

Iron Fish¹ (1976)

By Taeko Kōno (河野多恵子) (Japan)

Translated from the Japanese by Yukiko Tanaka

We were the last to leave the room. As we both slowly descended the stairs, stopping in front of the exhibit on the wall and at the display case on the landing, an attendant came down right behind us. Hardly any visitors could be seen in the rooms downstairs, and another attendant was picking up the signboard to bring inside.

"Are you closing? Is it too late to look around?" asked a person who had just come in.

"We close at four," answered the attendant.

The clock on the wall showed that it was not quite four. A few people had come into the front lobby, unaware of the closing time. Soon the two attendants, who had already changed their clothes to go home, came back to close the large front doors, leaving one door ajar as they departed.

"They're closed," a voice remarked outside the doors.

Stragglers inside began leaving one by one from the now darkened lobby. We were also walking toward the door.

"Would you excuse me for a moment?" she suddenly said to me.

"Let me hold that for you," I said, indicating her umbrella; like most women, we did things like that for each other. She seemed puzzled for a moment, then looked at what she had in her hand.

"It's not raining now, is it?" she said to herself, and handed me the umbrella. "Why don't you go on ahead. I'll join you soon." She returned the way we had come.



Taeko Kōno
1926-2015

¹ The title alludes to a *Kaiten* (回天), manned suicide torpedoes used by the Imperial Japanese Navy in the final stages of World War II. Though the *Kaitens* had the advantage of a pilot to guide the weapon to its target, in practice they proved less effective than conventional torpedoes and never had the deadly impact of the analogous *Kamikaze* aircraft. Part of this was due to engineering problems that were never fully overcome. The setting for the story is a war museum where one of the *Kaiten* is displayed.

I left the building, trying not to look back to see where she was going. I thought I understood why she wanted to return; it had not been necessary, then, to offer to hold her umbrella. The reason we had stayed until closing time in the first place was her obvious reluctance to leave, which didn't seem unreasonable. It must have been the front lobby that she couldn't resist seeing again. She wanted to be there, to look at the place once more without my company.

When we had arrived, the rain had almost stopped; now the sky above the trees was faintly colored by an autumn sunset. I went down the stone steps to the drive, still trying not to look back the way I had come, and slowly walked along the gravel in the front garden. The narrow garden was met by a walkway. I took the walkway, turned, and continued until I came to an arrow pointing toward the building I had just left. I stopped there and neatly folded both umbrellas. The ground was covered with fallen leaves. I played with the leaves, poking them with the umbrellas, remembering that there



were several pressed leaves and flowers among the various articles that had belonged to those men.²

They looked quite incongruous beside the rougher, more disturbing items in the display case. Their color had faded against the paper underneath, which was also discolored. In the same case I had seen several photos of young women, or perhaps I should call them girls. One of these young victims must have pressed those leaves and flowers. The paper strips cut in irregular sizes, and the manner in which the leaves and stems had been taped here and there, told of the awkward hand of a girl who used scissors to make tape in the days

before the invention of cellophane tape. A few of the leaves had retained their original bright color. I too had pressed pretty leaves and cut paper tape when I was a girl. The pressed leaves I had made were consumed in that gigantic fire ignited by remote control at the end of the war. There were several years' difference between the girls in the photos and myself, which is why I had escaped the tragic death that overtook them. Their deaths seemed so

² Oshibana (押し花) is the traditional art of making pictures with pressed, dried flowers and plants. Its popularity in Japan dates back to the 16th century.

extraordinary because they were caused by something controlled from a distant location: the very nature of remote control made the whole thing difficult to understand.

I heard footsteps and turned around. It was an old woman in a worker's uniform. I walked back a little way to a spot where I could see the front of the building. Both doors were closed, with the two small round handles side by side. I had not yet started to worry. I assumed that she would appear at any moment from behind a tree or the pedestal of some statue, smiling awkwardly as she put away the handkerchief with which she had just dried her tears. I looked at the side of the building, where I saw a metal door. I went to see if it would open, but it didn't move. Its resistance filled me with a sudden apprehension: I realized that the front doors must also be locked.



front façade of the Yūshūkan military and war museum
(Yasukuni Shrine, Chiyoda, Tokyo)

The two ring-shaped handles turned out to be ornamental: underneath was another more ordinary handle with double keyholes. This wouldn't turn either. I went around to the other side of the building to make sure she was not there, then returned to the main door and started pushing and pulling the handle.

