The main force of the Takashima Division disembarked at Ta-ku directly after the fall of Peking, just when the late summer heat struck the continent. The sweating, dust-covered soldiers marched, accompanied by countless swarms of circling flies.

For two months the troops advanced southward, pursuing the enemy along the banks of Tzu-ya River. By the time they heard that Shih-chia-chuang had fallen to their comrades, it was already deep autumn and frost lay white on the sentries’ shoulders.

Takashima Division’s main force marshaled the rest of its units in the village of Ning-hsin and rested for ten days while awaiting its next orders. During that time, each company conducted a memorial service for its war dead. Two company commanders had been killed in the fighting, and the infantry had lost one-tenth of its numerical strength, but there was no talk of coming replacement units.

Flames suddenly shot up just to the rear of the private house assigned to the regimental headquarters. Reflections of the thick smoke raced furiously across windows shining in the evening sun.
The first to run up, Corporal Kasahara and two of his men seized a Chinese loitering at the scene—a shabbily dressed youth of twenty-two or so, his neck, hands, and feet streaked with dirt.

“Nii!” bellowed Corporal Kasahara, addressing him brusquely as “you.” But he did not know enough Chinese to be able to interrogate him. With a vigorous sniff of his runny nose, he told a subordinate, “Go call the headquarters interpreter.”

As the soldier ran off, Kasahara sat on a cauldron that had been thrown out into the street and turned his attention to the fire. Flames snaked along the walls to the second-story ceiling and reached the ridge of the roof. Gaps between the tiles began to glow white with heat; blazing whirlpools streamed within the windows.

“Oh, how it burns! This is hot!” Holding out his arms as if over a charcoal brazier, the other soldier scrutinized the face of the Chinese. “By the look of that mug, I’d say he did it.”

Solitary, like a dead tree, the youth stood beside the two men, his face expressionless, thin, vaguely stupid. Seven or eight more soldiers rushed up and surrounded him. Hands in pockets, legs gaitered, interpreter Nakahashi arrived, a holstered pistol slung over his rocking shoulders.

“Did this one do it?”

“Looks that way. Just ask him a few questions. Trying to torch the headquarters, the son of a bitch.”

The interpreter spat out a match he had been chewing and directed two or three sharp words at the youth, but the latter only glanced at him and remained silent. Shoving his shoulder, the interpreter asked again. In a quiet voice, the youth briefly replied. The interpreter suddenly struck him across the face. The youth
staggered. In the midst of the raging flames a mass of tiles broke away from the ridge and crashed to the ground.

“What did he say?” asked the watching soldiers.

“Bastard says setting fire to his own house is his own business!”

Corporal Kasahara, who had been sitting on the cauldron and warming himself by the fire, jumped to his feet, grabbed the youth by the arm, and started off.

“This way. On the double.”

The youth obediently began to walk, and the two soldiers followed. After some ten paces, Kasahara turned and threw interpreter Nakahashi a meaningful grin.

At the village outskirts a hundred yards off, a willow-lined creek with rice fields stretching away from both banks formed a silent evening landscape into which the four emerged. The sun had set, dyeing the sky red. Red clouds reflected mutely in the waters of the stream. The autumn was tranquil, unruffled by wind. Farmhouses stood here and there but lacked any sign of human life. After jumping over several dead Chinese soldiers, the men stood at the creek’s edge. The last of the wild chrysanthemums blossomed in clusters by the water’s surface; new circular pools had appeared throughout the fields in the wake of an artillery attack.

Kasahara turned around. The youth had bowed his head and was gazing at the creek’s barely moving water. The rounded rump of a well-fed horse protruded above the surface. Floating weeds clung to the Chinese saddle; the horse’s head was invisible.

“Look away!” barked Kasahara and waited. “Doesn’t understand, does he. The man’s a nuisance.”
Out of necessity he stepped behind the youth and drew the Japanese sword, rasping, from the scabbard. Catching sight of it, the scrawny, crowlike youth dropped to his knees in the mud, began to shout a stream of in comprehensible words, raised his clasped hands, and pleaded. But Kasahara was used to such pleas. Even so, he did not enjoy them.

