

## The Psychology of Unemployment and Other Destitution

### A Case

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We don't meet Sasaki at first. We see his wife instead—we peek at her in her home, which is a Tokyo flat situated next to a railroad line. There's a storm outside; a glass sliding door has been left open. Interior floors are wet with rain. She scurries in house slippers to wipe the floor. She's wearing a skirt, sweater, comfortable socks, and the house slippers. Then she is on her knees, hand-mopping the collecting rain. The background music sounds synthesized; it is Kazumasa Hashimoto's "Tokyo Aishiteru" (roughly translated, "Tokyo Love"), whose melody is reminiscent, at times, of a Japanese flute of ancient variety. She closes the glass door, but opens it again to observe the rain. Leaves on a tree are wracked by wind, even if the branches and trunk hold steady.

At Tanita Corporation, which has something to do with healthcare equipment, the blinds are shut in a large-windowed office on an upper floor. The same storm rages. Beyond the blinds, there are rectangular shadows like sails in turbulent air, but it's not clear whether the shadows are . . . banners, perhaps, outside the building? Oblivious to weather, a salaryman in dark suit and dark tie, with an ID badge on a blue cord around his neck—this would be Sasaki—frets about a "body-fat scale" which was a co-worker's responsibility. He grunts orders to an underling. Sasaki is Director of Administration at Tanita, but not for long.

Cut to another locale in Tanita Corporation. A handsome, low-percent-body-fat woman appears in deep focus—she's young, in a light gray and figure-flattering outfit. An obsequious man wearing horn-

rimmed glasses accompanies her. She sashays past Sasaki without glancing at him—without so much as a thought to glance at him. The woman and bespectacled man are on their way to meet the boss, who distantly resembles Mickey Rooney’s Yunioshi from Breakfast at Tiffany’s. We learn that the woman is Chinese, not Japanese. But her Japanese is impeccable (she’s been studying night and day, she says); the boss is impressed. Horn-rim says that once the new phone lines are installed in the mainland China office, Tanita Corporation can hire three people just like the bright Chinese woman for the price of one Japanese salaryman. As we overhear in a second meeting, this time between Sasaki and the boss: “I am aware of the great job you’ve done as the director of administration,” the boss says, “So, Mr. Sasaki, what will you do after you leave the department?”

Huh? Sasaki returns inarticulately.

“What are your skills?” the boss asks.

We see only the back of Sasaki’s head. He has thick black hair; he is 46 years old. It’s not necessary to see his face. In the background, as elsewhere at Tanita, the Venetian blinds in the boss’s office are closed. Between the slats of blinds, we notice that the storm has abated, only to alert us to an internal one. Sasaki’s sturm und drang is underway; it has begun with a vitiating query about his “skills.” He is speechless and immediately jobless.

Roughly now, in the lower right corner of the screen, Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s name appears; he co-wrote and directed Tokyo Sonata (2008). Known in Japan mainly for horror movies, Kurosawa (no family relation to the late Akira Kurosawa) hasn’t stepped wholly out of his genre. Within the first three minutes of Sonata just described, the plot is set: Sasaki has to find a job. Understated horror, confusion, and some beautiful events will follow, but Kurosawa’s surreal representation of psychology stands apart from his story. As Dr. Johnson once said of a very long psychological novel by Samuel Richardson, you could try to follow plot, but you might as well hang yourself—and, worse, you’d miss the psychology. In Kurosawa’s Sonata, to be unemployed is a psychological state of suspense. Yes, there’s a story about how Sasaki finds a new job, but the limbo is the interest.

In the United States, seasonally adjusted unemployment doubled between January 2007 and summer 2010. As I write, fifteen million Americans are jobless—approximately one in ten adults above the age of sixteen. The true figure is higher (one can't be precise), due to “discouraged workers” who no longer look for a job and can't be quantified. Kurosawa would have us consider that neither statistics nor nationality matter if bad news hits where you live. Sasaki has a wife, two boys (about 19 and 12 years of age), and a decent standard of living, even if they live next to a railroad track. “I protect this family. That's how it works,” Sasaki says in a tiff with his eldest son, later in the movie. The son's comeback could haunt anyone, but especially a parent in the process of a downsizing: “You say you're protecting us, Dad. But what do you do everyday?” Strip away the self-importance that we attach to whatever we do on a daily basis, especially when we don't have a real job at the moment. What's left?

