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## Izumi Kyōka's Fukagawa: Two Translations

Cody Poulton

At the turn of the twentieth century, the novelist and playwright Izumi Kyōka (泉鏡花 1872–1939) set several stories in and around Fukagawa. It was a working-class district on the east bank of the Sumida River, very much a vestige of the old city of Edo, but from the Meiji era (1912–1925) onward, it was undergoing rapid industrialization and urbanization. A densely packed neighborhood of canals, wooden houses, lumberyards and factories, it would become the most damaged part of Tokyo in the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. The air raids of 1945 further decimated Tokyo. Today areas like Kameidō, Honjō, and Fukagawa are scarcely recognizable from how they looked a century ago; the postwar efforts to expand the city limits into Tokyo Bay through landfill have pushed seaside districts like Susaki inland. One can catch glimpses of the old Edo east of the Sumida River in the fiction of Nagai Kafū (永井荷風 1879–1959), but Kyōka's stories set there bring the district to life in a way like no others.<sup>1</sup>

Below I provide translations of two of Kyōka's stories set in Fukagawa, *Katsushika Sunago* (葛飾砂子 “A Requiem to the River,” 1900), and *Sanjaku-kaku* (三尺角 “Three Feet Square,” 1899) and its sequel, *Kodama* (木霊 Echo, 1901). Kyōka also set a longer novel, *Tatsumi kōdan* (辰巳巷談 A Tale of Tatsumi, 1899) in the Fukagawa licensed quarter Susaki.

Kyōka was born and raised in Kanazawa. His father was a craftsman in damascene metalwork and his mother came from a family of noh actors and musicians. Tokyo (or Edo as it was known before 1868) was the birthplace of Kyōka's mother and his adopted home from 1890, when he moved there to become a disciple of popular novelist Ozaki Kōyō (1868–1903). Except for a period from 1905 to 1909 when he lived in Zushi, close to Kamakura, and brief trips around Japan, Kyōka would remain a resident of Tokyo until his death in 1939. During the brief period between 1897



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and 1901 Kyōka was finding his stride as a novelist, beginning to write stories like *Kechō* (化鳥 Chimera, 1897) in a modern colloquial as well as works in the more florid, neoclassical *gazoku setchū* (雅俗折衷 classical and colloquial) style favored by his mentor Ozaki Kōyō. Indeed, a feature of Kyōka's mature literary style is a combination of vivid colloquial dialogue, often in the local dialect of his characters, and an elegant literary style that was already starting to go out of fashion as Naturalism (自然主義 *shizenshugi*) came into vogue. The romanticism and lyricism of Kyōka's prose is always imbued with a touch of mystery, even the supernatural. His most famous story, *Kōya hijiri* (高野聖 The Kōya priest) was published in 1900, the same year as *Katsushika Sunago*. I hope that the reader will enjoy these stories.

A note on the translation: some readers may object to some of the stylistic choices I have made. Kyōka's prose in the original is difficult even for modern native readers of Japanese. His sentences can be exceedingly long, his syntax hard to unravel, his vocabulary obscure. I have tried to emulate that as much as possible in my English. At the same time, he had a keen ear for dialect and dialogue and though a translator wades into trouble when trying to catch the voice of someone in another tongue, I have often chosen colloquialisms that might strike the English reader as odd. For example, I have the hero of *Sanjaku-kaku* call his father "Pop" where in the Japanese he calls him "chan" for *totchan*. The point here is to convey the affection and intimacy of one character for another.

Acknowledgements: I would especially like to thank my colleague Kaori Nakata at the Kyoto Consortium for Japanese Studies for her careful reading over of my translation of *Sanjaku-kaku* and its sequel and making suggestions to improve it. As always, there is never a perfect translation and any mistakes are my own. These translations are dedicated to the great translator of poetry from the English language into Japanese, Kawamoto Kōji.

**A Requiem to the River**  
(*Katsushika Sunago*, 1900)

**A Temple Fair**

1.

Kitsunosuke, the adopted son of Onoe Kikugorō and a great actor in his own right, was stricken with a lung disease before he had barely reached his twenty-fifth year, and in great pain he passed away, leaving a poem to the effect that he wanted to drink of the dew of a chrysanthemum.<sup>2</sup> Not only his fans, but also the aficionados of the stage, as well as his fellow actors—the entire community of the Pear Orchard—to a voice, mourned and grieved his loss as though a single, white lily had wilted away.<sup>3</sup>

In the arcade in front of the Tomioka Shrine in Fukagawa there is a shamisen store called Matchiya, and one evening late in the autumn of the following year, Kikue, the owner's sixteen-year-old daughter, left the shop saying she was going to the fair nearby at the temple to the god Fudō. Ten-thirty passed, then eleven—the street out front began to empty of passersby, but still she had not returned.

Even so, her parents were not unduly concerned. Just two blocks away, at the corner where the road leads off to the Susaki pleasure quarters, there was a little kitchenware shop that sold cheap items like recycled paper, straw scrub brushes, pocket-warmer sticks, mosquito coils, and black-market cigarettes (brands like Pirate and Hero) for a penny or two. Behind that shop was an alley that ended at a private residence with lattice doors.

*Ezaki Tomi*: the stylish nameplate on the door gave one the impression that it was perhaps a teahouse. Tomi was in fact the madame of Kyōmachi (or some such establishment) in Yoshiwara, a woman of unshakeable poise who, with her obi tied in front (as the prostitutes do) and the collar of her kimono alluringly pulled back over her shoulders, could at a glance calculate how full her customers' wallets were without budging from her seat. She had ruled over her little kingdom since the age of thirty; that was over twenty years ago, and now at fifty-seven, she had retired off as many as eight girls. She was, in other words, a woman to be reckoned with. For some time, she had been speculating in the real estate market, and until three months ago she had rented out this house to a woman, a former courtesan in Susaki. But that summer the woman's patron had bought her a teahouse catering to the brothels nearby in Benten-chō, and Tomi's house had thus come vacant again.

Which is where Tomi's daughter Onui enters the story. Now, Onui was

nothing like her mother. She was a thoughtful girl, of good figure and comely looks, gentle, kind, and capable. She had always dreamed of becoming a nurse. Having finished her internship at the university hospital she was now working in the neighbourhood, and her dedication to her work made her in great demand. Hired by the Onoe family, she had cared for Kitsunosuke until his dying breath. She was generously rewarded for her efforts, but those who play with fire get burned, as they say; exhausted from tending to her patient, she too had fallen ill, and so she returned home to recuperate just at that time when her mother was about to hang out a for-rent sign on the house.

Kikue had been friends with its former occupant, and even now that the woman from Susaki had left and Onui had moved in, she still dropped by for visits. No need to worry then, thought Kikue's parents, surely that's where she's gone; and they sent off their shop boy Yakichi to fetch her.

"Tell Kikue she'd best be getting home. Now Onui is feeling better she really needn't sleep over anymore. Mind you don't forget to thank her for putting up with her so much. Make sure they can hear you, boy—give 'em the doughnut peddler's call, why don't you." The boy had been napping, and his face was still puffy with sleep, but he was given his marching orders and so he staggered to his feet. Without further ado, he merrily galloped off to perform his errand.

"Anybody home?" he called as he opened the lattice door with a loud rattle. "I say, anybody home?" He called a second time, but there was no answer. The door to the little three-mat room off the entranceway was still partially open, and a lamp had been lit in the room beyond. Unperturbed, Yakichi stood in the entrance and announced, "Thanks for putting up with all our young mistress's visits. Miss Kikue, are you there?"

## 2.

"Miss Kikue?" He called again, but there was still no reply. "It's late." he went on, "you'd best be getting home. You mustn't catch cold." This last remark was a flourish he'd added to his master's text, and one he was rather proud of, actually. But still there was no response, so, glancing around in the gloom of the entrance, he leaned onto the doorstep and poked his nose inside for a look.

"Fried doughnuts! Our famous fried doughnuts! Crispy rain or shine!"<sup>4</sup> That ought to rouse them, he thought. If Kikue and Onui were playing tricks on him by pretending not to be home, then there should have been a stifled giggle or a guffaw, or a scolding from one of the girls. He

listened intently, but there wasn't a sound of life inside, only the wall clock ticking off the minutes and a kettle boiling dry.

"That's weird," he said to himself. To shake off his increasing doubt he yelled out again, "Hey! Fried doughnuts!" Utter silence. Even the light inside seemed to go dim. A strange look dawned on Yakichi's face, like someone trying to stifle a sneeze. He quite lost the cocky attitude he'd had when he entered, and he turned on his heels and fled from the gloom of the entranceway, forgetting to close the door. He did not head straight home, however, but lingered with his back to the street by the gutters under Onui's front window, absent-mindedly looking this way and that.

Three rickshaws clattered past at a merry clip. A young couple rode in one.

"Hey, watch it!" he yelled in a voice that was older than his years. He pulled his arms in from his sleeves and hugged his belly, as a poor man staving off hunger would, dreaming of cakes. Just then, he heard footsteps. There were three or four people approaching, talking loudly. They stopped at Onui's door.

"Thanks ever so much, dear." That was the tofu-maker's wife talking.

"Sorry for all the trouble."

"Thanks again." These voices belonged to Tome, the indigo dyer, and old man Uokan, the fishmonger.

"Not at all. You're most welcome." That was Onui the nurse.

Her companions left, still thanking her profusely. Onui stood there a moment to see them off. She wore an everyday striped kimono with an obi tied simply in the 'drum' style and white *tabi* socks on her feet, but her hair was done up in an elegant chignon. The effect was somewhat exotic for these parts, rather like a gentleman's top hat in a sea of topknots; accordingly, people addressed her as the 'young miss,' even though she was the daughter of a brothel-keeper.

Without so much as glancing at Yakichi, who was still standing by her window, Onui turned and made to go inside. It was then she discovered that the door had been left wide open. She hesitantly looked around.

"Welcome back."

"Well, if it isn't Yakichi," she retorted, giving no sign of surprise.

"What's happened to Miss Kikue?"

"Has she gone home already?" Neither quite knew what the other was talking about.

"I've been told to come fetch her, now you're feeling better."

Onui stood at the doorstep, frowning. "I wonder what's happened to

her?”

Yakichi paused for a breath, then said “Didn't you two go out together?”

“No.”

### A Wicker Basket

#### 3.

“That's strange. She's not inside.”

“Why, of course she is. You were fooled, that's all. You tried calling her, didn't you?”

“Sure I did. I hollered. I used the doughnut peddler's call, even.”

Onui smiled. “She'd never answer a stupid call like that. But thanks for trying. Come on in,” she said, and entered. Inside the entranceway she caught sight of a pair of girl's *geta* with straps of scarlet velvet. “Look, those are her clogs. What's the fuss?”

Peering over her shoulder, Yakichi followed her in. “Hey, I didn't see those there.”