"They close so early, don't they? We thought it'd still be open, too." I turned and saw an elderly couple on the steps. They must have thought I had also come too late: they sounded sympathetic.

"Yes. It's still early," I agreed absentmindedly. I pretended to be looking at the building while I waited for them to leave. Then I went back to the door. Hoping no one would come, I pulled and twisted the handle unsuccessfully and then banged on the door.



Next I tried pulling the handle while I pushed on the other door, hoping to make a small crack through which I could talk. Before long I noticed that the lower keyhole was one of those old-fashioned, mushroom-shaped fixtures that are larger than a keyhole of more recent design.

On a small piece of paper I wrote both her name and mine, and pushed it through the keyhole with a matchstick. I heard a tiny flutter as the paper dropped to the floor on the other side, then realized that I had no way of

telling if she had picked it up. I wrote another note and this time pushed it halfway through the keyhole.

I was certain the paper would disappear from the hole, but when it actually did, I felt as if I had witnessed the strangest thing in the world. I lowered my head and brought my eye to the keyhole. It was dark on the other side, and I couldn't see anything. Then suddenly a voice was talking to my eye.

"I'm all right. Don't worry... I want you to go."

"What do you mean?"

"I want you to go home."

"Then what?"

There was no answer. I banged at the crack where the two doors met.

"Please leave me to do what I want. Pretend that you don't know anything. I'll be angry if you don't..."

I had been afraid that she was in trouble, but now I detected something ominous and probably illicit about her behavior.

"What in the world are you...?" I raised my voice. I was not sure whether I was concerned for her or simply curious as to why she was doing something clearly forbidden.

"Someday you will understand."

"Don't be ridiculous," I snapped at her.

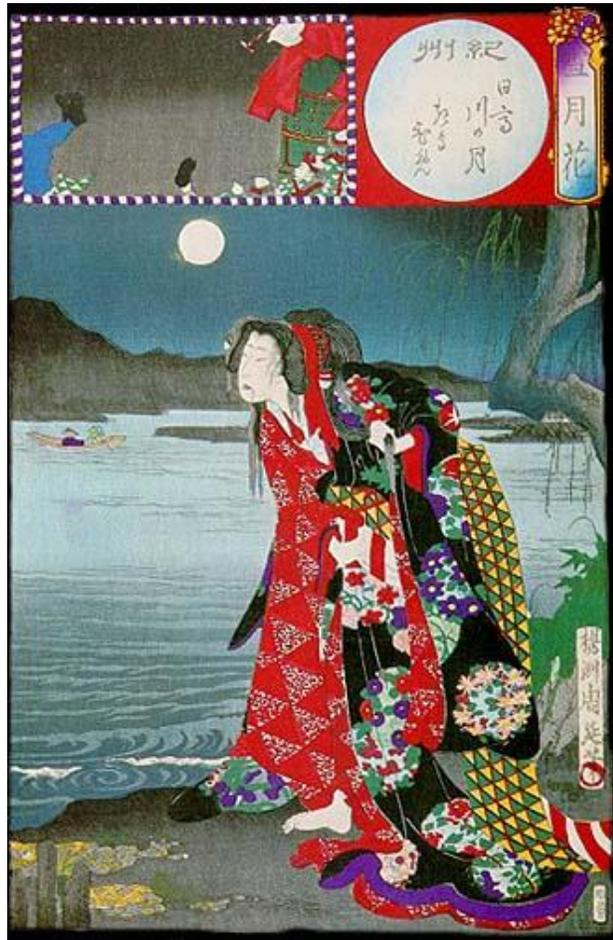
"I'll tell you sometime, if I can. But don't do anything that will make me angry. Please. You simply have to let me do this."

I shuddered. She sounded as if there was no chance that she would tell me why she was doing this. Her words echoed deep in my ears, like the ringing of a gong struck by a monk about to undergo

some particularly arduous discipline. When I realized after a time that she was not going to answer me any more, I felt dizzy; I saw the glittering blades of those swords on display, the brownish circles of bloodstains on the clothes, and the characters in the many letters written by those men in their final days-- all swirling up into the air.

The rays of the sun were fast dying away, a fact I must have noticed for my own benefit. I stared at the closed door, thinking about the pink telephone I had seen inside the building. There must be a black public phone as well, I thought. She had made a call on the way here, so she had that little black address book with her; she must have looked up my number in the same book when she called me yesterday from the station. Perhaps she would weaken and change her mind; she might try to call me out of desperation. If so, I must be at home. Resolutely I turned my back on the door.

