

Community Reading Group Annotations January 2026

The Memory Police

By: Yoko Ogawa

I'm interested in the roles that collective memory, knowledge, and imagination can have in creating or connecting communities and in resisting violence and oppression. The five books I've proposed span a range of genres, but each text explores the instability and collective potential of knowledge (from memory and forgetting to ideas of truth in images, as well as the histories and mythologies that underlie the climate crisis).

As a filmmaker, I feel it is urgent that media workers grapple with growing anxieties about the truth-value of photography and find new possibilities for seeing and narrating a world entangled in a complex climate crisis. For me, Community Reading Group has been a reassuring source of connection through shared study, and I hope our exploration of one of these texts may reflect on the ideas of collective knowledge that CRG practices weekly.

– Sara Suárez

Yōko Ogawa

The Memory Police

Chapter 1–4

Excerpted by Andrew M.

Ribbon, bell, emerald, stamp. The words that came from my mother's mouth thrilled me, like the names of little girls from distant countries or new species of plants. As I listened to her talk, it made me happy to imagine a time when all these things had a place here on the island.

Yet that was also rather difficult to do. The objects in my palm seemed to cower there, absolutely still, like little animals in hibernation, sending me no signal at all. They often left me with an uncertain feeling, as though I were trying to make images of the clouds in the sky out of modeling clay. When I stood before the secret drawers, I felt I had to concentrate on each word my mother said.

My favorite story was the one about "perfume," a clear liquid in a small glass bottle. The first time my mother placed it in my hand, I thought it was some sort of sugar water, and I started to bring it to my mouth.

"No, it's not to drink," my mother cried, laughing. "You put just a drop on your neck, like this."

My mother was at her most lively when she talked about this small bottle.

... "It was disappeared the autumn of the year that your father and I were married. We gathered on the banks of the river with our perfume. Then we opened the bottles and poured out their contents, watching the perfume dissolve in the water like some worthless liquid. Some girls held the bottles up to their noses one last time—but the ability to smell the perfume had already faded, along with all memory of what it had meant. The river reeked for two or three days afterward, and some fish died. But no one seemed to notice. You see, the very idea of 'perfume' had been disappeared from their heads."

She looked sad as she finished speaking. Then she gathered me up on her lap and let me smell the perfume on her neck.

"Well?" she said.

But I had no idea what to answer. I could tell that there was some sort of scent there—like the smell of toasting bread or the chlorine from a swimming pool, yet different—but no matter how I tried, no other thought came to mind.

My mother waited, but when I said nothing she sighed quietly.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "To you, this is no more than a few drops of water. But it can't be helped. It's all but impossible to recall the things we've lost on the island once they're gone." And with that, she returned the bottle to its drawer. (12–15)

Most people on the island found some other line of work quickly when a disappearance affected their job. ...

When the hats were disappeared, the milliner who lived across the street began making umbrellas. My nurse's husband, who had been a mechanic on the ferry boat, became a security guard at a warehouse. A girl who was a few years ahead of me in school had been employed at a beauty salon, but she quickly found work as a midwife. None of them said a word about it. Even when the new job was less well paid, they seemed to have no regrets about losing the old one. Of course, had they complained, they might have attracted the attention of the Memory Police.

People—and I'm no exception—seem capable of forgetting almost anything, much as if our island were unable to float in anything but an expanse of totally empty sea.

The disappearance of the birds, as with so many other things, happened suddenly one morning. When I opened my eyes, I could sense something strange, almost rough, about the quality of the air. The sign of a disappearance. ... It took patience and concentration to figure out what was gone. ...

Then I spotted a small brown creature flying high up in the sky. It was plump, with what appeared to be a tuft of white feathers at its breast. I had just begun to wonder whether it was one of the creatures I had seen with my father when I realized that everything I knew about them had disappeared from inside me: my memories of them, my feelings about them, the very meaning of the word "bird"—everything.

"The birds," muttered the ex-milliner across the way. "And good riddance. I doubt anyone will miss them." **He adjusted the scarf around his neck and sneezed quietly. Then he caught sight of me. Perhaps recalling that my father had been an ornithologist, he gave me an awkward little smile and went off to work.** When the others outside realized what had disappeared, they too seemed relieved. They returned to their morning duties, leaving me alone to stare at the sky. (19–21)

Here it seems disappearance seems conceptual. It seems to disappear before it physically disappears.

There seems to be a tone of profound dissatisfaction that creates a feeling of obedience to the state and some grasping for something akin to a memory.

It's not yet clear if the disappearance is a phenomenon or a directive. It seems to be both.

What is the value of a name after the thing that it denotes has disappeared.

This description feels similar to forgetting a dream.

That people seem relieved raises the question of what's off limits to being disappeared.

When evening comes, I go out to walk for an hour or so. I follow the coastal road to the dock, and on the way home I take a path over the hill that passes the observatory.

The ferry has been tied to the dock for a very long time and is now completely covered with rust. No passengers board it and it can no longer take them anywhere. It, too, is among the things that have been disappeared from the island.

My nurse's husband had once served as mechanic on the boat. After the ferry had disappeared, he worked as a watchman for a warehouse by the docks. But at some point he retired and he lives now on the abandoned boat. On my walk, I invariably stopped in to chat with him.

"How have you been?" he asked one evening, offering me a chair. "Are you making progress with your novel?" ...

"Slowly," I told him.

"Well, the most important thing is that you take care of yourself." He nodded to himself and added, "There aren't many people who can sit all day at a desk and make up such complicated things right out of their head." ...

"A novel isn't as marvelous as all that. To me, taking apart a boat engine, fixing it, and putting it all back together again is much more mysterious and wonderful."

"No, no. The ferry has been disappeared and there's nothing more to be said about it." We fell silent then for a moment.

So is the forgotten the unsayable?

I've always given him one of the first copies of each of my books.

So this is your new *novel*," he would say each time, pronouncing the word with great care and taking the book in both hands, as though he were receiving a sacrament. "Thank you, thank you," he would repeat, as his voice grew almost tearful and I felt increasingly embarrassed.

But he has never read a single page of any of my books.

Once, when I told him I'd love to know what he thinks of them, he demurred.

"I couldn't possibly say," he said. "If you read a novel to the end, then it's over. I would never want to do something as wasteful as that. I'd much rather keep it here with me, safe and sound, forever." (31-34)

The cadence of this book feels diaristic.

"I saw something terrible on my way here," I told R, my editor, in the lobby of the publishing house."

"The Memory Police?" he asked, lighting a cigarette.

"Yes. They seem worse recently."

"They're awful," he agreed, slowly exhaling a long stream of smoke.