“I was just on my way home from Kinoji's,” Onui continued. “A shipment of fresh fish just came in today, and seeing how Kikue likes lean tuna so much, I thought I'd pick up some for her. So I left her on her own.” She said all this as she sat on the doorstep. She took Kikue's clogs and set them neatly to one side. “But what do you think happened? There was a crowd gathered in front of the bath house making an awful racket about something, so I stopped to see what was going on. They pulled me aside and told me that the old lady with the tattoos at Ginji's place had fainted in the bath. I got held up, I'm afraid.” So saying, she stepped inside the six-mat room beyond, but there was no one there.

Onui's face did not betray the slightest sign of doubt. “Anyway, sorry I'm late,” she announced, crossing past the long wooden brazier to the corner of the room. She pulled a small change purse out of her obi and put it on the chest of drawers. Looking back at the doorway, she urged Yakichi to join her, then called out for Kikue. A quick glance around the room revealed no one: just the wall clock, a chrysanthemum in a vase, some magazines and a couple of library books scattered on the floor, and then just herself, standing there in front of the chest of drawers. For the first time her face showed signs of consternation. “Hey, Kiichan!” she cried.

“She ain't here, surely.” Yakichi was still on the doorstep, flat on his belly and inspecting the room.

“Can it be true, Yakichi? Kikue's not here.” Still leaning against the chest of drawers, Onui drew back a step and laid her hand on the door to

the little four-mat bedroom next door. It had been slid open about three inches. Sure that Kikue wasn't there even if she didn't look, Onui grew even uneasy. The muscles in her face froze into an expression that was both earnest and forlorn. She wavered, then steadied herself and cautiously slid the door open. The room was empty, down to the worn tatami. She bolted in, crying in alarm for Yakichi, who followed on her heels. "What's up?" he called.

"Hang on, Yakichi. You didn't happen to pass her on the way here, did you? No, that can't be, her clogs are still here. What then . . . ?" Onui went on talking as if to herself, aware that her own question made no real sense. She fell on one knee in front of a half-opened wicker basket. Cocking her head inquisitively to one side, she flipped open the lid and slipped her hands in to check the contents: there were two or three changes of kimono, carefully folded, inside.

"Was there a break-in?" Yakichi gasped.

"Not so fast," she said, as if waiting for her own heart to provide an answer. She gazed thoughtfully at the paper door to the kitchen.

#### 4.

"Yakichi."

"Huh?"

"Come," she ordered. She headed straight for the door to the kitchen, then stopped in her tracks, hand on the pillar. Then (as Yakichi still hesitated, wondering which way she would go next) she turned and bolted back into the six-mat room. Back and forth she went, her hand fluttering on one thing then another, as Yakichi, popeyed with shock, trailed in her wake from one room to the next. The two criss-crossed each other's paths, speechless as actors in a pantomime. Finally, Onui found the oil lamp she'd been looking for, and turned back toward the kitchen.

In the light of the raised lamp, Onui's slender face was flushed with fear. Following in behind, Yakichi thought that her waist was as slender as the width of her obi. A chill wind blew in from the kitchen as she opened the door, flattening the flame in her lamp so that it wavered and threatened to go out altogether. She held up her sleeve to shield it and looked up at the ceiling. The skylight was open, and two strings dangled down, white against the sooty blackness of the wall. She pulled at the cords, and the window snapped shut. The pale little flame blew out, as if plucked root and all from the wick and out the chimney of her lamp.

"Darn! It's gone out!"

The back door was wide open. Night had fallen over the alleyway beyond and all was quiet. A waning moon shone down on the tenements on either side, bathing the roofs in its light, throwing their eaves into shadow and sparkling here and there in the gutters. Somewhere, a cricket sang out as if the moon were its only audience. At the far end of that alley, through the skeins of mist, one could vaguely make out bits of blue—a midden of shells, piled outside a tall shed made from fencing slapped together out of seaweed stakes. Immediately beyond that, engulfed in fog, was the river and its steamboats. That was all to be seen, but for two changes of hospital whites that the nurse had hung on a pole that ran under the eaves across to the house next door. She had forgotten that she'd hung them out to dry.

“A ghost!” Yakichi blurted.

Onui too was startled, and with a cry sat down onto the kitchen floorboards. A shaft of moonlight lit up her bosom for a second, then settled in broken stripes against the floor.

“The light's gone out.” A ghost, indeed.

## A Catalogue of Bridges

### 5.

“Hey, you still asleep? Wake up! We've just passed under Iwami Bridge. That's the Fudō Shrine above us, and soon we'll reach the Tomioka Hachiman.”

They were a party of three: the man in the striped jacket and deerstalker hat shook his companion, who, attired in a formal crested kimono, lay curled up in the belly of the boat. The third reclined in the stern of the boat with his elbows on the gunwales, and began to sing softly:

*Hurry now, before the tide runs out,  
Before your oars stick in the mud, Row on, boatman row,  
Row to Tsukuda now.*

In fact, this boat was not headed for Tsukuda, nor was the tide going out. From noon on the sky had cleared, and the moon was bright enough now to dry out an umbrella, but there had been a storm overnight. The Sumida had risen almost an inch, and all the rivers and canals of Fukagawa, length and breadth, every twist and turn, were at high tide and filled to the brim. The water was silent, save for the calls of the boatman on this water taxi and the creaking of his oars.

Linked barges carrying gravel, logs and earth sailed downriver past

the banks of Hamaguri-chō, where a fenced enclosure on the left was emblazoned in whitewash with the insignia of local firms: ㊦ ㊧ and ㊨. A line of warehouses loomed up, then slipped away as they approached Hōrai Bridge. The water pitched and swelled against the heavy footings of the bridge and glistened in the moonlight. Logs bobbed lazily against each other in a small channel off to the side.

“Old man, I heard the fishing’s good around here, but what d’you catch?”

“Gobies and mullets, mostly,” the boatman answered.

“I’ll catch me a cute little mullet, then,” the man in the striped jacket said.

“Fat chance.”

“I’ll show you.”

The bridge sped past. Suddenly the river spread out on both sides, and it appeared that the tide would swell up and overflow the now low embankments. To the left was an island in the stream, a vast expanse of reeds as far as the eye could see, dotted here and there with boat builders’ huts and the occasional tuft of autumn wildflower. A stiff breeze now blew against them from the sea, and the boat, caught in midstream, pitched in the heavy swell of the tidal bore.

“Catch something, would you? Why, on a night like this, the eels jump clear over the boat,” the boatman muttered.

“Hell, it’s gloomy here.”

“What’s this river called, anyway?”

“It doesn’t have a name.”

“You’d think folks would call it something.”

“True enough, most places round here have names. There’s Iwami Bridge, and Hōrai Bridge, the latter named after the fabled land of the immortals. Hamaguri-chō’s name means “Clam Banks,” and then there are the Hachiman and Fudō Shrines. This here would be back behind the gates to the Tomioka Shrine,” the boatman replied. The boat curved around and under the shrubbery bordering the grounds of Hirasei,<sup>5</sup> then fell into deep shadow. There were many boats docked along the river, but this was the only one plying the waters at this hour.

Yet another bridge now swept over them like a rainbow. “What about this bridge here?” asked the striped jacket.

The man in the crested kimono didn’t wait for the boatman’s answer. “That’s Shiomi Bridge.”

“Hell, it’s lonely here.”

The boat arched round the corner. Here, where the houses huddled together, silent with their sleeping denizens, thin and stunted willows grew desolately and leaned toward the water like wilted flowers offered at a graveside. The embankment was all reeds, and when the wind rose up, as from time to time it did, it swept and swept with a shiver across the surface, rushing in a headwind against the straining oars. There, where a pile of wooden seaweed stakes was strewn among empty shells white as coral, a pale stone marker lay buried, taller than a man, close enough to touch.

6.

“This place gives me the creeps,” said the striped jacket, as he shifted around to sit against the gunwales on the port side of the boat. Where were his high spirits now?

“Hey, old man. What’s that?”

“Here? That’s where the flood washed up all the bodies back in 1791.”

On the surface of the stone was carved “District of Katsushika. Hallowed Ground”; a message in more cursive letters ran from the front side around to the back of the stone:

*On this place in the third year of Kwansei, rough seas destroyed many houses, and not few were those who drowned. This entire area of Nishi-irifune-chō, as far as the East Kichijōji Temple—a total distance of two hundred eighty ken—was leveled in the tsunami. The area was thus deemed at high risk to floods, and a hazard for human habitation. The wreckage has been removed and the land left vacant.<sup>6</sup>*

On one side was engraved the date: “In commemoration of the flood, dated this day of the twelfth month of Kwansei Six, Lower Year of the Tiger.”

“A mass grave is it then, to the drowned.”

“It’s unlucky to talk about stuff like that in a boat,” said the deerstalker, shuddering. This remark was swallowed up by a sudden roar as the water shot like an arrow under Kamikawa Bridge and through the sluiceways out toward the sea. —The current’s voice.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” said the deerstalker. He shifted uneasily in the boat and gave the keel a kick to stir his friend, who was sleeping so still one couldn’t tell whether he was dead or alive. “This place gives me the shivers. Wake up, for heaven’s sake! I need some company.”

Next was Hirano Bridge, and presently, here at Susaki, sparse reeds gave way to a vast expanse of pampas grass along the embankments. Out

toward the offing, the waning moon hung low in the sky, half hidden in their feathery tails. The boat pitched in the high tide and edged close against the verandas of dwellings along the water. Moored by the banks were several river steamers.

“Not a soul to be seen here either.”

“Even so, it looks a bit livelier than before.”

“Livelier, eh? How ‘bout it, old man? How are the little mullets around here?”

“Mullets? You can get a better class of fish than that. Here at the Kagaya they jump straight out of the river and onto your plate.”

“Enough already. All this talk about flying eels and whatnot is making me seasick.”

“They jump right in over the railings.”

“Come off it.”

“That’s nothing. Over in Aoyama, the chestnuts fly into the third-floor windows.”

“Now that is something!” Even the boatman laughed.

And again, the song:

*Hurry now, before the tide runs out,  
Before your oars stick in the mud,  
Row on, boatman row,  
Row to Tsukuda now.*

And so, they rowed until they reached the Benten Shrine. The boatman moved up into the prow and pulled the boat to moor with his pole. The water licked against the keel, lapping hollowly against the stone wall.

“Mind your step.”

“Hey, you alive?” Even after a couple of shakes the sleeping figure showed no signs of waking, but then he unaccountably bolted up and leapt straight out of the boat.

“Wait for us!” Pulling tight their collars and tying the cords of their jackets, his two companions slipped into their footwear and disembarked. The three huddled together and, as if on cue, cried “It’s cold!”

“Hush!” ordered the boatman, who was bent over fumbling for something in the boat.