If you suffer a career disappointment, then you no longer enjoy the validation of a particular role in the world. So what? is a reasonable response—for a while. Eventually, insidiously, loss of validation bleeds into something larger than a nicked narcissism. In time, the wound feels as large as the ego itself. From social science, we might borrow the term “legitimation crisis” to describe the extent of ego annihilation. Naturally, people without jobs can still work, often for personal and general good, as in volunteerism or the care of children at home, or they work in places they'd otherwise avoid, only for income. But if one subtracts the legitimate significance of the individual from any work, then crisis follows like a sickness unto death. Sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, whose term “legitimation crisis” I co-opt, himself borrowed the underlying concept from medicine. Think of any crisis as an illness. If, for example, a patient develops a bacterial infection, Habermas argued, there's a bacterium causing the disease, just as external events often cause a crisis. He adds dialectically, “the patient experiences his powerlessness vis-à-vis the objectivity of his illness only because he is a subject condemned to passivity and temporarily deprived of the possibility of being a subject in full possession of his powers.” To translate: if a Japanese Mickey Rooney dumps you in favor of China, are you fully to blame? Maybe not. Worse, Habermas's “deprivation” might not be temporary. What he calls

condemnation to passivity can persist stubbornly, in a way that unemployment benefits and COBRA do not. After job loss, some kind of infection eats at self-worth like a psychological fungus; the condemnation to passivity develops an ineluctable pace.

Sensing deep trouble at home, about halfway through Sonata, the eldest Sasaki son recommends that his mother divorce Sasaki. “Just get a divorce. You’re still totally fine,” Takaji says. She is shocked at the suggestion (there’s nothing quite like a Japanese woman’s expression of “Huh??”), but then she reflects, “It’s more complicated than that.” Takaji wonders aloud, “It is?” Moments later, his sideward glance at his mother, full of affection for her, is at once skeptical and forlorn. “I guess I just don’t get it,” he admits. Good for him. Confessed ignorance is a step towards wisdom. What he doesn’t understand is beyond his ken, because he is young (also, he has no idea what’s in store for him as a warrior). He thinks that a fix is obvious—which might be correct, only if the problem were obvious.

Sasaki’s wife gleans—rather, she lives—an effect of legitimation crisis, that we are more dumb-mute than helpless. A person loses his job, its validations, income. He is not incompetent, alcoholic, derelict, or inherently evil. Little cracks in his family become fissures, then canyons. A tiny pore in his own psyche opens into a hole as wide as the self. Very likely, the canyons and holes had been there all along, and the job loss happened just at a time when the invisible became easier to see. Takaji does not “get it,” but Kurosawa, a man well into his fifties and perhaps jobless from time to time, does—well enough. Sonata is a “sonata da camera” or instrumental work specifically for a small room—the one inside our heads, that is. The wife, who is at the center of Sonata’s psychological portrayal, is precise and correct. The psychology is far more complicated than a job or a marriage, or the lack of either.

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People say that professional rejection shouldn’t be taken personally. Of course it shouldn’t, but here’s the problem: rejection targets the Sasaki in us. If it weren’t personal, it would have the significance of bulk mail, readily discarded. The boss at Tanita Corporation asks a truly horrific question—and it repeats like a chorus in a later job interview in which a young male interviewer wears a

natty suit vest and a woman scrivener at her computer, who transcribes the interview, looks like fashion mannequin.

“What can you do?” the young man asks.

The mannequin clacks at her laptop, recording every word.

Sasaki tries to answer in practical terms: “I’ve worked in administration, so I’m confident of my interpersonal skills.” The dialogue continues in the clipped manner characteristic of Sonata (self-effacingly in an interview, Kurosawa has apologized for the curt dialogue in his native Japanese, made more eloquent, he has said, only in the English subtitles), but the point is plain enough. Sasaki’s skills are nondescript. Or, perhaps they could be described, but the worst possible time to articulate one’s talent is when it has been questioned here and elsewhere, and already found lacking. The interviewer is unimpressed with the vagueness of “interpersonal skills.”

“I see. What else?” he asks.