"But today was different somehow. They took four people at once from the center of town, in broad daylight. As far as I know, they've generally acted at night, on the edge of town, taking just one member of a family."

"Those people must have been hidden in a safe house."

The regime of forgetting it appears is very recent, only about 15 years old.

It's always struck me as odd that the police can tell who they are," I said, watching him as he looked out at the fountain. "I mean, the people who don't forget after a disappearance. I don't think they have any distinguishing features. They're men and women, all ages, from all different families. So if they're careful and make sure to blend in with everyone else, they should be able to pass. It shouldn't be that hard to play the game, to pretend that the disappearances affect them like they do the rest of us."

"I wonder whether it's really as simple as you make it sound." R thought for a moment.

"The conscious mind is embedded in a subconscious that's ten times as powerful, which may make trying to pretend almost impossible. They can't even imagine what these disappearances mean. If it were easy to pretend, they wouldn't be hiding away in these safe houses."

"That's true," I said.

"It's just a rumor, but I've heard they're learning to analyze our genes to find out who has this trait. They're assembling technicians in a secret facility at the university."

"Analyzing genes?" I murmured.

Community Quote Sheet

Metaphor Key: ★ (recurrent); ⊥ (contradictory); Z (abstruse)

“That’s right. There are no visible identifiers that link this group of people together, but the assumption is that there must be something in their genetic makeup. Judging from the behavior of the Memory Police, it seems the research must be fairly advanced.”

The men who had been talking near the ficus tree had finished their conversation. Three cups were left behind on their table. The receptionist began clearing them, her face completely blank.

“I waited until she had gone. “But why do they take people away? They haven’t done anything wrong.”

“The island is run by men who are determined to see things disappear. From their point of view, anything that fails to vanish when they say it should is inconceivable. So they force it to disappear with their own hands.”

The crumpled envelope lay on the table between us. R pulled it to him and took out the manuscript.

“It seems strange that you can still create something totally new like this—just from words—on an island where everything else is disappearing,” he said, brushing a bit of dirt from one of the pages as though he were caressing something precious.

I realized then that we were thinking the same thing. As we looked into each other’s eyes, I felt, once again, the anxiety that had taken root in our hearts a long time ago. The light reflecting from the spray of the fountain lit R’s face.”

“And what will happen if words disappear?” I whispered to myself, afraid that if I said it too loudly, it might come true. (42–47)

The function of the regime is to eliminate evidence or to deny, which also comes with the rejection of the concrete, specific or particular. And with this deriving any semblance of truth from the particulars.

Maintaining the abstraction of the powerful.

The Memory Police are described as always sowing chaos, but they are so meticulous that it appears as order.

Key words/phrases

Yoko Ogawa

The Memory Police

Ch. #5-8

Excerpted by Sara

p. 38-39

“Where will you be?” I asked, voicing the question that most concerned me. “Perhaps I could help in some way, bring you things you need or let you know what’s going on outside.” The Inuis glanced at one another and then their eyes fell back toward their mugs. After a moment, the professor spoke up.

“It’s terribly kind of you to be concerned, but I think it would be best not to tell you anything about the safe house. It’s not that we’re worried you might let something slip—if that were the case, we would never have brought the sculptures here in the first place. But we can’t allow ourselves to cause you any more trouble than we already have. The more deeply you become involved, the more danger you’ll be in. You can’t be forced to reveal what you don’t know, but if you do know something, there’s no telling what they might do to get it out of you. So I beg of you, please don’t ask about the safe house.”

“I understand. I’ll leave it at that. I may not know where you are, but I’ll be praying for your safety. Before you go, is there anything else I can do?” I clutched my empty mug and looked at them.

“Could I trouble you for a nail clipper?” Mrs. Inui murmured. “His fingernails have gotten so long.” She took the boy’s hand in hers.

“Of course,” I said, searching for a clipper in the back of a drawer. When I had found it, I helped the boy remove his gloves. “Hold still now. We’ll be done in one second.” **His fingers were slender and smooth, and spotless, without a single freckle or mole. I crouched down in front of him and gently took hold of his hand. As our eyes met, he gave me a bashful smile. His legs, dangling from the chair, swayed back and forth.**

I carefully clipped his nails, starting from the little finger of his left hand. The nails were soft and transparent, and came away with the least effort, fluttering to the floor like flower petals. We listened to the quiet clicking of the clippers, their echoes sealing this moment in the depth of the night.

When I finished, the sky-blue gloves were waiting on the table.
And that is how the Inui family vanished.

p. 46-47

I leaned out over the windowsill, blinking again and again. The surface of the river was covered with tiny fragments of...something...in an indescribable array of hues—reds, pinks, and whites—so thick that not a space was visible between them. Viewed from above, they appeared to be soft, as they collided and merged with one another, flowing along at a pace that seemed more leisurely than the usual current of the river....

Petals covered the surface as far as the eye could see. My hands had cleared a patch of water for a brief moment, but petals soon came flooding in again to fill it, and then they flowed on, almost as if someone had hypnotized each one of them and was drawing them toward the sea....

“Who would have imagined this?” someone murmured.

“It’s the most beautiful disappearance ever.”

“We should take a picture.”

“Better not. What’s the use of a picture when something’s disappeared?”

“I suppose you’re right.” .

The few flowers in the garden other than roses had survived—bellflowers, a couple of spiny cacti, some gentians. They bloomed discreetly, as though embarrassed to have been spared. The breeze seemed to discriminate, choosing only the rose petals to scatter.

A rose garden without roses was a meaningless, desolate place, and it was terribly sad to see the trellises and other signs of all the care that had been lavished on the flowers. **The murmur of the river did not reach me here and the rich, soft soil made a pleasant sound underfoot.** With my hands thrust in my pockets, I wandered across the hill as though walking through a cemetery of unmarked graves.

In years past, I had carefully studied the stems, leaves, and branches and had read the tags that identified the different varieties, but I realized now that I was already unable to remember what this thing called a rose had looked like.

These fine details are creating an element of intimacy and closeness, illustrating the painfulness of being disconnected from people.

In this world, everything feels very enchanted until it disappears.

The recurrent references to the river signals that it is an important motif.



p. 50

“I worry sometimes,” I told him, without looking up. “I don’t know what will happen to the island if things continue to disappear.... I mean, things are disappearing more quickly than they are being created, right?” I asked him.

He nodded and furrowed his brow, like someone suffering from a headache.

