

The Story of The Inflated Man (1974)

Kanai Mieko

I was introduced to an artist who only ever painted pictures of caves, and I listened to his story.

This is what he told me.¹

I never completely bought the story about the children kidnapped by the circus who were forced to drink vinegar because it made their bones supple; but I had no doubt that “once upon a time” this kind of thing really happened. That tale used to hide, coolly and quietly, among the ancestral ashes, in the middle of a darkened room, from where it would leak out in a faint, rasping voice. I had absolutely no idea exactly how long ago “once upon a time” meant, that had been left deliberately vague. In attempting to picture such a time in the past, I had to test the limits of my imagination; but I can only describe such an age as a vast sea of grey mist, absurdly surrealistic, or as a world that just simply didn’t exist. When I was little, of course, I didn’t realize that things such as “time” and “memory” existed inside of me. And while I responded sensitively to the stimuli of simple, everyday reality, I still had no awareness of the concept of “a void.” In other words, around that time, I had yet to encounter the Inflated Man, and I had never even seen a circus, not even once. However, I was fascinated by this circus that I had yet to see; it sounded like a perfect miniature world. If a museum is a compendium of

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¹ The (italicized) opening paragraph refers to a frame for the story when it was originally published in the *Shingeki* version but removed when it was published in the later versions mentioned above.

everything dead from the whole of natural history, then the circus is a compendium of everything alive and exciting in the world, complete with a zoo and an aquarium. If memory serves, the first time I saw the circus was when I was seven, when a big circus troupe came to our park. In the wide-open space of the park grounds a huge khaki tent suddenly appeared one day, and just as suddenly disappeared on another. Now, what kind of shape was that circus tent? I must have seen it from somewhere afar, but to be frank, my memory remains a little sketchy here. I can remember the inside quite clearly – the look of the thick khaki fabric seen close up, the thick wire rope pulled taught to secure the tent in place, the robust-looking steel pegs that were driven into the ground, and the cages of fierce animals lined up at the rear of the entrance – but I cannot recall the shape of the whole tent when seen from a distance. I suppose for kids who live in cities with zoos, wild animals and elephants are hardly something to drool over; but for kids like me from the country, the first chance to get close up to real predators was at this peripatetic zoo, the circus.

At the circus, the crowd turn their heads to watch the trapeze in mid-air – and wouldn't it be great if I could remember the shape of the tent above, but, somehow, I only had a vague notion of height – at the time the only tents I knew were small, triangular ones for camping; so from the outset, I'd gone in believing that all tents were like that – indeed, I don't even think it crossed my mind to consider what shape the circus tent might have been. But I was struck by how peculiar it was that there was a thing so immense that it couldn't even fit into my field of vision; nevertheless, into it I went.

The breath-taking speed with which the circus materialized and then vanished aside, more than the circus itself (the “actual circus” to which my parents took me to see), I was

bewitched by images of the circus. I became quite the expert. The circus was really exciting, and being a little child, I didn't know how to regulate such excitement; indeed, after seeing it that first time, I broke out in a fever. The khaki-colored interior was as vibrant as a primary color; it signaled a world of wild and tumultuous festival, a world that was excessively childish, violent, and ruled by the principles of chaos. The man who held the ringmaster's whip issued orders like a rage-fueled king. For the longest of times afterward, I wondered if I hadn't just imagined the whole thing. To put it mildly, I'm not sure if over half of what I remember now isn't just a smorgasbord of stories that I had digested about fierce animals, acrobats, and trapeze artists. Even now, in the middle of a micro-cosmos that does not abide by the laws of time, this "circus" still exists; it is a giant khaki-coloured balloon-shaped labyrinth.

The Inflated Man was of the opinion that: "According to the laws of the microcosmos, things that are perfect, or rather, which aspire to perfection, approach the condition of sphericality." It was an honest opinion and not one he held merely to validate his own appearance; he genuinely lived by it. I don't know his real name; but his popular name (or rather, the stage name for his circus act) was "Peach, The Inflated Man." He was also billed as an "Appetite Artist." The name "Peach," of course, referred to the fruit. As a light-pink ball covered with soft, sparkling golden hair, he indeed reminded me of a peach: the soft pink *suimitsu* peach, not the hard *tenshin* peach. I met Peach again close to thirty years later, and he was still performing at the circus, "in order," he told me "to eat." If he'd been a normal person, "to eat" might have been taken as meaning "to generally earn a crust," or "to do all manner of things that, when bundled up together, determine our way of life." But when Peach, The Inflated Man, said "to eat," he literally meant "to eat." If Peach didn't eat a certain fixed amount each day, he would slowly lose weight, and if he lost weight he would cease to be "The

