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STANDING WOMAN

Translated by David Lewis

Standing Woman

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might do harm or good, I do my best not to think about it. I might want to try.

The morning sunlight hurt my eyes as I slipped on my wooden clogs and left the house with the envelope. Since there was still time before the first mail truck would come, I turned my feet toward the park. In the morning no children come to this park, a mere eighty square meters in the middle of a cramped residential district. It's quiet here. So I always include the park in my morning walk. Nowadays even the scanty green provided by the ten or so trees is priceless in the megalopolis.

I should have brought some bread, I thought. My favorite dogpillar stands next to the park bench. It's an affable dogpillar with buff-colored fur, quite large for a mongrel.

The liquid-fertilizer truck had just left when I reached the park; the ground was damp and there was a faint smell of chlorine. The elderly gentleman I often saw there was sitting on the bench next to the dogpillar, feeding the buff post what seemed to be meat dumplings. Dogpillars usually have excellent appetites. Maybe the liquid fertilizer, absorbed by the roots sunk deep in the ground and passed on up through the legs, leaves something to be desired.

They'll eat just about anything you give them.

"You brought him something? I slipped up today. I forgot to bring my bread," I said to the elderly man.

He turned gentle eyes on me and smiled softly.

"Ah, you like this fellow, too?"

"Yes," I replied sitting down beside him. "He looks exactly like the dog I use to have."

The dogpillar looked up at me with large, black eyes and wagged its tail.

"Actually, I kept a dog like this fellow myself," the man said, scratching the ruff of the dogpillar's neck. "He was

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A future society uses a frightening method to provide urban greenery.

I stayed up all night and finally finished a forty-page short story. It was a trivial entertainment piece, capable of neither harm nor good.

"These days you can't write stories that might do harm or good: it can't be helped." That's what I told myself while I fastened the manuscript with a paper clip and put it into an envelope.

As to whether I have it in me to write stories that

made into a dogpillar when he was three. Haven't you seen him? Between the haberdashery and the film shop on the coast road. Isn't there a dogpillar there that looks like this fellow?"

I nodded, adding, "Then that one was yours?"

"Yes, he was our pet. His name was Hachi. Now he's completely vegetized. A beautiful dogtree."

"Now that you mention it, he does look a lot like this fellow. Maybe they came from the same stock."

"And the dog you kept?" the elderly man asked. "Where is he planted?"

"Our dog was named Buff," I answered, shaking my head. "He was planted beside the entrance to the cemetery on the edge of town when he was four. Poor thing, he died right after he was planted. The fertilizer trucks don't get out that way very often, and it was so far I couldn't take him food every day. Maybe they planted him badly. He died before becoming a tree."

"Then he was removed?"

"No, fortunately, it didn't much matter there if he smelled or not, and so he was left there and dried. Now he's a bonepillar. He makes fine material for the neighborhood elementary-school science class, I hear."

"That's wonderful."

The elderly man stroked the dogpillar's head. "This fellow here, I wonder what he was called before he became a dogpillar."

"No calling a dogpillar by its original name," I said. "Isn't that a strange law?"

The man looked at me sharply, then replied casually, "Didn't they just extend the laws concerning people to dogs? That's why they lose their names when they become dogpillars." He nodded while scratching the dogpillar's jaw. "Not only the old names, but you can't give them new

names, either. That's because there are no proper nouns for plants."

Why, of course, I thought.

He looked at my envelope with MANUSCRIPT ENCLOSED written on it.

"Excuse me," he said. "Are you a writer?"

I was a little embarrassed.

"Well, yes. Just trivial things."

After looking at me closely, the man returned to stroking the dogpillar's head. "I also use to write things."

He managed to suppress a smile.

"How many years is it now since I stopped writing? It feels like a long time."

I stared at the man's profile. Now that he said so, it was a face I seemed to have seen somewhere before. I started to ask his name, hesitated, and fell silent.

The elderly man said abruptly. "It's become a hard world to write in."

I lowered my eyes, ashamed of myself, who still continued to write in such a world.

The man apologized flurriedly at my sudden depression.

"That was rude. I'm not criticizing you. I'm the one who should feel ashamed."

"No," I told him, after looking quickly around us, "I can't give up writing, because I haven't the courage. Giving up writing! Why, after all, that would be a gesture against society."

The elderly man continued stroking the dogpillar. After a long while he spoke.