“What can the people on this island create?” I went on. “A few kinds of vegetables, cars that constantly break down, heavy, bulky stoves, some half-starved stock animals, oily cosmetics, babies, the occasional simple play, books no one reads... Poor, unreliable things that will never make up for those that are disappearing—and the energy that goes along with them. It’s subtle but it seems to be speeding up, and we have to watch out. If it goes on like this and we can’t compensate for the things that get lost, the island will soon be nothing but absences and holes, and when it’s completely hollowed out, we’ll all disappear without a trace. Don’t you ever feel that way?”

... and the energy ...
Introduces an interesting
shift in sentiment.

p. 59-60

“The object my mother told me was most precious,” I said, after a long pause, “was an heirloom from her own mother that she kept in a drawer in the second row, right about here. A little green stone, tiny and hard, like a baby tooth that had just fallen out. I think I remember it that way because my own baby teeth were falling out about then.”

“And the stone was beautiful?” he asked.

“Yes, I suppose so. It must have been, since my mother often took it out and held it up to admire in the moonlight. But nothing about it remains with me—that it was beautiful or dear or that I wanted to have it—nothing. Just the cold sensation when my mother once set it on my palm. When I stand here in front of the cabinet, my heart feels like a silkworm slumbering in its cocoon.”

“But that’s just the way it is—everyone feels that way about the things that have disappeared.” He touched his hand again to the frames of his glasses. “Could the green stone have been called an emerald?” he added.

“Em...er...ald,” I murmured over and over, and as I did I began to sense a faint stirring somewhere deep within. “Of course, that was it...em...er...ald. I’m sure that’s right. But how did you know?”

He said nothing for a moment. Instead, he began opening the drawers again one after the other. The handles gave a muffled clank. When he got to the drawer farthest to the left in the fourth row, he stopped and turned toward me.

“This one held perfume,” he said. I was about to repeat my question—how had he known?—but stopped myself. “There’s still some here,” he said, gently pressing on my back to force me closer. “Can you smell it?”

I peered into the little drawer and took a deep breath, recalling suddenly that my mother had made me smell odors this same way. But all that filled my chest was the chill, stale air. The sensation of his hand on my back was much more vivid than the memory of the perfume.

“I’m sorry,” I sighed, shaking my head.

“Don’t apologize,” he said. “It’s very hard to recall things that have disappeared.” He blinked and closed the “perfume” drawer. “But I remember,” he added. “The beauty of the emerald and the smell of perfume. I haven’t forgotten anything.”

There’s an imbalance of
power being gestured
toward here.

Key words/phrases

river

Yoko Ogawa

The Memory Police

Ch 9-12

Excerpted by Beth

69–70

But the remodeling of the room proved to be a more difficult problem. **It was rumored that all the carpenters on the island had been recruited** by the Memory Police and instructed to alert them to any suspicious construction projects. But it would also attract attention if they found out that we were quietly doing the work on our own.

So we were already in a state of nervous exhaustion by the time we had merely assembled the tools and materials. The old man proved his ingenuity in gathering all the things we would need. He slid lengths of pipe and lumber under his sweater, hung bags of nails and hinges and screws around his waist, and stuffed his pockets full of tools. When he finally reached the house for a delivery, the look of relief on his face was obvious. He would laugh and give an odd stretch to his spine, explaining that the clattering sound all around him as he pedaled his bicycle had made him feel as though his bones were coming apart.

It was wonderful to see how he went about his work. **He was careful, precise, conscientious, and, on top of all that, quick. From time to time he would study a drawing he had made ahead of time—probably on a page from the logbook as well—then, once he had collected his thoughts, launch into the work without hesitation.**

Craft motif reappears

75–76

It was raining on Wednesday morning. A deluge that seemed to threaten to inundate the whole island and send it spinning down a whirlpool. When I opened the curtains in my room, I could see nothing but the rain splashing against the window.

I didn't know whether the rain would be good or bad for our plan. On the one hand, it might help us evade the eyes of the Memory Police, but I was also worried that it would impede the movement of R and the old man. In either case, there was nothing for me to do but wait.

I turned up the heater and warmed the whole house. Then I boiled a kettle of water. Finally, I took to checking the street every few minutes from the window in the hallway, in order to be prepared to unlock the door as soon as they appeared. Normally, it took about twenty-five minutes to walk from the station, but there was no telling how long it would take in this down-pour.

At 8:25, I suddenly began to feel as though the hands of the clock had slowed. I stood in the hallway and looked back and forth between the window and the clock on the wall in the dining room. The windowpane was cloudy with condensation, so from time to time I had to wipe it with the sleeve of my sweater, which soon became damp in turn.

But the only thing I could see were sheets of rain, obscuring everything—the trees in the yard, the fence, the telephone poles, the sky. Thick, suffocating sheets of rain. I prayed that R and the old man would manage to make their way through. It had been a long time since I had prayed for anything.

It was after 8:45 by the time they finally arrived. I unlocked the door and they all but fell into the hallway, soaked to the skin and grasping each other's shoulders. Their hair was plastered to their faces and their clothes were dripping. Their shoes made a squishy sound. I led them into the dining room near the heater.

They were still clutching the business newspaper and the bag from the bakery that had served as their signs, though both were now limp as dishrags. The rolls in the bag had gone soggy and were completely inedible.

R took off his coat, sank into a chair, and closed his eyes. He sat, breathing quietly. The old man, seemingly determined to warm R as quickly as possible, moved the heater closer and went to find a blanket to put around his shoulders. Drops fell to the floor wherever he went, and soon steam was rising from both of their bodies.

We sat for a while, staring at the heater and listening to the sound of the rain. I'm sure we had things we wanted to say, but it seemed as though something weighed on our chests, preventing the words from coming out the moment we opened our mouths. The flickering flame, visible through the round window in the heater, was bright red.

It seems like this scene is a washing away of the previous part.

The rain scene feels like it punctuates the change of state btwn. the three characters from acquaintances to conspirators

81–82

“How does it feel to remember everything? To have everything that the rest of us have lost saved up in your heart?”

“That's a difficult question,” he said, using his forefinger to push up the frames of his glasses and then leaving his hand at his throat.

“I'd imagine you'd be uncomfortable, with your heart full of so many forgotten things.”

“No, that's not really a problem. **A heart has no shape, no limits. That's why you can put almost any kind of thing in it, why it can hold so much. It's much like your memory, in that sense.**”

“So you have everything inside you that has disappeared from the island?”

Something to watch is the evolution of paternalistic relationships btwn. the old man, R., and the memory police

“I’m not sure about everything. Memories don’t just pile up—they also change over time. And sometimes they fade of their own accord. Though the process, for me, is quite different from what happens to the rest of you when something disappears from the island.”