“Ei!”

The youth’s screams instantly ceased, and the fields reverted to the hushed silence of a twilight landscape. The head did not fall, but the cut was sufficiently deep. His body still upright, a geyser of blood overflowed the shoulders. The body tilted to the right, toppled into the wild chrysanthemums on the bank, and rolled over once. There was a dull splash as the torso plunged in alongside the horse’s rump. The muddy soles of his bare feet turned up toward the sky.

The three wordlessly retraced their steps. At several places in the village, Rising Sun flags were still visible in the failing light. The smoke from the burning house began to mirror the redness of the flames. It was just about dinnertime.

By nightfall the fire subsided of its own accord. In the rear garden of the regimental headquarters, four or five soldiers surrounding the bonfire were, as always, roasting sweet potatoes. Smashed up chairs blazed, twisting in the bonfire. Army priest Katayama Genchō, choking on the dense smoke, rolled a potato over with the tip of his shoe and muttered hoarsely, “It seems the front is shifting.”

“Where to, I wonder.” With soiled thick fingers, Corporal Kasahara extracted and lit a rationed Golden Bat.
“Back to Tientsin, it seems. His Excellency the Division Commander hinted as much.”

“You spoke with the division commander?”

“Yes, about the bones. If the unit were to stay here for a while, I had planned to accompany the bones as far as Tientsin or Dairen, but His Excellency told me not to bother. Most likely we are all going to Tientsin anyway, he says.”

“Tientsin!” cried out Corporal Kasahara, slapping his knees. “All right! If it’s Tientsin, we’ll just live it up to the hilt! Hey, hey!”

A soldier solemnly chimed in: “Call the geishas, buy the whores, swill the sake.”

“Ah, hahaha!” guffawed Kasahara. Tapped on the shoulder, he turned to see interpreter Nakahashi come to warm himself by the bonfire.

“Did you do in that nii?”

“That I did, the son of a bitch,” Kasahara replied, as though still indignant over the arson. But in fact he had forgotten all about it until asked. It was not a rare incident for him. “There’s a dead horse in the creek. Just about now he’s probably getting a hug from the horse.”

A soldier sprang to his feet and saluted, alerting everyone to the fact that the regimental commander, Colonel Nishizawa, was strolling toward the bonfire, a cigarette in his mouth. The colonel returned everyone’s salute, stretched his arms toward the fire, and asked about the delicious aroma. Drawing up a chair, the men readily replied that they were roasting potatoes.

“Would you treat me to one?”

The soldiers laughed happily. Regimental Commander Nishizawa was a superior they worshipped boundlessly. Lean and tall, he appeared sickly, but bore himself with such dignity that his
very skin seemed to radiate valor. Clothing and hands both soiled with mud and grime, he was as filthy as the soldiers. He sat in the chair and began to stroke his unkempt beard.

“You’ve grown quite a splendid beard, Unit Commander, sir,” said the interpreter.

“Not as splendid as the army priest.”

Once more the soldiers laughed with delight. They felt immensely grateful that he had chosen to warm himself by the fire with them. Peering into the flames, Corporal Kasahara used a piece of wood to retrieve a potato roasted to just the right degree, then with the help of a piece of paper he had drawn from his pocket, he gingerly picked it up. But he hesitated to present it to the commander.

“Aren’t you going to offer it to him?” asked the army priest hoarsely. The commander silently stretched out his arm. Bending forward, Kasahara reverently held out the potato. All intently watched the commander prepare to eat it.

“There’s been talk the unit is moving out. Where do you fellows think we’re going?”

“To Tientsin, it seems,” Katayama Gench replied.

“Why do you think so?”

“His Excellency the Division Commander seemed to be saying so.”

Colonel Nishizawa peeled the potato and tossed a steaming fragment into his mouth. The soldiers gulped.

“Where are we actually going, sir?” asked interpreter Nakahashi.

“I don’t know myself. In any case, the front is changing; that much is certain.”

“I see.”
“Have you gotten your field rations?”
“We have, sir.”

