

from Yalm. of. the Hand. Stories  
Yasunasi Tjwabata

## Canaries

[1924]

Madam:

I must break my promise and write a letter to you just one more time. I can no longer keep the canaries I received from you last year. My wife always cared for them. My only function was to look at them—to think of you when I saw them.

You were the one who said it, weren't you? "You have a wife and I have a husband. Let's stop seeing each other. If only you didn't have a wife. I am giving you these canaries to remember me by. Look at them. These canaries are a couple now, but the shopkeeper simply caught a male and a female at random and put them in a cage. The canaries themselves had nothing to do with it. Anyway, please remember me with these birds. Perhaps it's odd to give living creatures as a souvenir, but our memories, too, are alive. Someday the canaries will die. And, when the time comes that the memories between us must die, let them die."

Now the canaries look as though they are about to die. The one who kept them has died. A painter like me, negligent and poor as I am, cannot keep such frail birds. I'll put it plainly. My wife used to care for the birds, and now she is dead. Since my wife has died, I wonder if the birds will also die. And so, madam, was it my wife who brought me memories of you?

I considered setting the canaries free, but, since my wife's death, the birds' wings appear to have suddenly grown weak. Besides, these birds

don't know the sky. This pair has no companions in the city or woods nearby with whom they could flock. And if one of them were to fly off alone, they would each die separately. But, then, you *did* say that the man at the pet shop had merely caught one male and one female at random and put them in a cage.

Speaking of which, I don't want to sell them back to a bird dealer because you gave these birds to me. And I don't want to return them to you either, since my wife was the one who cared for them. Besides, these birds—which you had probably already forgotten—would be a lot of trouble for you.

I'll say it again. It was because my wife was here that the birds have lived until now—serving as a memory of you. So, madam, I want to have the canaries follow her in death. Keeping my memories of you alive was not the only thing my wife did. How was I able to have loved a woman like you? Wasn't it because my wife remained with me? My wife made me forget all the pain in my life. She avoided seeing the other half of my life. Had she not done so, I would surely have averted my eyes or cast down my gaze before a woman like you.

Madam, it's all right, isn't it, if I kill the canaries and bury them in my wife's grave?

JMH