“Different how?” I asked, rubbing my fingernails.

“My memories don’t feel as though they’ve been pulled up by the root. Even if they fade, something remains. Like tiny seeds that might germinate again if the rain falls. And even if a memory disappears completely, the heart retains something. A slight tremor or pain, some bit of joy, a tear.”

He chose his words carefully, as though weighing each one on his tongue before pronouncing it.

“I sometimes wonder what I’d see if I could hold your heart in my hands,” I told him. “I imagine it fitting perfectly in my palms, soft and slippery, like gelatin that hasn’t quite set. It might wobble at the slightest touch, but I sense I’d need to hold it carefully, so it wouldn’t slip through my fingers. I also imagine the warmth of the thing. It’s usually hidden deep inside, so it’s much warmer than the rest of me. I close my eyes and sink into that warmth, and when I do, the sensations of all the things that have disappeared come back to me. I can feel all the things you remember, there in my hands. Doesn’t that sound marvelous?”

82–83

“When I read your novels, I never imagine that your heart is hollow.”

“But you have to admit that it’s difficult to be a writer on this island. Words seem to retreat further and further away with each disappearance. I suspect the only reason I’ve been able to go on writing is that I’ve had your heart by my side all along.”

“If that’s true, then I’m glad,” R said.

I turned my palms up and held them out. Then we stared at them for a time, without so much as blinking, as though I were actually holding something in my hands. But no matter how hard we looked, it was painfully clear that they were empty.

91–92

eeeeeeeeee

He had taken hold of the barest tip of my finger, but I was as overwhelmed as if he had taken me in his arms. His hand was cold and hard. I don’t believe that he held me with unusual force, but I felt an inescapable sense of oppression, as though the skin of his hand had attached itself to my finger, which continued to tap at the key.

His shoulder, his elbow and hip were just there, next to me. He seemed to have no intention of releasing my finger, which continued to tap at the key.

eeeeeeeeee...

The tapping of the key striking the paper was the only sound in the room. Snow had begun to fall again, covering the tracks I had made between the gate of the church and the clock tower.

He continued to hold me tighter and tighter. The stopwatch slipped from his breast pocket, turning over once in the air as it fell to the floor. I wondered whether it had broken. It seemed strange that I would be preoccupied with the stopwatch when I should have been worrying about what he was trying to do to me.

The bell in the clock tower began to chime. Five o’clock. The vibration came from far above, rattling the window glass and passing through our bodies, before being absorbed by the snow below. The only motion was the falling of the snowflakes. I held my breath, unable to move, as though locked inside the typewriter.

95

“But even if you can’t resist them, you don’t have to burn your photographs. Important things remain important things, no matter how much the world changes,” said R. “Their essence doesn’t change. If you keep them, they’re bound to bring you something in return. I don’t want to see any more of your memories lost.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head wearily. “Nothing comes back now when I see a photograph. No memories, no response. They’re nothing more than pieces of paper. A new hole has opened in my heart, and there’s no way to fill it up again. That’s how it is when something disappears, though I suppose you can’t understand...”

He looked down, his eyes sad.

“The new cavities in my heart search for things to burn. They drive me to burn things and I can stop only when everything is in ashes. Why would I keep them when I don’t think I will be able to recall the meaning of the word ‘photograph’ much longer, not to mention the danger if the Memory Police find them. They’re even more vigilant after a disappearance, and if they suspect me, that will put you in danger.”

R. might represent a utopian theme, which concerns the state.

*distributed cognition

*somatic dimension of memory

The text treats memory as highly concrete versus something abstract.

It might be that there is no dualism happening in Ogawa’s world.

Oppression in the book is described as suspending of all motion.

To try to preserve a photograph but also have lost the notion of what a photograph is introduces an interesting philos. question.

Key words/phrases

Heart, warmth, clock, time, look, see

There’s a focus on what can be seen & the looks that are occurring.

Yoko Ogawa

The Memory Police

13-16

Excerpted by Tracy

90 “The townspeople avoided going out any more than necessary, and on weekends they stayed home and shoveled the snow. They closed their curtains at dusk and lived as quietly as possible. It was as though the snow had frozen their hearts.”

98 “I suppose your rules also prevent you from telling me when he’ll be able to go home?” “Indeed they do,” the man said, smiling and recrossing his legs. “You catch on quickly.” The tassel from one of the medals on his chest shook. “Our primary function here is to assure that there are no delays in the process and that useless memories disappear quickly and easily. I’m sure you’d agree that there’s no point in holding on to them. If your big toe becomes infected with gangrene, you cut it off as soon as you can. If you do nothing, you end up losing the whole leg. The principle is the same. The only difference is that you can’t touch or see memories, or get inside the hearts they’re kept in. Each one of us hides them away in secret. So, since our adversary is invisible, we are forced to use our intuition. It is extremely delicate work. In order to unmask these invisible secrets, to analyze and sort and dispose of them, we must work in secret, to protect ourselves. I think you can understand.” He stopped his monologue here and began tapping the table with his fingers.

100 “I liked the sound of R’s voice through the makeshift speakers. Like a spring bubbling up from far below me. As it traversed the long rubber tube between the two funnels, all unnecessary sounds faded away, leaving only the soft, transparent liquid of his voice. I pressed my ear against the funnel, unwilling to waste even a single drop. “Sometimes I put my hand on the wall and try to imagine what’s going on outside. It almost seems as though I can sense it—the direction of the wind, the cold, the damp, where you are, the sound of the river, all the vague signs. But in the end, it never works. The wall is just a wall. There’s nothing on the other side, no connection to anything else. This room is completely closed off. All my effort only serves to convince me that I’m living in a cave, suspended in the middle of nothingness.”

108 When I blinked my eyes, I realized that the only things floating on the water outside the porthole were the plumes of seaweed. It had been years since I’d seen a boat moving across the horizon. The day they had disappeared, my memories of them had been fixed in place and had sunk into the bottomless swamp of my soul—so that now it was hard work indeed to imagine these people who had gone off over the water. “I wonder if they got away safely,” I said. “I’m sure that they managed to get off the island. But the seas are rough in winter. It’s possible they vanished without a trace.” He set his cup on the table next to the bed and then wiped his mouth with the napkin. “But where do you think they were going? You can’t see anything beyond the horizon,” I said, pointing out at the sea. “I don’t know. Maybe there’s a place out there where people whose hearts aren’t empty can go on living.”