Bang! A loud report filled their ears, making the boatman jerk straight up. Before their eyes, the brilliant sparks of a firecracker exploded in a flurry of threadlike traces and then were swallowed up by the dark water. The author of these pyrotechnics was the man who, a moment before, had

been fast asleep. He looked at his companions, who had leapt back on either side in astonishment, and cried:

*Crack went the whips  
As they forded the stream by night . . .<sup>7</sup>*

## A Mantra Boat

### 7.

“What now?” the boatman muttered scornfully under his breath. He removed the kerchief from his head and scowled. He was a man of about sixty: the hard-bitten edges of his thin face had been softened, made endearing by the wrinkled folds around his forehead, eyes and mouth. His salt-and-pepper hair was close cropped, making him look like a buddha. The old man’s name was Shichibei, and he lived alone on the edge of town.

Shichibei: of all the boatman plying these waters, he alone took his last customers one way only, and then his work was done. Every night when he reached his last stop at Benten Shrine, he would turn back the way he came, rowing past the stone monument to the Flood, and moored his boat to the pine tree growing at the bank by Hōrai Bridge. Aside from the occasional night off because of stormy weather, this was his nightly routine through the months and years.

He was known as a man of deep faith, and on his voyage home every evening he would chant a verse from the Lotus Sutra. Over and over again, he would recite the *gatha* from Chapter Sixteen, beginning with the line “Since I attained Buddhahood,” and ending with “and quickly become a Buddha in this very body.” People in these parts gossiped about what karma, good or ill, had led him to chant, night after night, this requiem for the river’s souls; but those who knew Shichibei for a full score of years or more had no idea what had set him on that course, nor did the man himself speak of it. The seeds of good bear fruits of merit, so the scripture says; there was no blame in it. There are those who pray simply for the sake of their health, so the boatman needed no especial reason for his chanting.

Again tonight, as was his custom, he climbed into the prow of his boat, leaned forward, and with the shaft of his oar gave a push off the riverbank. “Fine moon!” he sighed, and began to chant:

*Myōhō Renge Kyō nyorai jūrokubon jūroku  
Jiga tokubutsurai, shokyō shogōsū, muryō hyakusenman okusai asōgi*

*Here beginneth the Sixteenth Chapter of the Lotus of the Perfect Law:*

*Since I attained Buddhahood, the number of kalpas that have passed  
Is countless: hundreds, thousands, myriads . . .*<sup>8</sup>

The wind was calm and the ripples on the river made no sound. Night wore on, and every once in a while, the straining of his oars echoed over the water.

*Jōseppō kyōge musū oku shujō jirai muryōgō*

*Constantly I have preached the Dharma, converting  
Countless millions of sentient beings, all this for immeasurable kalpas.*

The voice of the Law carried over the reeds, stirring the willows and coming to rest by the pillows of poor folk whose weeping was as faint and plaintive as a cricket's.

On a moonlit night such as this, the Boat of Prayers and its lone oarsman could be counted among the Seven Wonders of Honjō; or so thought those who lived in the quarter. Those who lived in thatched cottages and humble tenements where, by night, no light burned; or where the thin smoke of morning fires under leaden roofs lingered among the stunted branches of the willow; childless parents, motherless children, wives with no husbands, stepmothers and blind old crones—women who have but only each other to care for them—young and old, all who eke out their wretched livings here: surely all their dreams and waking thoughts were not of any world on which this sun shines.

Such folk could not fathom that they lived in the same world as those moustachioed gentlemen who, in their Inverness capes, rode about in rickshaws; they were so tired in body and soul they no longer recognized the wretchedness of their wretched lives. For such as these who live here, there was no music more precious than this.

*Shūjō kishinbuku shichikii nyūnan isshin yoku kenbutsu fujiyaku shinmyō  
When sentient beings have become truly faithful, honest and upright,*

*Gentle in intent, single-mindedly desiring to see the Buddha,  
Not hesitating even should their life be lost . . .*

This was what the old man sung, as he plied his little boat under the moonlight.

The cry of the fortune-teller selling oracles of love told Shichibei that

he had just passed that place where the stone memorial stands.

*Myōhō Renge Kyō nyorai jūrokubon jūroku*  
*Jiga tokubutsurai, shokyō shogōsū, muryō hyakusenman okusai asōgi*

## 8.

Who would listen to this voice at such an hour? There was one I should mention here, for her fate is linked to that of Kikue, and Onui had cared for the woman. The daughter of a man who had been a leading retainer in the times before the Restoration, she had been sold into prostitution. She now supported her invalid mother and bedridden father, who lived in a tenement close by the pleasure quarters.

After her substantial debts had been deducted from her earnings, the pocket money left over was scarcely enough to tip her hairdresser. Since the pittance that her parents hungrily waited for from day to day still amounted to a considerable portion of her monthly wages, she had no choice but to go deeper into debt. But she was popular enough, as popular as the other girls whose names were emblazoned on the teahouse awning, so the proprietor wasn't loath to give her yet another loan when she asked for one. But such favours were given only to those who drew in the customers, and to do that she had to sell her body.

While even the most beautiful woman in a house of ill fame can expect a few years' grace, still the work gradually began to tell on her, and already at the age of twenty-two the signs were there that she was past her prime. The boys steered clear of her when she had no make-up on, and at least a couple of times a month her services were not called for. Some days she simply took to her bed, trying to cool her feverish body with a piece of ice slipped under her bosom.

"A half-day off for a trifle like this?" her madame needled her. "Why, before she died, Ukifune wasted away so fast that the towel used to wipe her sweat seemed to take the very flesh off her, so thin did her arms and legs become. You can't have your own way, you know. You're in your prime, girl," she was told. She was able to get yet another advance but her debt, like all the others, was noted in their books, and hateful as it was, she was in no position to complain.

All said and done though, she was a woman of principle—or, to put it more bluntly, she was a stubborn sort who'd sooner turn pale with rage than burst into tears. She'd put a good face on things, but when she was hard up, she started to ask for what she shouldn't have. When that

happened, well, her fish—all the greasy loaches, eels and tadpoles that flirted with her—would slip the hook and slither away. It was truly poor fishing in the quarter then, and even the best catches began to stay away. She had less and less business, and her advances started to dwindle. Winters were cold, summers hot; the years passed by and her expenses mounted even higher: towels dyed with her crest; bedding to be bought; new outfits to get, even if the covers on her mattress had already been changed; the tea would run out, the clock stop; haberdashers came morn and night, selling something or other; presents for friends leaving service; bills to pay when a child in the house died, or to help out the book-keeper when his house flooded; or there'd be a party for one of the jesters, or a sumo tournament to attend. All these were additional expenses and would be duly recorded in the ledger. Just running errands for the other girls meant that one couldn't use such feeble excuses as a stomach-ache. In this fashion, she'd had the length of her contract increased, and in addition to the prospect of yet another two years in hell, she was burdened by another twenty yen of debt.

It was at the Obon festival. She'd taken her remittance to the shack where her parents lived, and without so much as a hello, she gasped for a glass of water, and clinging to her mother's obi like a little child in disgrace, complained that she couldn't go on like this anymore. "If only there were just one of you to care for," she said. Her father, who they thought was asleep at the time, heard everything. He committed suicide that very night.

When she heard the news, the woman's face went pale and her eyes turned hollow.

Thus she remained. She lay in bed, complaining it was so hard it might be made of stone, and became so thin her ribs began to show. The doctor gave her up as a lost cause and told them that she suffered from a lung disease; what's more, the shock of her father's death had weakened her heart. Only then did her proprietor cancel all her debts, but he fleeced her out of everything she had but the clothes on her back, saying it was worth but a fraction of what she really owed them.

Nothing could be done for her. The sun's eye gazed down on her in her tenement by the river as she lay with her pillow to the north, toward the water, with her hair in disarray. For those like her to hear the boatman's sutra was ever so sad, so poignant and fraught with regret. And yet it was a joyful sound.

The words of the holy scripture wafted across the river's surface as Shichibei drifted in his boat at the mercy of the current.

## 9.

As Hōrai Bridge loomed overhead, a wreath of cloud passed over the moon, bathing the entire scene in a shimmering wash that left dim outlines of field and river, boat and boatman. The water had become murky, and spread out like a great estuary, vast and limitless: it was as if Shichibei were crossing a sea in a lifeless moonscape.

*Myōhō Renge Kyō nyorai jūrokubon jūroku*

Was he followed by a ghost, some listening spirit drawn by the sutra to his boat? Somewhere a crow cawed twice. Shichibei gazed up into the clouded sky, wondering whether it was a harbinger of more rain, then once again resumed his recitation in a tranquil tone of voice that seemed to say that nothing concerned him, all the world had been forgotten.

The boat sliced through the water, then suddenly began to pitch wildly in a cross-wake. Shichibei broke off his chanting. “Well now, what’s this, some apparition?” he muttered. He turned his rudder to the portside and rowed around. The two lines of his wake and the oncoming waves collided, glistening like forks of lightning.

Shichibei frowned and leaned into the oar, then straightened, propelling the boat downstream a couple of yards past the mark he was aiming at. He turned, looked back, and said “hello, we have a visitor.” Once again, he resumed his chanting, but there was a note of urgency in his voice now. With a heave, he turned the prow of his boat back into midstream. Something shining wanly in the moonlight bumped up against the side of the boat, stirring little eddies of water.

He jumped down and knelt in the boat’s belly. He shook his grey head but thrust his hands into the water with no hesitation. Two or three feet from the side, a pale, wet form drifted toward him. He leaned out to pull the body in and the boat rocked back, flooding the gunwales on the other side; but he got a firm grasp, and both boat and body now floated together. He had instinctively grabbed what turned out to be an elbow, awkwardly twisted. “Poor thing,” he said, “you’re bent all out of shape. I’ll have trouble with you, that’s for sure.” He gave a jerk and the body rose a little out of the water, but the dead weight of it dumbly resisted his efforts. He wrinkled up his nose, and with a grunt managed to hook his arms around the body and haul it up and over the side, face down.

She hadn’t been in the water very long, for her Shimada coiffure was still in place. The little gobies hadn’t had time to nibble on the scarlet crepe

ribbon, but her hair had come untied and was plastered down the nape of her neck and against her cheek like a streak of blood.

She was still half submerged in the water, and the current threatened to carry her away. The old man held on to her tightly, all the while rapidly reciting his sutra. Neither shock nor fear brought on his agitation, however, but an ardent desire to save this flower he had chanced upon. Even if her throat is slit or her breast has been stabbed, if only I can get her in the boat there's a chance she'll live, he thought. Clinging to a thread of hope but fearing for the worst, Shichibei's heart raced, but his closed eyes betrayed no other emotion than that of deep compassion. Once again, he began to chant the verses of the Lotus Sutra.

At last, the swollen, muddy river tossed up its sacrifice into Shichibei's arms. It had forgotten her, and in the dim darkness it flowed on as if nothing had happened at all.