Sasaki wears his dark suit. In every scene when he’s searching for a job, he wears a bright red necktie, which is a symbol. When he ties it at his neck, he’s bleeding.

“What can you do?” asks the interviewer.

Sasaki: “I’m willing to do anything.”

“That’s too vague . . . We want to know your specific skills.”

“What?”

“We want you to show us what you excel at.”

“Right here?”

“Yes, right now.”

Sasaki: “Do you mean . . . like, singing karaoke?”

Sasaki is a corporate Sisyphus; his real skill has to do with some administrative rock on an incline, but there’s no explaining his talent to the guy in the vest. His line, then, about singing karaoke is sardonic and superb, but, viciously, the interviewer dogs him. Not happy with any of Sasaki’s answers,

he invites Sasaki to sing karaoke, but Sasaki can't sing, manifestly.

There will be no job offer.

Tanita Corporation provided a severance package, so there's income for a time: unemployment benefits can extend up to a year in Japan. The family continues to live in their home comfortably; they eat well. In fact, Sasaki and his family eat with charm and fury; there are at least a dozen scenes in Sonata involving food, often at the family table, where heads are down, and rice, salad, soup, main course, and condiments are consumed all at once with dextrous speed and voracity. Come the morning, Sasaki uniforms himself in suit and red tie and he's off to ostensible work, lugging his briefcase with shoulder strap. The wife says goodbye under the assumption that her world hasn't measurably changed.

An American viewer certainly wonders why Sasaki doesn't talk with his wife; why he doesn't update her about a turn in their shared fortune; why they don't concoct a plan together to defend home, hearth, and their two boys, never mind themselves. But if we pause to consider family dynamics (not just in a Tokyo family), a household is usually packed with secrets. The identity of individuals—not the role they play in a family, but who they are themselves—has everything to do with those secrets. Hausfrau Sasaki has fantasies about driving—she has recently acquired her driver's license, which is harder to come by in Japan than in the U.S.; she shops for a retractable-roof cabriolet that Sasaki couldn't afford even in the best of times; she thinks or dreams, perhaps, of freedom. Eldest son Takaji wants to join the military—the American army, no less—with an idealistic notion to protect his family, because American forces protect Japan. (In 2009, according to The New York Times, 29,000 foreigners served in American uniform without U.S. citizenship.) Then, there's the youngest son, a sixth grader named Kenji, the baby in the family. Sasaki thinks Takaji is “a mess” because Sasaki was too lenient with him. He vows no leniency with his youngest.

Kenji has a way of unmasking adults, as we learn from a snapshot at school. He and his teacher don't get along; the teacher singles him out for discipline one day. Kenji passes along a manga comicbook during class. He's caught, but he's not exactly guilty of misdemeanor; the teacher turns

haughty. “I profoundly despise anyone who would sneak this into my classroom,” he says. All the classmates look away as if shame were too painful to watch. But Kenji knows about the teacher’s addiction to pornographic manga, because he saw the teacher reading his copy of “Weekly Eros Mania” on the subway. Kenji divulges teacher’s nasty secret in front of the class, adding nicely, “You tried hard to hide it.” Someone yells “Gross!” and anti-teacher bedlam follows. No other student crosses the line of propriety quite like Kenji, but the boy takes no relish in outing his teacher. In general, he isolates himself by speaking what others would prefer to keep hidden.

Kenji’s own secret—and singularity—is that he goes to a certain young woman at a place called Kaneko School. She has recently divorced. Her room is always sunlit; she covers her shoulders with a shawl or light sweater; she has China-doll features and luminous skin. Kenji pays her with his lunch allowance. She teaches him . . . the piano. Previously, in a decision as random as the teacher singling out Kenji for manga, Sasaki forbade his son from piano lessons. Sasaki was uninterested in the whims of children, including (or especially) those of his last child. But “whim” hardly describes Kenji’s interest. More than once, he hears piano exercises when he walks by Kaneko School; he can see the pretty teacher and the piano from the street. He listens carefully. A student performs an academic piece by Franz Burgmüller. It’s pretty, but not music. At home, Kenji practices on an electric keyboard which he discovered in a garbage pile. The keyboard doesn’t produce sound, yet he touches the keys and hums all the notes. Kenji is a prodigy, a Mozart whose Leopold won’t let him really play.