Three different images haunted me throughout that night-- images of the monk and the rigors of his trial; of a criminal; and of an accident victim (I couldn't rule out the possibility that she had met with some mishap). I felt the same awful tension that people must have experienced as they prepared to lift the giant bell of Dōjōji, which Princess Kiyō had hidden inside.³ The anxiety was so real my stomach actually began aching. It was not that she



Kiyohime at Hidaka River, woodblock print by Chikanobu (1890)

³ According to Japanese folklore, a handsome visiting priest named Anchin once fell in love with Kiyohime ("Princess Kiyō"), the beautiful daughter of a village headman and promised to return to marry her. After a time, however, he overcame his passion and forgot about her. Kiyohime became furious his change of heart and pursued him in a rage. The priest tried to escape by crossing the Hidaka River, but Kiyohime pursued him by jumping in after him-- in her rage transforming into a large serpent. When Anchin saw her coming after him in her new form, he sought refuge at Dōjōji temple and asked the priests for help, where they hid him under the temple bell. However, the serpent smelled him in his hiding place and started to coil around it. She banged the bell loudly several times with her tail, then gave a great belch of fire that melted the bell. The fire was so great that she not only melted the bell but she killed the priest as well. After that, the temple was without a bell for four hundred years, and when a new bell was cast, the

had broken in, I tried rationalizing; if she simply remains inside and does nothing, it isn't a crime. But if she steals an item or two that she feels she must have, I must let her know that I won't betray her. I'm not afraid of being arrested for it. As I went over all this in my mind, I realized that I ought to try and rest; I would need all my strength on the following day. It would obviously be busy.

That was four years ago. She told me later what she did that night, which I spent without sleep. The following is what I have put together from the story she told, with a few assumptions of my own.

Sometime, somewhere, her first husband had bade a last farewell to several of his close friends and had entered the belly of an iron fish before putting to sea. His wife knew nothing about this. The iron fish had destroyed itself against another great fish-- or was it a small iron island, whose upper half lay flat on some distant ocean? Her husband died, destroyed with the iron fish. His flesh was torn into many pieces that drifted down to the bottom of the sea, where they must have attracted the real fish feeding there.



"human torpedo" volunteers
(clutching cherry blossoms)

She had heard that her husband had been enshrined along with innumerable other men and some women who had died extraordinary deaths, though each death was different in the manner and degree of its tragedy.⁴

restless spirit of Kiyohime haunted it until the bell was exorcized by the chanting of the Lotus Sūtra at Myōmanji, where a portion of the ashes of the Sakyamuni Buddha had been enshrined.

Even in the folk tradition, Kiyohime is not treated as a straightforward villain, and her point of view typically elicits some sympathy with audiences in the story's many adaptations. However, Kōno's allusion here elides altogether the ambiguous nature of the character. This is typical of much of Kōno's work, which often sympathetically depicts women whose behavior or attitudes challenge Japanese norms of femininity (sometimes in purposefully shocking ways).

⁴ Enshrinement here is not merely erecting a monument or marker, but a housing of the actual souls of the dead as *Kami* ("spirits") in a Shinto shrine.

She had not been to the place where her husband was said to be enshrined. They had been married less than a year when he left her to serve his country. He came back to her only twice after that to spend a night with her. Both times he neither told her where he had been nor where he was going. One hundred and sixty-two days after his second overnight visit, she was informed that her husband was no longer of this world. By counting the days she realized that she had been unaware of his death for one hundred and twenty-one or twenty-two days. Her married life had lasted less than two years.

When it was confirmed that her husband was indeed among the enshrined, she did not go to visit the spot. It was not that she was skeptical about the act of enshrinement: rather she simply did not feel like going to a place that must be horribly gloomy. Whenever people asked her why she hadn't been, or more directly told her that she ought to go, she responded that she would go someday. Inwardly, however, she had a very different feeling; it was an attitude that could only be explained with an expression she had never used before: "The hell with it."

When she thought about her reluctance to visit her husband's shrine, she realized that the gloominess of the place was only one of her reasons after all. The main reason was that it was not yet time. She wanted to experience her husband's death all by herself, to feel the loss personally. She did not think she could do so yet. Excessive public reaction was partially responsible for her attitude, but then, for many more years after the public had ceased to pay much attention to the matter, she still couldn't have his death all to herself.