### Dew from a Robe

#### 10.

When Kikue left the Matchiya for the temple fair shortly after noon, she had tied up her abundant hair in a Shimada with strips of finely tie-dyed *kanoko* silk and two ribbons of red and aquamarine. She wore a lined kimono in a striped pattern of twilled silk in pale indigo, a collar of Chinese satin, and a detachable collar of white chrysanthemums on a red ground. Her underkimono was of scarlet *kanoko*, wrapped round and round in a pink waistband, over which she wore a crepe satin *itajime* obi with an embossed design in pale green and scarlet, tied simply without padding. The tie of her obi was in the latticework design favoured by Kikugorō and was fastened with a twisted cord of red and purple.

Theirs was a shamisen store, frequented by those in the theatre business, and her parents were people of fashion. When Kikue heard that her favorite actor Kitsunosuke had died, she took to her bed and wept bitterly. But this was her birthday, and claiming that she felt much better now, she did up her hair and put on a new change of clothes. Shod only in her *geta* clogs, she clattered out of the house. Thus she appeared when Shichibei's boat plucked her out of the water; not even her hair had come undone. Only her clogs were missing; they were discovered by Onui in the entranceway of her house. (Kikue had been barefoot when she threw herself into the river.)

By dawn, everything—her waistband, her pale green and scarlet *itajime* obi with its cords, and her indigo kimono—all hung in a confusion

of color from a straw clothesline in Shichibei's kitchen, limp and still dripping. A thin morning mist drifted in from the skylight, the puddles on the rotten floorboards all that was left of the tide. Alas, thought Shichibei, that straw rope was too poor a thing for hanging up such lovely dress. If only he had one of those silk cords they use to tune drums with. The clothesline was tied at one end to the drawstring for the skylight, which was the only thing in the house left open. Both the back and front doors were shut.

Kikue lay behind a low bifold screen covered in a patchwork of bric-a-brac: paper dolls, playbills, leaves from an almanac. Fanning the flames in his little earthen oven, Shichibei turned and craned his neck to look at her. "How are you feeling, child? Do you remember anything?" Only her long, oval face, with its soft, bushy eyebrows and straight, finely formed nose, could be seen peering out of the covers. Her bright eyes stared at him vacantly, and yet they seemed deep in thought. Shichibei laughed out loud and remarked, "There's no sin in that face. You must think you're still dreaming."

The girl lay tucked in the covers, looking as forlorn as the abandoned Shunkan.<sup>9</sup>

Her head rested on the ragged batting of a cushion, folded over without coverlet or pillowcase. Her hair had come loose some time after he pulled her into the boat, and now lay in sopping tangles, wet no doubt because the old man had made her cough up some water. Last night a dying cricket sung in a rain of drops from her dripping hair.

"Well, look at you now, my pretty girl! I won't beat about the bush, you're quite a mess. How are you feeling, poor thing? Does it hurt anywhere? How about your stomach?" asked Shichibei.

Too shy to speak, she finally mustered enough courage to shake her head.

"So you're not in pain, then" he went on, "that is good news, really, quite a lucky break for you. Tell me, girl, did you faint right after jumping in? You see, you must've swallowed some water, 'cause you coughed up a cupful, anyway. But not to worry, so long as you get your spirits up, you'll be fine. Oh, don't let me scare you. I've got neither dog nor old lady here, nobody else but me. Whatever made you do it, don't you pay no mind, and don't go blaming me neither for saving you. You're better off thinking nature herself brought you back from the dead. Just imagine it was all a dream and now you're awake," the old man said, gazing down on her with kind and gentle eyes. "It's morning now. You're no longer dreaming."

## 11.

“Sir?” Kikue did not reply immediately, and when she spoke her voice was faint.

“She’s alive!” The old man sat up and slapped his knee. “The first cry of the newborn!”

Once more, there was a pause. “Where am I?” she wailed.

“Excellent!” Shichibei chuckled, “You’re back among the living, that’s where! Are you feeling better now?”

“Where am I?”

“Well, well,” he muttered cheerfully to himself. “I tried my best to revive you, but all you did was shake no matter what I said or did. I was at my wit’s end I was. You’ve had an awful scare, but you’re back among the living, that’s for sure. And, what’s more, you’re talking. Even better! So I’ll tell you where you are: you’re in the Tsukuda pleasure quarters. Go past the front gates of the Hachiman Shrine and cross Hōrai Bridge—my place is just on the other side of the square. I’m a boatman on the water taxis—Shichibei’s my name.”

“Across Hōrai Bridge ... ? Oh.” Kikue suddenly became thoughtful.

“You know it, girl? Do you live around here then?”

“Yes . . . I mean, no,” she said, then fell silent.

Shichibei could read her heart. “It’s enough you know where you’re from, without my knowing too, I suppose. But you do know Tsukuda?”

Another pause. “Didn’t I see a girl there one day, about the same age as me? We passed each other on the street. She was pretty.”

“Hang on. A girl your age. That’d be about sixteen or seventeen?”

“Yes, well . . . “

“There are plenty of wenches round here, but none so pretty nor so innocent as you.”

“Yes, there is. I swear. She’s got a round face and lots of hair, and she wore a red underkimono with a bold patterned cotton yukata over top.”

“Hang on, that sounds like the girl at Okan’s place. She just came off her contract. Why, she’d be about thirty!”

“No, she’d be younger than that.”

Shichibei scratched his head. “Well, that confounds me. I’ve forgotten what day it is, let alone the month or year ... He looked quite at a loss, then he slapped his thigh and said, “Now I know. There is one. But come to think of it, she sells well.”

Kikue didn’t catch his meaning at first. Finally it dawned on her, and

in a tearful voice she commented simply, “is that so?” Once more she lay back on the pillow, closed her eyes and wept. She was alive, that much she knew, and it wasn’t fear or doubt that made her cry now, but only the sadness of a thousand memories flooding over her.

“What’s the matter, girl. Tell me.”

She finally turned toward the old man. “Sir?”

“Hm?”

“Shall I get up?”

“Get up?”

“I can, you know.”

“Well, good for you then, but you’re better off staying put—it don’t matter a bit if you do. Still, if you insist, go right ahead and try. If you can, you’re as fit as a fiddle. So long as you’ve got your wits back, then I’d say there’s nothing to worry about.” Shichibei urged her on, just as a doting grandfather encourages a toddler to take her first steps.

Gripping the hem with her pale fingers, she shyly peered at him, then buried her face in the covers. “I – I . . . can’t.”

## Pale Green

### 12.

“Now, don’t you worry,” said Shichibei, studying her with concern. “Look, there are your clothes.” The sound of dripping could be heard in the kitchen. “You’d catch your death of cold if you put those wet things on. Here, I’ve put out a padded kimono for you by the pillow. Throw that on instead. Oh, I know what you’re thinking. Don’t you worry, nothing happened. I didn’t touch a hair on your head. See for yourself—you’ve got that amulet from Fudō round your neck to protect you.” Assuring himself that she was all right, he turned around, got down on his hands and knees and, pursing his lips, checked the fire under the pot.

Presently, the girl’s head and shoulders appeared over the top of the screen. The bun of her Shimada hung limp and dripping with brine. She held it in her hand and gave it a little shake. “Is it all right if I wear it then?”

“Why of course. I just washed it, so it’s free of boat lice.” He watched her put it on over her scarlet crepe underkimono. “Wait. I’m afraid I can’t lend you a cord to tie it with, and my only good obi’s far too short. Tell you what, use your own obi over top. I don’t mind if my robe gets wet.

“*Dokkoisho!*” With a grunt, Shichibei awkwardly scrambled to his feet, and like a cricket, disappeared with a single bound into the kitchen.

In the morning mist—or was that a drizzling rain?—the straw rope

presented a scene of autumn wildflowers. Water trickled from the kimono's hem and the obi's tail like pale green and purple dew. The morning cold made one shiver.

Standing out among these clothes was a *yukata*, slung limply over the cord so its sleeves and collar looked like withered flowers: a cotton kimono in a bold pattern of auspicious emblems against a white ground of morning glories, flowers befitting autumn.<sup>10</sup> When, the night before, Shichibei had pulled her from the water, Kikue was wearing this *yukata* over her lined kimono, bound in the Kikugorō obi mentioned earlier. At the time the old man had wondered what significance the *yukata* had for the girl. Once again it caught his eye, but never could he have imagined that this had been the angel of death that had lured Kikue into the water. In fact, this had been what Onui was so shocked to find missing from her clothes basket. Onoe Kitsunosuke, whose image on stage was indelibly impressed upon the star-struck Kikue's waking and dreaming thoughts, had worn this very robe on his deathbed, even in his last moments when he wrote his parting poem. Its auspicious pattern had bewitched her.

Though she was but the daughter of a brothel-keeper, Ezaki Onui was a kind and thoughtful girl whose only dream was to be a nurse. She was never so happy as when she looked after Kitsunosuke. When on the day his condition took a turn for the worse, the young man drew a vase with a single chrysanthemum to his pillow and had Onui burn a rare incense which he had received from a certain marchioness. Onui removed the ice pack suspended over his head. He lay back on his pillow, swathed in a snow-white quilt and coverlet. Strands of hair glistened on his forehead; he was more beautiful now than at any time on stage.

### 13.

Kitsunosuke laid his beautiful, unblemished hand on his chest and inhaled the fragrance. A single wreath of smoke split into two fluttering branches that blew over his pillow. He turned his head the other way, toward the chrysanthemum, and feebly tried to open the collar of his *yukata*.

“What's the matter?” asked Onui.

“It's a waste of good incense I know,” he replied painfully, “but I'm all sweaty, and I want to mask the smell.”

Thus, alas, did this vision of a god vanish from the Pear Orchard. Redolent with the scent of rich incense, this *yukata* was Kitsunosuke's gift to Onui. It had been the shroud for the body of this young man who died of tuberculosis, and though Onui was usually careful about contagion, she

was loath to part with the robe. Kitsunosuke's family let her have it as a keepsake, and she hid it at the bottom of her wicker clothes basket.

Now, Kikue had been a longtime fan of Kitsunosuke, so enamored of the actor that she would blush to her ears just seeing his name on a playbill. Though she was a good deal younger than Onui, the two girls got along well together, and that evening, on her way home from the temple, Kikue dropped in to see her friend on a whim. They naturally fell to talking about the actor, and Kikue squealed with surprise when Onui took the *yukata* out of the basket. In the light of the lamp the girls knelt facing each other. Onui spread the *yukata* over their knees, and described how Kitsunosuke looked, how gentle and refined his features were, those last few moments before he passed away. Why, Kikue could almost smell that incense, that lingering fragrance of chrysanthemum.

One thing led to another, and Kikue suddenly burst into tears, overcome with emotion. Realizing what she had done, Onui offered to go out and buy some sushi. But while Onui was embroiled in all that excitement at the bathhouse, Kikue (no doubt affected by some deep karmic connection from a former life) put on Kitsunosuke's scented *yukata* and ran to follow the young man in death.