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Hints of Sonata’s surrealism occur early in the movie, only to coalesce into what critics have called Kurosawa’s apocalyptic tendency or, alternatively, his trademark visionary quality towards the end of the movie. Once terminated at Tanita, Sasaki cleans out his desk into two shopping bags, which he carries with him. Promptly he visits a park for the unemployed. Especially since 2009, Tokyo and other Japanese cites have seen the spontaneous emergence of “villages for dispatched workers” or haken mura, but none quite with Kurosawa’s inhabitants. His park scene looks like a Samuel Beckettian world as

painted by Magritte, infected with people in suits, a waiting room with well-dressed Japanese Vladimirs and Estragons sitting on concrete stoops. All are between jobs.

The least well-dressed man at the park is a kind of clown—he's rotund, down and out, and his voice annoys like a bad sportscaster's. Sasaki overhears a conversation in which the clown does the talking. "Did you visit Hello Work? . . . You've got to stop by Hello Work before you come here. Go, before your luck runs out; otherwise, you'll be stuck here for life, like me." "Hello Work," pronounced HA-LO WA-KU in Japan-glish, is an employment agency with long lines in dark stairwells. There are a number of scenes at HA-LO WA-KU, each more Ingmar Bergmanian than the one before—which leads us to a psychological question: what does a slow death of optimism look like? A line or waiting room is an apt conceit; it is understandable and contemporary. At HA-LO WA-KU, you get a number as at a butcher counter (the name HA-LO WA-KU is itself grotesque and mocking: there's nothing to say "Hello" to, not with any enthusiasm). The service at Hello Work is painfully slow. And, after a long wait, your own head is served to you, either in the form of no work or a lousy job.

Since Sasaki eats well at home, there's little reason (it would seem) to go to food lines or soup kitchens during the day, yet he does. So does the character named Kurosu. At the unemployment park, which happens to be located next to the free food (gruel, as in Dickens), Sasaki and Kurosu meet by chance. They haven't seen each other since high school. Kurosu outdresses Sasaki and all the suits: he's wearing a three-piece, and when his cellphone rings, he flips it out of his vest pocket with the aplomb of a corporate stallion. He talks business talk on his call but, in reality, he has programmed his phone to ring five times per hour. When it rings, there's no client or senior VP on the line; there is no one on the line. "It's a little known feature, so it fools most people," he says.

Like Sasaki, Kurosu has mentioned nothing to his wife, and he's been unemployed far longer than Sasaki. Kurosu worries, however, that his wife suspects a problem, because she looks at him uneasily, with eyes of spousal mistrust. He concocts a plan to have Sasaki to dinner at his home; Sasaki will play the role of Kurosu's business colleague from the office. The wife can only conclude that there

is an office, because of Sasaki—so Kurosu thinks, although neither she nor his eighth-grade daughter will be convinced.

There's a fine moment at dinner. They all eat a home-cooked meal, but Kurosu pauses midbite to observe, "ah, didn't you order sushi?" The wife reminds Kurosu that he's the one who wanted a home-cooked meal for Mr. Sasaki—nothing ordered in, specifically. "I guess I did," says Kurosu. They all continue eating until the cellphone rings from another room; it is another Kurosu non-call. We note that absence of the sushi has an equivalent in every culture. In the West, it would have to do with emperors at home and work having absolutely nothing to wear.

If one learned just one Japanese word from Sonata, it should be sugoi, the term Sasaki reliably applies to Kurosu. It means, "amazing," with a connotation of awe. There's a variation—honto sugoi, "really, you are amazing"—which would be my estimation of Kurosu's genius in artifice, also of a deceptively simple metaphor in his last lines in the movie. It's actually a multiple trope: if work is a boat, unemployment is the Titanic—and sinking is inevitable or preordained. (At dinner, the absence of sushi is also a trope, but we shouldn't discuss it further; it's sugoi as is.) "When you think about it, we're like a slowly sinking ship," Kurosu says. There's water up to the chin, and escape naturally comes to mind. But the solution to foundering is not another boat, even of the life-saving variety. Anyway, the lifeboats are already filled with women and young people and they are gone. Kurosu has been brutally consistent: there is no sushi, no boat, no work, no one on the phone, and no real prospect that the wait will end. To drown is to wait. For those familiar with the experience (of waiting, during legitimation crisis), long stretches of time pass when the messages and emails have nothing to say ("We regret . . ."; "Unfortunately, at this time . . ."; "No"; "We nevertheless appreciate your interest . . ."). At first, there's no good news, then there's no news worth hearing at all. Kurosu amazes, because he's neither mordant nor morose; he is accurate, his argument airtight.

