been held, her hair on end in her panic, her arms flailing above her head, her mouth shaping a voiceless cry, her little-girlish green shoes flapping as she trod back over the path of her own midnight shadow that no one else could see, like a film run in reverse. After informing the police, she sobbed silently till they came from her family to fetch her. Thus, when the police had finished their inquiries, it was left to me and my friend's sturdy old grandmother to perform the last offices for the naked, crimson-headed corpse with the last of its life's semen drying on its thighs, a corpse surely beyond all salvation. The deceased's mother had retreated into an imbecilic state and was useless. Just once, as we made to wash off the dead man's disguise, she showed an unexpected determination and opposed the move. The old woman and I turned away all who came to express condolences, and alone, without interruption, the three of us held a wake for the dead man in whom the myriad cells, once treasurers of his uniqueness, were already in process of swift, furtive disintegration. Like a dam, the dry, parched skin held in the sweet-sour, rosy cells that had dissolved and changed into something indescribable. This crimson-faced corpse of my friend as it lay proudly remote, decomposing on an army-style cot, was filled with a more urgent sense of reality than it had ever had in twenty-seven years of life—life lived pitifully in a diligent effort to pass through the dark tunnel, only to end abruptly before emerging on the other side. The dam of the skin was sentenced to burst. Fermenting clusters of cells were preparing, as a wine is prepared, the real, physical death of the body itself. Those left behind must drink that wine. There was a fascination for me in the close-packed moments that my friend's body marked off in its relationship with the lily-fragrant bacteria of corruption. As I watched the passage of this pure time on its once-

only flight, I was made aware again of the fragility of that other kind of time, soft and warm as the top of an infant's head, that admits of repetition.

I couldn't help feeling envious. No friend's eyes would watch, no friend would understand the true meaning of what was happening when I closed my eyes for the last time and my flesh embarked on its own experience of dissolution.

"When he came home from the clinic, I should have persuaded him to go back again," I said.

"No—the boy couldn't have stayed there any longer," his grandmother replied. "The other mental patients were so impressed with the fine things he'd done there that he couldn't possibly have remained any longer. You shouldn't forget that and blame yourself. What's happened has made it quite plain—it was the best thing possible for him to leave the clinic and lead a free life. If he'd killed himself there, he could never have painted his face red and hanged himself naked, could he? The other patients wouldn't have let him, they respected him too much."

"You bear up so well, you're a great help."

"Everyone has to die. And in a hundred years nobody's going to inquire just how most people died. The best thing is to do it in the way that takes your fancy most."

At the foot of the bed my friend's mother sat rubbing the corpse's feet untiringly, her head hunched into her shoulders like a frightened tortoise, and showed no reaction to our conversation. The small features of the flat, vegetable face that so cruelly resembled her dead son were all slack, like melting candy. It seemed to me I'd never seen a face express so immediate or so utter a despair.

"Like Sarudahiko," said his grandmother inconsequently.

Sarudahiko: the word, vaguely rustic and comic in its associations, was on the verge of suggesting some meaning, albeit vague, to my mind, but my faculties were already too dulled by fatigue to produce more than the faintest tremor, which failed to expand; the thread of meaning escaped me. Even as I shook my head in vain, the word Sarudahiko sank like a sounding line, the seal of meaning unbroken, down into the depths of memory.

But now that word, Sarudahiko, came rising to my mind, a clear outcropping of a vein of familiar memories, as I sat in the water at the bottom of the pit with the dog in my arms. The tissues of the brain

relating to this word, frozen ever since that day, had thawed out. Sarudahiko—Sarudahiko the divine—had gone to Amanoyachimata to meet the gods descending to earth. Amenouzume, who had engaged in negotiations with Sarudahiko as representative of the intruders, had gathered together the fish who were the original inhabitants of the new world in an attempt to establish his dominance, and with a knife had slashed open the mouth of the sea slug, who resisted in silence. Our gentle, twentieth-century Sarudahiko had been, if anything, a fellow to the sea slug whose mouth had been slashed. At the thought, the tears gushed from my eyes and, streaming down my cheeks and along my lips, dropped onto the dog's back.

