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Mr. Walker's Pillow Book

Barrie Sherwood

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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Abstract

Mr. Walker's Pillow Book

Barrie Sherwood

This attractive novel is, ostensibly, the English translation of an ancient Japanese manuscript with an introduction and footnoted commentary by the translator. Leonard Walker is an archaeologist who has discovered *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa*, a diary-like manuscript dating from the Nara Period (AD 710-794). In his work as translator and commentator, Mr. Walker is not as rigorously objective nor as truthful as one might expect of a respected scholar. His own history intrudes the pillow book, bringing up questions as to its authenticity and the role it may be playing in revealing the details of his own life. This particular, peculiar, and charming arrangement for a novel is, in a sense (though theirs was a Siamese evolution), necessitated by Walker's character. Only in the interplay between his slipping devotion to scholarship and his unsettling nostalgia is his personality revealed.

Leonard Walker was Professor of Archaeology at Nara Junior Women's College and Associate Advisor of the Nara National Cultural Properties Research Institute of the Agency for Cultural Affairs. He devoted thirteen years to excavating the site of the ancient palace of Nara and authored many insightful essays on his findings including "Polyethylene Glycol and Freeze-Drying Techniques for Wooden Artifacts" (1977) and "Ancient Disposal: Rice Paddy Septic Fields" (1982) which won the Toyo Bunko Nihon Prize for outstanding contribution to national cultural studies. Late in 1994, Walker's wife, Marian, died tragically of a cocaine overdose. Soon after, Walker left home, career, and country to take up residence among the 2000 odd islands of the Philippines. It was from the small, idyllic island of Boracay that he first made contact with Marcos Press of Manila to arrange for the publication, at his own considerable expense, of *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa*. Leonard Walker's last correspondence with Marcos Press was in March of 1996; it consisted of his Introduction to the text, the final money-order, and a written request that all proceeds from the sale of the book be donated to the United Way.

Lady Kasa was born 12 centuries ago (720?) and served as lady-in-waiting to the Princess Takano during the middle years of the Nara period. It is unknown if she was ever married, but she was in love, for a time, with the illustrious Ōtomo Yakamochi, then Governor of Etchū Province. Twenty-nine tanka professing her love, devotion, and, later, contempt for Yakamochi have been preserved in the *Collection of 10,000 Leaves*, the great anthology of Nara poetry. Early in 747, Kasa left Nara. Her life after her Court service came to an end is totally obscure.

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INTRODUCTION

Makura no sōshi (‘notes of the pillow’) was a generic term for an informal book of notes which men and women of old Japan composed when they retired to their rooms in the evenings. Pillow books were popular in their time and later developed into that most quintessential Japanese literary form, the *zuihitsu*. In modern days the genre has picked up unseemly connotations, but in truth there was never anything inherently licentious about pillow books; the name simply derives from the fact that they were often kept inside pillows. The pillow used by the Naran aristocracy, it should be pointed out, was less amenable a bed companion than the downy sack of today; it was a heavy wooden box, ten inches in height, that featured a hard, flat, brocaded surface for laying the head upon, and drawers for combs, jewellery, perfume or—more interestingly—notebooks.

The only *makura no sōshi* thought to have survived to the present day is that of Sei Shōnagon. It is a vast and discursive miscellany of anecdotes, descriptions of nature, character sketches, poems, and highly subjective lists of good and bad, pretty and ugly, laughable and pitiful, admirable and tasteless. It dates from the Heian period (794-1185) and provides such a detailed picture of contemporary court life that Mr. Arthur Waley has called it “the most important document of the period that we possess.”¹ The redoubtable Mr. Ivan Morris has added that, although Sei Shōnagon’s pillow book is the only one of its type known to have survived from ancient Japan, “it is possible that many

¹ Waley, Arthur *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1979, p. 14.

others were written”.¹ In light of this statement it should seem less doubtful to certain critical orientalists that another pillow book has recently come to light: *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa*.

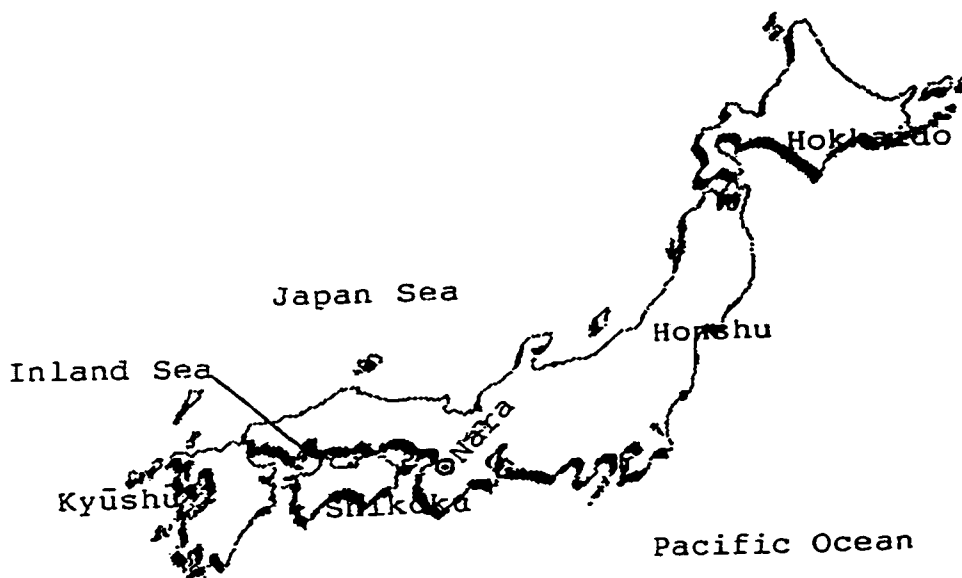
In Japan, any archaeological finding that sheds light on pre-Showa Period (1926-1989) society is classified a “Significant Find” by the Agency for Cultural Affairs. Any insight into Edo (1603-1868) or earlier periods is classified a “Major Find”. For the dancing, radiant beam it casts into the mists of the remote Nara period (710-794), *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa* exceeds all such classification; surely one of the great archaeological discoveries of Japanese history. Before going on to examine the pillow book, however, it is well to learn some more about the halcyon age of Japanese civilization from whence it comes.

History, in fact, begins with Nara.

In pre-history and proto-history, economic and political power in Japan had been centred on the north coast of the island of Kyushu, where proximity to Korea allowed for interaction with the continent's powerful culture. About 200 BC the influence of bronze culture displaced the Neolithic at this point of contact and was in turn succeeded by iron culture, which China developed under the Han Dynasty. But because Kyushu had little advantage apart from its geographical location, power, once it was consolidated, tended to gravitate eastward to richer

¹ Morris, Ivan *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* Columbia University Press, New York, 1967, p. 11.

land and a more central location on the main island. About AD 350 a great expedition made its way from Kyushu along the northern shore of the Inland Sea. Despite stubborn resistance from Neolithic Ainu locals, they eventually landed at Naniwa, at the mouth of the Yodo River. It was not far from here, in the fertile Yamato Basin to the east, that Japanese culture began to flourish.



1. The Japanese Archipelago

At the expedition's arrival, the Emperor Jimmu Tenno was enthroned at Kashiwabara, but the capital did not remain here for long. According to an ancient belief that a dwelling place was polluted by death, it was customary upon the demise of a sovereign for his successor to move into a new palace. Thus, for the following four centuries, the centre of government was shifted repeatedly in Yamato and the neighbouring provinces.

In terms of practicality this superstition is ridiculous. On an emotional level, however, it is not beyond our understanding. Consider Lady Gemmyō, whose son was the Emperor Mommu... In spring of 709, young Mommu returned to the Fujiwara capital from a visit to the cherry orchards at Yoshino. On arrival he complained of headaches and nausea more severe than those usually brought about by mere saké. Doctors, priests, and diviners, summoned to his bedside, made futile efforts to revive the ailing young man and in the forenoon of the next day he passed away. Lady Gemmyō had no choice but to attend the complex funereal ceremonies that followed, the tedium of which she must have found all but unbearable. Is it any wonder she left Fujiwara's haunted gardens and verandas behind as soon as she could? Who would not have done the same in her position?

Thus, in the year 710, Gemmyō acceded to the throne and moved the capital to Heijō, or as it came to be known, Nara¹. The specific location was chosen because it met perfectly the requirements of Chinese geomancy which was then, like most things Chinese, in high esteem. The directional code of the "Four Birds and Beasts"—cyan dragon, vermilion sparrow, white tiger, and dusky warrior—stipulated the need for a river to the east, low and damp area to the south, a long road to the west, and a rise to the north. Moreover, practices of divination by interpreting melons (pepomancy) and cracks

¹Nara: Two such simple syllables to be so richly endowed. There is no meaning universally agreed upon by scholars, but the word, at least, has a regal posture in lieu of a definition. I have always envisioned the N as an heraldic bend on the white escutcheon of the page. Or the lapel of an Empress's robe. Or, better, the king's bandoleer—a's in obeisance, r the defiant prince.

in burnt tortoise shells (plastromancy) had pinpointed Nara as an ideal location for commerce and industry. Such augury is less nonsense to the present reader, but it was proven valid in the minds of the ancients when, in 741, Emperor Shōmu moved the capital away from Nara. The gods chafed violently at their desertion: Shōmu's efforts to build a new capital met with failure and the country was rocked with earthquakes day and night. On the advice of Nara's priests and diviners he soon returned to Nara and the gods were—coincidentally or not—appeased.