Lost in such thoughts, Kikue stared at the still-wet robe.

"Why don't you use the waistband there?" Shichibei said innocently.

She was silent, still gazing at the *yukata*.

"You can wrap it around double if you like. How 'bout it?"

"All right. Go get it please," she said abruptly. She was an unworldly girl who had been spoiled by her parents, and that is why she was so curt with the man who had saved her life.

Shichibei smiled. "Look, it's only a thin sheet of silk—it's as dry as a bone now." He studied her face carefully and grinned. "Haha! You've died and been reborn, no doubt about it. The girl with the Shimada hair has to wear diapers now. Why, you look like a kid in clothes two sizes too large. Here, roll up your sleeves like this. Yes, that's the way. How's that?"

"I hurt here," Kikue said, rubbing her forearm. Her head drooped, as if her neck was too weak to bear the weight of it.

"I'm sure it does. That's how you died last night, with your arms across your breast. You held on so tight you bruised your arm."

"Really? I tried that hard to die?"

"Listen to the girl! As if drowning were such an effort. But joking aside, tell me how it felt."

"I was dazed at first, but then I bobbed back up to the surface. So I

held myself like this and tucked in my legs, and I sank again. I can't remember anything after that."

"Why, you poor thing. It must've hurt."

"No, it didn't. I just felt like crying, that's all."

## In Memoriam

### 14.

An old hand at coaxing information out of people, Shichibei seized the chance to learn more. "Whichever, you're back in the land of the living, so that's cause for rejoicing. Tell me, though, what's the baby's name? Ohana? Oume?"

Kikue began to answer, then shut her mouth.

"Well, no matter. The porridge is ready, so how about a bowl? It'll put the strength back into you."

"I can't eat a thing," Kikue answered curtly, then once again burst into tears, as if she had suddenly recalled something.

"Well, that's no matter neither. Maybe I should stop asking questions, and leave you be. It's really no wonder you feel the way you do. You've had a dreadful shock, like New Year and Obon all at once. But if you don't mind, I'll go ahead and eat. The pot's bubbling and damned if I ain't famished. I was up all night with nary a drop of wine to wet my lips."

He fidgeted about, running here and there getting things from the kitchen, then sat down again cross-legged on the floor, pulling a lacquer tray up against his hairy shins and piling his plate with condiments: *shiso* seeds, pickled shrimp, sheets of dried sardine, salted greens. In the cloud of steam rising from his porridge, Shichibei's face was beet red and intent on scooping up the contents of his rice bowl into his mouth. Every once in a while, he stole a sidelong glance over the bowl at Kikue. No longer able to hold up her head, she hid her face in the bedclothes, sighing deeply.

As if suddenly awakened from his reverie, Shichibei hurriedly finished up his breakfast, laid down his chopsticks, and wiping the furrowed corners of his mouth with the edge of his kerchief, crossed his arms and nodded. He looked out into the kitchen: from the skylight and the cracks in the frame of the back door poured in the light of a nine or ten-o'clock sun. A vision of the scene outside—across the square to the banks of the river, the traffic of people and boats, the smoke of chimneys, the lumberyards, the warehouses, and beyond, the Sumida with its bridges—all as it should appear at that hour could one see it, floated up before him in his mind's eye.

“There, there,” the old man said, gently laying his hand the girl’s shoulder. “It’s no wonder you feel this way after all you went through last night. For better or worse, I pulled you from the water before you could die. I’ve done my best to soothe you, but it looks like I’ve only given you a headache. I’m so sorry. I won’t trouble you again with my questions.

“Maybe I should’ve gone for help when I found you last night—there’s a police box over by Shiomi Bridge. Had I done that, I might’ve washed my hands of the matter.

“No doubt that would’ve been for the best but, you see, I could tell you’d thrown yourself in the water and not fallen nor been pushed. Whichever, I’m sure you had good reason to try and kill yourself, but damned if I know what made you do it.

“One thing I do know,” Shichibei said, trying to make light of the matter, “if I’d gone for help the whole town would’ve gotten wind of it, and then you’d have had to face whoever it was you were running away from, which would’ve only added to your suffering. That’s why I brought you here without telling anybody. It was thoughtless of me, but I’ll say this: an old fogey like me couldn’t have done it on his own—why, heaven itself took pity on you and helped out. So don’t let that go to waste. Don’t do anything rash, all right, girl? Your mum and dad must be worried about you. Why don’t you just sit tight for a while here and think things over. Go ahead, take your time. It’s best I’m not here to distract you. Anyhow, this old snail has got to leave his shell and get off to work now. All right? You’ve got the whole place to yourself.”

## 15.

“Do what you like. Sleep if you want, or if you’re hungry, warm up some rice with a little tea—there’s a bucket of water there. Just take your time and plan where you want to go from here. Think it over carefully, but mind you don’t do anything silly, and go off someplace you shouldn’t. Promise me you won’t do anything foolish. If you do decide to go back home, to your mum and dad, or to your uncle’s or aunt’s place, well, go right ahead, and don’t pay no mind about stopping to say goodbye or thank me. You know Hōrai Bridge?—well, cross the square, and you’ll see a pine and a willow growing down by the riverbank—the bridge is just beyond that. All right?

“But if you want to stay, then by all means, stay a couple of days, as long as it takes for you to make up your mind. Just make yourself at home.

If there's anything you want to get off your chest, then go ahead and tell me. I'll do what I can to help—There's no sense poking my old wrinkled mug in your business, but I can't help but care for you.

“But promise me this.”—And here he lowered his voice—“Don't do anything silly and run off. This is a rough neighbourhood, and folks around can see your comings and goings plain as day. There's pimps and prostitutes, punks and white slavers, press gangs—any number of ne'er-do-wells who'd jump at the chance to sweet-talk a girl like you. They'll gag your mouth and kidnap you before you had a chance to call for help, let me tell you. So keep the doors locked, all right? If you do decide to go home, then don't make no detours, and don't let the thought of me stop you. Well, I'll be going now. Just stretch out your legs and think it over.”

Without waiting for an answer, Shichibei made to leave, then stopped and squatted down by the fire, lit his short-stemmed brass pipe, took a puff or two, then tapped out the ash. He put the pipe into his tobacco pouch and, together with his kerchief, thrust the two into his obi, then stood up and headed for the door. Looking back anxiously at Kikue's still wet clothes, he stepped down onto the earthen floor and stuck his feet into a pair of sandals. There he paused for a moment before taking out his kerchief and tying it around his head. The back door rattled opened, and the kitchen turned as bright as noon. Beyond, as far as the eye could see, were fields of reeds, and here and there puddles that reflected the autumn sky so clearly that the noonday moon might have shone in them. A dragonfly flew by, then another. In the distance, behind the tiny figures of fishermen, a glimpse of sails on the river. A gust of wind blowing off the sea turned the damp clothes, the keepsake *yukata*, into a flurry of colour.

The old man stood outside the door, then paused by the fence made of seaweed stakes, gazing pensively at one or two late-blooming daisies among the withered reeds. No longer able to hold it in, Kikue sobbed bitterly.

*Namu myōhō renga kyō nyorai jūrokubon daijūroku*  
*Jitoku butsurai shokyō shogōsū hyakusenman okusai asōgi*

Seven days had passed, and it was the anniversary of Kitsunosuke's death. The streets were empty, and all about, the houses dark. Downriver, the stream flowed on softly bubbling, washing the branches of the willows along the banks. With her parents' permission, Kikue dressed up and did her hair just as she looked that night, and on that very spot by Hōrai Bridge, she and Onui cast the *yukata* into the river, in memory of its owner.

“Kiichan.”

“Yes, sister.”

The two turned toward each other, and with tearful eyes they raised the *yukata* reverently and offered it to the waves with a prayer.

*Namu Amida Butsu*

*Namu Amida Butsu*

The beats of a drum could be heard just then from a high window in one of the houses in Susaki; the sound carried far and was swallowed by the sea. The *yukata* was caught in the current and borne silently away.

Kikue has become a fine young woman now. To this day she keeps, tucked in the fold of her favorite Kikugorō obi, a photograph of the young actor and a letter of condolence written in lipstick by a friend, tied together in a sprig of chrysanthemum. This year she will be twenty.

***Three Feet Square***  
*(Sanjaku-kaku, 1899)*<sup>11</sup>

**1.**

“.....”<sup>12</sup>

In the mountains the loggers’ songs, on the water the boatmen’s songs, at the post stations the packhorse drivers’ tunes—just like the ticking of the second hand on a watch, these all ease their hearts, lift the burden of their cares, free their bodies to get on with the work, songs to give them strength, fill them with power as a war cry does. Their call in unison, *Hey hey!* makes them forget all about the village, their wives and children, time, death, desire, longing.

And so it is too that when they raise their voices and sing, *The sun shines on the valley, but the pass is dark with cloud*, or *Oh that I could give you a warm robe and stockings too*, these workers can banish all vain thoughts, lay down their burdens, rest from their labors, shed their sorrows, forget their pangs of love and endure their tears at night.<sup>13</sup>

And that is why the pony driver’s song sounds so melancholy. All said and done, what difference is there from the prayers of a cowardly, weak old man? These songs are nothing but the discontented mutterings of the downtrodden set to music.

Among all the boatmen, pony boys, loggers, and ladies at their looms, this one sawyer didn’t sing. From morn to night Yokichi knelt under the

great log he was slicing with his giant saw, pulling and pulling into the grain and gazing up like one at prayer.<sup>14</sup> He had been sawing the log from the morning of the day before and he was already halfway through. A camphor twenty-seven feet in length and three across, squared off, he was slicing it in half. Though but a skinny-armed seventeen-year-old, Yokichi was good at his job.

His features adorable, his face round and innocent, he wore his bandana tied in back and his three-foot obi tied in front. On his *happi* jacket was the insignia 南,<sup>15</sup> the great house he belonged to; his boss also owned the camphor.

It was still hot so he wore no leggings. Barefoot, he knelt in the wood scraps, his knees, thighs and chest all white with sawdust. Heavysset, yet he wasn't fat—he'd look good in *hakama*.<sup>16</sup> The house where Yokichi lived was nearby. Just a block away, where that poor ginkgo tree felled in the storm lay, still half green, the other half withered, was a bridge. Across that russet bridge to the other bank of the river was a gangplank down to a boat. That boat was Yokichi's dwelling and that plank he'd cross back and forth every day to get there.

The tide's ebb was a sorry sight, like the aftermath of a tempest, casting up old household items, broken vessels black with mud, choked in the skeins of the flowing duckweed. For many a long year those weeds had clung to the keel and gunwales of Yokichi's boat and gave no sign of letting go, but when the tide rose in the estuary the branches of the weeping willows dipped their tips in the flood and the muddy leaves of the bamboo grass and the duckweed wiped clean the keel, hiding the hold in the turbid waters, and when the boat rose up with the tide, along the embankment the chimneys of the rich men's houses, belching pale smoke, no longer seemed so tall and those broken pots and trash, those rags and bent nails, would all disappear into the brink and the house would never look so clean as it did when it rose in the azure wake of the tide that filled the reservoir.

