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A retired professor of Japanese literature suffers a stroke that paralyzes him almost entirely, leaving him unable to communicate other than by moving his eyes. His vital organs begin to fail. Doctors give him only a week or so to live. He indicates that he wants his 16-year-old grandson to take him home to Kyōto, where cherry trees are beginning to bloom.

The boy takes care of his grandfather, a formerly austere and powerful man—bathes him, changes his position regularly to prevent bedsores, reads to him from *The Tale of Genji*, cleans the soiled sheets and clothes—and is repeatedly awed while massaging his arms and legs by how soft they are, how yielding.

One afternoon in the garden—the grandfather in a wheelchair, the boy sitting beside him, holding his hand—clouds gather over nearby mountains; and as they do, the boy gets a feeling, which seems to be coming through the paralyzed hand he is holding, that his grandfather wants to write a death poem. The boy asks if this is so, and his grandfather's eyes move to the right—yes.

Just then the boy sees a cherry blossom fall and thinks: A few days ago there were no blossoms; a few days from now there again will be no blossoms. He looks up at the darkening sky and is surprised to hear himself saying:

Rain clouds overhead
a deep, black silence—a flash
we live and are gone.

“Was that your death poem, Grandfather?”

Eyes move to the left—no.

The boy looks again at the cherry tree, sees in it pink, white, gray. He feels a tingling from his grandfather's hand and speaks another haiku:

To life's eastering
shadow, how great the speed of
color through the trees.

"Was that your death poem, Grandfather?"

The grandfather slowly lifts his eyelids. No.

Now, the boy looks carefully at the cold, bony, withered hand he is holding, and discovers in its frailty an exquisite beauty, perfect like a blossom on a tree, so fleeting. In the next moment he feels that he is in his grandfather's body, unable to move or talk. Looking out of those tired old eyes, he experiences neither fear nor anxiety. What he sees is his young self blooming with youth, sitting close to him, holding his wizened hand in a young hand, and he thinks during an exhale that seems never to end:

Exuberant spring—
so soon crow's feet at your eyes
and withered desires.

Returned suddenly to his accustomed self, the boy asks, "Was that your death poem, Grandfather?"—but he receives no answer.