

# THE FALLING LIGHT

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Excerpts translated by Charlotte Coombe

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Living through a deluge and then opening your eyes. A deluge. A flood. A tsunami. And letting it take everything in its path. Rimbaud did something like that. And I was on the way to doing it, on that train from Osaka to Tokyo.

I often return to Rimbaud and his *Illuminations*. He has been with me all my life. I don't really know why; perhaps it's because to me, he is Rimbaud the Enigmatic. I see him as a sublime irreverent, an unbeliever with peripheral emotions, elusive and evasive like a ghost that's constantly expected, but never appears. A young man who demolishes conventions, who is individualistic, a wanderer; an absolute literary heretic, a poet who abandons poetry because both poet and poetry have worn each other out; an inventor of phrases that grow and grow but never allow a glimpse of their summit; phrases that are always even taller than I imagine when I'm reading them, and which I climb like Jack up the beanstalk.

The prologue of *Illuminations* is entitled 'After the Deluge' and is a deafening explosion. A trickle of images bursts into the opening of the book, which announces the "time of the Assassins", that is to say, the era of the sectarians, of the heretics, of those who split an idea in two and push it to the verge of hallucination: "As soon as the idea of the Deluge had subsided / A hare stopped in the clover and swaying flowerbells / and said a prayer to the rainbow/ through the spider's web." <sup>i</sup> So it begins.

In Japan I realised that Rimbaud's prologue, which kept coming to me with renewed force, was the prologue of another yet to come. An illumination of the *Illuminations*. Certain lines that I had randomly highlighted now acquired a different meaning. Lines such as: "The precious stones that began to hide"; or "the children in mourning looked at the marvellous pictures"; or "what we do not know", became phrases that presaged a flash of light. What we do not know—the wonderful and valuable—must be illuminated in order to be seen. That's what I needed to understand.

So, when I saw Mount Fuji, I was also saying my prayer to the rainbow through a spider's web.

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For me, Japan means *faraway*, as Roland Barthes writes in *The Empire of Signs*. A *faraway*—the distant, the different—which refers to a fictitious country. More like fictionalized, or fictionable, which is like saying

*invented*, which, in turn, is like saying *readable*. After all, it is the country where everything is about writing, and writing is an invention, an equivalence, which must be read to signify reality. Japan is my *faraway*.

I translated and wrote the prologue to Barthes' book about Japan many years ago, in the mid-1980s. I did it for the pleasure of delving deep into the writing of the man who was then my teacher, Roland Barthes, and whose work had a profound impact on my way of tackling literary creation, both as a writer and as a reader. As I said in that prologue (here we have yet another prologue), Barthes taught me to understand and define the *fragment*, a perspective that embraces and breaks down "the world as a text, pleasure as a criterion, life as a game of rhetorical elements, the search as a reason for dialectical developments". Barthes led me to see Japan as an infinite sum of fragments.

It was through translating that book that I entered into all things Japanese. The act of translating is not a merely instrumental one. It is an appropriation and an understanding. In a certain way, the translator appropriates the text he is translating and understands the author's intentions and so he ends up becoming, simultaneously, both the text and the author of what he is translating. It belongs to me, and I belong to it. This belonging is equivalent to reliving the *experience* of someone else; it is a *copy* of that original experience. The translator *brings new life* to the author and his text.

The first time I ever heard of Hiroshi Kindaichi, I was quoted one of his luminous (and heretical) ideas: "Shintoism *translates* the existing, makes it live another life on another plane." I immediately wondered what Shintoism translated the existing into, what it converted it to: a language, a representation, a symbolization, a copy, a *graphic script*? And what was that other plane? My thoughts returned to Barthes, but the person I was talking to added, "Kindaichi is the answer to your question."

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It must be said of Hiroshi Kindaichi that he was an 18th-century sectarian and heretic. He brought about a bifurcation of thought, as Rimbaud would do with poetry. For, as I later established, Kindaichi could well have been the Rimbaud of Shintoism, but a hundred years earlier. His teachings were reflected in his brilliant book, the *Treatise on Heretical Shintoism*.