"It's painful, suddenly giving up writing. Now that it's come to this, I would have been better off if I'd gone on boldly writing social criticism and had been arrested. There are even times when I think that. But I was just a

dilettante, never knowing poverty, craving peaceful dreams. I wanted to live a comfortable life. As a person strong in self-respect, I couldn't endure being exposed to the eyes of the world, ridiculed. So I quit writing. A sorry tale."

He smiled and shook his head. "No, no, let's not talk about it. You never know who might be listening, even here on the street."

I changed the subject. "Do you live here?"

"Do you know the beauty parlor on the main street? You turn in there. My name is Hiyama." He nodded at me. "Come over sometime. I'm married, but. . . ."

"Thank you very much."

I gave him my own name.

I didn't remember any writer named Hiyama. No doubt he wrote under a pen name. I had no intention of visiting his house. This is a world where even two or three writers getting together is considered illegal assembly.

"It's time for a mail truck to come in."

62 Taking pains to look at my watch, I stood.

"I'm afraid I'd better go." I said.

He turned a sadly smiling face toward me and bowed slightly. After stroking the dogpillar's head a little, I left the park.

I came out on the main street, but there was only a ridiculous number of passing cars: pedestrians were few. A cattree, about thirty to forty centimeters high, was planted next to the sidewalk.

Sometimes I come across a catpillar that has just been planted and still hasn't become a cattree. New catpillars look at my face and meow or cry, but the ones where all four limbs planted in the ground have vegetized, with their greenish faces stiffly set and eyes shut tight, only move their ears now and then. Then there are catpillars that grow

branches from their bodies and put out handfuls of leaves. The mental condition of these seems to be completely vegetized—they don't even move their ears. Even if a cat's face can still be made out, it may be better to call these cattrees.

Maybe, I thought, it's better to make dogs into dogpillars. When their food runs out, they get vicious and even turn on people. But why did they have to turn cats into catpillars? Too many strays? To improve the food situation by even a little? Or perhaps for the greening of the city. . . .

Next to the big hospital on the corner where the highways intersect are two mantrees, and ranged alongside these trees is a manpillar. This manpillar wears a postman's uniform, and you can't tell how far its legs have vegetized because of its trousers. It is male, thirty-five of thirty-six years old, tall, with a bit of a stoop.

I approached him and held out my envelope as always. "Registered mail, special delivery, please."

The manpillar, nodding silently, accepted the envelope and took stamps and a registered-mail slip from his pocket.

I looked around quickly after paying the postage. There was no one else there. I decided to try speaking to him. I gave him mail every three days, but I still hadn't had a chance for a leisurely talk.

"What did you do?" I asked in a low voice.

The manpillar looked at me surprise. Then, after running his eyes around the area, he answered with a sour look, "Won't do to go saying unnecessary things to me. Even me, I'm not supposed to answer."

"I know that," I said, looking into his eyes.

When I wouldn't leave, he took a deep breath. "I just said the pay's low. What's more, I got heard by my boss.

Because a postman's pay is really low." With a dark look, he jerked his jaw at the two mantrees next to him. "These guys were the same. Just for letting slip some complaints about low pay. Do you know them?" he asked me.

I pointed at one of the mantrees. "I remember this one, because I gave him a lot of mail. I don't know the other one. He was already a mantree when we moved here."

"That one was my friend," he said.

"Wasn't that other one a chief clerk or section head?"

He nodded. "That's right. Chief clerk."

"Don't you get hungry or cold?"

"You don't feel it that much," he replied, still expressionless. Anyone who's made into a manpillar soon becomes expressionless. "Even I think I've gotten pretty plantlike. Not only in how I feel things, but in the way I think, too. At first, I was sad, but now it doesn't matter. I used to get really hungry, but they say the vegetizing goes faster when you don't eat."

He stared at me with lightless eyes. He was probably hoping he could become a mantree soon.

"Talk says they give people with radical ideas a lobotomy before making them into manpillars, but I didn't get that done, either. Even so a month after I was planted here I didn't get angry anymore."

He glanced at my wristwatch. "Well, you better go now. It's almost time for the mail truck to come."

"Yes," But still I couldn't leave, and I hesitated uneasily.

"You," the manpillar said. "Someone you know didn't recently get done into a manpillar, did they?"

Cut to the quick. I stared at his face for a moment, then nodded slowly.

"Actually, my wife."