Kurosu dies by gas inhalation, as does his wife. Someone in his neighborhood, whom Sasaki accosts some time later when he tries to learn Kurosu's whereabouts, wonders aloud about a murder-

suicide.

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From a chapter on symptoms in Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy (first part, third section), we read the following description of a need to escape, to flee in some random flight of the destitute: “. . . both ways they are troubled, whether they do or do not, want or have, hit or miss, disquieted of all hands, soon weary, and still seeking change, restless, I say, fickle, fugitive, they may not abide to tarry in one place long . . . ” Why stay indeed, if there's no centripetal force and no legitimate center? Before long, all the Sasaki—dad, mom, Takaji, and Kenji—run away somewhere. Takaji is off to the Middle East, because America escalates its military presence there. Improbably, 138 Japanese recruits are mobilized and sent. The youngest, Kenji, runs away from home, after an argument. Sasaki learns about Kenji's clandestine piano lessons by way of letter from Kaneko School describing Kenji as a genius. The teacher recommends a special junior high school for the musically gifted. “How can our child be a prodigy?” Sasaki protests (in his life, all spectacular news is dubious). He's angry, too, about Kenji's deception and secrecy: “I hate that kind of cowardly attitude more than anything,” he says in a perfectly self-damning line. There's a tussle between father and son and then another one—then Kenji cascades head first down a flight of stairs. He's unconscious, concussed. But his brain is uninjured, as we eventually learn from a doctor in an emergency room's waiting area. After the domestic violence, maybe Kenji wonders whether his home near the tracks was ever a good place. He runs away in the baggage hold of a bus.

In the mean time, Sasaki accepts a janitorial position through Hello Work—to the Japanese sensibility, his new job is for untouchables. Mainly, he cleans restrooms and toilets, specializing in the latter. His fall from administration to sanitation would seem a final blow: as a menial in overalls at a tony shopping mall, he cleans the Augean stall as an anti-Hercules. Perhaps Kurosawa intends a portrait of his hero's marginalization, and, naturally, there's mortification in cleaning a public bathroom. But it's not all anomie at the mall. For one thing, the atrium is light and airy; it rises stories up, to the bright sky. The ambience is attractive, with brisk business in stores, unlike thousands of moribund malls in America.

Most importantly, deus ex machina happens at the mall.

Both time and plot get a little confused when the deus appears. On the stall floor next to a toilet bowl, Sasaki finds a brown envelope with a stack of ¥10,000 notes inside. It's the gratuitous find of a lifetime; Sasaki's proverbial ship has docked. He pockets the envelope and scurries from the latrine like a squirrel with nuts.

Three hours earlier, however, a cloak-and-dagger thief (literally with dagger, face ninja-cloaked) enters through the glass sliding door at the Sasaki flat. Mrs. Sasaki is home by herself. The thief is a professional locksmith who has fallen on hard times, who decided to become a thief out of desperation, but is lousy at it. "Where's the money?" he asks, as he ransacks shelves and drawers of the fastidiously kept home. As testament to his incompetency, the thief un.masks himself; he looks like a young Toshiro Mifune, hero of many Akira Kurosawa samurai movies. "She saw my face! Damn, she saw my face!" he screams. The acting is magnificently bad—I think or hope, quite intentionally.

