



*"Kenzaburo Oe has reached a new pinnacle in postwar Japanese fiction."*

—Yukio Mishima

# Kenzaburo Oe

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# A Personal Matter



*The*  
**1994**  
**Nobel Prize**  
**Winner**

*Translated by*  
*John Nathan*

# A PERSONAL MATTER

by Kenzaburo Oë

*Translated from the Japanese by John Nathan*

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# A PERSONAL MATTER

*This translation is for “Pooh”*



## Translator's Note

There is a tradition in Japan: no one takes a writer seriously while he is still in school. Perhaps the only exception has been Kenzaburo Oë. In 1958, a student in French Literature at Tokyo University, Oë won the Akutagawa Prize for a novella called *The Catch* (about a ten-year-old Japanese boy who is betrayed by a Negro pilot who has been shot down over his village), and was proclaimed the most promising writer to have appeared since Yukio Mishima.

Last year, to mark his first decade as a writer, Oë's collected works were published—two volumes of essays, primarily political (Oë is an uncompromising spokesman for the New Left of Japan), dozens of short stories, and eight novels, of which the most recent is *A Personal Matter*. Oë's industry is dazzling. But even more remarkable is his popularity, which has continued to climb: to date, the *Complete Works*, in six volumes, has sold nine hundred thousand copies. The key to Oë's popularity is his sensitivity to the very special predicament of the postwar generation; he is as important as he is because he has provided that generation with a hero of its own.

On the day the Emperor announced the Surrender in August 1945, Oë was a ten-year-old boy living in a mountain village. Here is how he recalls the event:

"The adults sat around their radios and cried. The children gathered outside in the dusty road and whispered their be-

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wilderment. We were most confused and disappointed by the fact that the Emperor had spoken in a *human* voice, no different from any adult's. None of us understood what he was saying, but we all had heard his voice. One of my friends could even imitate it cleverly. Laughing, we surrounded him—a twelve year old in grimy shorts who spoke with the Emperor's voice. A minute later we felt afraid. We looked at one another; no one spoke. How could we believe that an august presence of such awful power had become an ordinary human being on a designated summer day?"

Small wonder that Oë and his generation were bewildered. Throughout the war, a part of each day in every Japanese school was devoted to a terrible litany. The Ethics teacher would call the boys to the front of the class and demand of them one by one what they would do if the Emperor commanded them to die. Shaking with fright, the child would answer: "I would die, Sir, I would rip open my belly and die." Students passed the Imperial portrait with their eyes to the ground, afraid their eyeballs would explode if they looked His Imperial Majesty in the face. And Kenzaburo Oë had a recurring dream in which the Emperor swooped out of the sky like a bird, his body covered with white feathers.

The emblematic hero of Oë's novels, in each book a little older and more sensible of his distress, has been deprived of his ethical inheritance. The values that regulated life in the world he knew as a child, however fatally, were blown to smithereens at the end of the war. The crater that remained is a gaping crater still, despite imported filler like Democracy. It is the emptiness and enervation of life in such a world, the frightening absence of continuity, which drive Oë's hero beyond the frontiers of respectability into the wilderness of sex and violence and political fanaticism. Like Huckleberry Finn—Oë's favorite book!—he is impelled again and again to "light out for the territory." He is an adventurer in quest of

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peril, which seems to be the only solution to the deadly void back home. More often than not he finds what he is looking for, and it destroys him.

A word about the language of *A Personal Matter*. Oë's style has been the subject of much controversy in Japan. It treads a thin line between artful rebellion and mere unruliness. That is its excitement and the reason why it is so very difficult to translate. Oë consciously interferes with the tendency to vagueness which is considered inherent in the Japanese language. He violates its natural rhythms; he pushes the meanings of words to their furthest acceptable limits. In short, he is in the process of evolving a language all his own, a language which can accommodate the virulence of his imagination. There are critics in Japan who take offense. They cry that Oë's prose "reeks of butter," which is a way of saying that he has alloyed the purity of Japanese with constructions from Western languages. It is true that Oë's style assaults traditional notions of what the genius of the language is. But that is to be expected: his entire stance is an assault on traditional values. The protagonist of his fiction is seeking his identity in a perilous wilderness, and it is fitting that his language should be just what it is—wild, unresolved, but never less than vital.