Apart from geomantic benefits, Nara enjoyed a mellow climate and was well connected to the sea and other important sources of trade by road and waterway. The layout of the city itself was modelled on the Chinese capital of Chang'an. The main entrance was from the south, along Scarlet Phoenix Boulevard (alternately translated, by those of no poetic ability, as "Red Finch Road" and "Vermilion Sparrow Avenue"). A capacious seventy-five metres wide and lined with willows and orange trees, this magnificent thoroughfare bisected the city and ran for nearly four kilometres, past houses progressively larger and more elaborate, to the Scarlet Phoenix Gate at its northern end. This in turn was the main south entrance to the Imperial Palace, a village in itself.

Nara was by far the most developed Japanese city of its time. It boasted two markets, one on each side of Scarlet Phoenix Boulevard, that were open on alternating weeks; a Confucian university; over fifty Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines; and at least a dozen private and state-owned saké breweries. Money economy was beginning to prevail and trade was steadily expanding. The population, at its height, reached 200,000. In a rural

valley of rice paddies and crude pit-houses, the metropolis of Nara—its streets laid out on a rigorous grid, its “skyline” bristling with pagodas—stood out as a paradise of safety, prosperity, and order.

The Naran aristocracy were a sensitive people, appreciative of beauty, and in that respect their capital had no peer. The pre-eminent poetry collection of the period, the *Collection of 10,000 Leaves* (*Manyōshū*), contains no shortage of poems expressing their proud exuberance:

The Imperial city of fairest Nara
Glow now at the height of beauty
Like brilliant flowers in bloom.¹

Down a wide boulevard of Nara parades a young gallant wearing a silver-wrought sword. A Lady of the court, unrestricted as yet by the mean mores of medieval society, strolls along by herself in the shade, trailing her multi-coloured skirts. They meet at a bridge and make enjoyable conversation beneath the zelkova trees. It is this picture of a gay metropolis which the envoy to a foreign land or the soldier stationed at one of the empire’s lonely outposts can never forget and which causes him the most unbearable pangs of nostalgia. His is an Odyssean pain of separation:

Although across the plains of the sea I have come

¹ De Bary, Theodore, Ed. *Collection of 10,000 Leaves* Columbia University Press, New York, 1965, p. 97.

Passing through two thousand islands,
Not once has the city of Nara
Left my heart.¹

Unlike subsequent anthologies filled with jejune compositions by the bepowdered poetasters and pampered court minions of the Heian Court, the *Collection of 10,000 Leaves* is typified by a genuineness of feeling and Mr. Donald Keene has praised it accordingly as "one of the world's great collections of poetry."² Compiled in its final form in the eighth century, the anthology contains 4516 poems arranged in twenty volumes. Embodying strength of feeling, sincerity, and simplicity, these poems are the purest expression of the early Japanese spirit, yet untainted by the perversions of the samurai code. Whole sections of the work deal with the recurring themes of love's sensuality and spirituality, and, especially, the sorrow of separation:

Had I but known the way she left this world,
I would have built a barrier,
Between my dying love and death.³

Unfortunately, even as the *Collection of 10,000 Leaves* was being finished, a vogue for Chinese prose and poetry was taking possession of court circles. It lasted for over one hundred years, from the late Nara period to the early Heian, and Japanese literature was

¹ Ibid., p. 244.

² Keene, Donald *An Anthology of Japanese Literature* Grove Press, New York, 1955, p. 23.

³ De Bary, Ed., p. 131.

greatly neglected. Only with the appearance of the great Murasaki Shikibu (*'The Tale of Genji'*) and Sei Shōnagon (*'The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon'*) did native literature regain at least a measure of the respect it had commanded in the Nara period.

Apart from Nara's practicality and formal beauty, Buddhism was its greatest strength, a factor not to be overlooked in comprehending the city's longevity. Buddhism had been introduced from Korea several centuries earlier and had found a strong following alongside the native Shintō religion. Nara became the site of the greatest and most powerful Buddhist temples; by the middle of the century there were no fewer than forty-eight Buddhist temples within its precincts. In Nara society, consequently, Buddhism ascended to an unheralded level of importance, the state and church entwined to a degree equalled in the west only by the Vatican. As one can see from a short look at the *Collection of 10,000 Leaves*, traditionally Buddhist sentiments concerning life's vanity and evanescence such as "life is frail" and "nothing endures" soon added a melancholy note to the hitherto charmed province of Japanese poetry:

How I loathe the twin seas
Of being and non being
And yearn for the mountain
Of bliss, untouched by

The changing tides.¹

At the start of the eighth century, the clergy were the prepotent force in Japanese politics, but more and more they faced tenacious and inventive opposition from the Fujiwara family. Surprisingly, the Fujiwara's never commanded any significant military strength, physical force being the least important of their methods of persuasion and assimilation. Instead, this aristocratic and influential clan forged infrangible links between themselves and the imperial family through 'marriage politics': the wedding of Fujiwara daughters to reigning Emperors. By the late 700's, marriage politics had pushed the clergy away from the centre of control, and the Fujiwara's were well on their way to establishing a predominance in national affairs which would last for centuries.

If you visit the city of Nara today, it is not difficult to understand why the ancients—secular and religious—were so much in love with it. Nineties Nara has not lost all of its old perfume. Walking through Nara Park, climbing into the pristine hills of the Eastern Nara Basin, twelve centuries are stripped away. The blinding pandemonium of pachinko parlours, the cataracts of shoppers in the covered streets, the megapolis of Ōsaka-Kyoto² on the other side of Mount Ikoma are all very far away from us. We follow the time-polished stones of an ancient road. Around us, we hear the bellowing of stags and the

¹ De Bary, Ed., p. 131.

² To give the reader a fair idea of "mega", Ōsaka-Kyoto has a population of around ten million and productivity equivalent to the Dominion of Canada's gross national product.

“ho-to-to! ho-to-to!” of the *hototoguisu*.¹ The only traffic likely to be encountered in these ancient, indifferent hills are elderly hikers passing by, all smiles and “*ohayo*”s and “*kawai desu-ne*”s² in their over-engineered boots and genuine lederhosen. The following poem is not, one hopes, incongruous with the spirit of the rest for being penned twelve centuries later:

On the autumn wind,
the bell of Kofuku-ji
And an ambulance siren.
Weighted with early snow, the boughs
move silently, make a poem.

It should be restated—right now—that Nara *was* the Golden Age. There was caprice on one hand and ignorance on the other, but there was nothing so sinister as the “dark rooms behind the facade of conscientious citizenship” that some have implied; no decadent addictions or premeditated murders; no dirt for far-reaching investigators to smear over its pall of white brocade. Nara was as far removed from the age which spawned *haiku* and *Kabuki* and the tea ceremony as that age is from our own, but if it had few such pretty contributions to make to popular culture in comparison with the Momoyama or Edo Periods, it had no rednecks either, no tyrants, no mercurial and merciless assassins, no caltrops, no prostitutes, no *seppuku*. The Narans peacefully, at times happily, coexisted. What more could be expected of the people, after all? The downfall, the

¹ ‘*cuculus poliocephalus*’

² “Good morning” and “It’s so pretty!”

“licentious mess”, has only come in its wake.... As George Sansom put it in, *A History of Japan to 1334*: “A distinguishing feature of the history of the following periods is the decay of institutions perpetuated from the Nara Period.” A grievous weakening of Imperial authority from the late Nara Period to the end of the Heian opened wide the gate for the rise of the military class. This led to the formation of feudalism which, for some seven centuries, totally changed the face of Japan. From the first ascendancy of this military system down to our own confused days, everything in society—ambition, honour, the very temperment of a man and his daily pursuits—became thoroughly unlike those of which our authoress was an eye-witness. To this day, Japan has not yet recovered any more than a semblance of this ancient civilization which it once attained and then lost.

Perhaps the pithiest expression of nostalgia for the ideal of the Nara Period is the word, *sayonara*. Incorporated within its four lyrical syllables is the name of that great city. Resounding a billion times a day, all across Japan, *sayonara* is a word synonymous with yearning, a veiled tribute to the halcyon days.

Until the discovery of *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa*, our knowledge of Nara has been gathered from four sources: the *Collection of 10,000 Leaves*; early Court histories such as the *Nihonshoki*; the considerable collection of art, fabrics, and musical instruments amassed by Emperor Shomū and preserved today in Nara’s *Shoso-in* museum (well worth a visit if you are in Nara); and archaeological excavations at the Nara Palace Site.

Concerning the latter, the greatest source of archaeological information has come from

the discovery of *mokkan*. *Mokkan* are narrow wooden tablets that were used by the Nara bureaucracy as order forms, receipts, time-cards, cargo-tags, and inventories. I myself have excavated and preserved over 30,000 of these ubiquitous sticks. Although no one can deny their contribution to Nara studies, they have become in recent years an overabundant source of mostly useless information. One typical *mokkan*, for instance, records the rather otiose fact that Mr. O-no Kasumaro, lower junior eighteenth rank,



2 *mokkan*

Carpenter at the Ministry of Construction, did not show up for work on the 10th of April, 746 and was docked a day's salary. That's all. Tight-fisted archaeology reveals nothing else about Mr. Kasumaro. Other *mokkan* kindly inform us that the residence of Empress Kōken ordered one *to* of red beans, fifteen *shō* of soy sauce, and some radishes from the Great Catering Office at an unknown date; taxes received from the province of Etchū in

747 came in the form of twenty *to* of dried shark meat; the Nara Palace Saké Bureau was destroyed one January; the princess Takano's domicile was re-floored in 746, etcetera, etcetera, *ad infinitum*. In the past, *mokkan* added greatly to our understanding of Naran culture, but the greater number of those found today only seem to bolster what is already understood. For those familiar with *mokkan*, it is only too obvious the historical gap that *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa* has stepped into.