Given how the scenes patch together, "the money" seems to relate to the cash that Sasaki found on the bathroom floor at the mall, but there's no connection. The thief abducts Mrs. Sasaki. He has just stolen a retractable roof convertible; he commands her to drive the car—which she does, in a less-than-what-she-ever-expected wish-fulfillment. She makes one stop (because she needs to use the restroom, she says) at the very mall where her husband Sasaki, unbeknownst to her, works his new job. In a bizarre variation of the Stockholm syndrome, she shops for sandwiches for herself and her thief/abductor—and, as she descends the escalator from an upper floor, Sasaki in orange overalls appears, having just emerged from the restroom with cash in pocket. Husband and wife meet at the bottom of the escalator; they are doppelgänger strangers to one another. We could refer to their moment of transformation from ignorance to knowledge (what Aristotle called "recognition" in a tragedy), but let's recall that we're watching a Japanese movie. There is no recognition and no immediate transformation, not unlike the nation's politics.

Sasaki runs, quite literally, out of the mall. His wife also runs away—in the convertible with the

thief. Sasaki stumbles along a road strewn with garbage piles; his wife and the thief drive to “road’s end” at the edge of the ocean. There’s much, much more: at the seashore as night falls, a spot of land or a boat or something at the horizon preoccupies Mrs. Sasaki, but the thief can’t see a thing because of a twilight blindness; there’s a rape that seems an act of mixed violence and entropy; Sasaki is hit by a minivan; he lies at the curb of a road; back at the seashore, Mrs. Sasaki and her thief spend the evening in a convenient shack, but she can’t avoid going outside—not to flee, but to water’s edge, where she studies a star as if it were a single candle low in the sky, and when it extinguishes, she reclines in water like Ophelia; the thief wonders if she is God herself.

In these scenes, we aren’t dealing with apocalypse or a variety of religious experience. Perhaps it’s all self-conscious and visionary (too much so?), but Kurosawa consistently depicts waiting—that is, a fantastical wait, with which we are all uncannily familiar. From your own experience, take any untoward event in mid-life (job loss at Your Corporation or choose what misfortune you will, including the sense that one has not lived up to personal expectations in life thus far). “Practice losing farther, losing faster” says poet Elizabeth Bishop of that precise transitional time when one’s potential becomes one’s inherent failure to fulfill it. Her “losing” describes a crisis of legitimation that is both sociological and psychological, in which a person can’t help noticing that effort is feckless, despite all effort. The crisis is not an exercise in massive self-pity, though it can have egregiously maudlin aspects. Rather, there is nothing to be done—such would be Habermas’s condemnation to passivity, an active process that culminates in a sense of uselessness more than helplessness. In Sonata, “practice losing” has visual analogues, all variations of waiting, or (in what amounts to the same thing) an arbitrary running in place: queue in a stairwell at Hello Work; wait in a food line; experience a pseudo-apocalyptic night at oceanside; run away (in shame, but going where?) until you get hit by a passing vehicle—and the minivan driver flees the scene of the accident.

The police apprehend Kenji the stowaway at a bus station. He spends his night in a holding cell. He is released; there’s a long walk home. (The fundamental Tokyo scene in the movie, seen from

different angles, is an ascent along narrow roads with forks in them to the Sasaki residence. There are no sidewalks. Business placards hang over pedestrians' heads.) There's news on TV that, in an American turnabout, military forces will downsize in the Middle East. One hundred and thirty eight Japanese nationals will return, all save Takaji. We see little of him after he leaves home, save for a dream sequence in which he reappears from the Middle East (he's in American uniform and weary). In reality, he remains abroad because he has found a "path to happiness" in his service.

When Mrs. Sasaki faces morninglight at water's edge, she finds that her thief has driven the stolen convertible directly into the ocean—a suicide, presumably. Sasaki awakens from his roadside coma, befuddled. Somnambulistically, he deposits his envelope of cash into a community lost-and-found box. Sasaki, his wife, and Kenji reconvene at home for a complete home-cooked meal. Sasaki still wears his orange overalls from work—"You are dressed funny," Kenji observes. The flat remains disorganized after the thief's ransacking. Sasaki shovels rice into his mouth.

One can't conclude that the answer to joblessness is mere work, or that industriousness in a mall is the solution to a legitimation crisis, if one attends to the nuances of Sonata. The movie's answer to unemployment and its despair is precisely not the resurrection of some previous (dubious) legitimacy at Tanita Corporation or any place of business. What, then, is the path to a better place? A classical if slightly morbid sensibility might have it that "the beautiful fills us with despair," as Paul Valéry once wrote, but in Sonata the inverse is truer to the heart of its psychological portrayal: despair makes beauty possible for Sasaki the everyman. And "the path" has to do with the possibility of beauty.