Inflated Man.” And, leaving aside the fact he wouldn’t be able to continue his act, if it came to the point where death was inevitable, he would far rather burst resolutely, like a balloon that is pricked by a pin, or held up to a cigarette, than let the light but dense void trapped inside of him leak out, like a dirigible that slowly loses strength as its hydrogen escapes. He was terrified of allowing himself to wither away. For once withered, there would be no way to reinflate. Once he had ceased to be inflated, “The Inflated Man,” would not even be a man.

A long time ago I actually saw his performance, but – how does one put this? - it was a really peculiar act. Among the onlookers were those who grumbled that not only wasn’t it a novelty act, it wasn’t even worth the entry fee. In the past, they used to say that all greedyguts were the same, and gluttony certainly didn’t deserve to be categorized as “art”; if you ate too much it just proved that you were dense, and you’d be called a stupid fatso. However, there was also a whole load of fans who held eating competitions themselves: competitions in eating a lot, competitions in eating quickly – and they maintained that, in terms of a normal person’s appetite and stomach, Peach had achieved a high level of success. His supporters said that watching him made them feel great. He had an unbelievable appetite! Even a whale would have whistled (if it had a tongue); even a horse would have slunk away with its tail between its legs (if it could), or doffed its cap (if it were wearing one). Gargantua would have turned completely pale; even the Cyclops would have found it an eye-opener; we could all feel positive about our desires. However, to an alarming degree, Peach’s act lacked any sex-appeal. Perhaps because of this, while it prompted you to ponder desire and pleasure, it also left you with an acute awareness of the pettiness of your own appetite. This, then, was broadly the opinion of his fans. But for those who weren’t fans, Peach’s huge size and appetite was talentless – he was devoid of aesthetic value – and they looked down on him as a wasteful guzzler: with such a huge

body he could have become a sumo wrestler, but instead he was just a monstrous simpleton without a trace of ambition.

While watching his routine, I began to feel nauseous. At the time, he was eating a bucket of sponge pudding as a post-meal sweet. For quite a while after this my stomach would heave whenever my Mum served up pudding for dessert. These “swallowing acts” (the so-called “human pump,” “intestinal arts,” or “appetite arts”) that utilize the space between the mouth and stomach, are invariably characterized by degrees of unnaturalness or a lack of plausibility, and this unnaturalness or lack of plausibility is determined by the extent to which the revolting thing that the entertainer happens to be eating, chewing, or swallowing deviates from normality. But in Peach’s case, there was a complete lack of outrageousness in what he was eating. It wasn’t as if he strangled chickens or snakes, or sucked live blood, or devoured raw meat, or swallowed small light bulbs in order to show us his belly through his flesh and skin, switching the light on and off. Nor did he eat fire, nor swallow glass or swords. He merely, innocently, ate plain, everyday, common-or-garden food. It was simply that he ate an astonishing amount. Circus performances were twice daily, so Peach performed at brunch and dinner. This meant, that in the morning, for instance, he would polish off either a Japanese-style breakfast, comprised of a bathtub of rice, another of miso soup, roughly five dozen eggs, one whole salted salmon, and three sticks of pickled radish; or, an English-style breakfast consisting of a bucket-full of orange juice, three buckets of porridge, twenty slices of toast, a pound of butter and a pound of orange marmalade, three dozen eggs, two kilos of either bacon or ham, and four buckets of tea (with milk). If pressed, I’d have to agree that there is no artistry in such an incredible ability to eat. However, when I actually saw him perform, even though I was just

a child back then, I knew that there was something strange about his act. Perhaps it was because he exuded a kind of brazen obscenity.

At the time, he was so obese one might describe him as perfectly round; and yet, his body was light, so people called him The Inflated Man. But although he was light, it wasn't as if he could do any great acrobatics, he could only bounce about like a giant ball on a big trampoline. His bounce was exactly like that of a ball that had been pumped up with lots of air. In fact, he once performed as a football (dressed up in black and white check) in a sketch about a football match between a circus clown and a group of three dwarfs. However, his real talent lay in just eating; and it was this, actually, that attracted large audiences. I could only think that he was, beyond doubt, like a big ball, a big ball that was stuffed full of something mysterious. But what was it? I imagined his innards as a large cavern inside his body. I thought of Jonah in his whale, or its pastiche, Pinocchio in *his* whale. And if The Inflated Man's innards were like a cavern, then perhaps I could fit easily inside him, all snuggled up. Wasn't he formed like that hull-like skeleton, with dark cavernous innards plastered with skin and flesh on top? Around the age of twenty, I worked extremely hard to develop my technical skills in drawing, and I drew a diagram of The Inflated Man's innards. Coloring it with watercolors and pencils, I painted a man whose curved bones formed a ball shape, and inside this I drew myself, curled up asleep.