111 “I watched him from behind for a few moments. Was it an illusion, or had his body actually begun to shrink since he’d hidden himself away here? He had definitely grown pale, without any contact with sunlight, and his appetite was poor, so he’d lost weight, but what I sensed was not that sort of tangible change but some more abstract transformation. Every time I saw him, I could feel the outline of his body blurring, his blood thinning, his muscles withering. Perhaps this was just evidence that his body was adapting to the secret room. Perhaps it was necessary to rid oneself of everything that was superfluous in order to immerse completely in this airless, soundproof, narrow space shrouded in the fear of discovery and arrest. In recompense for a mind that was able to retain everything, every memory, perhaps it was necessary that the body gradually fade away. I recalled a circus freak show I’d once seen profiled on television. There was a shot of a wooden box that held a young girl who had been sold to the show. Her head protruded from a hole, but her arms and legs must have been folded tightly inside. She had been forced to pass months and then years in that state, never released even to eat or sleep. In time, her arms and legs would have frozen in place, and she was exhibited to the public as a kind of deformed human insect.”

121 “Your voice will never come back.” I had no idea why he was telling me this. The problem now was not my voice but the typewriter. You can’t repair it? I tapped at the keys at random, but the levers still refused to move. “Your voice is trapped inside this machine. It’s not broken, it’s just been sealed off now that it no longer has a purpose.” Sealed...sealed...sealed...The word spun meaninglessly in my head. “It’s an extraordinary sight, don’t you think?” he said. “Every one of these is a voice. A mountain of voices wasting away here, never again able to make the air tremble. And today, yours joins them.” He picked up my typewriter with one hand and tossed it back where it had been resting. It sounded like a heavy door slamming shut—closing off my voice. Why? Why are you doing this? My lips moved but no sound emerged. “You don’t seem to understand. There’s no point in trying to talk anymore.” He put his hand over my mouth. His palm was cool and smelled vaguely of metal, no doubt from the stopwatch. “You’ll forget you ever had a voice,” he continued. “You may find it annoying at first, until you get used to it. You’ll move your lips as you just did, go looking for a typewriter, a notepad. But soon enough you’ll see how pointless it is. You have no need to talk, no need to utter a single word. There’s nothing to worry about, nothing to fear. Then, at last, you’ll be all mine.”

135 “Not at all. The best gift I can give you is one of the things I’ve been hiding. Of course I know something so insignificant can never make up for all the risks you’ve taken on my behalf. But I’ll be happy if I can help delay or stop this decay in your hearts even in some small way. I’m not sure how to do that, but I think there might be some benefit from holding these forgotten objects in your hands, feeling their weight, smelling them, listening to them.”

R turned the box over and wound the key. The melody started again from the beginning. I could see the knot of the old man’s necktie and my left ear reflected in the mirror.

I looked over at R. “So you really think our hearts are decaying?”

“I don’t know whether that’s the right word, but I do know that you’re changing, and not in a way that can be easily reversed or undone. It seems to be leading to an end that frightens me a great deal.” As he spoke, he swiveled the handle of his teacup back and forth. The old man continued to stare at the music box.

“An end,” I murmured to myself. It was not as though I had never thought about this. End... conclusion... limit—how many times had I tried to imagine where I was headed, using words like these? But I’d never managed to get very far. It was impossible to consider the problem for very long, before my senses froze and I felt myself suffocating. Nor was it helpful to talk about this with the old man, since he simply repeated over and over that everything would be all right.

“It feels terribly odd to have something that has disappeared right here before my eyes,” I said. “After all, this is something that supposedly no longer exists. Yet here we are looking at this box and listening to the music and pronouncing the name...o...ru...gō...ru. Doesn’t that seem strange to you?”

“Not strange at all. The box exists without any doubt and it’s right in front of us. The music continues to play, before the disappearance and after. It plays on faithfully, as long as the key is wound. That’s its role, now and forever. The only thing that’s different is the hearts of those who once heard it.”

“I understand,” I said. “It’s not the box’s fault that it disappeared. But what can we do? It’s disturbing to see things that have disappeared, like tossing something hard and thorny into a peaceful pond. It sets up ripples, stirs up a whirlpool below, throws up mud from the bottom. So we have no choice, really, but to burn them or bury them or send them floating down the river, anything to push them as far away as possible.”

“Is the music from the box that painful?” R asked, bending over and crossing his hands on his knees.

“No, not at all. I don’t think so at all,” the old man hurried to put in.

Key words/phrases

Voice

Yoko Ogawa

The Memory Police

Chapters 17–20

Excerpted by Zach W.

Key words/phrases Magic; uselessness; voice; “going to pieces”

Questions

1. What happens when something “disappeared” is kept?
2. What does it mean to be “reduced to pieces?”
3. Why is the old man resigned to the disappearances, to the point of accepting the likelihood of the disappearance of all humankind?
4. What is the relationship between ecological crisis and fascist regimes?

153– “What’s this?” one of the men said. I immediately thought he must have noticed
154 the rug, and my hands came reflexively to cover my mouth. “What is this?” he repeated, coming toward us with long strides. I repeated a phrase from the music box melody to myself, trying to keep from screaming. “Keep your hands behind your head,” he ordered in a deep voice.

I slipped my hands behind my head and clasped them together to keep them from trembling.

“Why is this still here?” he said, holding a small rectangular object in front of my face. I blinked and stared at a pocket datebook that had been in my handbag.

“No particular reason,” I said, trying to stop the tune from the music box that was still playing in my head. “I just forgot about it because I hardly ever used it.”

He was interested in the datebook and had not noticed the rug— or so I told myself. And the datebook presented no real problem. Nothing important was written in it, at most the date the dry cleaning would be ready or the schedule for street sweeping in the town or an appointment with the dentist.

“The disappearance of the calendars means that we no longer have any use for days and dates. **You know what happens if we keep things around us that should have gone away.**” He flipped through the pages at random but apparently had no interest in what was written on them. “We need to get rid of this right away.”

166 In the past few days I’ve begun to feel my body growing more distant from my soul. **It’s as though my head and arms, my breasts and torso and legs are all floating somewhere just out of reach**, and I can only watch as he plays with them. And that, too, is because I have lost my voice. When the voice that links the body to the soul vanishes, there is no way to put into words one’s feelings or will. **I am reduced to pieces** in no time at all.

I wonder if there is any way out of here. Of course I think about the possibility. At the instant he opens the door, I could push past him and run down the stairs. I

What happens when things that are supposed to be forgotten are kept around?

In the case of the old man, who was gifted the music box, there is a sense of calm and at the same time an unsettling sense. Something like alienation.

What’s int. about this quip by the memory policeman here is how the idea of what happens when something is kept around is presented as a truism.

Here, her voice is taken away—first, metaphorically and then literally.