As the conversation paused, everyone suddenly thought of the fighting they had been through since leaving Tientsin. They tried to foresee the battles that lay ahead. With the commander so close they grew exhilarated and bold; fighting a war appeared a surprisingly peaceful, effortless undertaking.

A soldier on duty walked up, brought his heels together with a click, and saluted.

“The adjutant asks that you come, sir. A message has arrived from the headquarters.”

“Right.” Colonel Nishizawa rose from his chair. All the soldiers around the bonfire stood to attention and saluted.

When he had gone, they relaxed, started to chat, and fought to be the first to get the potatoes out of the fire.

Corporal Kasahara took off his right shoe and sock. His large, splay foot, black with encrusted dirt, emitted vapor. His leg was surprisingly white and tender.

“And so within a day or two we finally leave.”

He gazed at the sole of his foot by the light of the bonfire. The drone of an airplane became audible. It was impossible to know whether the plane was hostile or friendly. Even so, no one took any notice of it. They were used to such uncertainties and not inclined to worry about them.

His right leg resting on his left thigh, Kasahara again drew the sword, rasping, out of the sheath.

“What are you doing?”

“Well, you see, the skin of this valuable limb that’s been made to walk too much gets hard and aches, so the foot can foot it no more. Hurts worse than if a bullet hit it.”
He bent his face over the sole and, sniffling, commenced to pare the hardened skin with the sword. The blade was chipped in several places; it had not been sufficiently wiped and showed a reddish tinge. Fat stains had made it lose its luster and acquire the color of lead.

**Next morning** at early dawn the order to depart was handed down. The march destination was Shih-chia-chuang, nearly forty miles away. Ruts left by gun carriages and supply vehicles had so ravaged the road that the line of march was frequently thrown into disarray. Transport units and the Third Infantry Battalion of the Nishizawa Regiment remained behind to set out on the following day. By that time a unit was expected to arrive in Ningshain to take up garrison duty.

The marching troops consumed their noon and evening meals in the space of a twenty-minute rest. Freezing water from their canteens pierced the men’s insides as they drank.

The otherwise uninterrupted march brought them to Shih-chia-chuang late in the night, with the moon risen high. The units headed straight for the train station, entered its grounds—pitch-black, for all the lights had been extinguished—and were billeted for the night in the waiting freight cars. The soldiers took empty oil cans aboard and kindled fires in them to keep warm. Then they curled up to sleep on the straw-littered floor where horses appeared to have lain just a few days earlier. Utterly exhausted, each man drew up his gaitered legs, rested his head on the thigh of a comrade, and slept, immobile as a corpse. At intervals the door was rudely shoved open and a voice shouted in.
“Is First Class Private Noda here? First Class Private Noda!”

The soldier in question groaned a response, his voice unbearably weary. But when the man outside shouted, “Night watch!” for the second time, the replying voice suddenly turned distinct as the soldier hurriedly rose. Even in his sleep he understood the importance of night watch. It was a pitiful spectacle of a man submitting to duty with the virtual precision of a machine. Cradling a rifle in his arms, he crept out from among his sleeping comrades, jumped down onto the darkened rails, drew his bayonet, and fixed it to the rifle with a metallic click. The frozen ground under his shoes was solid as a paved road. He turned up the collar of his coat and walked to the guard room. This was located in the ticket office, behind the sales window, where a dozen relief soldiers were warming themselves around a fire.

The next morning as the eastern sky began to brighten, the freight train, fully loaded with soldiers, started to move. Rising Sun flags fluttering here and there, Shih-chia-chuang was awakening at last from an uneasy slumber. Already dozens of army civilian employees in suits and overcoats, pacification unit armbands on their sleeves, bustled about its streets carrying out their postwar tasks: to build a cheerful North China, to make its inhabitants understand the justice of Japan’s cause, to grant them a sanctuary for the pursuit of peaceful lives. The inhabitants, their soiled black clothing like crows’ plumage, their bulging, cotton-padded sleeves all twisted, sported Rising Sun armbands and were sure to break into smiles and salute whenever they encountered soldiers. This was merely an expression of their wretched lot. A people accustomed to war’s havoc, they had made it a habit since ancestral times to act subservient toward armies of
occupation. Despite receiving their salutes, the soldiers did not trust them.