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The first time I considered going to Japan was after reading Barthes' book, but I was young, and it seemed too expensive and difficult a trip (I figured it was an impenetrable world for a Westerner), and, besides, I had neither the time nor the money. But the seed had been sown and had germinated. That idea of the "*faraway*" was at the forefront of my mind, waiting for an opportunity. I didn't want to travel like a tourist. I wanted to take a meaningful trip, one that would make a lasting mark. The time would come. I knew Japan would find me eventually. The opportunity presented itself many years later, when

I was invited to give a series of lectures in Tokyo on literary translation at a conference funded by Víctor Ugarte, the director of the Cervantes Institute. The fact that the purpose of the trip was to talk about translations and translators was already meaningful in itself, perhaps even fated. Seeing as I was in Japan, I began my lecture by recalling Hitoshi Igarashi, the Japanese translator of *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie, who, in compliance with Khomeini's fatwa, was stabbed to death on 12th July 1991. Hitoshi Igarashi was murdered simply for *being a translator*. They never found the culprit, who probably fled the country after committing the crime. Starting with that brief tribute, which came to me instinctively (from a colleague to a colleague, so to speak), Japan sought me out and finally found me. After the conference, a very thin man in a suit and glasses came over and said in English: "You know what? No one ever talks about Igarashi anymore; he's fallen into oblivion. You remembered him, and I was really touched." I admitted that I had forgotten about Igarashi too, until I'd needed to prepare the lecture; that's when I suddenly had an *illumination* and his story came to mind. "In Japan, everything is connected, the living and the dead; this is the country of ghosts," the man said. Then he shook my hand and walked away. I was later told that he was a relative of Igarashi.

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Therefore, according to Kindaichi, *kami* are not gods, but beings or entities granted a nature of superiority and mythologized as a moral authority because of the sense of wonder they provoke, a wonder that lingers flows into in an intimate dialogue with them *as personal spirits*.

This is what, in my retrospective inner journey to the source, helped me understand what *kami* were to me. This is how I realised that my *kami* were Mount Fuji, and wolves, and crows and horses and the Sun and the Moon, but they were also my dead parents, and my grandfather Justino and my aunt Carmen, as well as Gustave Flaubert, Marcel Proust, Denis Diderot, *Don Quixote*, Jerusalem, the volcanoes, *The Great Wave* by Hokusai, Roland Barthes, *Moby Dick*, Hurbinek, the Eiffel Tower, the Sydney Opera House, Franz Kafka, Jacques Brel or the sea, to name a few that I have discovered in my life.

There is, underlying them, an evident ghostliness: they are invisibilities that populate my framework of what is visible. And they are *kami* because my capacity for wonder is high: I have yet to lose my fascination and experiences of joy; they still vibrate within me. I felt that this vibrational complicity is what connected me to Kindaichi.

Strictly speaking, however, what I call *kami*, are, in Japanese, *mikoto*. In the polytheism of orthodox Shintoism, all heavenly deities are considered *kami*. *Mikoto* are earthly deities or human beings with attributes perceived (or assigned) as divine, or authoritative. But this differentiation can also imply a hierarchical rank of importance or majority: *kami* are universal, *mikoto* are local; Mount Fuji and trees are *kami*, Flaubert and my mother are *mikoto*.

But this was irrelevant to Kindaichi. He changed that distinction, grouping all celestial *kami* together with terrestrial *kami*, thus eliminating the concept of *mikoto* altogether. Interestingly, this was precisely what his contemporaries considered heretical.

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After leaving Matsusaka, Kindaichi saw what Norinaga did not, and vice versa, Norinaga would say something and Kindaichi would answer him. During the trip, they were a Yes and a No walking together, sometimes without giving each other a breather in the argument, other times granting each other the benefit of the doubt through a silence as sarcastic as it was disapproving. During their stay at the Izumo temple, neither of them backed down or changed their opinions. This is how the so-called *Eight Controversies of Izumo* came about.

Kindaichi maintained that they were dictated to him by a red fox with whom he crossed paths several times in the sanctuary. He retained a firm conviction that a fox had saved him from fatally hitting the back of his head at the entrance to Izumo. The fox became a *kami* for him. The fact that a fox would be talking to his disciple greatly irritated Norinaga.

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#### *Controversy Five: Repetition*

At Izumo, they also addressed the eternal dilemma between the copy and the original and, thus, the sense of repetition that is inherent in rituals. In Norinaga's orthodox Shintoism, the original has absolute value because it is unique; to him, every *kami* is unique and original.

On the other hand, Kindaichi holds quite the opposite view: the *kami* is a reflection of the unique. "Is there not a mirror in temples?" asked Kindaichi, repeating the fox's words. "Does the confrontation between the self and its double, —the 'other self' that is capable of looking and admiring—, not take place in the reflection? Therefore, the value is in the copy." And, met with Norinaga's silence, he argued that it was, "like with books or engravings, which are valuable in themselves because they multiply an original that only exists because its reproduction is known. Were there not millions of gods who issued forth from Izanagi and Izanami, or from Amaterasu?" Kindaichi was alluding to the eight million *kami* which, according to the *Kojiki*, exist in the world.