The time came when she was able to feel her husband's death personally, and by then her image of the shrine was even drearier than ever. Her reluctance had now changed to rejection, and she saw no meaning in such a visit. She knew that a time would come when she would associate morbidity with the place; she also knew that she would then go there just to make sure she was right about it. Meanwhile, whenever she thought about the visit, she was somehow certain that she wouldn't be able to explore the shrine alone and at leisure; its meaning for her was greater than its association with her husband. It was something she could possess all to herself, doing whatever she wanted there.

Time went by and she remarried. Seven years had passed since her first husband's death, but it hardly felt that long. She was still only twenty-seven, however, and that at least seemed real to her. Her first marriage, the loss of her husband, and her second marriage all seemed to have come rather quickly. After the second marriage, she began referring to her late spouse as "my first husband," even to herself.

It was not only out of consideration and politeness toward her second husband that she refrained for so long from visiting her

first husband's shrine. And she was reassured somehow, knowing that she would go there someday just to see for herself what a grim place it was. She was also reassured by the thought that she had not been kept from making the visit and neglected her first husband out of consideration for her second; neither had she tried to slip away to pay her respects and thereby ignored the feelings of her new spouse. It helped her decision seem more natural when she and her husband moved to a city a long way from the shrine. When she decided to visit the place on an impulse while she was away from home, with me as a companion, nearly a quarter of a century had passed since the loss of her first husband.

It was an autumn day and, unfortunately, raining. In spite of that, the site was remarkably airy and light. This surprised her, since she had always thought it would be gloomy. There were broad gravel walkways, lanes lined with large trees, areas that looked like small parks, and open spaces adorned with young trees here and there. The place was filled with a cheerful brightness which spread to every edge and corner of the vast expanse, and the autumn rain and falling leaves seemed even to enhance its lightness.

"I'm so glad," she said to herself repeatedly. If it had been as gloomy as she had imagined, she would have felt remiss in her duties to both her first and second husbands: remiss in not having visited sooner for the first and in coming after all in spite of the second. She might even have regretted coming. Things were very different from what she had expected, however, and she felt free to think whatever she wanted.



Yasukuni Shrine (Chiyoda, Tokyo), founded to commemorate anyone who had died in service of the Empire of Japan (1868-1947)

The spot where her first husband was enshrined along with many other men and some women was a building made of natural rocks, wood, and metal. There must be places he would rather have gone to stay, she thought. She wondered whether he had seen this shrine before he died. But he must have known when he entered the iron fish that he would come here after his death. He might have quite liked this cheerful place; in fact, it was the sort of spot his

spirit might have wanted to revisit now and then, though not, perhaps, on this particular day.

The ornaments on the building's exterior were not inappropriate. She saw the words "Pray for the dead" hanging from the branches of a tree. On another placard was the phrase "Rest in peace." Quite a few people who knew him were still alive, so she doubted somehow that his repose was all that peaceful.⁵

There were a few annex buildings on the vast grounds, and it was into one of these that she locked herself.

The voice from the other side of the iron doors stopped when she refused to respond. So she went straight to the iron fish in the lobby and placed her hands on the side of its body. The surface was very rusty, and her hands felt as if they were rubbing against scales. She then stepped under the wooden rail to get even closer to the thing, and lay down so that she could embrace its body with both arms. The fish was too large for her arms-- it looked as if she were clinging to it. As she held it, her body was filled with the sense that she had a right and duty to be there.

Altogether over a hundred iron fish had sunk one after another. Each had been ripped apart and scattered on the bottom of the sea. Years later, one of the fish was discovered with most of its body somehow intact. It was this salvaged body that she now embraced.



salvaged *Kaiten*

Earlier in the day, when she had first seen that long tapered cylinder in the center of the lobby facing the door, she hadn't known what it was. "This is what he rode in," she'd muttered to herself as she read the explanation on the plate. "He must have entered from this hole here," she said, noticing a round opening on top

that had lost its lid. She reached her arm out to touch it. Then she came back to the plate. "So it was forty-six feet long," she noted with some surprise. She could see that it was very narrow, only four feet in diameter, and to herself she acknowledged that her husband must have found it suffocating. Since one opening faced the main door through which light still shone in, she could see halfway through the empty cylinder, which was sliced in two. The

⁵ In Japanese folklore, the spirits of the dead find rest when they no longer have ties to the world of the living.

light, however, did not reach all the way to the other end. She could imagine how claustrophobic her husband must have felt.