The suburbs of Shih-chia-chuang were littered with the rubble of devastated dwellings. The houses had collapsed into desiccated heaps of roof tiles and bricks; only the thick walls remained standing in rows amidst an eerie stillness. Alongside the railroad tracks, villagers worked under Japanese direction to dispose of the corpses of Chinese soldiers. They had dug a ditch and were burying them. Flung in by the dozen one atop another, gaping like fish, heads limply hanging, the soldiers were covered with earth as they lay. A tomb of the unknown warriors was being built in the middle of a millet field.

Loaded with bored soldiery, the freight train ran north along the Peking-Wuhan railway. It passed through Cheng-ting, Tingchou, and Pao-ting before stopping for the night at Cho-chou station. This was so far to the rear that even the faces of the local garrison troops appeared tranquil. In a guardhouse some of them went so far as to share the sake from their canteens with the arrivals.

The following morning the train set out again, reaching Peking before noon. It merely passed through Peking, however, and started south. Destination Tientsin as expected, thought the soldiers.

A man in the corner of the swaying, dimly-lit carriage broke the silence. “Platoon Commander, sir, what are we going to do in Tientsin?” It was the brave First Class Private Hirao who, whenever drunk, sang “Manchurian Bandits” drumming on his thighs.

Second Lieutenant Kurata turned his mild, bespectacled gaze
toward him and softly smiled. He was clearly at a loss for an answer.

“If the front is changing, then we should be going northwest of Peking, toward Chang-chia-k’ou,” grumbled Hirao. “Tientsin is not the front.”

“Tientsin is garrison duty,” said another soldier.

“I’ve no idea myself,” Lieutenant Kurata replied quietly with a resigned smile and looked out through the carriage door left open a crack to let in light. Framed by the doorway, a plain of withered millet rushed past in an ever receding streak. Farmers were working the fields illumined by slanting rays of the sun. Here peace had already arrived.

That night they pulled into Tientsin. Soldiers worn out by two days and nights on the train sprang to life at last, stooped to pick up their knapsacks, rose hugging them, and jumped down onto the railway tracks. Just then the orderly from the battalion headquarters came running, shouting, “You’re not getting off! Get back on! Get back on! Train leaves in a minute!”

In confusion the soldiers scrambled back up into the same freight cars, wondering aloud where in the world they were being taken. The long military train carrying the battalion to its unknown destination began to move once more. The compasses strapped to the men’s wrists indicated east. They seemed to be heading for Ta-ku, where they had disembarked two months earlier. After that, perhaps, a triumphant return awaited them.

During the night, however, the train rushed through T’ang-ku and turned northeast.

The Soviet-Manchurian border! The chilling rumor flashed through the train. No doubt they would be fighting the Soviets. A new tension silenced them and put them on edge. Russia was
the next enemy. They knew the fearsome strength of the Russian army and had often heard of the heavily armed pillboxes guarding the Soviet border. If such were their orders, they had to be obeyed, and they felt no hesitation whatsoever about carrying them out; but their thoughts suddenly turned homeward, and they recalled once more their native mountains and rivers. It was unlikely they would see them again. They bit their lips hard. Not surprisingly, many soldiers did not sleep that night.

Second Lieutenant Kurata sat cross-legged leaning against the iron door and took out a notebook from his inside breast pocket. Shaking with the train’s motion, he began to write the day’s diary. Since the start of the campaign, even during the fiercest fighting, he had not missed a single day’s entry; he was a methodical man. The brief account jotted down, he next took from his knapsack a postcard printed red, signifying military mail.

“Are you well?” it began. “Your teacher, luckily, is also well and carrying out his military duty. Please grow up quickly and work for the sake of the country.” It was that sort of a letter. In his hometown he had been an elementary school teacher. (What a peaceful life that had been!) If the unit were headed for the Soviet-Manchurian border, he wished to send a heartfelt letter of farewell to the children who had been his pupils. But the directions of all military movements were to be kept secret. Hesitant about the impact it might make on the children’s minds, he wrote that he would probably be prevented from meeting them again.