A year before his death, he'd cut short his studies at Columbia University and returned to Japan, where he entered a home for mild cases of mental disorder. Of the whereabouts of the home and his life there, I know nothing other than what he himself reported. Neither had his wife or his mother or grandmother actually visited the place, though it was said to be in the Shonan district. He forbade all those close to him to visit him there. Thinking about it now, I feel far from sure even that such a home existed. However, if one is to believe what he said, the place was called the Smile Training Center, and the inmates, who were given large doses of tranquilizers at every meal, spent all their time placidly smiling. It was a single-story building similar to the beachside hostels to be found all over the Shonan area, and half of it was taken up by a single, large sun-room. During the day most of the patients chatted amiably to each other, sitting on the swings that were installed in large numbers on the extensive lawn. Strictly speaking, the inmates weren't even patients but travelers, as it were, on a prolonged stopover. Under the influence of the tranquilizers, they became more manageable than the most docile of domestic animals, and whiled away the hours in the sun-room or on the lawn exchanging happy, untroubled smiles. They were free to go out, and since no one felt he was being kept in confinement, no one ever ran away.

Coming home about a week after entering the home to get books and a change of clothing, my friend declared that he seemed to have adjusted to this odd place more swiftly and more comfortably than any of the placidly smiling patients who had entered before him. Three weeks later, however, on his next return to Tokyo, his smiles, though still there, looked faintly forlorn. And he confided in his wife and my-

self. The male nurse who brought the patients their drugs and their meals was a brutal fellow who would often treat them abominably, since under sedation they were unable even to feel anger. Sometimes as he passed a patient he would deal him a hefty blow in the belly, quite without provocation. I suggested he should protest to those in charge of the center, but he said that if he did the director would only think he was inventing it out of boredom, or suffering from a simple persecution complex, or both. After all, no one, at least along the Shonan coast, could be as bored as they were, and they were all to a greater or lesser extent out of their minds. Besides, thanks to the tranquilizers, he himself hardly knew whether he was really angry or not. . . .

Nevertheless, it was only two or three days after this that he flushed down the toilet the tranquilizers doled out to him at breakfast, did the same at lunch, and again at suppertime. The next morning, having discovered that he was indeed angry, he lay in wait for the brute and—himself suffering a considerable amount of damage in the process—ended by half slaying him. As a result of this incident he won the sincere admiration of his gently smiling friends but, following a talk with the director, was obliged to leave. As he left the Smile Training Center, waving to the mental patients who saw him off with the same amiable, fatuous smiles on their faces, he experienced a profounder sadness than ever before.

“It’s as Henry Miller said. I felt the same kind of sadness as his. Actually, until that moment I’d never realized the truth of what he wrote: ‘I tried to smile with him, but I couldn’t. It made me terribly sad, sadder than I ever felt before in my life.’ It’s more than just a turn of phrase. . . . And there’s another phrase of Miller’s too that’s been haunting me ever since: ‘Let’s be cheerful, whatever happens.’”

From the end of his period at the Smile Training Center until his death by hanging, naked, with his head painted bright red, there’s no doubt that he remained obsessed by Miller’s words, “Let’s be cheerful, whatever happens.” His brief and premature last years were spent in unequivocal cheerfulness. He even lapsed into a particular sexual proclivity and explored its peculiar type of frenzy. I was reminded of it by a conversation with my wife when I returned home, stunned and exhausted, after the cremation. She was drinking whisky, alone, as she waited for me. That was the first day I saw her drunk.

As soon as I got home I went and looked in the room she shared

with our son. The child was still at home in those days. It was barely dusk, but the child lay on the bed looking up at me placidly with absolutely empty brown eyes, the kind of placidity with which a plant, if plants had eyes, might gaze back at someone peering at it. My wife was not beside him. If I remember correctly, she was sitting quite drunk in the gloom of the library when I found her, perched precariously on a step stool between the shelves like a bird on a swaying branch. I was so taken aback that I felt, if anything, more embarrassed for myself than for her. Getting the whisky bottle out of the niche inside the stool where I'd hidden it, she'd seated herself on its steps, taken a gulp straight from the bottle, and continued to drink little by little, getting steadily drunker as she went. Seeing me, she jerked back like a mechanical doll. Her upper lip was greasy with sweat. She couldn't stand up. Her eyes, the color of plums, were feverish, but the skin of her neck and shoulders showing above her dress was rough with goose pimples. Her whole being suggested a dog driven by sickness to chew grass furiously only to vomit all the more.

"You're ill, surely?" I asked, ridiculously.

"No, I'm not ill," she replied with open scorn, swift to sense my embarrassment.

"Then you're drunk, in fact."

Squatting down facing her I watched, fascinated, a drop of sweat, quivering on the edge of her upper lip as she stared back at me suspiciously, roll down sideways as the lip curled. Her squalid breath, laden with the damp fumes of alcohol, swept over me. The exhaustion brought by the living from the deathbed of a friend seeped like a dye into every corner of my body, and I could have sobbed.