As is the case with much ancient literature, however, one learns little of the life of the common man from *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa*. The setting is the Court, the characters are the aristocratic elite, and the concerns of the narrator are profoundly different from those of the common man. The Imperial Court was the focus of Naran society and the utmost ambition of ladies and gentlemen of some birth was to be introduced there. Kasa became one of the ladies-in-waiting to Princess Takano sometime in 745 and kept her position there until spring of 747. Her pillow book covers the last eight months of her stay at Court and includes descriptions of several well-known historical events and personages, as well as sundry, informative snippets about features of daily life. (Those familiar with the hypotheses made in my essays and articles will notice several uncanny correlations.)

A large portion of Kasa's text concerns her relationship with the illustrious statesman and poet, Ōtomo Yakamochi. He is one of the great figures of the Nara period, having occupied several important positions at Court and contributed five hundred of his own poems (and many others which he collected from various lovers over the years) to the

Collection of 10,000 Leaves. Unfortunately for Kasa, in September of the year 746, Yakamochi left Nara to become governor of Etchū province. Their correspondence during this time was completely one-sided: neither the *Collection of 10,000 Leaves* nor *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa* contains even one letter addressed from Yakamochi to Kasa. Understandably, this left Kasa with feelings of deep despair that course beneath the surface of even the most matter-of-fact observations and give her pillow book its particular sad tinge. Having once said good-bye, Kasa and Yakamochi probably never met again. She left the Court of Nara sometime in early 747, several months before Yakamochi's return.

The arrangement of *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa* is desultory and confusing: episodes and anecdotes follow each other with little attempt at logical or chronological sequence; there is no real sense of plot movement and there is little attempt at conclusion or denouement. Still, it is surely the unconcerned concatenation of event and image which is one of the book's more charming aspects. Gone is the guiding—at times dictatorial—hand of the authorial mastermind. Gone is the task of learning obscure rules to involute literary games. Never are we under the impression that this is a vehicle of meaning which may all too quickly leave us behind should we nod. Nothing could be so plain and free of guile as Lady Kasa's bedtime *pensées*, light reading for those with an interest in entertainment, vital historical document for the scholar.

It is next to impossible that the original of *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa* could have survived to the present day through the destructive heat and humidity of a thousand Japanese summers. The manuscript in my possession is certainly very old, but is not by any means an incunabula. This has led several of my colleagues to question how an ancient text of considerable value as literature and historical artefact could possibly be copied and re-copied for twelve centuries without ever being discovered by society at large. It is for their benefit and peace of mind that I make an hypothesis: monks.

It has often been the case in history that the care of valuable texts was left to the church. It is more than likely, considering Nara's pre-eminence as a religious centre, that *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa* fell into the hands (the aged, suede-soft hands) of monks at one of Nara's great temples. Impressed by the document's graphic nature, these scholarly monks included it in their collection of Indian and Chinese sutras, recopying it when it began to deteriorate, at once condemning and blessing it to a sort of historical Limbo, a cycle of deterioration and renewal which the present translator, on a veritable Skellig Michael in the tropics, accepts and humbly perpetuates.

In *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, Mr. Ivan Morris states that “There can be no literature in the world less suited to translation than that of the classic Japanese.”¹ On this point I certainly could not agree more. Working with a language which allows little or no

¹ Morris, p. xvii

distinction between the mutually exclusive categories we take for granted in European languages—past and present, question and affirmation, singular and plural, male and female, doubt and certainty, and, in some cases, positive and negative—the translator takes a great deal of the responsibility for the creation of meaning upon himself. The less said of this cunei-thorny issue, then, the better. On a purely grammatical level, however, there are several points about the translation that I should like to make clear. First of all, most Japanese names, except those appearing in direct quotations, appear in western order, i.e. family name second. Second, most Japanese suffixes—such as *-jo* for “castle”, *-ji* for “temple”, and *-kawa* (*-gawa*) for “river”—have been retained and are followed by the English equivalent in lower case; e.g. “Hosanji temple”, “Sahogawa river” or “Osaka-jo castle”. This practice should prove helpful to those who would follow up their reading with a visit to Japan (recommended to scholars and casual readers alike) or conversation with a Japanese person, who would certainly recognize “Todai-ji temple” but might balk at “the Temple Todai”. Last of all, as a rule, all dates appear according to the western calendar, except when the name of an era is important for clarity or style.

No further explanation of my methodologies or theories of translation will be offered here.

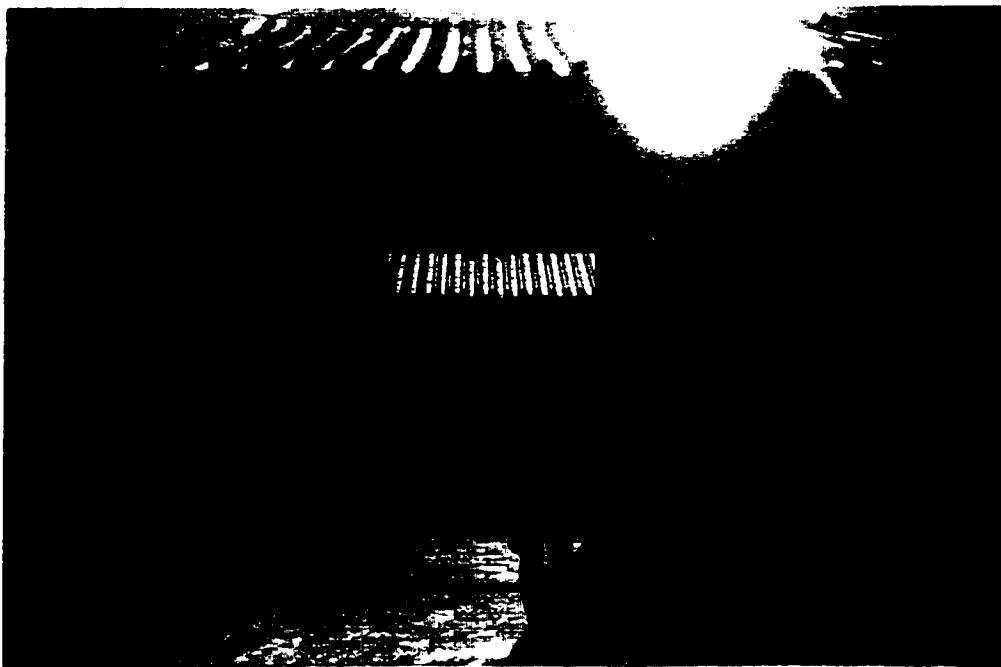
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Any book from a civilization as remote as eighth-century Nara, Japan would normally require a far more extensive introduction than is provided here. Had I the leisure, I would certainly fill the lacunae. In lieu, I beg the reader to consider that, though he may not

recognise how valuable *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa* is to the world of historians, he may at least appreciate on an artistic level the small world it does create.

All that remains to do is to give my sincere thanks to all those who have assisted me in my labours. My gratitude goes out to innumerable friends and colleagues in Nara, Tokyo, Boston, New York, Oxford, Cambridge, Paris, and Geneva. Specifically, I owe a great deal to Mr. Philip Junta of Marcos Press, Manila, for his forbearance in editorial input, to Ms. Roxy Mandalon of Panay College for typing the manuscript and this introduction, and to Professor Edwin Rommel, for the many forthcoming observations and opinions contained in his review article on *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa* to be published by the Luzon Journal of Asiatic Studies, vol. xxxvi, 1997.

Finally, above all, my gratitude, my thoughts, and my love go out to Marian Walker, for overseeing the project.



The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa

How truly now I understand
the impermanence of this world,
seeing Nara, the Imperial City,
lie thus in ruins.

- Anonymous

On a moonlit night in the seventh month

On a moonlit night in the seventh month we heard the voice of a woman singing in the garden.

“Whoever could it be?” wondered the Princess, for it was late and it was during a period of abstinence. “Go and see who it is.”

When I walked onto the veranda I saw a woman in white beside the pond. I called out to her and she came up the path through the plume grass. It was a woman in a flimsy robe, but with the moon behind her I could make out few of her features save for the sheen of moonlight on her shoulders and parted hair. She came to within several yards of me and stopped.

I asked her what she was doing outdoors at such an hour. The reply could not have been stranger:

“The snow will fall heavily tonight,” she said in a small, silvery voice. “I came to see about your health.”

It was one of the few times that I have been truly at a loss for words. My first thought was that this was someone playing a trick, yet I would most certainly have recognised the voice had it been anyone from the palace. Standing there alone on the edge of the veranda, dressed only in my white under-ropes, I felt suddenly off balance between the ground and the wide, night sky. I took a step back.

“Is your lover here?” asked the woman.

“My lover?” I breathed. And all I could manage for a reply was to move my hand vaguely at my side. No.

The woman turned away. Her over-robe billowed around her legs in a gust of wind and behind her the heads of plume grass shivered. I could not make up my mind what to do, and so I only watched her go as she walked back down the path towards the water. When she was gone, I went back to Princess Takano with her strange words.