The words affected him even before they could affect the children. Startled, he looked around the carriage. Even the awake soldiers were drowsily nodding. What terribly innocent, docile youths they were! He imagined now that he was surrounded by
his pupils. Lance Corporal Mita was not among them, nor First Class Private Mizuno, nor First Class Private Taga. He shut his eyes and thought of the battle in the outskirts of Hsien-hsien: I survived! He could not help but be amazed: I am still alive! There was something disturbing, unsettling about it. Perhaps this irritation was a form of unease that would persist until he died. Suddenly he yearned for a furious fight. When next he found himself at the front, he would charge like mad, he thought, and felt his face flush, his heart pound violently.

Yet again they greeted the dawn from inside the freight train. First Class Private Hirao had slept curled up in the very corner and was bathing his face in the morning sun’s rays shining in through the door. He rose, yawned hugely, and shouted, “Aah! I want to wash my face! How great I’d feel if I could only wash my face with cold water!”

The forty men in the carriage laughed, all sharing his wish. They could not recall having washed their faces in the past four or five days.

“I’d like to take a leisurely shit,” said First Class Private Kondō, a university graduate. Ever since leaving Ning-hsin there had not even been time to go to the toilet. The freight train lacked such facilities and the station stops were too short, and so the soldiers’ bowels suffered. But that afternoon the train arrived at Ch’in-huang-tao and remained a full two hours in the station. This was time enough for First Class Private Kondō to satisfy his need.

The troops received another three days’ worth of field rations.
AND THEN the train went on, still running northeast. Chin-chou, Kou-pang-tzu, Hsin-min-tun. . . . By the time it reached Mukden, tedium and lack of exercise had made the soldiers profoundly depressed. They had lost their vigor, moved listlessly, and felt irritable.

Commanding officer Nishizawa rode with his adjutant in an armor-plated car at the front of the train. Even he got off at this station to move his arms and legs about and massage the joints stiffened by the long journey. The soldiers quickly sat down on the platform and crossed their legs. Standing produced an unbearable pain in the entire body.

After an hour’s rest they boarded a different train. This was not a freight but a passenger train, equipped with toilets and washbasins. It left Mukden and proceeded south.

“Going home!” Within seconds the voice spread along the length of the train. “Hurray, we’re going home!” So greatly did they long to return. The joy of the men who had not expected to see their flesh and blood again welled up irrepressibly.

They spent the night on the train before arriving at Dairen and being billeted in the homes of its citizens. Everyone assumed that just as soon as the rear guard joined them they would board the ships together and sail home in triumph. That night they strutted throughout Dairen, drank sake, sang war songs, and bought homecoming presents.

The following morning when they were all assembled for the company roll calls, the commanding officer made an announcement.

“We are not going home yet. Stop buying souvenirs.”

They then marched to the coast on the city outskirts, where they boarded dozens of waiting boats and conducted repeated
amphibious assault drills. For the first time, the soldiers realized they were bound for a new front.

Where that front was, no one knew—neither the company commanders nor the battalion commanders, not even the regimental commanders, and possibly not Division Commander Takashima himself. It was all a strictly guarded operational secret; even the letters the soldiers had mailed were detained at the post office and not forwarded until the right time had come.

Finally on the third day the Nishizawa Regiment embarked. The steamships, numbers painted on each side, flew flags atop the masts identifying them as troopships. Assigned to guard duty in the regimental commander’s cabin, First Class Private Kond noticed a securely sealed packet of documents. Written in red on the outside were the words “Seal to be broken three hours after leaving port.” The packet contained classified military maps of the region where they were to go ashore. Minutely detailed charts of the Yangtze River valley from Shanghai to the environs of Nan-king, they showed a web of interlacing tributaries and recorded such information as their width, depth, mud depth, fords, width of roads, and places that became mired after rain. This was the battlefield that awaited them.

Without a single siren blast, the three ships followed each other out of the Dairen harbor. The soldiers opened the porthole windows and wordlessly watched the city of Dairen with its outlying islands recede in the distance. They tossed into the waves the gifts they had bought, threw themselves onto the iron-frame bunks, and went mutely to sleep.