March, 1968



# 1

Bird, gazing down at the map of Africa that reposed in the showcase with the haughty elegance of a wild deer, stifled a short sigh. The salesgirls paid no attention, their arms and necks goosepimpled where the uniform blouses exposed them. Evening was deepening, and the fever of early summer, like the temperature of a dead giant, had dropped completely from the covering air. People moved as if groping in the dimness of the subconscious for the memory of midday warmth that lingered faintly in the skin: people heaved ambiguous sighs. June—half-past six: by now not a man in the city was sweating. But Bird's wife lay naked on a rubber mat, tightly shutting her eyes like a shot pheasant falling out of the sky, and while she moaned her pain and anxiety and expectation, her body was oozing globes of sweat.

Shuddering, Bird peered at the details of the map. The ocean surrounding Africa was inked in the teary blue of a winter sky at dawn. Longitudes and latitudes were not the mechanical lines of a compass: the bold strokes evoked the artist's unsteadiness and caprice. The continent itself resembled the skull of a man who had hung his head. With doleful, downcast eyes, a man with a huge head was gazing at Australia, land of the koala, the platypus, and the kangaroo. The miniature Africa indicating population distribution in a lower corner of the map was like a dead head beginning to decompose; another, veined with transportation routes, was a

skinned head with the capillaries painfully exposed. Both these little Africas suggested unnatural death, raw and violent.

"Shall I take the atlas out of the case?"

"No, don't bother," Bird said. "I'm looking for the Michelin road maps of West Africa and Central and South Africa." The girl bent over a drawer full of Michelin maps and began to rummage busily. "Series number 182 and 185," Bird instructed, evidently an old Africa hand.

The map Bird had been sighing over was a page in a ponderous, leather-bound atlas intended to decorate a coffee table. A few weeks ago he had priced the atlas, and he knew it would cost him five months' salary at the cram-school where he taught. If he included the money he could pick up as a part-time interpreter, he might manage in three months. But Bird had himself and his wife to support, and now the existence on its way into life that minute. Bird was the head of a family!

The salesgirl selected two of the red paperbound maps and placed them on the counter. Her hands were small and soiled, the meagerness of her fingers recalled chameleon legs clinging to a shrub. Bird's eye fell on the Michelin trademark beneath her fingers: the toadlike rubber man rolling a tire down the road made him feel the maps were a silly purchase. But these were maps he would put to an important use.

"Why is the atlas open to the Africa page?" Bird asked wistfully. The salesgirl, somehow wary, didn't answer. Why *was* it always open to the Africa page? Did the manager suppose the map of Africa was the most beautiful page in the book? But Africa was in a process of dizzying change that would quickly outdate any map. And since the corrosion that began with Africa would eat away the entire volume, opening the book to the Africa page amounted to advertising the obsolescence of the rest. What you needed was a map that could never be outdated because political configurations were

settled. Would you choose America, then? North America, that is?

Bird interrupted himself to pay for the maps, then moved down the aisle to the stairs, passing with lowered eyes between a potted tree and a corpulent bronze nude. The nude's bronze belly was smeared with oil from frustrated palms: it glistened wetly like a dog's nose. As a student, Bird himself used to run his fingers across this belly as he passed; today he couldn't find the courage even to look the statue in the face. Bird had glimpsed the doctor and the nurses scrubbing their arms with disinfectant next to the table where his wife had been lying naked. The doctor's arms were matted with hair.

Bird carefully slipped his maps into his jacket pocket and pressed them against his side as he pushed past the crowded magazine counter and headed for the door. These were the first maps he had purchased for actual use in Africa. Uneasily he wondered if the day would ever come when he actually set foot on African soil and gazed through dark sunglasses at the African sky. Or was he losing, this very minute, once and for all, any chance he might have had of setting out for Africa? Was he being forced to say good-by, in spite of himself, to the single and final occasion of dazzling tension in his youth? And what if I am? There's not a thing in hell I can do about it!

Bird angrily pushed through the door and stepped into the early summer evening street. The sidewalk seemed bound in fog: it was the filthiness of the air and the fading evening light. Bird paused to gaze at himself in the wide, darkly shadowed display window. He was aging with the speed of a short-distance runner. Bird, twenty-seven years and four months old. He had been nicknamed "Bird" when he was fifteen, and he had been Bird ever since: the figure awkwardly afloat like a drowned corpse in the inky lake of window glass



still resembled a bird. He was small and thin. His friends had begun to put on weight the minute they graduated from college and took a job—even those who stayed lean had fattened up when they got married; but Bird, except for the slight paunch on his belly, remained as skinny as ever. He slouched forward when he walked and bunched his shoulders around his neck; his posture was the same when he was standing still. Like an emaciated old man who once had been an athlete.