“Snow?” the Princess exclaimed in bewilderment, for it was, as I said, late in the seventh month. “Could she have been referring to falling leaves?”

I replied that there were many things which “snow” could stand for but none of them save the winter’s cold which could possibly harm anyone.

“Snow in the seventh month...” she repeated absently. “Are you sure you’re not just dreaming, Kasa?”

After some discussion with the other ladies we decided that the episode was beyond our comprehension. The Princess would give it no more attention and consigned it in her mind to being a prank, the gist of which would come to light in the following day.

Still, I noticed that the Princess did not sleep calmly that night. The fact of which means, of course, that neither did I.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

The Kofuku-ji bell is tolling, bidding all to rest.

But you, being forever on my mind

I cannot sleep.

How I detest

How I detest false exoticism. As if chrysanthemums or a red columns were enough to imbue the most mundane scene with special significance. Rain is rain and a shadow a shadow no matter where it falls. As bad as this sentimentalism is in Chinese poetry, it is abominable in our own. In a country with few native works of literature, it is all the more obvious and distasteful.

The Chrysanthemum Festival

It is the day of the Chrysanthemum Festival. On the terrace before the red columns of the Great Supreme Hall, Emperor Shōmu, after tasting the saké steeped with yellow chrysanthemum petals, was presented with the ceremonial small white trouts. At that moment, just as Chamberlain Fujiwara and the Ministers of Right and Left, splendidly dressed in many-layered silks, were crossing the terrace, with the fish lined up and held aloft on Chinese mirrors, and everyone was silenced by the most profound admiration, I felt a childish humour well up within me and it was all I could do to suppress a burst of laughter.

Needless to say, I found such a reaction alarming. Later on, in her apartments, I asked Princess Takano about it. Was I sane that something so serious should cause me to laugh? To my great relief, Takano replied that this was not so strange at all. She too, she told me, had felt the same emotion several times before. Once, at the Kamo Festival of all times and places, she and the Vestal Virgin, standing side by side in front of the great shrine, surrounded with garlands of hollyhocks and all the monks hushed in prayer, had begun to

giggle. It was extremely embarrassing and Chamberlain Fujiwara, among others, had grown quite red with indignation. But there was nothing either of them could do to stop giggling. Everything that seemed most serious only caused them further mirth. “Sitting in the audience at the Chrysanthemum is one thing, Kasa, but just try peeing yourself in front of everyone at Kamo!” she laughed.

The Princess is so kind. Hearing her story put me quite at ease. I ventured to peel a pear.

Takano wondered if I knew the origin of the ceremony. “Was there something we were celebrating, or lamenting, or trying to ward off?” she asked.

“Kamo or Chrysanthemum?”

“Either one, I suppose.”

I had to admit that I did not know.

“I wonder if it’s all just for our amusement,” she said. This opinion is the privilege of a princess. I myself believe there must be a worthy intent for every ceremony—practical or magical—without which there would only be spectacle. “Do you know how many ceremonies there are, Kasa?”

“There is one for every day,” I replied, the nude, glistening white fruit now slipping about in my fingers as I tried to shear off the peel in one unbroken string. “But many of them have disappeared, or have been amalgamated, or have sunk into daily routine, like raising your cup before drinking; it used to be a prayer for rain in the fifth month.”

Takano found this delightful. “I wonder how many ceremonies we conduct without even knowing!” she exclaimed. “Careful with that pear. It might be sacred.”

Things that make a thinking sound in the night

A carriage going over the threshold at Akatainukai Gate. A clumsy visitor's wooden head-dress against the transom. The heavy bamboo water conduit in the East Precinct Garden. A stone with poem attached, landing on the floorboards of the veranda. One's pillow falling over in the midst of a vigorous dream. Quite alarming!

Princess Takano and I were sitting

Princess Takano and I were sitting on the veranda, sometime in the fifth month, when we saw Ōtomo Yakamochi walking across the yard towards the State Halls. He was elegantly dressed in green and he swung his arms at his sides as he walked, looking very pleased with himself. I certainly had no intention of speaking with him, but just as he was passing by, the Princess called out to him and then scurried behind the curtain of state to leave me absolutely stuck, the only one on the veranda, and Yakamochi coming back thinking *I* had called to him. I would have followed the Princess and given her a sound scolding but I could hardly have done it without looking like a complete fool in front of Yakamochi. He, of course, flattered to be addressed by a lady, came across the gravel into the shade of the eaves.

He was wearing a forest green head-dress—albeit one of the soft, low-crowned types—and an over-robe of a lighter fern, belted with black. His pants were a pale rose and his scabbard was of Chinese vermilion. I vividly remember how the cords of his head-dress bounced across his chest as he walked. I would simply have appreciated

watching him pass by in his finery, but now I was forced to talk with the man on no pretext whatsoever.

“It’s Kasa, isn’t it?” he asked, peering into the veranda. “May I part the blind?”

I replied that he certainly could not and asked him in the most derisive tone how he had made such a hideous colour combination. Wasn’t there some kind of standard for guards? Unaccountably, this severe demeanour seemed to put the man at ease.

“Of course there’s a code,” he laughed, pushing back the blind several inches so that he could take a seat on the edge of the veranda. “But my shift’s over. These are my fraternising clothes.” He sat down facing away from me and made no further attempt to talk. Across the yard, the young Prince Asaka was trying to coax a timid white cat from underneath the veranda of the Empress Komyo’s apartment. He had a ball of silk cord which he dangled in front of it, but the cat was wary. It would come out only so far as to bat at it with one hesitant paw before retreating to the shadows. Yakamochi watched the young prince with amusement, leaning forward with his hands on his knees. Every strand of his hair was pulled up and knotted flawlessly beneath the head-dress. He was a lovely man and I found his nonchalance aggravating. “Are all the Guards’ Captains as impolite as you?” I asked him finally.

At this he straightened up abruptly. “What do you mean, *all* the Guards’ Captains?” he replied indignantly. “Why would there be more than one?”

“Well, who’s doing your job?”

“At this very moment you mean?... No one.”

Until then I had never given any thought to what palace guards actually did. I had always assumed that their appearance at festivals and ceremonies was a *secondary* task. Had bandits never tried to sack the palace? or the hairy AINU?

“Hairy AINU!” He laughed loudly and clapped his hands with delight. “Hairy AINU! I haven’t heard that since my grandfather last waylaid me with one of his stories.... Hairy AINU... Do you want to know what I spend my time doing, Kasa? I fill out *mokkan* all day, just like any other official.”

I did not appreciate his laughter. How should one be expected to know such things? When I judged that I had shown adequate grace in talking with him, I told him that he bored me and had better leave. This he did far too willingly.

Though I was left in an irritable mood all that day, it now seems charming to remember it.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

If it were death to love,

I should die for you—

And die again

One thousand times over.

Magnificent things

The parade of blue horses, even if they are grey. Arrows fletched with falcon. One has arrived late at a ceremony; rushing through the colonnade, one becomes aware of the

unusual silence and wonders if one has been mistaken of the date. Passing through the gate, one finds a thousand people seated in the plaza, all in absolute silence. A good melon. Anything from China. The Emperor's zelkova coffret. On my first day at Court I was invited to go along with Princess Takano to the Imperial Domicile to meet the Emperor. I was so nervous that I never once looked up from the floor and all I can remember is staring at that coffret, trying not to faint. The smell of cold ashes in the brazier on a rainy morning. The sun going down over Mount Ikoma. An unexpected gift. Even better, an unexpected visit.

Prince Asaka has gone missing

The night of the Festival of the Great Bear and Deity of the North Star, the young Prince Asaka went missing. Because of all the destruction that had been done to the Saké Bureau after the banquet, his absence went unnoticed until late afternoon the next day, when his nurses realised that none of them were keeping watch over him. A casual search was mounted through the palace but the boy was not found. As the afternoon wore on, the news began to spread around the palace and I could see the look of concern upon everyone's faces. The situation seemed more and more dire with every passing hour. Patrols were sent into the hills and along the banks of the Sahogawa and Horokawa Rivers. In late afternoon, I was resting in my apartment when a courier came to summon me to the State Halls.

As I walked down the long hall, I passed a pair of open doors where the last orange sunlight spread across the floor like a shining brocade, grey where my shadow crossed it.

The sun was setting over Mount Ikoma. When I faced the dais at the front, I could see nothing in the shadow but an orange disc still hovering before me. When finally the glare melted into the shadowy interior of the hall, I made out the Chamberlain Fujiwara and the Ministers of Right and of Left seated upon the dais. Without any formalities Fujiwara asked me, "Kasa, do you love your mistress?"

"Why..." It was a question I could hardly have expected. "Why, dearly," I replied. "How can you doubt it?"

"Oh, doubt?" Fujiwara replied, looking with satisfaction at his colleagues. "No, no doubt," he said. "On the contrary." The Minister of the Right nodded, compressing chins. The Minister of the Left grunted and eyed me sternly. Fujiwara addressed the two men: "If the Emperor were to submit to his illness, heaven forbid it, only the Prince Asaka would stand in the way of Princess Takano's accession." He faced me once again. "It is for this reason I wonder if the Lady Kasa has not been acting too much in the princess's interest."

There is the same

There is the same white cat crying in the yard. If one did not know better, one would say it was the crying of a child. I cannot see it tonight, but I have seen it on previous nights skirting the yard, ducking under the veranda when the guards pass by.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Never, even in my heart,

Did I imagine it:

That I would long for you like this,

Although no mountains

Or rivers separate us.