As she moved on, looking at other exhibits, she forgot about the cylinder, but it was not because she found something else that strongly drew her attention. When she remarried, she had divided most of her first husband's belongings among a few of his acquaintances. For herself she kept some pictures and a set of badges, which she knew were at the bottom of her velveteen-covered jewelry box. The exhibits in the display cases did not seem particularly valuable or significant in her eyes. She saw me walking away from one case with a sudden awkward motion: in it was a document which read at the end, "Neither debt nor guilt nor any tie to women need I feel." She noticed me turn my face away and wipe my eyes. Someone of our generation, who has lived through and yet not personally experienced the war's most tragic moments, tends to react more strongly to such relics, she thought. She looked at the exhibits, taking more time than she needed, because I was examining them carefully.



Kaiten exhibit at the Yūshūkan
military and war museum

When she came back down to the main floor and stood in front of the fish-shaped cylinder, she again thought of the claustrophobia. That sensation was intensified after one of the building's front doors was closed, darkening the lobby. When she made me leave by myself, however, she had intended to follow me right away, as she had said she would. She merely wanted to be inside the cylinder in slightly darkened surroundings. She wanted a chance to experience the feeling of being in there alone, while one door of the building was still open.

Before that chance had come, it was already almost four. In two minutes the other door would be closed. She felt as if it was going to close and trap her husband in that suffocating cylinder. If she wished, she could do exactly as he had done and lock herself in. And in that attempt she had almost succeeded. Her heart began to pound.

She was still standing in the semidarkness of the lobby when the last visitor left. The way to the stairs was blocked by a metal bar, which the attendants had locked a few minutes earlier as they

were leaving. While she had been waiting for the place to become totally deserted, she had pretended to be looking at some of the exhibits by the wall near the entrance, like a late visitor reluctant to leave. Now she moved slowly, checking the two doors that she had not seen the attendant lock; she found they too had been secured. At the end of the lobby was a wall of frosted glass; beyond it was a conference room with wooden desks and benches. The light coming from the small room in the back went out at four. She hid herself when she saw an old cleaning woman locking the door to that room.

It was still not very dark in the building when the old woman latched the large front door, thereby shutting her in. The ceiling of the conference room was glass, and light came into the lobby through the frosted pane. There must have been some windows by the staircase, too: some light reached down from that direction as well.

It seemed as if the iron fish were now deep in water. She noticed a very dim light rising from the bottom of the ocean.

Part of the cylinder rested on some tiny white pebbles spread in a rectangular wooden frame. The light at the bottom of the sea was the reflection of those white pebbles faintly gleaming in the darkness. It was not yet completely dark-- there was enough light to tell where the pebbles lay.

At the bottom of the deep sea she touched the white pebbles; she held them in her palm, then scooped them up in both hands. Earlier in the day she had seen a child doing the same thing. As she held the pebbles, she became convinced that the flesh of her husband's dead body on the ocean floor had not been consumed by fish and become part of their bodies; he had been dispersed and scattered about like these little stones.

Her husband had been a young, fastidious man. Perhaps she thought of him in that way because she herself had been young then. He had probably seemed fastidious because he was immature, even awkward; but she, being clumsy and even less mature, couldn't think of ways to help him relax.

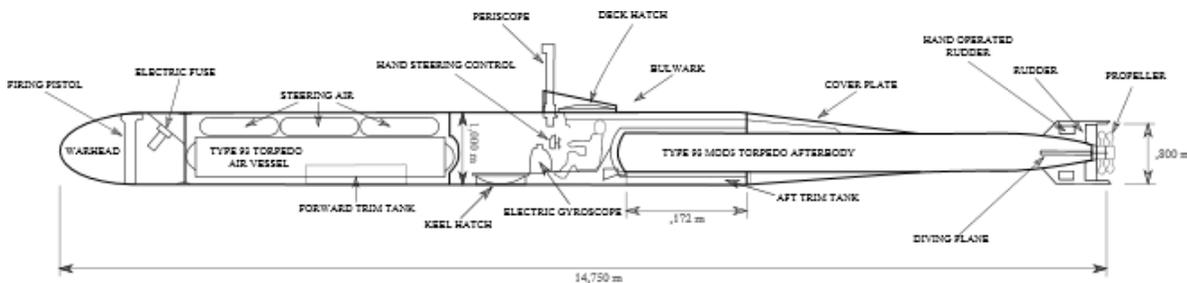
"We must get a move on," he often used to say. That was the only habit of his that she could remember. No doubt the prevailing mood of the times made him use the phrase, but he also seemed to have employed it as an expression of hope that they would soon become open and intimate with one another. And perhaps he was also implying that, though young, they were a married couple and must remember to behave appropriately so that others would treat them as such. Once he even used the phrase in their marriage bed. It was much later, however, that she was able to reflect on this rather