Community Quote Sheet

Metaphor Key: ★ (recurrent); ⊥ (contradictory); Z (abstruse)

could beat on the floor with a typewriter to alert the students in the classroom below, or take one apart and throw the pieces out the window. But these ideas all seem useless, and besides, even if I found my way outside again, I wonder whether **I would be able to reassemble the pieces of myself.**

While he's busy teaching the typing students downstairs, I peek out from behind the face of the clock and look at the scene below. The church garden is carefully tended, with some flowers always in bloom. People often gather here, chatting in the shade of the trees, sitting on the benches to read. Children play badminton, the typing students pass through on bicycles. Occasionally someone will look up at the clock on the tower to check the time, but of course no one notices me.

If I listen, I can hear the sound of their voices, but I can't understand what they are saying. At first I thought it was because they were too far away. But that wasn't really the reason. It's simply that I can't comprehend the words.

184— “I remember hearing a saying long ago: **Men who start by burning books end**
185 **by burning other men,**” I said.

“Who said that?” asked the old man, speaking softly and bringing his hand to his chin.

“I’ve forgotten, though I’m sure it was someone important. But I wonder if that’s where we’re headed.”

“I wonder,” echoed the old man. “It’s hard to say.” He looked up at the ceiling, blinked, and rubbed his chin again. “But there’s nothing to be done. It’s not as though they’re burning every printed word. It’s just the novels, so **there’s no reason to think they’ll go further anytime soon.**”

“But what if human beings themselves disappear?” I asked. This was the question that had been on my mind. The old man swallowed and blinked again.

“You have to stop worrying about things like that. The disappearances are beyond our control. They have nothing to do with us. **We’re all going to die anyway, someday, so what’s the difference?** We simply have to leave things to fate.”

193 “Does it tire you out to be doing something you’re not used to?” asked the old man as he arranged the teapot and cups on the table. He was wearing the sweater I had given him over a thick shirt, with wool slippers on his feet.

“No, everyone is very nice to me,” I told him, “and **I’m enjoying the work.**”

We were meeting for tea on the boat for the first time in a while. What’s more, we were having pancakes. I had found eggs and honey, both great rarities, and we cooked together. We divided the batter in thirds and made three cakes, one of which I’d wrapped in a napkin to take to R.

Again, it seems that the allusion to “falling to pieces” seems to invoke a motif of depersonalization — of not being able to coalesce into a whole. Another assoc. is the systemization of authoritarian regimes. Here the character is not only describing a sense of being dismantled but also the idea of something being reduced into fungible objects, interchangeable commodities.

This is a paraphrasing of a famous line by Heinrich Heine

We might be able to think of the old man’s resignation as a kind of stockholm syndrome.

Community Quote Sheet

Metaphor Key: ★ (recurrent); ⊥ (contradictory); Z (abstruse)

Don, who had been dozing under the sofa, must have smelled the pancakes, since he appeared suddenly and began to nudge the tablecloth with his muzzle.

“Typing is hard, but I enjoy practicing. As soon as your fingers start to move, a sentence appears almost effortlessly—it’s like magic.” The old man poured the honey over the pancakes, careful not to waste a single drop.

“And the business seems to be going well. Herbs grow in the least bit of soil, and you can harvest them even with all this snow. Food is so hard to get that people are selling half-rotten meat and vegetables, and **everyone wants something fragrant to kill the smell—so my coworkers are expecting big bonuses.**”

“That’s good,” said the old man as he lifted the lid on the pot to see whether the tea had finished steeping.

This was similarly the word “magic” that R. used to describe the music box. Magic thus is being repeatedly used to describe machines.

Community Quote Sheet

Metaphor Key: ★ (recurrent); ⊥ (contradictory); Z (abstruse)

Yoko Ogawa	The Memory Police	Chapter # 21-24	Excerpted by Annie
Key words/phrases		Themes: heightened animism of sculptures, swamp metaphor for memory & mind, the changing relationship between those who remember and those who do not due to the disappearances	

pp. 213-214	<p>(the narrator after recounting a vague memory) Having said all this almost in a single breath, I placed my hands on my chest and bent forward. I had concentrated so completely on this memory that I was having trouble breathing. A pain ran through my chest, deep under my ribs.</p> <p>"Don't overdo it. You should rest a bit." He put the ticket down on the bed and brought me a cup of tea. Supplies of tea were so low now that it was little more than colored water, but it was comforting nonetheless.</p> <p>"It's always like this. I can never remember anything that can satisfy you."</p> <p>"It's not about satisfying me, it's about waking up your sleeping soul."</p> <p>"My sleeping soul. I wish it were just sleeping, instead of completely gone."</p> <p>"But it's not. Didn't you just remember something about the ferry ticket? The handle on the drawer, the palm of your mother's hand, the sound of the river?"</p> <p>He stood up to turn down the lamp and then sat on the bed again. The hidden room had been almost completely restored after the earthquake, and the mirror, razor, and bottles of pills were back in their places. The only visible difference was the trapdoor, which had been repaired with new boards. I realized that the two of us always talked on this simple, sturdy bed that the old man had made in a great hurry. This bed draped in a fluffy quilt I made sure to air out every few days. We had no place to be, other than this small rectangular space. It was here we talked, and ate, and gazed at each other, here where our bodies came together. It was the one space that had been granted to the two of us. It seemed impossibly cramped and vulnerable.</p>	<p>- narrator portraying R as a memory "cookie monster"...what does this detail tell us about the changing relationships between those with/without memories?</p> <p>- How does this compression of space/containment of the narrator and R juxtapose with what's happening in the novel inside this novel?</p>
pp. 218-219	<p>R talked on without a pause. It was wonderful to hear him, as though he were reading me a thrilling fairy tale or playing delightful music. From time to time I would raise my head to glance over at the three objects lined up on the bookshelf, but they seemed to be dozing-so very peacefully that it was almost impossible to believe that they were the source of all these stories. I rested my cheek once more on R's chest.</p> <p>He told me he had once played the harmonica at a school concert when the conductor's baton snapped in two and everyone burst out laughing, interrupting the performance. How his grandmother used to produce <i>ramune</i> from the pocket of her apron and feed them to him one after the other, until one day they made him sick. How his mother scolded her. How his grandmother had died from a disease that wastes away the muscles of the heart.</p> <p>Listening to stories about things that had disappeared usually tended to overexcite my nerves. But there was nothing disagreeable about these stories. And though I wouldn't have been able to recount much of what R told me, it didn't bother me in the least. Much as I had done as a girl during those secret times with my mother in the basement studio, I was content now to simply listen innocently to everything he said-like a child with the hem of her skirt spread, waiting to receive God's chocolate from heaven.</p>	<p>There seems to be a lot of animism going on with these objects</p> <p>Noteworthy that we began the book w/ the protagonist being a producer of stories and now she can only be a consumer.</p> <p>- memory as</p>