"You're dead drunk, you know."

"I'm not particularly drunk. If I'm sweating it's because I'm scared."

"What about? The kid's future?"

"Scared that there should be people who kill themselves, naked, with their heads painted red."

I had told her that much, passing over the part about the cucumber.

"That's nothing for you to be particularly scared about, is it?"

"I'm scared that *you* might paint your head red and kill yourself, naked," she said, and hung her head in a display of unconcealed fear.

With a shudder I saw for a moment, in the dark brown mass of her hair, a miniature of myself dead. The crimson head of Mitsusaburo

Nedokoro in death, with lumps of partly dissolved powder paint dried behind the lobes of his ears, like drops of blood. Even as my friend's body had been, so my own had the two ears left unpainted, token of the inadequate lapse of time between the conception of this bizarre suicide and its execution.

"I won't kill myself. Why should I?"

"Was he a masochist?"

"What makes you ask me that, the very day after his death? Just curiosity?"

"Well, supposing," she went on in a tone made excessively abject by the signs of anger in my voice (though an anger that wasn't particularly clear even to myself), "supposing he did have some sexual perversion, there wouldn't be any need for me to be afraid for you, would there?"

She jerked her head back again and stared at me as though demanding my agreement. The unspeakably naked sense of helplessness in her preternaturally red eyes shocked me. But she shut them almost at once, raised the whisky bottle, and took another gulp. The curves of her eyelids were dark like dirty finger pads. She coughed till the tears came to her eyes and whisky mingled with saliva dribbled from the corners of her mouth. Instead of being concerned on her behalf over the stain it would make on her new, off-white silk dress, I took the bottle from her hand—a hand scrawny and stringy as a monkey's—and took a swig to cover my awkwardness.

It was true, as my friend had told me with a mixture of pleasure and sadness at a point midway in his sexual progress—a point, that is, on the slope of a tendency still vague yet clear enough to the person concerned, neither shallow enough to be of the kind that anyone might experience by chance nor sufficiently indulged to be absolutely past discussing with others—that he'd long been seeking masochistic experiences. He'd visited a private establishment where some ferocious female catered to masochists. There was nothing remarkable about what happened the first day. But on his second visit three weeks later, the stupid brute of a woman, remembering his tastes accurately, announced portentously that she would henceforth be indispensable to him. It wasn't until the next stage, as he lay naked on his face and a knotted hemp rope landed with a thud beside his ear, that he realized that the great brutish female had indeed assumed a place in his world as an unarguable fact.

“It was as though my body was completely disassembled, all soft and limp in each part, something like a string of sausages, without any sensation at all. But my mind was floating somewhere way up above, completely cut off from my body.” And he’d fixed his eyes on me with an oddly weak, pained little smile.

I took another mouthful of whisky and, like my wife, was seized with a fit of coughing which sent lukewarm whisky through my undershirt to run down the skin of my chest and belly. Then as I gazed at her, sitting with her eyes still shut, the dark lids evoking another, false pair of eyes like the protective markings on the wings of certain moths, I was seized with an impulse to talk to her roughly.

Even assuming he was a masochist—I would say—it wouldn’t mean you’d have nothing to be afraid of. It wouldn’t justify your making a distinction between him and me and telling yourself I would never paint my head red and kill myself, naked. Sexual peculiarities aren’t very important in the long run; they’re only one distortion caused by something grotesque and really frightening coiled up in the depths of the personality. There was some enormous, uncontrollable, crazy motive force lurking in the depths of his soul, and it happened to induce a particular distortion called masochism—that’s all. It wasn’t his involvement with masochism that gave birth to the madness leading to his suicide, but the reverse. And I too have the seeds of that same, incurable madness. . . .

But I said nothing of all this to my wife, nor did the idea itself send its fine tendrils down into the folds of my brain, blunted by exhaustion. The fancy, like bubbles rising in a glass, fizzed for a while then vanished. Such notions pass without leaving any experience behind. This is particularly true when one remains silent about them; all one needs to do is wait till the undesirable notions pass away without damaging the walls of the brain.

If I could get by in this way now, then I should be able to escape the poison until the massive counterattack when I would finally have to accept it as an experience. Curbing my tongue, I put my hands under my wife’s arms from behind and hoisted her to her feet. It felt like sacrilege to support my living wife—the mystery and vulnerability of a body made to give birth in peril and in stress—with arms contaminated by lifting the body of a dead friend; yet of the two bodies, equal burdens, it was to my dead friend’s that I felt closer.

We advanced at a slow pace toward the bedroom where the baby