It wasn't only that his hunched shoulders were like folded wings, his features in general were birdlike. His tan, sleek nose thrust out of his face like a beak and hooked sharply toward the ground. His eyes gleamed with a hard, dull light the color of glue and almost never displayed emotion, except occasionally to shutter open as though in mild surprise. His thin, hard lips were always stretched tightly across his teeth; the lines from his high cheekbones to his chin described a sharply pointed V. And hair licking at the sky like ruddy tongues of flame. This was a fair description of Bird at fifteen: nothing had changed at twenty. How long would he continue to look like a bird? No choice but living with the same face and posture from fifteen to sixty-five, was he that kind of person? Then the image he was observing in the window glass was a composite of his entire life. Bird shuddered, seized with disgust so palpable it made him want to vomit. What a revelation: exhausted, with a horde of children, old, senile Bird. . . .

Suddenly a woman with a definitely peculiar quality rose out of the dim lake in the window and slowly moved toward Bird. She was a large woman with broad shoulders, so tall that her face topped the reflection of Bird's head in the glass. Feeling as though a monster were stalking him from behind, Bird finally wheeled around. The woman stopped in front of him and peered into his face gravely. Bird stared back. A second

later, he saw the hard, pointed urgency in her eyes washing away in the waters of mournful indifference. Though she may not have known its precise nature, the woman had been on the verge of discovering a bond of mutual interest, and had realized abruptly that Bird was not an appropriate partner in the bond. In the same moment, Bird perceived the abnormality in her face which, with its frame of curly, overabundant hair, reminded him of a Fra Angelico angel: he noticed in particular the blond hairs which a razor had missed on her upper lip. The hairs had breached a wall of thick make-up and they were quivering as though distressed.

"Hey!" said the large woman in a resounding male voice. The greeting conveyed consternation at her own rash mistake. It was a charming thing to say.

"Hey!" Bird hurried his face into a smile and returned the greeting in the somewhat hoarse, squawky voice that was another of his birdlike attributes.

The transvestite executed a half-turn on his high heels and walked slowly down the street. For a minute Bird watched him go, then walked away in the other direction. He cut through a narrow alley and cautiously, warily started across a wide street fretted with trolley tracks. Even the hysterical caution which now and then seized Bird with the violence of a spasm evoked a puny bird half-crazed with fear—the nickname was a perfect fit.

That queen saw me watching my reflection in the window as if I were waiting for someone, and he mistook me for a pervert. A humiliating mistake, but inasmuch as the queen had recognized her error the minute Bird had turned around, Bird's honor had been redeemed. Now he was enjoying the humor of the confrontation. *Hey!*—no greeting could have been better suited to the occasion; the queen must have had a good head on his shoulders.

Bird felt a surge of affection for the young man masquerad-



ing as a large woman. Would he succeed in turning up a pervert tonight and making him a pigeon? Maybe I should have found the courage to go with him myself.

Bird was still imagining what might have happened had he gone off with the young man to some crazy corner of the city, when he gained the opposite sidewalk and turned into a crowded street of cheap bars and restaurants. We would probably lie around naked, as close as brothers, and talk. I'd be naked too so he wouldn't feel any awkwardness. I might tell him my wife was having a baby tonight, and maybe I'd confess that I've wanted to go to Africa for years, and that my dream of dreams has been to write a chronicle of my adventures when I got back called *Sky Over Africa*. I might even say that going off to Africa alone would become impossible if I got locked up in the cage of a family when the baby came (I've been in the cage ever since my marriage but until now the door has always seemed open; the baby on its way into the world may clang that door shut). I'd talk about all kinds of things, and the queen would take pains to pick up the seeds of everything that's threatening me, one by one he'd gather them in, and certainly he would understand. Because a youth who tries so hard to be faithful to the warp in himself that he ends up searching the street in drag for perverts, a young man like that must have eyes and ears and a heart exquisitely sensitive to the fear that roots in the backlands of the subconscious.

Tomorrow morning we might have shaved together while we listened to the news on the radio, sharing a soap dish. That queen was young but his beard seemed heavy and . . . Bird cut the chain of fantasy and smiled. Spending a night together might be going too far, but at least he should have invited the young man for a drink. Bird was on a street lined with cheap, cozy bars: the crowd sweeping him along was full of drunks. His throat was dry and he wanted a drink, even if

he had to have it alone. Pivoting his head swiftly on his long, lean neck, he inspected the bars on both sides of the street. In fact, he had no intention of stopping in any of them. Bird could imagine how his mother-in-law would react if he arrived at the bedside of his wife and newborn child, reeking of whisky. He didn't want his parents-in-law to see him in the grip of alcohol: not again.