pp. 231-232	<p>"If we do remember something," said the old man, struggling to find words, "what do we do then?"</p> <p>"Nothing in particular. We're all free to do as we choose with our own memories," R said.</p> <p>"I suppose memories live here and there in the body," the old man said, moving his hand from his chest to the top of his head. "But they're invisible, aren't they? And no matter how wonderful the memory, it vanishes if you leave it alone, if no one pays attention to it. They leave no trace, no evidence that they ever existed. But I suppose you're right when you say we should do everything we can to bring back memories of the things that have disappeared."</p> <p>"You should," said R, after a moment's pause. "Our memories have been battered by the disappearances, and even now when it's almost too late, we still don't realize the importance of the things that have been lost. Here, look at this," he said, picking up the manuscript pages that had been sitting on the desk. "These exist here and now, no doubt about it. As do the characters written on them. A mind that we cannot see has created a story that we can. They may have burned the novels, but your heart did not disappear. We know, because you're sitting here next to me right now. The two of you have rescued me, so I must do everything I can to return the favor."...</p> <p>"But what if everything on the island disappears?" I murmured. The two of them were silent for a moment. I realized I had said something that should not be said, and they seemed stunned to silence by the fear that once these words had been said aloud, it might actually come to pass.</p>	<p>an embodied and material practice</p> <p>- what happens to a memory if you stop paying attention to it?</p> <p>- why does Ogawa use the imagery of a swamp for memory/mind?</p>
pp. 237-238	<p>"Even if the whole island disappears, this room will still be here," R said. His tone was even and calm, filled with love, as though he were reading an inscription engraved on a stone monument. "Don't we have all the memories preserved here in this room? The emerald, the map, the photograph, the harmonica, the novel-everything. This is the very bottom of the mind's swamp, the place where memories come to rest."</p> <p>(narrator begins, speaking to the old man)</p> <p>"R seems to think he can keep anything in the hidden room."</p> <p>"Yes, he believes in the power of the hiding place we've made. But I have my doubts. Of course, I wouldn't think of telling him about them, and what good would it do if I did?"</p> <p>"You're right, none at all. But he's the only one on the island who truly understands the disappearances. You and I don't even understand the things from the statues..."</p> <p>"So even if we resist the Memory Police, we can't resist the fate that separates us from R," he said.</p> <p>"Sometimes I find myself wishing that the next thing to disappear would be the Memory Police themselves. Then no one would need to hide ever again."</p> <p>"That would be wonderful. But what if the hidden room disappears before that happens?" he said, rubbing his hands together in front of his chest. Perhaps he was trying to warm them or perhaps he was praying. I was at a loss at these words, never having imagined what it would mean if the hidden room disappeared, if a time came when I no longer knew what was there, under the rug. How to raise the trapdoor. Why R was there beneath our feet...</p> <p>"I'm sure you don't have to worry about that," I said as cheerfully as I could, trying to cover my confusion. "We've managed to cope with all kinds of disappearances in the past, but no one has suffered terribly, no one even seems to mind much. I'm sure we'll be able to cope with whatever comes next."</p>	<p>One possible read of the swamp image is its association as a place of refuge or fecundity. The cellar functions similarly to the idea of the swamp. So it's possible to forget the means of escape by forgetting these places of refuge.</p> <p>- what happens when we forget why we are protecting something/so meone?</p> <p>- what mechanisms make us forget these types of motivations?</p> <p>- juxtapose societies built on the survival mentality of 'coping' vs. an abundance mentality</p>

Yoko Ogawa

The Memory Police

Ch. 25–28

Excerpted by Andrew M.



I closed my eyes, more conscious than ever of the new cavity that had opened up in my body. It was filled to the brim with clear water that retained no trace of any memory. R's hand stirred the water, but no more than a few tiny bubbles rose to the surface and popped silently.

"I'm happy you're here," I told him. "Happy to know you'll go on looking after my leg even though it's gone. The other legs on the island must feel sad and abandoned."

"I can't imagine what it must be like in the outside world, with things disappearing one after the other..."

"I doubt the changes seem as great to us as they would to you. We shrug them off with as little fuss as possible and make do with what's left. Just as we always have. Though this time people do seem a bit more concerned. Maybe because we haven't been able to dispose of the thing that's disappeared and have to keep carrying it around with us. Though I'm already getting used to that, thanks to you."

"You go to great lengths to get rid of these things, don't you?"

"I suppose we do. But this time there's nothing to be done. We can't burn them or crush them or throw them in the sea. We just try to avoid them as much as possible. But I'm sure that will pass soon enough. I don't know how, but sooner or later everything will fall back into place."

"Fall back into place? What do you mean?"

"Eventually, the hole left by our legs will find a place in our hearts and minds that fits it perfectly, a place to fall into."

"But why would you do that? Why would you want to get rid of these things? I need your leg as much as I need the rest of you..." He closed his eyes and sighed. I started to reach out to touch his face but then froze when my leg threatened [*sic*] to slip off of the bed. He took it in his hands and brought it to his mouth, kissing it on the calf. A quiet kiss that was almost like a whisper. (331–333)

"My body will go on disappearing bit by bit," I said, shifting my gaze from my toes to my knees, from my hips to my chest.

"No, you mustn't say that."

"It doesn't matter what I say, the disappearances will continue. There's no escape. I wonder what will be next. Ears? Throat? Eyebrows? My other arm or leg? Or maybe my spine? And then what will be left? Or will nothing be left at all? I suppose that's it, every last bit of me will disappear."

"No, that's impossible. Aren't we here together, right now, in spite of everything?" He put his hand on my shoulder and drew me to him.

"But the arm and leg you see aren't really mine. No matter how much you care for them, they're just shells, empty skin. The real me is disappearing as we speak. Slowly but surely being sucked into thin air."

"But I won't let you go."

"And I don't want to go. I want to stay with you, but that won't be possible. Your heart and mine are being pulled apart to such different, distant places. Yours is overflowing with warmth and life and sounds and smells, but mine is growing cold and hard at a terrifying pace. At some point it will break into a thousand pieces, shards of ice that will dissolve."

Was the ending of the book apocalyptic?

What does it mean when you can't put something that is lost out of sight and out mind?

The work of the Memory Police gains a certain justification when the people who lose/forget things are unable to remove from awareness the object to be forgotten.