The kannons

The faces of the kannons in the temple resemble the faces of the ones you know. Once you have recognised a face, you shall never again behold merely lifeless bronze. That cast visage, distant in its silence, even with your fingers upon it, suddenly, without warning, lives. When you return to the gallery of kannons you are no longer a stranger, you return to it as if to your own city. All these quiet faces were crying, whispering, plotting, laughing as you approached. They only fell silent when you entered.

Rank

Four grades for Imperial Princes. Twenty-seven ranks for other mortals. After this there are only *tadabito*, commoners of no fixed existence. Rank, division, and grade are reviewed and adjusted once per year.

It has been known for someone to move up five or six ranks in his lifetime. There was one man, a carpenter of the eighteenth rank, who saved young Yuhari from a boar. Yuhari was unharmed but the man was gored by the animal and eventually died from the

wound. The Emperor, much in debt to him, appeared at his bedside and bestowed upon him the twelfth rank. At his death, this was raised to the tenth. We all agreed that it was a most remarkable career ascent.

A ruined poem

Before Princess Takano precipitated our meeting, I had never taken any interest in Ōtomo Yakamochi, for all his charming looks. But from that one short introduction a curiosity grew. Nothing in his demeanour led me to believe that this interest was mutual until he appeared one day at the East Precinct Garden.

A fabulous storm had arrived above the Land of Yamato and I was watching it from the veranda of the Small Pavilion. There was a column of black cloud approaching from the north and the rain was draped like violet curtains across the hillsides. I was amazed by the speed of the storm and I had the feeling that I was the only one standing before it as it rushed down the valley. So lost in thought was I, that when the rain finally did reach me, rasping across the pond and clattering against the roof tiles, I did not think to close the blinds but only took several steps back to avoid the drops.

In the midst of the downpour the gate at the far end of the garden opened and a figure ran down the path beside the pond. I recognised him immediately. When he reached the house he practically leapt onto the veranda and frightened me from my trance.

“No,” he laughed, “it’s not the *shikkongo shin*¹. Just Yakamochi. The Princess told me you were here.”

¹ ‘thunderbolt bearer’

“So I am.”

“I wrote you a poem... but I'm afraid the rain has ruined it.”

I asked him to show it to me anyhow, but he declined. “No, it's quite ruined,” he insisted. “I shall have to write another and return in more clement weather.”

I wondered if he had written a poem at all, and if not, what was he doing out in the storm? He was drenched and his robes were making a puddle where he stood. But he did not stay long. Without another word, he jumped from the veranda and sprinted back down the pathway, his figure turning to grey in the steam rising from the pond.

When I returned home, Princess Takano asked me what happened. I told her that I thought Yakamochi was insane.

“Was there a poem?” she asked.

“No,” I replied.

She wanted to know if I was disappointed but I could not say if I was or not. She suggested we invent the poem he might have written. At first, I was amused by her suggestion, but it turned out to be rather embarrassing in the end: I had no idea in the world what Yakamochi might have written for me.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Though we only saw each other
Dimly through the morning mist,
I go on longing for you,
So much that I shall die.

Lady Gorii

One simply has to feel sorry for Lady Gorii, though she is shown exaggerated kindness by those at court. You see, she has a growth upon her nose that reminds one, as the ancient saying goes, of “a well-ripened fruit carried in a mountaineer’s sack.”

Yet another hour

Yet another hour goes past without seeing Ōtomo. I get up from my place overlooking the yard and begin pacing. The other women cannot stand it but I persist in spite of their complaints.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

This world is thick with men’s eyes,
and so I must go on longing for you,
my Lord,
though you are near to me
as the spaces in a bridge of stepping stones.

Not everyone

Not everyone has the good fortune to be beautiful, but every face has something to recommend it. Even the ugliest person has some admirable feature that one may appreciate. When I am in conversation with someone who is ugly, I do my best to

concentrate upon whichever feature is not particularly offensive and appreciating it brings me genuine joy. So I am watching Lady Gorii's dimples appear and disappear as she speaks, or the Minister of Trade's long eyelashes, or the slight, shiny, inward curve of the Rector Nishiyama's temples. Only in speaking with the Chamberlain Fujiwara is my every effort foiled and I am forced to look at his pointed silk shoes.

When the officials are getting changed into court dress and taking their breakfast at the Morning Assembly Halls, I like to pass through and watch them. Here there are many lower officials mixed with those of higher rank and it is impossible to tell which is which when they first arrive. Only once they are in their robes does one learn their rank and wonder however such and such a man, who had looked so dignified before, could be a mere scribe.

A new lady-in-waiting

Lady Nakatomi's sudden decision to marry Nishiyama has stunned us all. Nishiyama is rather old and stooped; some say his brothers used to force him to pick rice with the commoners. I, for one, never thought Nakatomi would marry him. But there has been rumour that a short-term affair with one man or another has ended with a foreseeable consequence and she is now in a great hurry to be married.¹ Of course, old Nishiyama

¹*Lady Nakatomi to Ōtomo Yakamochi*

Should you refuse me,
Do you think I would force you?
No, I would remain
Confused in love as the roots of rush
And still keep longing for you.

will be delighted. He will strut about for a time, and take up hunting again, boasting that his arrows are still sharp, until he learns the truth and drops dead at his own feet. All very convenient for Lady Nakatomi but inconveniencing for the rest of us. Her departure leaves only four ladies in attendance to Princess Takano: Ki, Heguri, Gorii, and I. For the daughter of the Emperor it is not proper that she have an even number in her retinue so a new lady-in-waiting will arrive in one month to replace her.

The new lady-in-waiting

The new lady-in-waiting has come. Her name is Koto. She is young and very pretty and we all hope that she will get along well. So often it is difficult for a young girl to adjust to court life. I, myself, had so many strange, romantic ideas about court life. Even after a month with Princess Takano, I was still blushing when the guards walked past in the night, pulling their bow strings to ward off spirits. The first time I saw one of the guards, I thought he was a courtier playing an instrument and had come to serenade me. Such ideas!

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Oh how steadily I love you—
you who awe me
like the thunderous waves
that lash the sea coast of Isé!

*The Big Buddha.*¹

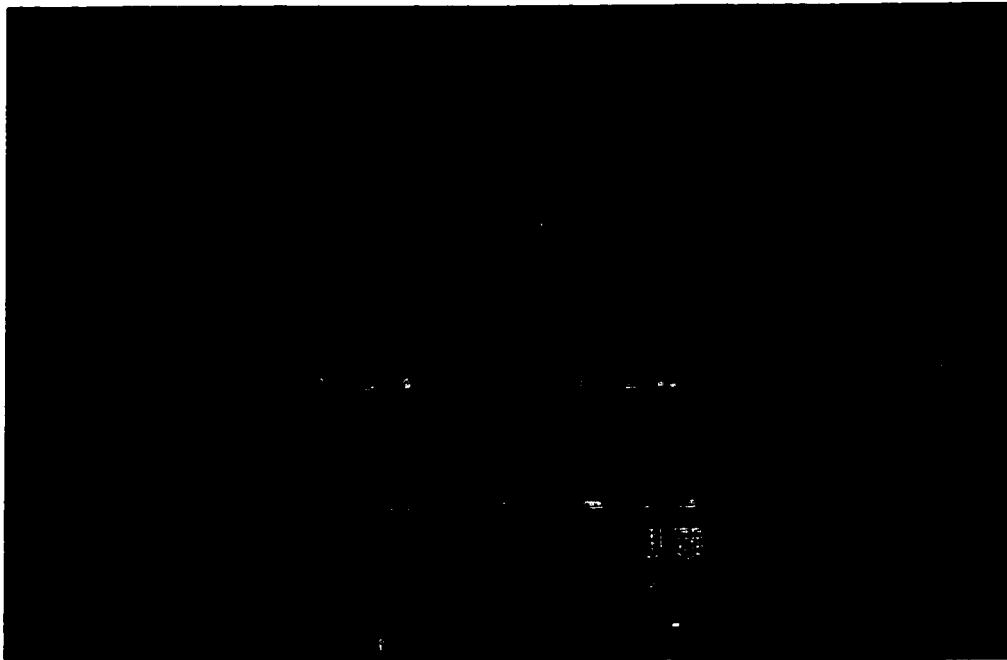
Construction of the *Daibutsu* continues and everyone includes it in their prayers. I heard Emperor Shōmu say that when it is completed it will be of such grand scale that a man may climb through the nostril. Today I took Koto up the hill to see the progress.

Much has changed since I was in these hills last. On a flat, cleared expanse where there had only been forest before there are many, many men at work on the construction of the Todai-ji temple. There is a complex of workshops and shacks as big as a village, surrounded by a constant stream of labourers and cart traffic. The noise is thunderous. Only the foundation of the temple has been laid but one can see that it will be immense. Beyond the workshops and piles of stone and logs and sawyer's rigs we could see a scaffold rising above the trees with a roof of thatch on top of it. We ordered the carriage to go over there and when we came near we were greeted with the oddest, most impressive sight of all. Resting on great wooden blocks, surrounded by a scaffold of bamboo were the monstrous bronze haunches and belly of the Buddha. We could see many squared lines upon his "skin" where the panels of cast bronze had been fitted together. Many men were at work here, clambering over the massive knees with brushes, hammers and other tools. The master architect, Kuninaka no Muraji Kimimaro, in his tall black head-dress, stood on one of the thighs with his long-stick in his hand, calmly watching the progress. Above him, where the chest and shoulders of the Buddha should

¹The *Daibutsu* ['Big Buddha'] is the largest gilt bronze Buddha in the world and the temple which houses it, the Todai-ji, the world's largest wooden building.

have been, was a mere framework of wood and wax, unclothed as yet by the shining cast panels.