Bird's father-in-law lectured at a small private college now, but he had been the chairman of the English department at Bird's university until he had retired. It was thanks not so much to good luck as to his father-in-law's good will that Bird had managed at his age to get a teaching job at a cram-school. He loved the old man, and he was in awe of him. Bird had never encountered an elder with quite his father-in-law's largeness, he didn't want to disappoint him all over again.

Bird married in May when he was twenty-five, and that first summer he stayed drunk for four weeks straight. He suddenly began to drift on a sea of alcohol, a besotted Robinson Crusoe. Neglecting all his obligations as a graduate student, his job, his studies, discarding everything without a thought, Bird sat all day long and until late every night in the darkened kitchen of his apartment, listening to records and drinking whisky. It seemed to him now, looking back on those terrible days, that with the exception of listening to music and drinking and immersing in harsh, drunken sleep, he hadn't engaged in a single living human activity. Four weeks later Bird had revived from an agonizing seven-hundred-hour drunk to discover in himself, wretchedly sober, the desolation of a city ravaged by the fires of war. He was like a mental incompetent with only the slightest chance of recovery, but he had to tame all over again not only the wilderness inside himself, but the wilderness of his relations to the world outside. He withdrew from graduate school and asked his father-in-law to find him a teaching position. Now, two years later, he was

waiting for his wife to have their first child. Let him appear at the hospital having sullied his blood with the poisons of alcohol once again and his mother-in-law would flee as if the hounds of hell were at her heels, dragging her daughter and grandchild with her.

Bird himself was wary of the craving, occult but deeply rooted, that he still had for alcohol. Often since those four weeks in whisky hell he had asked himself why he had stayed drunk for seven hundred hours, and never had he arrived at a conclusive answer. So long as his descent into the abyss of whisky remained a riddle, there was a constant danger he might suddenly return.

In one of the books about Africa he read so avidly, Bird had come across this passage: "The drunken revels which explorers invariably remark are still common in the African village today. This suggests that life in this beautiful country is still lacking something fundamental. Basic dissatisfactions are still driving the African villagers to despair and self-abandon." Rereading the passage, which referred to the tiny villages in the Sudan, Bird realized he had been avoiding a consideration of the lacks and dissatisfactions that were lurking in his own life. But they existed, he was certain, so he was careful to deny himself alcohol.

Bird emerged in the square at the back of the honky-tonk district, where the clamor and motion seemed to focus. The clock of lightbulbs on the theater in the center of the square was flashing SEVEN PM—time to ask about his wife. Bird had been telephoning his mother-in-law at the hospital every hour since three that afternoon. He glanced around the square. Plenty of public telephones, but all were occupied. The thought, not so much of his wife in labor as of his mother-in-law's nerves as she hovered over the telephone reserved for in-patients, irritated him. From the moment she had arrived at the hospital with her daughter, the woman had been obsessed



with the idea that the staff was trying to humiliate her. If only some other patient's relative were on the phone. . . . Lugubriously hopeful, Bird retraced his steps, glancing into bars and coffee houses, Chinese noodle shops, cutlet restaurants, and shoestores. He could always step inside somewhere and phone. But he wanted to avoid a bar if he could, and he had eaten dinner already. Why not buy a powder to settle his stomach?

Bird was looking for a drugstore when an outlandish establishment on a corner stopped him short. On a giant billboard suspended above the door, a cowboy crouched with a pistol flaming. Bird read the legend that flowered on the head of the Indian pinned beneath the cowboy's spurs: GUN CORNER. Inside, beneath paper flags of the United Nations and strips of spiraling green and yellow crepe paper, a crowd much younger than Bird was milling around the many-colored, box-shaped games that filled the store from front to back. Bird, ascertaining through the glass doors rimmed with red and indigo tape that a public telephone was installed in a corner at the rear, stepped into the Gun Corner, passed a Coke machine and a juke box howling rock-n-roll already out of vogue, and started across the muddy wooden floor. It was instantly as if skyrocketers were bursting in his ears. Bird toiled across the room as though he were walking in a maze, past pinball machines, dart games, and a miniature forest alive with deer and rabbits and monstrous green toads that moved on a conveyer belt; as Bird passed, a high-school boy bagged a frog under the admiring eyes of his girlfriends and five points clicked into the window on the side of the game. He finally reached the telephone. Dropping a coin into the phone, he dialed the hospital number from memory. In one ear he heard the distant ringing of the phone, the blare of rock-n-roll filled the other, and a noise like ten thousand scuttling crabs: the high teens, rapt over their automated toys, were