At such times the boat's gangplank stood level with the land. This morning the tide was high and the rising sun lit up Yokichi's face under the willows as he set out to work. In that golden shaft of sunlight, his face was the very image of innocence.

## 2.

Yokichi worked all day and when at dusk the sun set, the tide went out, the frail branches of the willow trailed in the dark water, then the boat sank and the plank tipped steeply down to his home.

His old dad slept inside, no longer able to stand up straight, afflicted with some ailment of the aged, and though Yokichi wasn't worried that he would take any sudden turn for the worse and the boy would take his lunch where he worked, he always made a point of checking in on him once a day during break.

"I'm off to work now. See you later, Pop."

Lying there in the cabin like Buddha on his deathbed, Yohei raised his head and, gazed on his son's sweet face—though soaked with sweat, Yokichi's eyes were cool and clear, his brows arched like the bodhisattva Jizō's. His father smiled and nodded and said,

"Get some tofu for us again from the Willow House."

"Aye," said his son and, crawling under the rush matting over the door, he straightened himself up and crossed the gangplank. On the far side, two doors down, stood a willow and in the shade of its long wands was a wide entrance with two lattice paper doors, written on one in *kana*, the other in *mana*, the word *tofu*.<sup>17</sup> Behind the green curtain of the willow wands the paper stood out a fresh white, but autumn was coming and some panes had become torn and sooty and were replaced with clean sheets. The Willow House was an old establishment, but in this hamlet of eighty or ninety households—less than a hundred—it wasn't a big business, and when young Kizō, the proprietor now, made the rounds selling his wares after noonhour, the shop was quiet, its entrance under the willows closed. Under the tree from the street to the door, a carpet of shells—white, some black, a few pale pink, others red—covered the muddy earth and kept it dry.

Next door stood the big woodshop and, piled up under its eaves, right to the roofline, were evenly laid stacks of lumber and, in the square space between the woodpiles, one caught a glimpse of a cool storefront, a good thirty mats in size,<sup>18</sup> and in the darkness where the sun never shone, an elderly clerk sat at the till. This was the corner residence and if you turned right, there was a single greyish road where the telephone poles leaned this way and that, helter-skelter, their lines drooping in the middle, lower than the eaves in some places, dangling diagonally as if exhausted. They ran from all the way back behind the storehouse and, as if drawn on a blueprint, those lines traced the march of civilization from past to present, but you might say it sagged when it reached these rooves.

Nor was it just the telephone poles or the wires. The ginkgo at the foot of the bridge, the willow growing by the bank, the eaves under the tofu shop, the earthen wall in front of the corner residence, and not only those—everything in sight, the pillars of the gate, the stone wall, everything was

leaning, leaning, leaning, and none the same way, some to the south, some to the north, some west, some east, tipped this way and that, looking like they had been caught buffeted and battered in a storm, though the sky was clear and cloudless, the waters calm, and all around was tranquil. Every color faded, the wetlands grey, the grass, the trees, even the lumber whose high piles hemmed in the hamlet, the glimpse of the water in the reservoir through cracks in the stacks of lumber, all seemed a wretched waste, as if dressed in mourning.

### 3.

As if to match the damp, depressing look of the place, those who dwelled there kept their voices low. The tofu man, the greengrocer—heads down they walked, as if not to draw attention to themselves—all were drably dressed and the women refrained from wearing anything red or ornaments in their hair. The surroundings cast a pall over everyone.

The roots of the willows along the bank that were higher than the joists of the houses, the intermittent croaking of the frogs living over the gables, the chirruping of insects in the deep reeds that grew over the triangular bridge with its broken railing and loose boards where the nails stuck out, the infestations everywhere of boat lice, the distant smoke from the factory chimneys, the creaking of carts on their way to Susaki, even the cop who made his rounds every two or three days, the shrill call of the postman, the cawing of the crows—all signalled that this was the end of the road and ruin was the destination.

Yet, just because it was falling apart is not to say this town would ever disappear. It wasn't in decline—the people and their dwellings would thrive, progress, get rich, the telephone posts would be straightened and their wires tautened, the bridge would get a coat of paint, the charred wooden walls would be replaced with brick, and the lice and the frogs would be killed off with quicklime. Which is to say that, as people and their houses thrive, the old scenery would disappear. In short, just as a snake sloughs off its skin and the cicada outgrows its shell, as people and their dwellings headed the way of prosperity, convenience and profit, they sloughed off the old scene that marked the end of the road and ruin as the destination.

I'm not speaking of the future here—don't we see this trend already today? Those who've shed their old skins leap and cry for joy, they break into a run and revel in their good luck, but that's not to say that a snake that's sloughed off his skin is any more beautiful than the skin he left

behind.

Ah, that dear, that dreamy scene so like a cicada's shell—will something beautiful be born there? Someone beguiles him at the Willow House.

Sent by his father, no sooner had he climbed the gangplank than Yokichi's eyes were drawn without thinking to the tofu shop.

The Willow House wasn't deep-set, but its threshold was back of the entrance, and in the corner of the four and a half mat room behind, roughly where the clerk would be sitting in the woodshop next door, someone was leaning against the pillar, her arms folded across her chest, the skirts of her cotton yukata folded up, sitting where her bed was with a shawl over her lap. She was wearing a striped, thickly padded jacket over top. He caught a glimpse of its yellow cotton lining and a collar that was as white as snow. Her hair, in the Tenjin-style, was thick and dull and fuzzy like a brown bear's and done up loosely with a pleated, tie-dyed cord in a pale green. Her back to him, she looked frail and wan.

Beyond there was no courtyard, just a closet, and here too the lumber was stacked to the ceiling. So it was that, in the gloom of the interior, the pale green of her hair band and the white of her cheek shone reflected in the polished wood of the pillar, like the blossoming of a dayflower, fragile and lovely to behold.

Glancing at her on his way past, Yokichi bid her a good day, but then doubled back and looked again. She wasn't the woman he took her for.

#### 4.

"She's not home," he mumbled and was about to go on his way.

Just then, inside the paper door, bright and warm where the sun shone on it, the swishing of water could be heard, and then the clack of wooden clogs.

An enticing voice called, "Off to work are you now, Yokichi?"

The door opened and a face appeared. She was wearing a cotton tie-dyed yukata in a spider's web pattern, her sleeves tied back with torn strips of muslin crepe, her alabaster arms exposed, her hem folded up under a narrow cord around her waist, her bare shins the very image of brisk efficiency.

Her teeth were dyed black,<sup>19</sup> her face long and her features well defined, brows raised and her hair tied back, a woman in her thirties—this was Oshina, Kizō's wife.

Her hand, damp with water, propped itself on the trunk of the willow

as she leaned out of the shop and gazed at Yokichi, smiling.

The earthen floor, the till, the buckets, the cloths, everything was wet and shiny in the sunlight, but the big wooden tub of water in which the tofu lay submerged was a pale green, reflecting the willow tree in the haze of the heat.

“I’ll stop by later this evening.”

“I thank you kindly,” said Oshina, ever so politely, still smiling.

Yokichi was about to go on his way, but when he heard this he thought it would be too curt of him to say nothing, so he turned back, blinking, and replied earnestly, innocently, “No, I thank you, as always!”

“What are you saying now?” she chuckled.

“What do you mean?”

“Why, you’re a special customer, so it’s for me to thank you for coming every day to buy our tofu,” she said, still leaning halfway out of the doorway, her hand holding onto the willow, studying Yokichi’s face.

Yokichi felt awkward. “Customer indeed—I’m just a little sawyer, that’s all.” Yokichi pantomimed sawing a piece of lumber, moving his arms back and forth. “Like this, you pull. I’m nothing but a little sawyer. You’re the mistress, the lady of Willow House. I’m the one who ought to be thanking you.”

“Really, now! I hardly think that’s necessary . . .” she said, then, gazing around to make sure no one saw them, with her face to Yokichi, she waved her beautiful, bared arms in an exaggerated fashion.

“Go ahead and swagger, like this!”

“Swagger? What have I got to swagger about? If only Pop would eat some fish,” said Yokichi, then, lost in thought, he looked down as if to wilt.

“What, has he taken a turn for the worse?” she asked, frowning with concern.

“Do you think I could manage if he did? What I mean is, he’s faring well enough for the time being, but, why, since he won’t eat fish he’s just getting weaker and weaker. It stinks and he won’t touch it, so it has to be tofu or nothing, Pop says.” Then Yokichi got an idea. “Hey, missus, do you think you could make me up some tofu with bones in it?” he blurted.

## 5.

“Dear me!”

Oshina was more surprised than amused by Yokichi’s sudden outburst.

“Ask the boss—surely he could fix up something for him. You know, take ‘mock goose’—fried tofu full of gingko nuts, shiitake mushrooms and

other stuff.<sup>20</sup> Ask him if he couldn't slip in some ground fish too."

"Oh, my! All right, I'll ask what he can do."

"Could you, please? If my old man doesn't get some fish to eat, he'll just get weaker and weaker."

"What's your dad got against fish?"

Bony tofu, indeed! Oshina was so taken aback by Yokichi's earnestness that she failed to see the humour of his request.

"How shall I put it? I mean, he doesn't come right out and say it in so many words. Call it a fish, but think: it's still food with a face, with eyes and a mouth, a head and a tail, lying there on the plate like a corpse, something that started out raw and got simmered into a mushy stew. It gives him the creeps, he can't stomach it.

"Pop does go on about it, but even the old folk living up in the hills have no trouble eating salted fish.

"And if stewing it puts you off, why not eat it raw?" I ask, but he gets all shaky. 'Go on, I say, try a little. I can even chop up some raw fish into a *namasu*<sup>21</sup> for you.' But he pulls a face and says 'No way. I can still see the fish what it came from, with the head and bones attached, that face.' Oh, what to do?" Yokichi said, nodding, doing his best to put across his dilemma.

"I see. Well, chalk it up to age. Old folks are sensitive. You oughtn't to try force it if it disgusts him. It won't do his health a bit of good if you only succeed in making him feel worse."

"Yeah, but he's wasting away, so I worry 'bout him. If I could get him to put down something he doesn't know what's in it, how could that offend him? You know, that special tofu I'm talking about."

"You mean the bony mock goose?" she said, laughing. Her face, freshly made up with her blackened teeth, was lovely.

A tendril of willow brushed against Oshina's cheek and she bit into it as if to strip off the leaves with her black incisors. She chewed on a couple of the green leaves, took them in her hand, laid them on her palm and looked at them. Just then, the girl in the pale green hair band, who was clinging to the pillar at the threshold, glanced her way and their eyes met.