Before this strange sight were many more sawyer's rigs, piles of material, balks of building timber being pulled toward the site, and smoking cauldrons. Koto and I stayed in our carriage watching for a long time. The cauldron fires had begun to glow in the falling light before we realised it was time to go home, the carpenters passing by made dark silhouettes against the sparks. The yelling subsided and we heard laughter instead. In the west, Ikomayama was outlined against the sky, growing larger and darker until it seemed as if the sun had crept up right behind it and was casting its crimson light straight up to the clouds above.



4. Todai-ji Temple

O wondrous and comforting is Ikomayama, Protector of the Land of Yamato and the glorious City of Nara!

Koto and I agreed to write poems for Ikomayama when we returned and present them to the Princess to tell her of the beautiful view. The carriage jerked as it started down the hill. We could see to the south where the dull orange trails of the Horokawa Rivers drifted across the rice land and disappeared into the shadows of the mountains of Kai. It was a most beautiful view and it was perfected when Koto pointed out the twin five-storied pagodas of Yakushi-ji, still visible below us in the middle distance. Unaccountably, this view gave me a melancholy feeling and I refused to write my poem after all. Koto was upset. Poor girl. She is young and so easily disappointed. She has no idea at all what the night can be like.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

More sad thoughts crowd into my mind
when evening comes; for then appears your phantom shape—
speaking as I have known you speak.

Last spring, a new stone

Last spring, a new stone was placed in the East Precinct Garden. Since then, we have all become most fond of it for its pleasing shape and distinctive character. Emperor Shōmu decided yesterday that the stone has healing properties and deserves court rank.¹ In a small ceremony during which the stone was bathed and girded with a woven rope,

¹ It was not uncommon in the Nara Period for inanimate objects or plants or animals to hold court rank. Cats, bows, hats, melons, pillows, and inkstones were some of the beneficiaries of Imperial promotion.

the Emperor gave it the name Healer and elevated it to the Tenth Rank. Lord Tabito suggested it be given a government post as well and sprightly Emperor Shōmu replied, “Yes, yours.”

We all found this very amusing. Tabito has a reputation for the most exceptional laziness.

On the fourth day of the second month

On the fourth day of the second month in the same year, we saw Lady Kannagibe Maso, the Great Vestal Virgin, pass by on her way to Kamo Shrine for the Festival of the Spring Prayer. Many Shinto officials went there with her to carry out rituals and recite prayers for good crops and as they passed through the yard they clapped their wooden sticks together to clean the air around the Virgin. Princess Takano and I commented on how lovely she was in her layered silks, each of a deeper green until the edge of the last robe showed red around her ankles. Such an honour to be the Great Vestal, but such a pity as well. There would be many men willing to court her otherwise.¹

¹ Lady Kannagibe Maso, To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Did you hear
the voice of the wild goose
as it flew above,
crying as she sought her mate?
Oh what a plaintive sound.

I first came

I first came to have a notebook when Ōtomo brought me one. I am always very pleased to have some new paper, especially when it is coloured paper, or decorated, or even a plain white paper if it is nice. This was the first that I had received a notebook and I was overcome with pleasure at the sight of it.

“Now you must write a diary in a careful hand,” Ōtomo told me, “and record all of your poems in it. One day I should like to read it.”

I told him that this would be the simplest thing in the world.

Nara palace

We have all come to stay at the West Palace for Princess Takano’s monthly defilement. None of us likes it here because the building is old and centipedes keep falling from the ceiling. When the Princess asked us to recite a poem my choice was the most fitting of anyone’s. I asked the Princess if she remembered her father’s folly in moving the capital to Kuni and then I recited the poet Sakimaro’s lament:

O Nara, city of my abiding trust!

Because the times are new,

All have gone—led by their sovereign—

Even as the spring flowers fade,

Or as the crows fly away at evening.

On its wide streets where once proudly walked,

The lords and ladies of the Great Palace,

No horses pass; nor men.

What desolation—alas!

Now that with the change of times,

Nara is become,

An Imperial City that was,

The grass grows rank in the streets.¹

I, for one, give no city my abiding trust. I love Nara only inasmuch as it is possible to love a place, which is a shallow kind of attachment at best. One need not look far to find ten poems by the same author praising the capitals of Fujiwara, Nara, Naniwa, Shigaraki, Kuni, and Nara again, each as if it were the one and only love of his life. A person may stop and wait for you in time. No place ever stops unless it is forced and I have more faith in myself than in carpenters.

I will now describe Nara Palace:

The entire compound of the Imperial Palace of Nara measures ten *chō* east to west and eight *chō* north to south [1.1 km² with an eastern extension of 0.8 x 0.3 km.] There are ten gates in the great outer wall. On the southern side, from west to east, are Wakainukai Gate (also called 'Music Bureau' Gate), Scarlet Phoenix Gate at the centre, Mibu Gate, and, where East 1st Column Avenue meets 2nd Row Middle Avenue, Chiisako Gate. On the eastern wall are Yamabe Gate and Akatainukai Gate, the closest to the Imperial

¹ De Bary, Ed., p. 121.

Domiciles. On the northern wall there is only one gate, this is Ikai Gate, at the very centre. Facing the west, from north to south, are Ifukube, Saeki, and Tamate Gates.

Of all these gates, Scarlet Phoenix is by far the most elaborate, an imposing structure of the highest calibre. It is two-storey gate with hip-gable roof and greenish ceramic tiles like those of the State Halls. The elegant red Chinese pillars stand in three rows of six each, spaced equidistantly. The rows are separated by seventeen *shaku* [5.5 metres].¹

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Could I ever forget you,

As long as my life be safe?

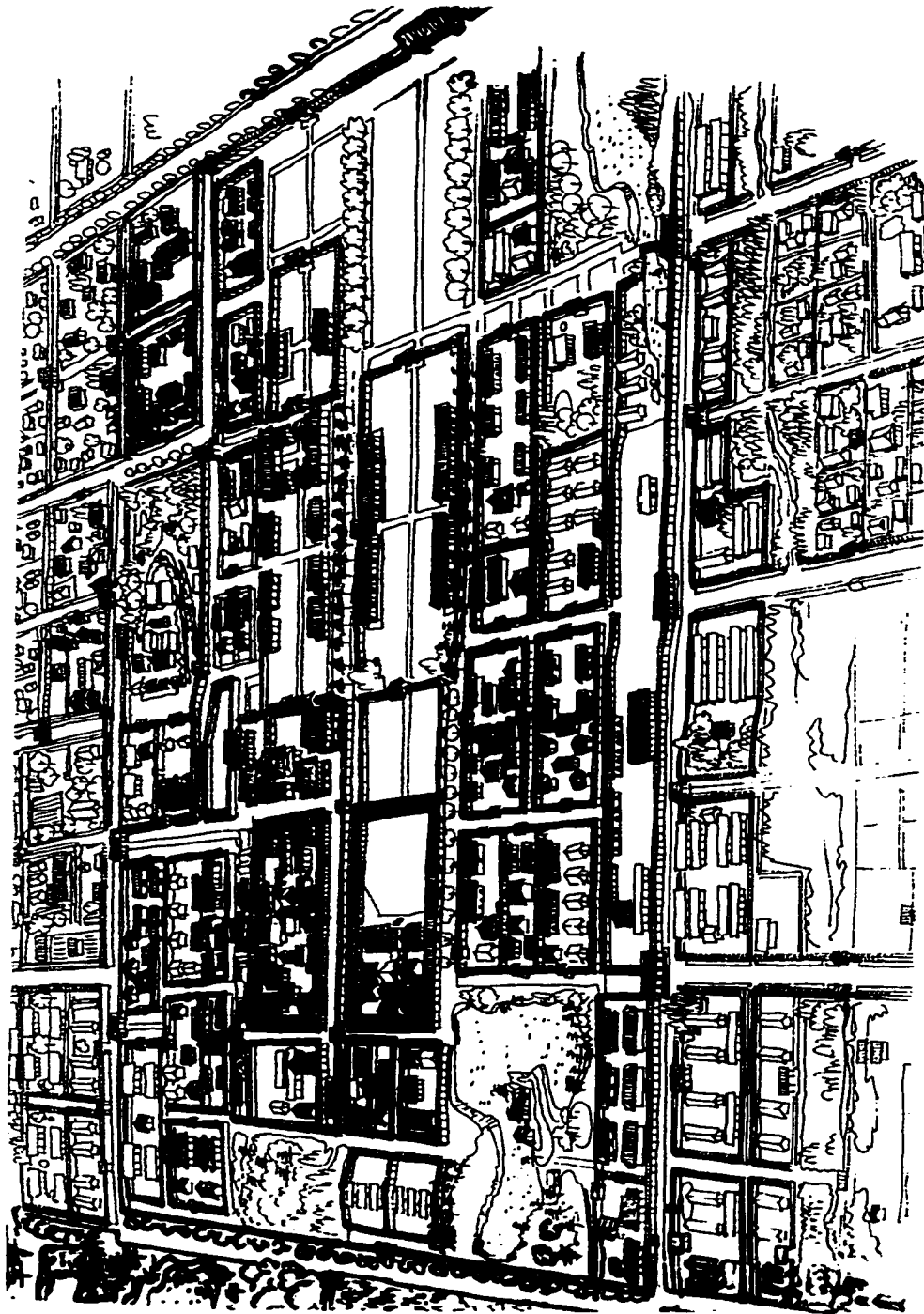
No, not even if my longing

Increases day by day.