For Kindaichi, on the other hand, any form of ritual repetition was still related to symbols. He argued that a repetition, being the copy of a primitive original, might be more important than the original itself, because repetition symbolizes and preserves the original, something that does not happen the other way

around. In other words, with the disappearance of the copy, the original does not disappear; this does not happen with the disappearance of the original, which irretrievably cancels out the existence of any hypothetical copy. Kindaichi, evidently, was a pioneer of logic.

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*Controversy Seven: The Path of Mysterious Things*

Norinaga rejected the notion that reason—the self—could be the means of analysing Shintoism. He believed in the gods and let himself be thoroughly swayed by them. Kindaichi, on the other hand, did not believe in them but transformed them into a kind of intermediary path to reaching one's self, because he knew that they are just a trail leading to something else, something unnamed and mysterious. *Kami*, therefore, are a clue to be followed, a path to be travelled. “*Kami* are unfinished; it is the human mind that must complete their meaning,” Kindaichi said. Figuring out how to do that is what gives a whole life meaning, and it is achieved through reason. However, there are shady areas where reason pales. Norinaga and Kindaichi agreed that there was a ‘neutral’ zone of ‘mysterious things’; the fox also agreed, or this is what Kindaichi thought he understood when he saw him. All three were anti-Confucians, and were united by that in this controversy.

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Towards the end of 1790, Kindaichi also embarked for Holland, known then as the United Provinces of the Netherlands. He departed on the same ship aboard which Akkersdijk left the previous year, *De Zwarte Parel*, a three-masted schooner that travelled the route between Amsterdam and Nagasaki, stopping off at all the trade delegations opened by the Dutch East India Company in the Indian Ocean and part of the South Atlantic. The captain of the *De Zwarte Parel* had a ticket for him paid for by Akkersdijk and gave him precise instructions on how to camouflage himself until he left the port. In order to travel—which was forbidden for all Japanese—Kindaichi had to wear a wig and, in addition, had to dress in Western clothing and cover his face with a handkerchief, feigning illness, so that he would not be identified at the bridge checkpoint between the island of Dejima and Nagasaki. After some tension and hesitation on the part of the guards, he passed through without being discovered. He was thirty-six years old. On board the ship, he wondered if he would ever return to his country, a country he loved so dearly.

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This happened because, shortly after the French invasion of the Netherlands, Akkersdijk travelled to

London in early March 1796 and took Kindaichi with him. The Dutchman gave the pretext of needing to oversee his paper exports, but he presumably also undertook that trip to get Kindaichi away from his daughter Katrina. Going by Akkersdijk's account—our only reliable primary source—, he and Kindaichi arrived in a London still so reminiscent of the one portrayed in the paintings and engravings of Hogarth. The city reeked of soot and burnt coal; the frequent fog mingled with the black smoke from the chimneys, giving Kindaichi the feeling that he was in a filthy, vaporous, unsettled world. Akkersdijk, who was already of a certain age, rented two rooms for them at 11 Green Street. They stayed there in London for forty days. Kindaichi went about in Western clothes so as to pass unnoticed, although with his exotic hairless face, he did not always succeed. Moreover, as Akkersdijk explains, “sometimes people suspected that he was a woman in disguise.” Everyone they came across asked them for money. Among the scroungers, Akkersdijk cites sweepers, dressmakers, harlots, clerks, street sellers, children, boilermakers, priests, coachmen, drunkards, masons... He also writes that one day they attended an event in which two burly men in Leicester Square fought with their fists, and it was called ‘boxing’. Another day they visited an animal house on the Strand, where Kindaichi was particularly fascinated by an old rhinoceros; even going so far as to pity it for its miserable, motionless life. They often dined at the *Crown and Anchor* tavern, with its liberal, almost Jacobin atmosphere. They listened to everything and talked little.

#### And 169

Whenever one writes, there is a shadow lurking over the writer, the shadow of the hypothesis, of the feverish imagination. I read something like this once in a book by H el ene Cixous, a thinker as singular as she is prolific, and that feverish shadow is precisely the one that has hung over the writing of this book. I could easily describe it here the way Ludwig Wittgenstein described his own book: “It has been written for those who amicably approach the same spirit with which I have written it.” And I also subscribe to the words of Empedocles, which came many centuries earlier:

“Consider my arguments well, learn from them.”

Dear reader, I know that everything you have read so far will seem strange to you, but—as Hiroshi Kindaichi defined his own *Treaty*—this book that you have in your hands, and that you have now finished, is above all a *torii*. So allow me then to ask you: will you be able to pass through it; will you want to? If you do, you'll be on the path to learning; if not, you'll have only wasted a small amount of money.

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<sup>i</sup> The quotations in English from Rimbaud's *Illuminations* are taken from the New Directions 1957 edition, translated from the French by Louise Varese.