It was as if until that moment Oshina had been entirely unaware of what she'd done. She stopped, looked down, gazed at the palm of her hand, then looked up at the willow branch and said, "Why, I bet you'd tell me, Yokichi, that these leaves felt pain."

She looked at him, smiling and, catching a glance of the younger woman, Oshina turned around and raised her hands to the sky and

gracefully gave the trunk of the willow tree a little shake, fluttering the sleeves of her cotton yukata with its scattered pattern of cobwebs.

Yokichi pulled the sleeves of his *happi* together and stood and looked, but suddenly turned and said, “You’ll ask the boss, right? About the bony tofu.”

“I’ll ask,” said Oshina, loosening the cords that tied up her sleeves. They hung down from her shoulders like a monk’s surplice.

“Sorry to put you out.”

“Oh, come on now.” She smiled.

“Oh, right. I’m the customer.” Yokichi nodded as if to confirm this, then turned and stuck out his elbows so that the ‘Minami’ on the back of his jacket jumped. He hitched up the sleeves of his *happi* and waved his arms. “See, my lady? I’m swaggering.”

“Toodle-oo!”

## 6.

“Aye,” Yokichi no sooner said than he set forth across the russet bridge in his black work jacket. He crossed paths halfway with the postman. By the time the postman made it this way over the bridge, Yokichi had disappeared into the yellow shadow cast by the withered, fallen ginkgo tree.

## 7.

“Mail!”

“Hello?” Oshina stood under the willow, her hair freshly washed. The postman’s cry and sudden appearance had surprised her. He stopped stock straight in front of her, his arms and legs blackened by the sun.

“Sarashina Oryū!”

“That would be us.” Oshina took the letter and, staring at the address on the blue envelope, held up one of her sleeve’s cords in her free hand and stood barefoot in her clogs with their black straps. She turned the envelope over to see who’d sent it, flushed with color, and glanced over at the threshold. The corner of her lips on one cheek curled, and she said, as if she couldn’t restrain herself, “Ryūchan, he’s written!”

As she pivoted, as lithe as the willow, she slipped out of her clogs. The soles of her feet were beautiful.

## 8.

Yokichi entered his workshed and, as was his habit, went straight to

the piece of lumber he was working on and knelt down. He had grabbed the shaft of his saw just as the postman, bent forward as if borne on the current of the tide, hurried past the shed.

Yokichi paid him no mind. He didn't look out to see him pass but began to pull on his saw.

A shingled roof had been erected over the immense trunk of camphor to keep it dry, a good ten spans high, with a stand to keep it off the ground sticking up at an angle so that the top almost touched the gable. Yokichi knelt under the base, rising up on his knees and pulling, rising up and pulling. The teeth of the great saw went up and down and Yokichi, pulling with all his might with both arms, looked smaller than the saw itself.

There was more to the shed than Yokichi and the camphor. Tall piles of lumber were stacked high on both sides, higher than the boy, and there was no room for anyone or anything else in the drifts of sawdust around him than little Yokichi himself. Amidst the piles of lumber and sawdust, there was just enough room for his small body and nothing else.

Behind him was the bank of the estuary and here too the water was clear and blue all over the earth and the swell of the little waves lapped at the river's edge. Along the path by the bank, as far as the eye could see, lumber was stacked in square piles twenty, thirty boards high, all well ordered and evenly spaced. Men silently passed, appearing and disappearing amidst these squares, on the far side of the stacks.

Into this sad, silent scene erupted at a regular beat, *clang! clang! clang!*, the rings of a hammer, coming from a shed next door to Yokichi's workspace, where three stonemasons were cutting slabs of stone.

They worked in the damp darkness of a shed, long with a low-slung roof and boarded walls. The three were employees of the Minamiya, but unlike Yokichi, and like the carpenters, they were part of Minamiya's construction crew and they lived across the lane from Yokichi's shed in a little cottage, brand new, slapped together with thin walls on three sides full of holes, secured with rope and open on one side to the full sun. A table of unvarnished wood was set on the earthen floor and on it was a large terracotta teapot and seven or eight teacups.

Behind was a bench where one carpenter sprawled face down, his arms spread-eagled, and another, head to head with the other, lay on his side using his arm as a pillow, his trousered legs tucked in. Between the cottage and an open gate with two granite pillars and in front of the lattice door was a pump in pale green with the Minami insignia stencilled in white; on its frame hung a fishing pole and a wicker basket. It was dead silent in the

storefront of the big house, no sign of anyone. Behind, in what looked like the backyard, and well beyond that, was a trellis of withered grapevines, reflected upside down in the same reservoir here too and a bridge right by the gate and a forest of stakes planted thickly in the mud where the lumber lay in vast amounts submerged in the water as the current had carried them, there five logs, here six, branded with the company mark, a fretwork of zigzags across the water like a network of rice paddies, over which a flock of swallows would occasionally hover and flutter.

## 9.

The only things moving here were Yokichi and his saw.

As it was so quiet the only sound you could hear was the swish of sawdust that issued from the camphor every time he pulled.

*How come Pop won't eat fish*, he thought, as he leaned back and pulled the saw. A fine spray of sawdust flew out every time he pulled, sticking to his shoulders, chest, and lap, and again he rose up on his haunches, plunging the saw into the wood. And every time he rose up on his haunches and plunged the saw in, the saw would make a sound—a faint, desolate sigh would issue from the log like the spatter of winter rain.

Holding the handle and pulling back, Yokichi exhaled.

*Of course, a fish's corpse, the skeleton still attached to its skull on the plate*, he thought, his body going up and down with the saw and each time it did, there'd be another flood of sawdust.

*Why? Has it anything to do with my sawing this wood?* As he recalled what Oshina had said about the willow's leaves getting hurt, another gush of sawdust spilled over his chest.

Yokichi knelt there in the gloom of the woodshed, in his little nest surrounded by the pile of lumber around him and the scent of cedar and pine, intently gripping his saw and gazing upward.

The camphor was tilted up under the eaves of the roof and beams of sunlight filtered down through the gap as one might see in some dark, enchanted forest. He'd never seen a tree in these parts so tall as this one. The ginkgo and the willow by the riverbank and, to be sure, the pine trees growing on the embankment too, were all much shorter, their branches hardly any higher than the surface of the water that spread out as far as the eye could see.

This timber had been squared off on all sides, and he heard it had taken as many as eight loggers five days to do the job.

No doubt a tree this large grew only deep in the mountains, in some

far valley. He'd heard it came down from the forests of Hida.<sup>22</sup>

Its branches must have spread far, a roof for a valley, its thick leaves a canopy for a peak, a whole mountain gripped in its roots.

And so he imagined himself at its base in its shade, in the glancing light of the sun, as a little ant in a black jacket with the sweetest face, gazing skyward at the massive timber, and he curled in his arms and legs and shivered.

*I wonder how Pop's doing?*

The saw sliced into the wood.

*Oh, yeah. Right about now Yaroku will be passing by on his raft and he'll give Pop a shout.*

Without thinking, he turned around and looked out over the reservoir.

In the middle of it, bent over, his head covered in a kerchief and wearing a faded jacket, was an elderly man plying a long pole, like a scene in a painting of raft and rafter, slipping over the water's surface as if it were oil.

As he slid away in the other direction, his course was crisscrossed by a seagull grazing his skinny black-haired shins, tracing the line of a bow sharply over the blue water.

## 10.

"Your dad's all right, Yokichi!" the old man called from the middle of the pond. Not bothering to paddle up and peer into the boy's shed, he plied his pole and the raft, half-submerged, cast up little ripples, at which once again a pair of white wings fluttered down from the sky as if to plunge into the water, then flew away, and the old man punted after the seagull.

Yaroku was an old friend of Yokichi's father and, knowing that his filial son worried about the sick man while he was at work, he made a point every day to check in on the old fellow and report how he was doing. Relieved, Yokichi went back to work.

*Pop may be okay, but why won't he eat any fish? That's right, if given some sashimi or some chopped namasu or a bit of stewed fish, he'd shiver and say he couldn't lay his chopsticks on the plate where the corpse of that fish lay, with its head and bones attached. Give me a break! But it ain't just fish, is it? Bitten, a willow's leaf feels pain.* So thinking, he gazed up at the massive camphor log as if it were something holy.

Seeing its vague outline in the hushed midday gloom under the high roof, he listened without thinking to the sound of the pattering of sawdust falling from his saw. The sound merged with the splash of the ripples on

the pond and the ringing of the stonemasons' hammers next door like the rustling of leaves, the sigh of winter rain, the footsteps of an army of ants in a mountain valley.

Yokichi looked this way and that at the sawdust caking his shoulders, his chest, his lap, and suddenly thought with a shudder that it was the camphor's blood.

His thighs had been warm but then went icy cold and he slapped his sleeves and collar, half believing he had gotten drenched. He'd never felt this way before at work.

Feeling so totally alone, Yokichi looked up into the sunlight as if, buried at the bottom of some deep valley, he was seeing for the first time things as they really were. In the light filtering down through the cracks in the roof the vague shape of the huge camphor struck him as not simply a piece of timber three feet square.

Gazing up into the sun, Yokichi felt smaller than an ant at the base of a mountain, crawling on the roots of a massive, leafy camphor tree encircled by a sacred rope, its circumference five spans wide, and in the darkness under an unbroken canopy of green leaves falling, falling and piling up all around him, he realized he was stabbing his saw into the tree right below where the sacred rope girded it and, as if in a trance, his mind wandered and when he tried to pull the saw out it caught fast in the grain and he gasped, surprised by a rush of wind like a battle cry coming from peaks and gorges, and he tumbled out from his work shed like he'd fallen head first into a valley a thousand fathoms deep.

“Help! Help!”

x      x      x      x      x      x      x

“Listen!” Oshina cried in a tearful voice, holding her beautiful little sister in her lap, caressing her cheek as she lay there looking weakly up from her sickbed, her pale white cheeks faintly flushed with pink, her fuzzy hair just barely held together in the Tenjin style, with the pale green cord coming unravelled, the nape of her neck so white as if transparent. Oshina was gripping the letter firmly in her hand.

“Listen, Ryūchan! Ryūchan, don't give up! Don't you see? He writes, if ever those logs were to come to life again and sprout branches and leaves, he'd make you his wife!

“It was only natural you had to give your body to someone else for the sake of our parents or whatever it was.<sup>23</sup> I know that's why you lost heart,

you'd staked your life on him, but don't give up now Ryūchan! Don't you understand what he says here? It's going to be all right. Your wish has come true."

"Help! Help! The timber's bewitched! It's sprouting branches! Branches and leaves!" Yokichi cried in a loud voice, staggering past the tofu shop as if he were mad.

"Ryūchan! Ryūchan! Are you listening?"

The girl opened her eyes, her wan lips breaking into a weak smile. She was on the edge of death, as if her blood had been sucked dry by some evil spirit, and Yokichi's cry sounded like holy scripture to her ears. Were it not for Yokichi, surely no words could have saved her.