What seems to disappear is the ability to comprehend the utility of objects.

Community Quote Sheet

Metaphor Key: ★ (recurrent); ⊥ (contradictory); Z (abstruse)

“But you don’t have to go,” he said. “You just have to stay here. You’ll be safe here, where all the lost memories are preserved, hidden along with the emerald and the perfume, the photographs and the calendars...”

“Me?...Here?”

“Why not?” he said.

“Because it’s impossible,” I said, shaking my head in confusion at this unexpected idea. My arm slipped from the bed and struck his knee.

“But it isn’t. We’re protected here—you, me, all the things that were hidden in the sculptures. Even the Memory Police haven’t been able to find us.”

“But I know the end is coming. The disappearances used to happen suddenly, without warning, but I had premonitions before my leg and arm disappeared. I could feel my skin stiffening and growing numb. So I can tell something is going to disappear. It may be a few days from now or a few weeks, but it will come. And I’m frightened. Not because I’ll disappear and cease to exist, but because I’ll have to leave you. The thought terrifies me.”

“You mustn’t be afraid,” he said, laying me down on the bed. “I’ll keep you safe, here in my secret room.” (341–343)

I realized this might be my best chance to escape. A student in the typing class had come all the way up here, perhaps having heard suspicious noises or perhaps out of simple curiosity. Even though I couldn’t call out, I could run to the door and knock on it to let her know of my existence. ...

Hurry now! If you aren’t quick she’ll go away!

In my head I screamed these words to myself. But something held me back.

No! Keep still! How can you explain this to her? Would she believe you? And how would you even tell her? It’s not just words you lack. Your eyes and ears, every part of your body has been deformed to fit this room—that is, to fit his purposes. And even if she did help you, do you really believe you’d get back all the things you’ve lost?

Covering my ears with both hands, I hid my face in my lap, held my breath, and prayed the girl would give up and go back down the stairs. I knew now that I lacked the courage to rejoin the outside world.

...

How long has it been now since he’s visited me? And how long since I’ve eaten anything except the stale bread and jam he brought days ago? It’s too hard now anyway for someone as weak as I am. But my weakness is not because he doesn’t feed me; it’s because I’m being absorbed deeper and deeper into the room. I give up on the bread—which has begun to mold in any case—and merely lick the jam on the spoon from time to time.

I lie in bed and listen, waiting to hear his footsteps climbing the stairs. The slightest creak gives me a start.

He’s coming!

But I’m always disappointed. Deceived by the moaning of the wind or mice scuttling across the floor.

Why doesn’t he come to see me? Why doesn’t he realize that my voice, my body, my sensations, my emotions—everything exists only for him.

Is he giving that other girl a typing lesson at this very moment? He might be touching her fingers, patiently, gently in order to speed the process of capturing her voice.

I close my eyes, realizing that the end is coming soon. Just as I did when I lost my voice, I pray it will come without pain or sadness. But I suppose there’s no need to worry. It must feel much like a typewriter key falling back into place after rising for a moment to strike the page. (347, 352–353)

Something that is happening here is objectification, the protagonist is becoming an object.

Is she terrified that in “losing him” she’ll lose her function/utility

There’s a parallel between the spirit of resignation of the captive and the people of the island.

Entertaining the counter read for the moment:

If we are looking at the novel, the typist would be the protagonist, the captor is the memory police, and the women who is coming up the stairs could be R. or the possibility of escape.

The terms of one’s captivity aren’t known to the captive but rather by the captor.

I put down my pencil and rested my head on the desk, utterly exhausted. In addition to the difficulties I'd had finding the words and putting them together, I had struggled to write them down with so few parts of my body remaining to me.

The characters were awkward, written with my left hand, the lines growing weak and shaky and in places vanishing altogether, as though the words themselves were weeping. I gathered up the sheets of paper and fastened them with a clip. I had no real confidence that this was the story R wanted, but at least I had reached the end of the chain of words. I had completed the one thing I would be able to leave to him.

Though it was not so long ago that novels had disappeared, I had taken an extraordinarily circuitous route to bring the story to this point. Everyone on the island had a vague premonition about what awaited them at the end, but no one said a word about it. They were not afraid, and they made no attempt to escape their fate. They understood the nature of the disappearances, and they knew the best way to deal with them. ...

When our left legs first disappeared, we were thrown off balance and didn't know how to manage. But once our entire bodies were gone, no one seemed particularly upset. They seemed more coherent now that they had fewer parts, and they adapted easily to the atmosphere of the island, which was itself full of holes. They danced lightly in the air like clumps of dried grass blown along by the wind. ...

It became more and more difficult to climb down the narrow ladder into the room. I cried out as I let myself fall into his waiting arms, and he was always able to catch me with great skill.

But no matter how tightly we held each other on the bed, we could not escape the fact that the distance between us continued to grow. No part of our two bodies—his so perfectly symmetrical, strong, and alive and mine so sickly thin and lifeless—seemed in accord. Yet he never stopped trying to draw me as close to him as possible. It made me terribly sad to see how eagerly he held out his arms and drew them back, and often I found tears coming to my eyes.

"There's nothing to cry about," he would tell me, wiping my cheeks with his palms. At such times I thought how lucky I was to still have cheeks. But in the same moment I grew uneasy wondering where the tears would go when my cheeks disappeared, how his hand could wipe them—and the tears would flow even harder. ...

The hand that had written the story, my eyes overflowing with tears, the cheeks that had received them—they all disappeared in their turn, and in the end all that was left was a voice. The citizens of the island had lost everything that had a form, and our voices alone drifted aimlessly.

I no longer needed to fall into R's arms to descend to the hidden room. There was no need to lift the heavy trapdoor, since I was now able to slip through the narrow crack around it. In that sense, the complete disappearance of my body was actually a form of liberation. Still, if I was not careful, my unreliable and invisible voice might be swept away with the wind.

"It's peaceful with just a voice," I said. "With just a voice, I think I'll be able to accept my final moment calmly and quietly, without suffering or sadness." ...

"Do you really have to go?" he asked, gathering to his chest the air he held in his hands.

"Good-bye..." The last traces of my voice were frail and hoarse. "Good-bye."

For a very long time, he sat staring at the void in his palms. When at last he had convinced himself that there was nothing left, he let his arms drop wearily. Then he climbed the ladder one rung at a time, lifted the trapdoor, and went out into the world. Sunlight came streaming in for one moment but vanished again as the door creaked shut. The faint sound of the rug being rolled out on the floor came to me from above.

Closed in the hidden room, I continued to disappear. (355–356, 357, 359–360, 361–362)

What does it mean for use to be exhausted here?