

THE QUARRY

Alice Maher

Hikikomori

Haibun

The title *Hikikomori* refers to a Japanese social phenomenon whereby adolescents (and some adults) withdraw from the outside world to seek extreme isolation and self-confinement.

A *Haibun* is a Japanese form combining short prose with poetry; in this case, a haiku.

I am not clover. My roots, if I have roots, run shallow and thin. I do not spread and I do not travel. My sun is an incandescent bulb, and it does not move across my ceiling sky. My days and nights are not bound to natural lights. If I am awake, it is day. I sleep, and it is night. Food is left at my door, coldly waiting for me to creep to it. Morning meals of bread and miso arrive when I am tired. Evening meals of rice and fish accompany my waking yawn. Sometimes I eat and am grateful. Sometimes, craving warmth like the clover I am not, I venture to a darkened kitchen and heat an always-full kettle.

Mother's love for me
Cup ramen in the cupboard
Never running out

I may not travel, but every day I journey. My portal awaits, one of three choices, but the one I always take. One is a third-storey window that leads nowhere I care about. It is death, and I am not quite desperate enough to step out yet. One is a door, safe at certain times. Quick dashes to the bathroom and the kitchen, hiding my body from my mother like it's a game we agreed to play. *My* portal sits on the desk and hums in a soothing voice. Its light is more important than the bulb, far more important than the sun. I step through, plodding familiar paths. Here, people are words. I am also words, when I choose to be. Mostly, I like to be eyes.

Eyes that see a world
Where 'avatar' means more than
Simple godly things

Every so often, my journey is interrupted. My god-eyes turn away from the screen, to give my human ears a chance to hear. Voices: Mother. And some other. Noises like murmuring, but harsher, more demanding. I sit in the dark and ignore their building rhythm. I ignore the breathy voices calling to one another. I do not hear the moment breathy becomes breathless. I squeeze a plastic cup of broth, willing warmth back into it. But it has sat for hours, quite stale. Nothing I want anymore.

I feel a leaving
I sit and almost enjoy
The sound of sobbing

I never understood the human world. I am like a beast, hiding in my hole through an endless winter. Humans pass over my buried head but do not disturb my sleep. Humans with their crying sounds. Humans with their human food, left on the ground at the entrance to my burrow. Humans with their animal coupling and their human way of complicating even simple things. My mother is a human. I caught a glimpse of her recently, quite by accident. It was the time that humans usually spent in bed. I dashed from my shelter to satisfy my needs, but this time I was hunted. My mother's face glowed in the dark. It burned a ghost behind my eyelids.

'Kenji, listen dear.
I can't do this anymore.
I'll leave you some cash'

No more bread. No more fish. Some rice and miso has been left, optimistically, but I do not know how to make it into food. No more crying, or noise of any kind. I can walk the house freely, at any time. But still my room feels like the only space that belongs to me. I ventured into my mother's room, half-fearful of her ghost. But there was a disappointing amount of nothing. My room grew fuller and fuller of stale smells, unwashed sheets and dishes. My mother's room smelled like no human. I let it be.

What happens later,
When the cup ramen runs out?
I eye the money

I am eight years old. My mother is holding me, and I am drinking in her warmth. My father has left us, and now we are a pair. That's what my mother murmurs into my hair. *You and me, we have to be strong now.* I want to please

you so much my stomach hurts. My hand curls around you right before you push me gently back. You stand, pulling me up with you. You tell me I am your special boy; no, your special man. I will look after you, I say. *I know you will. I know.*

Everything I am
Refolded, crammed further down.
We are now a pair

I start rationing the ramen. Every time I go to the cupboard and see the plastic towers dwindling, or refill the empty kettle, my heart empties too. Then, slowly, my stomach follows. I crawl on my belly like a snake, hugging pillows to my crushed abdomen. The money sits on the kitchen counter where she left it. A bundle of notes, and a credit card. I can't breathe.

Come back, please mother.
I forget being a man
Please teach me again.

I tread delicately down pixelated paths, this time on a quest. I tap the keys, ignoring my usual sites. A map appears on the screen, of the area just outside my apartment. I barely recognise it. It looks dense, packed with buildings, roads, and other signs of human activity. Dots appear, a whole cascade of them. Are there really that many places that sell food nearby? My belly howls with impatience even as my tongue becomes swollen and stiff. I sift through the listings one by one, searching for key phrases.

Key phrases such as:
'Open 24/7'
I start making plans.

The paths I tread now are hostile. It is 3:30am and I thought I would be safe from human eyes, but they persist. I dodge down side streets, lit only by foxfire lanterns leading on to homely haunts. Places mentioned on my map but

unsuitable for my needs. The thought of sitting, ordering food, waiting among strangers and then eating among them, is far too much. Even my current mission, far more modest, sends my palms sweating. Everyone can see how uncomfortable I am. I am one of those stray cats, an abandoned pet to be turned back at any threshold I am presumptuous enough to approach.

Finally I see

Blue and green: 'Family Mart'

Ironic perhaps.