"Hmm, your wife, is it?" For a few moments he regarded me with deep interest. "I wondered whether it wasn't something like that. Otherwise nobody ever bothers to talk to me. Then what did she do, your wife?"

"She complained that prices were high at a housewives' get-together. Had that been all, fine, but she criticized the government, too. I'm starting to make it big as a writer, and I think that the eagerness of being that writer's wife made her say it. One of the women there informed on her. She was planted on the left side of the road looking from the station toward the assembly hall and next to that hardware store."

"Ah, that place." He closed his eyes a little, as if recollecting the appearance of the buildings and the stores in that area. "It's a fairly peaceful street. Isn't that for the better?" He opened his eyes and looked at me searchingly. "You aren't going to see her, are you? It's better not to see her to often. Both for her and you. That way you both forget faster."

"I know that."

I hung my head.

"Your wife?" he asked, his voice turning slightly sympathetic. "Has anyone done anything to her?"

"No. So far nothing. She's just standing, but even so—"

"Hey," The manpillar serving as a postbox raised his jaw to attract my attention. "It's come. The mail truck. You'd better go."

"You're right."

Taking a few wavering steps, as if pushed by his voice, I stopped and looked back. "Isn't there anything you want done?"

He brought a hard smile to his cheeks and shook his head.

The red mail truck stopped beside him.
I moved on past the hospital.

Thinking I'd check in on my favorite bookstore. I entered a street of crowded shops. My new book was suppose to be out any day now, but that kind of thing no longer made me the slightest bit happy.

A little before the bookstore in the same row is a small, cheap, candy store, and on the edge of the road in front of it is a manpillar on the verge of becoming a mantree. A young male, it is already a year since it was planted. The face had become a brownish color tinged with green, and the eyes are tightly shut. Tall back slightly bent, the posture slouching a little forward. The legs, torso, and arms, visible through clothes reduced to rags by exposure to wind and rain, are already vegetized, and here and there branches sprout. Young leaves bud from the ends of the arms, raised above the shoulders like beating wings. The body, which has become a tree, and even the face no longer move at all. The heart has sunk into the tranquil world of plants.

I imagined the day when my wife would reach this state, and again my heart winced with pain, trying to forget. It was the anguish of trying to forget.

If I turn the corner at this candy store and go straight, I thought. I can go to where my wife is standing. I can see my wife. But it won't do to go, I told myself. There's no telling who might see you: if the woman who informed on her questioned you, you'd really be in trouble. I came to a halt in front of the candy store and peered down the road. Pedestrian traffic was the same as always. It's all right. Anyone would overlook it if you just stand and talk a bit. You'll just have a word or two. Defying my own voice screaming, "Don't go!" I went briskly down the street.

Her face pale, my wife was standing by the road in front of the hardware store. Her legs were unchanged, and it only seemed as if her feet from the ankles down were buried in the earth. Expressionlessly, as if striving to see nothing, feel nothing, she stared steadily ahead. Compared with two days before, her cheeks seemed a bit hollow. Two passing factory workers pointed at her, made some vulgar joke, and passed on, guffawing uproariously. I went up to her and raised my voice.

"Michiko!" I yelled right in her ear.

My wife looked at me, and blood rushed to her cheeks. She brushed one hand through her tangled hair.

"You've come again? Really you mustn't."

"I can't help coming."

The hardware-store mistress, tending shop, saw me. With an air of feigned indifference, she averted her eyes and retired to the back of the store. Full of gratitude for her consideration, I drew a few steps closer to Michiko and faced her.

"You've gotten pretty used to it?"

With all her might she formed a bright smile on her stiffened face. "Mmm. I'm used to it."

"Last night it rained a little."

Still gazing at me with large, dark eyes, she nodded lightly. "Please don't worry. I hardly feel anything."

"When I think about you, I can't sleep." I hung my head. "You're always standing out here. When I think that, I can't possibly sleep. Last night I even thought I should bring you an umbrella."

"Please don't do anything like that!" My wife frowned just a little. "It would be terrible if you did something like that."

A large truck drove past behind me. White dust thinly

veiled my wife's hair and shoulders, but she didn't seem bothered.

"Standing isn't really all that bad." She spoke with deliberate lightness, working to keep me from worrying.