That evening there was a banquet

That evening there was a banquet held. The North Palace Garden is a lovely spot with a stream built in the Chinese ‘downstream’ fashion. It is covered in water lilies and there is a bank of reeds and plume grass along the shoreline. There is also a small sandy beach and various large rocks to represent islands. On the banks and interspersed throughout the

¹ The intricate geographical description which follows is a-poetic and tedious. In the casual reader’s interest, I have left out this thirty-seven page mass of direction, intersections, and place names and included instead a simple aerial map from *What is Japanese Architecture?*, a delightful book that anyone with an interest in the evolution of the Japanese architecture would be well advised to read. The reader may wish to consult this map (Figure 5) from time to time for practical matters or simply for enjoyment. Picture a tiny, lovelorn Lady Kasa strolling down the empty lanes, reclining beneath the cottonball trees, or kneeling down to watch microscopic goldfish from the bridge at bottom right.



5. Nara Palace, AD 750.

garden are black pine, plum, and sandalwood trees along with a damson in one corner that looks as if it is dying. All along the fences to the south and north are a great many



6. Reconstruction of the North Palace Garden

more trees, placed there to give the impression of continuing space beyond. Along the west side of the garden is the pavilion and along the east is a fence lined only with fringed pinks. Standing on the veranda, one can look over the garden and the fence to the hills beyond. When I first visited this garden, I was charmed by the way in which it seemed to borrow the view of the hills, as if this stream were a real river and those islands a hundred times larger than they really were. When they began floating cups down the stream I could truly have believed that I was standing upon a high mountain, looking down from a great perspective upon the traffic of a great river.

I knew that I should have very little chance of speaking to Ôtomo, certainly not in private anyway, and I was contented by the thought of simply watching him.

When we arrived it was late evening. The fire huts had already been lighted and I could see several people already racing cups upon the stream. Everywhere across the lawns, people were lounging on mats surrounded with tiered lacquer dinner boxes and jugs of saké. At the south end of the pavilion, standing on the grass in front of the veranda, Ōtomo was speaking with his cousin, the Lady Sakanoé's Elder Daughter¹. Inside the pavilion, Emperor Shōmu was seated and speaking with the Chamberlain Fujiwara standing at his side. I could tell immediately by the uneasy way the Emperor kept looking around for something of interest, that Fujiwara was being a nuisance, babbling on and on and saying nothing of any importance at all. Princess Takano immediately noticed the same thing and went inside to rescue her father.

I stayed in the shadows beside the garden gate awaiting an opportunity to approach Ōtomo. When, all of a sudden, I heard a great oath sworn behind me, I turned around to find Lord Tabito laid out beneath a sandalwood tree, his feet splayed out before him. With him were the poet Sakimaro and the statesman Tachibana Moroé.

It was obvious, right away, that they were drunk.

“Well, well, Lord Tabito,” I said sternly, standing above him with my arms crossed.

The elderly man propped himself up on his elbows and squinted at me. “Kasa? Why, Kasa. Saki! Tachi! You know Kasa, one of Takano's girls.”

¹ Lady Sakanoé's Elder Daughter, to Ōtomo Yakamochi

Not a day goes by
in which the mist does not rise
on Mt. Kasuga.
Likewise it is you, my lord
whom I long to see everyday.

Sakimaro is a narrow little man with bad vision. He has several tailors in his employ and his robes are always of the very finest quality. He sat cross-legged on the lawn and simply waved his hand at me with a silly giggle. As for Moroé, well, what does one need to say of Moroé? He was removing layers of a dinner box, looking for something to eat. He glanced at me and then went on with his search.

“You have good timing, Kasa,” Tabito chirped happily. “Sakimaro and Tachibana and myself were just launching into a little poetry contest on the merits of saké. It’s my turn, but I’ll let you go first if you like.”

I graciously declined. “How can one praise its merits when one does not drink it?” I asked. Moroé snorted. He found a dish of beans and lay back on the grass, picking them out of the dish one by one with his fingers.¹

“Very well, then,” said Tabito, “listen and weep, my friends. I take no responsibility for your tears.” At this, he pushed himself into a half-seated position, rubbed his eyes, and holding his cup out before him, told us this poem:

“Ceasing to live this wretched life of man,

O that I were a saké jar!

Then I should be soaked in saké!”

“Very good,” Sakimaro chuckled.

“There’s more”, Tabito continued.

“When I look upon a man,

who drinks no saké,

¹ Chopsticks had only recently appeared in Japan and were not widely used.

how like an ape he is!

Far better, it seems,
than uttering pompous words,
and looking wise,
to drink saké and weep drunken tears.”

Moroé roared with laughter and Sakimaro giggled into his cup. I had to admit, it was a funny poem and Tabito all the funnier when telling it, so earnest, as if to be a ceramic jar were the height of anyone’s ambition. “Here Kasa, sit, I’ll find you a pillow.”

Of course, I remained standing.

Moroé spoke out. “Speaking of pillows,” he said, concentrating on his dish of red beans. “Who’s resting his head on yours these days, Kasa?”

Sakimaro burst into giggles.

“You know very well it’s my son, Tachibana,” Tabito answered. “I hope the Ainu teach you some manners down in Kyushu.”

Moroé slurped up the juice from the bottom of the dish, now empty of beans. When it was gone, he went back to the lunch box and found several oranges. He tossed one to Tabito. “Here, tell Kasa to peel that for me. It’s a little test.”

Tabito disregarded the orange. “Who’s that woman with my son, Kasa?” he asked, pointing across the garden. I turned around to find that Sakanoé’s Elder Daughter had

gone and Ōtomo's aunt, the Lady Sakanoé¹ herself, was now speaking with him. They were leaning against the veranda drinking saké from large cup. It seemed that Lady Sakanoé was chastising him. I will not hesitate to write that I quite detest Lady Sakanoé. Whenever she speaks, she does so as if imparting the most important secrets in the world when really she is only telling you of some trifle.

"It's your own sister, Tabito," Moroé laughed. "What a parade of women to see Yakamochi."

When Ōtomo and his aunt finally finished speaking, I took a sliver of dried shark from the tray and walked across the lawn towards Ōtomo, now, momentarily at least, alone. Just as I was approaching, though, Prince Yuhara kneeled down at the corner of the veranda to speak with him. I stopped where I was, and would have turned around and left, but Ōtomo had already seen me and nodded in my direction.

"Well, Yakamochi," Prince Yuhara said, "have you thought of title for this little poetry collection of yours?"

"Little?" Ōtomo exclaimed. "You have no clue, Yuhara. I'll have ten thousand pages before I'm through. And some of them will come from Kasa here, if she'll deign to be included."

"My poetry is very poor."

¹ Lady Sakanoé, to Ōtomo Yakamochi

This is a land of fearful gossip
so do not show your emotion.
Do not let blushing betray our love
Even if the longing kills you.

“Not true, not true. I know you have talents.”

Prince Yuhara raised his eyebrows. “I can surmise.” He did not add to his comment, thankfully, and took his leave.

Ōtomo and I stood in silence. “Well, I’ve finally found a place in the parade.” At the south end of the garden, the light of one of the fire boxes played upon the undersides of the paulownia leaves. I watched them glitter. “I heard something recently which quite upset me, Ōtomo. They say you are to be considered for governor of somewhere or other. And you might actually be interested.”

“Kasa,” he replied, “let me tell you a story.”

I sighed. “I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Just listen. Do you know the story of the two brothers and the Chinese frieze?”

I had not heard of it. In the pavilion, Princess Takano had succeeded in freeing her father from the attentions of Fujiwara, but had now been latched upon herself. At least for Takano it was all only a matter of politesse; she could take her leave of Fujiwara when she liked. For a girl of less standing, however, the Chamberlain’s attentions can reach uncomfortable proportions. But Ōtomo was continuing with his story and I tried to pay attention.

“In Chang’an, not so very long ago, lived two brothers who were master stonemasons. In their twenty-first year, they should have found brides and started families, but their particular devotion to their calling preceded all else and the boys remained single. When construction of the new temple at the city’s centre was started, a master stonemason was needed to lay the frieze under the eaves of the dome. One of the brothers was called

upon by the master architect to take the job, but the young man refused to do it unless his brother too was included in the contract. The request was granted and the two young men set out for the palace. And when they came there, they were amazed.

“Now, in dividing the work, the two brothers decided they would start at the same spot and continue in opposite directions, laying stones until they should meet up again at the other side. They measured the circumference of the dome, agreed upon a pattern, and set about their task. And verily, the two brothers were so dedicated to their work that once they had begun they never left the scaffolding of the temple; they took their meals on high, looking down upon the dusty city, and only slept when they had used up all their supplies of stone and were waiting for more. So grand was the great hall of Chang’an and so intricate the work the two brothers did, it kept them busy for ten straight years, breaking the larger stones with mallets, chipping away with finer, tapered hammers until the stones were perfectly round, the size of a fingernail, ready to be inserted into the design.