My relationship with The Inflated Man was therefore, very profound (at least in my mind), and this should serve as the conclusion to my story; however, what I really want to say is that The Inflated Man, at that circus, was the entire reason I became an artist.

I went to meet him thirty years later, and there he was again, in the circus tent. Just as the moon orbits the earth, a rotund ageing dwarf ran around serving him food as he sat in the tent's center circle getting fuller and fuller. This moon-dwarf orbited his earth-giant at a dizzying speed. After the crowds had dispersed, I spoke with Peach in the empty tent.

"I feel that everything must be part of some kind of grand design, a grand design to become perfectly spherical: this is why all the stars in the universe are spheres, just as water takes the form of tiny beads when pulled by gravity to the surface of the earth. If God exists, surely He takes the form of a perfect sphere. I am not saying this metaphorically; I adopted this pure shape of the sphere because I wanted to become perfect. This doesn't mean I have a *rounded personality* or anything. I've become who I am by eating, but I've not been able to make others understand this. If I intended to become a god, I'd eat everything, without discrimination. I was always being badgered by the ring master to add eating raw meat or something to my act. And perhaps you, too, think I should try this. But if I ever start down that road I'm sure it'd be the end of me; I'd end up cramming absolutely everything inside my body. My body would become like Noah's Ark. By the way – as you had the wit to realize a long time ago, even though you were a small child (or perhaps I should say *because* you were a small child) – I've got a cavern inside my body, like a beach ball, or a balloon. For most people, food is converted into flesh and blood; but in my case, it becomes what you might term air, a void that has no substance, that continues to expand. My skeleton is made of something akin to rubber, and for that reason, I'm like a balloon that can be stuffed with a lot of nothingness. And while I am frightened of deflating, I'm also frightened to think about what'll happen if I continue to inflate. Balloons that inflate too much burst in the place where the rubber has become weakened and thin."

It's true that he was easily over twice the size he was when I saw him as a child. This means that he must have just kept on getting bigger and bigger. As a child, the size that I thought him to be back then would have used my own child's body as a means of comparison. The fact that I thought, as an adult, that he had expanded (and let's face it, in the meantime my mind's eye had also continued to inflate his body, or should I say, his ball) means that he himself had easily surpassed even my inflated opinion of his inflation.

I felt as if, just like Jonah, I'd been swallowed up into his cavern. His strange aspiration was ridiculous; it was a childishly selfish, violent ambition that most of all, I think, just made a mockery of people. Who needs a round-shaped human with no substance to him? Of course, as a spectacle, that's different, but from his point of view it wasn't even inevitable that he would *become* a spectacle. I suppose there was the salient point that if he didn't perform at the circus, he wouldn't be supplied with huge amounts of food; but even then, it wasn't inevitable that he would be *seen*, that people's eyes (or their gaze) would necessarily follow him. He wasn't, for instance, like that famous hunger artist. Indeed, not only was he not an artist, his very existence was in contempt of such artists. In order for a hunger artist to prove beyond doubt that he has not taken even one morsel into his mouth, he needs onlookers of discernment at every moment during the fast. In order to prove his fasting, others must be present. But in Peach's case, is there really the same necessity to be seen?

What would it have taken to prove the cavern's existence? What was needed to make people realize that all that food he consumed became an air-like void as he continued to inflate?

However, at the end of the day, he completely lacked the desire to make people understand. By chance, I was the one person who did.

That is the story I was told by the artist. He added that he only realized at the time that the voids that filled the cavern inside The Inflated Man and the inside of the empty circus tent functioned in exactly the same way as a skeleton (just like a ship's hull – its womb – but stood on its head).

"The Inflated Man was the circus!" he continued, as I listened. "So, rather ridiculously, I was inside a world contained within a man called Peach."

*"What did you intend to do if he had inflated too much and burst?" I asked the artist.
"Would you have become The Inflated Man instead?"²*

² Again, the (italicized) closing paragraphs refer to a frame for the story when it was originally published.