### ***Echo, an Epilogue***<sup>24</sup>

"Aren't you cold, dear?"

Oryū rose listlessly in the darkness and, gazing at the pond, went to him. The engineer had wedged himself into a corner under the squarish stack of lumber. The light of his cigarette illuminated his young profile under the wide brim of his hat.

Oryū laid her hand on his back and, though weak, was not afraid to speak to him. "You're all damp! The dew this evening is so heavy. No wonder you're cold, sitting straight on the wood there. That's not good—you're just getting over a long illness." She gave him a little push. "You're sure you're okay? I wouldn't have you take a turn for the worse. Kin-san!"

He said nothing.

"It's poison for you. You mustn't catch cold. Stand up! You'd be much better off standing," she said chuckling innocently. "You must be exhausted, having me drag you all the way here against your will. Will you forgive me? Of course I knew it was wrong. No matter how much trouble the both of us took, I couldn't face my sister if you had stayed with me. It was selfish of me to drag you here, but I can't have you sit out here in the cold."

Choking back her tears, Oryū then said, sliding beside him, "Come, sit on this, then."

"Your sleeve?"

"You won't?"

"You hardly need to do that."

"I can't have you sitting on the bare wood."

"I'm fine."

"As skinny as you are, you're stubborn as a bull," she said. Pushing

him over and laying her sleeve under his bottom, with her bare white arm Oryū clung to his lap and sighed.

The man didn't move and the two said nothing for some time.

Oryū eventually raised her arm and as she touched his hand, the cigarette he held at his chest passed involuntarily from his to the woman's.

"I thought I was going to die. You'll laugh at me again, but I vowed to go without salt for seven days and, with only the one thought in my head, which was to see you, I even stopped smoking. I know I'm a fallen woman. Even if you would never say that to my face, I'm still ashamed of it. And it's not like you're the same as you were either, your place in the world has changed. I knew it would never work out, but try as I might I couldn't let you go. Don't laugh at me!" she said choking back the tears, gazing at him.

"I begged you to say something, do something, to make me give you up. But then you sent your reply that you couldn't sleep and you'd be waiting for me. ... Didn't you?"

"You'd promised me that we'd be as man and wife if ever the lumber in the wood yards of Fukagawa came to life again and sprouted leaves. My wish for something that could never be came true. That's what happens when you believe in something that hard, dear." She lowered her voice even more. "I've got something to brag about now. Had it never happened, I could never have had the courage to bring you here to show you how the impossible came true and the wood has taken leaf again.

"You went to the sawyer's hut and saw it for yourself. You can't doubt that. It's all in what you believe. It was dark so you couldn't tell, you said, but that's only because you're cruel. Cruel people would never know."

She looked down, silent. Then, presently, she gazed up again and reached for his cigarette.

"Here."

"....."

"Well?"

"....."

"You're cruel."

"....."

"If you don't want it, let it go."

No sooner had she said that than she brusquely tossed the cigarette away. It cut an arc through the sky like a shooting star, flashing like a firecracker that went blue and scattered and then was snuffed out in the black water.

He watched it disappear, then said, "Oryū."

“What?”

“What you did was something nobody else would ever do.” The man spoke solemnly, as if the words came heavy and slow to him.

“It’s ‘cause I’m your wife,” Oryū said triumphantly, then, overcome with emotion, she suddenly laid her cheek on his lap as if to wilt away.

“And we’re the same age.”

The man was about to stroke the nape of her neck when he glanced up and was shocked to see that his cigarette hadn’t gone out.

But what he saw now was not the cigarette that Oryū had thrown. Was it mist? Fog? In the gloom, on the grey surface of the pond, he could make out the darker shape of a raft and a round-headed little figure crouched on it. A spark of light—perhaps it was smoking a pipe.

There was something else coming over the surface of the water toward them. Not on a raft, nor was its hem trailing in the water, but something tall, fluttering over the surface, coming from the far bank, wearing a pale, grey cleric’s robe the same color as the mist.

As he watched, it left the water, passed them by and disappeared into the shed behind them, where hundreds of lengths of timber were stacked. Its face looked as if it was painted the color of tarnished copper, with glowing eyes and large mouth, and arms and legs like withered sticks—a weird creature.

“Oryū,” the engineer tried to say, but the words stopped in his throat as he watched.

Just then a light flashed from out of nowhere and, on the embankment over the reservoir, between the pines growing there, stood a woman who lazily lifted her arm and beckoned this way.

The engineer bolted up and saw just then the prow of a boat docked right at the tips of his feet. Perhaps because the fog was so thick he couldn’t see it before. But it wasn’t just that.

An infant emerged out of the cabin in its hold wearing a crimson kimono with a yellow lining and, beckoned by the woman, as if it were being pulled that way, both baby and boat took off diagonally across the water.

It cut a course straight toward her, and the myriad logs lying half submerged there parted to left and right, as if by an invisible hand, to clear the way.

When he thought it reached the far bank, all was obscured in the mist. The sky was beginning to turn red, but on the surface of the black water he could make out the forms of five or six people. He heard their voices,

whispering.

“Oryū,” he cried, and held her tight. He could clearly make out her form in the fog, her pale green hairband, her snow-white nape, but as he watched, her colours faded, her form grew thin and vague, then turned black as ink. She vanished in his arms like a phantom.

He let go. By the fence where the lumber was densely packed and stood on end, he could make out a dim form. The engineer thought it was his own shadow, but there was no moon, and though his feet were planted on the earth like they had been nailed there, the shade faded, grew dark, grew darker, then faded again, and wavered in the air. It wasn’t him.

“Oryū!” he called, and again, “Oryū!” And he dashed after the shadow, ten yards or more.

“Wait!”

Her enchanting face, the flash of her smiling glance, her teary eyes, all were just a reach away, but grasp as he might, there was nothing. What he felt in the palm of his hand was the cold light of dawn, as the dark of night dimly faded.

The engineer was sure that last night he had fallen asleep at his Koishikawa residence, but whatever happened after was like a dream.<sup>25</sup> Nor did he feel he had come to his senses yet. As he gazed, in the fog that rose five or six inches off the damp ground by the water’s bank, he heard the chants of priests, the chiming of bells—there was no doubting it: Oryū stood there at the gate of her sister’s house in the wood yards of Fukagawa. A whiff of incense struck his nostrils and brought the engineer to his senses. Like a man deranged he forgot everything and ran to her house, only to learn that it was just then that Oryū ...

Ah, tell me if you can: are we ever to see the souls of women, or even plants and trees?

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Nagai Kafū’s most famous novel set in Fukagawa is *Bokutō Kidan* (墨東綺譚 1937, translated in Seidensticker, 1972).
- <sup>2</sup> “Chrysanthemum” (*kiku*) is an allusion to Kitsunosuke’s adoptive father, the kabuki actor Onoe Kikugorō V (1844–1903); Kitsunosuke’s character is based on Kikunosuke, the adopted son of Kikugorō. It is also an indirect reference to Kikue, the heroine of this story. Chrysanthemums are also symbols of autumn and there is a ritual of drinking chrysanthemum water on the ninth day of the

ninth lunar month as a pledge to a relationship.

- <sup>3</sup> Pear Orchard: A traditional Chinese epithet for the theatre world.
- <sup>4</sup> Fried doughnuts: *karintō*, a deep-fried confection made of sweet beans, molasses, and flour.
- <sup>5</sup> A restaurant famous in Fukagawa since Edo (1600–1868) times.
- <sup>6</sup> This monument can be found in the grounds of Susaki Shrine. See the following link: <https://www.abc.co.jp/ishibumi/extra/2/index.htm>
- <sup>7</sup> The first lines of a Chinese poem by Rai San'yō (1780–1832), describing Uesugi Kenshin's ambush on Takeda Shingen at Kawanakajima in 1561. The rest of the poem is as follows: "Dawn rose on a thousand soldiers, fast in the river's embrace. / Ten years of enmity, sharpening swords / Gone like a shooting star, or a great serpent's tail."
- <sup>8</sup> The translation here is based, with some changes, on Watson, p. 229.
- <sup>9</sup> Priest and minister to the emperor Goshirakawa, Shuncan was sent into exile in 1177 by the regent Kiyomori for plotting against the Taira family. His fate is the subject of an episode in the medieval epic *The Tale of Heike*, and several *nō*, puppet, and kabuki plays.
- <sup>10</sup> The design is a rebus or pictorial pun: the axes, koto and chrysanthemums (*yoki koto kiku*) that constitute the pattern also make up the phrase "to hear good news."
- <sup>11</sup> First published in *Shin-shōsetsu*, vol. 4: 1, 1899.
- <sup>12</sup> The daring opening line of *Sanjaku-kaku* is partially explained by the following paragraphs. In contrast to the songs other workers sing to beguile their time, our hero Yokichi's silence is underscored here.
- <sup>13</sup> *Saka wa teruteru, Suzuka wa kumoru, awase yaritaya tabi soete*: Lines from two popular folksongs, the first, *Suzuka no magobushi*, a packhorse driver's song from Suzuka in present-day Mie Prefecture, the second *Kisobushi*, which sings of how cold the mountains are even in the summer of Nagano.
- <sup>14</sup> In contrast to western saws, the teeth on a Japanese saw are configured so as to make the first cut by pulling. Yokichi kneels under the log, which is set on a diagonal scaffold over him.
- <sup>15</sup> 南: Minami for Minamiya, 'South House.'
- <sup>16</sup> *Hakama*: a pleated skirt worn over a kimono on formal occasions.
- <sup>17</sup> *Kana* is the Japanese syllabary, *mana* is an old term for Chinese characters, or *kanji*. In the original, the words are written as とうふ and 豆腐.
- <sup>18</sup> 30 mats: 540 square feet.

- <sup>19</sup> For over a thousand years, it was the custom of adult women in Japan to blacken their teeth with a solution of iron powder. The practice continued into the early decades of the twentieth century.
- <sup>20</sup> Mock goose: *ganmodoki*.
- <sup>21</sup> *Namasu*: a cold dish made of chopped raw fish.
- <sup>22</sup> A mountainous region on the border of Gifu and Nagano prefectures famed for its wood and its carpenters.
- <sup>23</sup> Oryū was likely forced into bonded service as a prostitute to support her family.
- <sup>24</sup> This sequel was first published as an independent story under this title in vol. 1:8 of *Shōtenchi*, a literary journal published in Osaka, then published as “Gleanings from *Three Feet Square*” (*Sanjakukaku Shūi*) together with the earlier story in the first volume of a collection of *Kyōka* stories published by Shun’yōdō in 1910.
- <sup>25</sup> Koishikawa in Bunkyo Ward of Tokyo is and was in *Kyōka*’s time (and is still today) a neighborhood of the educated upper class. Fukagawa was, and still is, a solidly working-class district.