comic habit of speech: at the time she had merely listened to him with the seriousness of a student being given a lecture.

There was one more expression, come to think of it: "I'd like..." He would say, "I'd like you to consult me in advance," or "I'd like you not to do things like this," or "If there's a movie that you want to go and see, I'd like to know." Was he trying to convey a sense of urgency in this expression, too?

"What was it that you wanted me to do, dear?" she said. Her smile suddenly turned into a sob, and she covered her mouth with her hands. "What do you want me to do now?" she asked, overwhelmed by a surge of gentle affection for him. "I'd like you to refrain from such pointless remarks," she thought her husband would have said.

She explored the slightly curved bottom of the cylinder with her hands, then climbed into the iron fish. Once inside, she slowly straightened up, but her head bumped the ceiling before she could stand straight. Her husband, who had been taller than she, would have had to bend over even more, she thought, and she stooped down a little further. Then she took a few steps, feeling the side wall. She realized that there were rings, one or two inches in diameter, set along the wall. There must have been another curved board set on the rings, she thought, and she stooped down even more. She remained in that position for a while.



Kaiten schematic

"Have you thought of anything you'd like me to do for you?" she said, squatting and rubbing the bottom part of the cylinder near her feet. Her hands touched hard, fine, sharp pieces of flesh. Again she remembered seeing a child doing just what she was doing.

Had he not wanted to see the brightness of the sun again, to breathe the fragrant air, to stretch his arms toward the sky? But he wouldn't respond to her questions and tell her what he would have liked. Her husband would not speak, and she didn't know how to help him say it. She felt the two of them had not changed since those days. A fastidious person he had been, her first husband.

Her first marriage had been so very short, and soon she had spent more years with her second husband. Over the many years of her

second marriage, when she thought about her first husband, she felt that his share of her life had been unfairly small. Somehow it seemed to be her own doing, but she couldn't understand why she felt that way.

Whether because of the moon, the stars, or simply cloud, the sky seen through the glass ceiling of the conference room was not completely black. She could judge the height of the ceiling, but the floor was in total darkness. She sat on a stool, which she had brought from the conference room and placed next to the iron fish, and leaned against a wooden rail behind her.

She felt that she had remarried too soon; her second husband had been only two years older than him, though it was seven years since his death. But perhaps that thought simply allowed her to feel more freedom in her present relationship. Perhaps she wanted to feel free.

Her second husband did not want to talk about his first wife; he almost never referred to her first husband, either. Once when the conversation naturally touched on him, he said, "That's because he was on his way to the front." And simultaneously the words "departure" and "war"-- words she had seen so frequently in those days-- loomed before her. She saw the image of her first husband superimposed on the phrase "a man on his way to the front," and it revived his memory with double intensity. That was the first and last time her second husband mentioned him, although he didn't purposely avoid the subject. "You must have been awfully good in your previous life, being picked by a man as nice as me to start marriage all over again. Although I'm not sure I picked the best sort for retraining." His joke gently implied that she need not feel uneasy about being remarried. She had never felt more grateful to him than at that time. It was for those words, spoken very early in their marriage, that she had stayed with him, she thought. There were times, however, when she felt she had been deceived by them. And it was then she felt like doing something to find out if she had in fact been led astray.

She tried to discover what sort of disillusionment or what sense of attachment her first husband might have felt toward her when he shut himself up inside the iron fish. Had they been a specific kind of emotion? Perhaps. She couldn't help regretting that more time from her life had not been spared for him.

As she thought about these things, leaning against the wooden rail in the deep darkness, she realized that the emotions she was now experiencing for her first husband had been fostered by her life with her second, and that her first marriage had made her react with keen appreciation to the comment that her current companion had made soon after their remarriage. Was there someone, somewhere, telling her this? She thought she might be able to answer this if she could see the brightness of the sun again.