A pragmatic person might dismiss such paths and winding roads leading nowhere, but that person simply does not know—or, likely, hasn't yet experienced—how long a waiting line can be. As Kenji might say, "You can try hard to hide it," but everyone might be in a line of one kind of another.

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At the White Mountain Music School auditions, Kenji the prodigy plays Claude Debussy's Claire de lune, a piece so familiar to the ear that one forgets the composer's debt to Paul Verlaine's poem

of the same name (here translated by Chris Routledge at [thereaderonline.co.uk](http://thereaderonline.co.uk)):

. . . All sing in a minor key  
Of victorious love and the opportune life.  
They do not seem to believe in their happiness  
And their song mingles with the moonlight . . .

For Verlaine, moonlight has little of the sentimentality that we hear in Debussy's music; light mingles only with putative certainties, including love, victory, opportunity, and happiness—all these can pass too quickly in a life. Verlaine's people don't seem to believe in their happiness, even if they say they are happy. The soul, the poet says, is a "select landscape, where charming masqueraders go."

A boy in a dark tie (not Kenji) plays an academic piece by Friedrich Kuhlau as the Sasaki enter the auditorium. The interior air is still; there's a main panel of judges, one of whom looks like a corpse; various serious people at other tables take notes. The boy bangs at keys accurately, confidently. There's a peculiar quality to the room's light—the illumination at different angles; a large spot of light in the foreground of the baby grand; a diffuse and fuzzy quality of shadow where light does not fall. The White Mountain audition marks a chapter's end in Sasaki's life—he still works at the mall, having been promoted to scraping chewing gum off tile. For his son's performance, he wears a light gray blazer, no tie, nothing dark. Once he and his wife are seated, in the only mistranslation that I recognize in the English subtitles, Mrs. Sasaki says she's "getting nervous." Actually, she worries about Kenji: "I wonder if he's OK . . . Kenji," she says. The question applies to all those who matter in the movie. We wonder whether Sasaki is OK; whether his wife is; whether the family as a unit is. Our only provisional certainty is that the four have somehow negotiated a passage through uncertainty. A sense of crisis may have attenuated, but it can't possibly go away. The delegitimizing question "what can you do?" still could be asked without a compelling response leaping to mind.

Kenji starts to play. Debussy wrote Clair de lune in D-flat major; there are many black key notes

at the start, as if the entire music were rendered a half note on the minor side. Within a few bars, the slightest amount of breeze picks up in the auditorium. Curtain sheers waver against large windows whose light seems all softness and diffusion. The music teacher from Kaneko School is there. She enters after Kenji has begun; director Kurosawa frames her figure in one such window. Weirdly, two men in ascots stand near her on either side. They look a bit absurd; she does not.

As Kenji plays his “Moonlight,” Kurosawa cuts to images of Sasaki and wife seated next to each other in the audience, and to the music teacher as well. All the shots are of the “I’m-about-to-cry” variety, with the sparkle of a tear in the welling eye. But Kenji surprises beyond sentimentalism. In response to what a person “can do,” Kenji, for one, can play Debussy—his talent has nothing to do with employment in the dull world. Artists return poorly on investment, on average—yet here at the end of Sonata is Kenji’s résumé, his talent for beauty, captured especially in the last moment of performance, when his right hand turns palm up and empty, because the music and the beauty are done.

Kurosawa and lighting director Tokuju Ichikawa provide a final, parting touch. Drawn to the music, more and more people collect in the auditorium like a lengthening queue at Hello Work; Kenji leaves all listeners and dour judges speechless. His mother and father approach the stage; Sasaki touches his son’s head with exceeding tenderness. As the Sasaki exit the auditorium together, a ray of sunlight from an unexpected angle illuminates their three faces. One could say, contra Verlaine, that they are happy momentarily, that beauty has lent them all the legitimation they need, despite the evanescence of the moment.

Whether or not such a minor human triumph means anything when compared to loss of work, loss of sociological self-definition, and loss of psychological well-being, we partly wish that employment could be so sugoi. If it were, life and work might be in balance, rather than in the routine antithetical opposition that bankrupts the psyche and ravages the landscape of the soul.