I perceived a subtle change in my wife's expressions and speech from two days before. It seemed that her words had lost a shade of delicacy, and the range of her emotions had become somewhat impoverished. *Watching from the sidelines like this, seeing her gradually grow more expressionless, it's all the more desolating for having known her as she was before—those keen responses, the bright vivacity, the rich, full expressions.*

"These people," I asked her, running my eyes over the hardware store, "are they good to you?"

"Well, of course. They're kind at heart. Just once they told me to ask if there's anything I want done. But they still haven't done anything for me."

"Don't you get hungry?"

She shook her head.

"It's better not to eat."

So. Unable to endure being a manpillar, she was hoping to become a mantree even so much as a single day faster.

"So please don't bring me food." She stared at me.

"Please forget about me. I think, certainly, even without making any particular effort, I'm going to forget about you. I'm happy that you come to see me, but then the sadness drags on that much longer. For both of us."

"Of course you're right, but—" Despising this self that could do nothing for his own wife, I hung my head again. "But I won't forget you." I nodded. The tears came. "I won't forget. Ever."

When I raised my head and looked at her again, she was gazing steadily at me with eyes that had lost a little of

their luster, her whole face beaming in a faint smile like a carved image of Buddha. It was the first time I had ever seen her smile like that.

I felt I was having a nightmare. *No*, I told myself, *This isn't your wife anymore.*

The suit she had been wearing when she was arrested had become terribly dirty and filled with wrinkles. But of course I wouldn't be allowed to bring a change of clothes. My eyes rested on a dark stain on her skirt.

"Is that blood? What happened?"

"Oh, this," she spoke falteringly, looking down at her skirt with a confused air. "Last night two drunks played a prank on me."

"The bastards!" I felt a furious rage at their inhumanity. If you put it to them, they would say that since my wife was no longer human, it didn't matter what they did.

"They can't do that kind of thing! It's against the law!"

"That's right. But I can hardly appeal."

And of course I couldn't go to the police and appeal, either. If I did, I'd be looked on as even more of a problem person.

"The bastards! What did they—" I bit my lip. My heart hurt enough to break. "Did it bleed a lot?"

"Mmm, a little."

"Does it hurt?"

"It doesn't hurt anymore."

Michiko, who had been so proud before now, showed just a little sadness in her face. I was shocked by the change in her. A group of young men and women, penetratingly comparing me and my wife, passed behind me.

"You'll be seen," my wife said anxiously. "I beg of you, don't throw yourself away."

"Don't worry." I smiled thinly for her in self-contempt. "I don't have the courage."

"You should go now."

"When you're a mantree," I said in parting, "I'll petition. I'll get them to transplant you to our garden."

"Can you do that?"

"I should be able to." I nodded liberally. "I should be able to."

"I'd be happy if you could," my wife said expressionlessly.

"Well, see you later."

"It'd be better if you didn't come again," she said in a murmur, looking down.

"I know. That's my intention. But I'll probably come anyway."

For a few minutes we were silent.

Then my wife spoke abruptly.

"Goodbye."

"Umm."

I began walking.

99 When I looked back as I rounded the corner, Michiko was following me with her eyes, still smiling like a graven Buddha.

Embracing a heart that seemed ready to split apart, I walked. I noticed suddenly that I had come out in front of the station. Unconsciously, I had returned to my usual walking course.

Opposite the station is a small coffee shop I always go to called Punch. I went in and sat down in a corner booth. I ordered coffee, drinking it black. Until then I had always had it with sugar. The bitterness of sugarless, creamless coffee pierced my body, and I savored it masochistically. *From now on I'll always drink it black.* That was what I resolved.

Three students in the next booth were talking about a

critic, who had just been arrested and made into a manpillar.

"I hear he was planted smack in the middle of the Ginza."

"He loved the country. He always lived in the country. That's why they set him up in a place like that."

"Seems they gave him a lobotomy."

"And the students who tried to use force in the Diet, protesting his arrest—they've all been arrested and will be made into manpillars, too."

"Weren't there almost thirty of them? Where'll they plant them all?"

"They say they'll be planted in front of their own university, down both sides of a street called Students Road."

"They'll have to change the name now. Violence Grove, or something."

The three snickered.

"Hey, let's not talk about it. We don't want someone to hear."

The three shut up.

When I left the coffee shop and headed home, I realized that I had begun to feel as if I was already a manpillar myself. Murmuring the words of a popular song to myself, I walked on.

I am a wayside manpillar. You, too, are a wayside manpillar. What the hell, the two of us, in this world. Dried grasses that never flower.