“After several years, the Emperor grew impatient. So it was that the opening ceremonies took place while the brothers were still at work. They looked down upon the straight squadrons of soldiers and the crowds pouring around them, and watched the fireworks exploding in the air before the dome and wondered what the occasion could be. Likewise there were those among the crowds who gazed up at the temple and noticed the fine filigree of a scaffold beneath the eaves, and a small spider clinging there, and wondered what it could be.

“And the frieze the brothers built was complex, for there were friezes within friezes and all manner of stylised creatures.”

A voice spoke up behind me: “Frieze?”

I turned around to find Lord Tabito standing behind me. He put his cup down on the veranda and looked curiously at his son. “What’s this about a Chinese frieze?”

“Nothing,” answered Ōtomo curtly.

“I was just curious,” said Tabito. “Sounds familiar.”

“Not now, father.” Ōtomo was stern. I felt sorry for this old man who had probably never been as severe with his sons as they now were with him. He raised his hands in apology and turned around to leave.

“Your cup, Lord Tabito,” I reminded him.

“So,” Ōtomo continued, “there were all manner of stylised flowers and animals in the frieze, but these had all been foreseen in the plan, and though the two brothers were a hundred yards, and ten years apart, one working in the sunshine, the other in the shade, yet their friezes, which were actually one and the same frieze, were identical. They could not see each other, nor speak with each other, yet they were bound by the chain that stretched between them, and only with doubt could the chain be broken. If the pattern of the frieze were to alter in the slightest, it would not match up when they reached the other side and all their devotions would go to waste...”

Of course I saw the meaning of the story; I had seen it when it begun. But all I could think of was, “Ten years?”

“Oh goodness sakes, no,” Ōtomo reacted. “I`m not spending ten years in the provinces. Perhaps one. That`s not too long to bear, is it?”

“Then the rumour was true.”

He smiled, knowing full well that I had caught him out. “I`ll come to see you tonight, shall I?”

“Yes,” I answered him. “I`ll wait for you.”

He smiled and touched my sleeve. “Yes, you will,” he said.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Look on my tokens

And remember me.

I too shall think of you

As the years trail away

Like a strand of rough gems.

A great box of crabs

A great box of crabs arrived from the port at Naniwa today. We went to see them at the Inner Catering Office and the top layer was still alive. It gave me an uneasy feeling. We decided to set one free in the western pond to see if it would survive. Nonchalantly, as if she did it every day, Lady Hisako carried it trapped between two slats of wood that she held before her like an offering. We must have looked a strange procession walking past the west palace, four skittish ladies following young Koto and a quivering blue crab.

The cooks had said it would die in fresh water, but we wanted to see for ourselves. Ki dropped it into the shallow water by Pebble Beach. I thought it would die immediately, but it only sank to the bottom and rested calmly on the pebbles, occasionally lifting a claw, moving to the left or the right, but never going anywhere. We soon got tired of it and decided to leave. We would come back tomorrow and if it were still alive we would tell everyone that the pond had a resident crab. We would call it Kaniko.

Lady Heguri, who had been the most frightened of it, felt compelled to ask how long a crab lived.

None of us could honestly say. How long does a crab live?

Then Koto called out to us.

We all turned and stared at the crab. It had begun to panic. It tried to climb an invisible wall towards the surface but once it got there it only struggled frantically—“Kaniko the dancing crab!” Koto cried out, which I thought was heartless, for the creature was obviously dying.

The crab’s panic was soon over. Its movement lapsed. It sank back under the water and came to rest upside down on the stones, its wrinkled white bottom staring up to the surface like a face.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Like the crane that cries
merely to be heard afar
in the dark of night,

must I only hear from you?

Will we never again get to meet?

Sometimes I find

Sometimes I find life in the palace to be so cloistered! It is like living in a country of foreigners. And though I understand the words they say, I do not understand the impasse of their problems. And they cannot understand mine. To be a lover is to be a fugitive.

An overheard conversation

An overheard conversation is a wonderful bit of luck. Going out of one's way to eavesdrop is, of course, quite reprehensible, but if people are careless enough to speak of private matters in another's presence it is certainly no fault of the listener. On the third day of the third month Empress Kōmyō threw a private 'Banquet of the Stream'¹. It was held in honour of Tachibana Moroé, who had just been appointed the newest Governor General of the Dazaifu. I was suffering from an infection then and was hardly in the mood to walk about, much less make useless conversation with the drunken men sure to be splayed across the lawns. I stayed in my palm-leaf carriage and watched the festivities from just beyond the gate.

¹ A quasi-ritual social occasion imported from China. People would gather to improvise poems and to float cups of wine on a flowing stream. A good idea of the fun involved can be had by visiting Arugo restaurant in Shinsaibashi, Osaka, a favorite haunt of Marian's. The bar faces a kind of trough and delicacies of all kinds come floating past on sturdy little wooden boats. [See Figure 7.]

At sunset, as the sky above Mount Ikoma was turning a brilliant shade of orange, I saw two figures approaching the gate. Presuming there was no one left sitting in the rows of carriages pulled up in the gravel lot just outside, Princess Takano and Ōtomo's cousin, Lady Sakanoé's Elder Daughter¹ came out to the gate to speak in private. Princess Takano seemed concerned.

"Whatever for?" I heard her ask.

"You can't guess?" Sakanoé's Elder Daughter replied incredulously. "Really, I don't know how you can be so naive, Princess. We've sent dozens of letters in only four weeks...."



7. Arugo Restaurant

Takano still looked confused. My curiosity too was piqued.

"Well, marriage!" the girl cried out happily. "He's asked me to marry him."

¹ Lady Sakanoé's Elder Daughter, To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Brave man, I realize
you have yearned for me,
but could your longing compare
to that in the heart
of a frail-limbed woman?

I was stunned. It was obvious that Princess Takano was too. She put her hand to her forehead and leaned back against the open door of the gate. She looked more than surprised, she looked upset.

The girl continued: "I know he has a reputation, but he's changed now. I can hear it in his poems." The Princess was silent. Sakanoé's Elder Daughter became alarmed when there was no reaction. "Do you not advise it?" she asked. "Am I making the wrong decision?"

At this, Princess Takano awakened from her surprise. She came forward from her stance against the gate and put her arms out to the other lady. "Of course not, dear," she managed. "He's a fabulous character, absolutely illustrious."

Just then a great cheer went up in the garden. The fire boxes were being lighted and sparks swarmed into the evening sky. My entertainment came to a sudden end. Princess Takano and Lady Sakanoé's Elder Daughter walked back down the gravel path to the stream where everyone was gathering. It was the last I heard of their conversation.

I always enjoy the chance to inform Ōtomo of events at court. That very night, I wrote a letter informing him of Sakanoé's Elder Daughter's impending marriage and the manner by which I had overheard of it.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Are my thoughts

revealed to others?

I dreamed my jewelled comb box

was opened to the light.

The Princess's domicile

The house in which we live is three bays wide by five bays long. It is surrounded by covered verandas. The western veranda faces the yard and is generally much busier than the eastern veranda, with attendants, ministers, and ladies-in-waiting passing along the



8. The Princess's Domicile

stone walkways, to and from the Emperor's domicile, the Empress's domicile, and the Catering offices.

Our house is composed of one large room partitioned by bamboo and lacquer screens, and curtains hung from movable wooden frames. These are staggered throughout the room to create chambers and corridors; above them, one can see the rafters of the roof from one end of the house to the other. Whenever there are gentlemen visitors who wish

to remain unknown, they remove their head-dresses before entering, so as not to be recognised by anyone peering overtop.

I remember once when Ōtomo's father, Lord Tabito, came to talk with me, he could not find the proper path through all the partitions and yelled out that he was lost. I stood up from where I was sitting and I could see his tall head-dress moving around above the curtain frames.

“What a maze you women live in!” he cried when he finally reached me, and then whispered: “I was afraid I was going to stumble across Lady Gorii somewhere back there.”

Lady Ki occupies the northern end of the room. Ladies Heguri and Gorii, the central portion, and Koto and I the south. Lady Ki has the prettiest screens of any of us, all of them gifts from the numerous gentlemen she has known in her long period of service. She sees so many different gentlemen, I can hardly keep track of all of them.¹

In the summertime, the domiciles are much more pleasant than any of the official buildings roofed with tiles in the Chinese style. Of course, the tiles' green tinge is far more attractive to look at than thatch, especially from a distance, from Kasuga Field for instance, when the roofs of the palace seem to shimmer like water. But they collect so

¹ We, however, blessed with the gift of historical omniscience, certainly can. Men of the Nara Period were ready to carry on sentimental adventures whenever they found opportunities and the ladies of the time were not disposed to discourage them altogether. Among the many poems Ōtomo Yakamochi contributed to the *Collection of 10,000 Leaves* are those sent to him by sometime lovers:

Lady Ki, To Ōtomo Yakamochi

I have entwined the threads of my life
into a true lovers' knot,
So another time, I'm sure,
I shall see you once again.

much heat during the day that it makes these buildings all but unbearable. Were you to go into the State Halls or the Great Supreme Hall of a summer afternoon you would find it entirely deserted. Homes should be built for the summer. In the winter one can live anywhere, but dwellings unsuited to the hot months are unendurable.

This morning I watched as Koto

This morning I watched as Koto slept. She looked so elegant. How is it she can be so charming asleep and yet so dishevelled and exhausted when she wakes?

Beyond the curtain, the blinds were open on the yard. I saw the Chamberlain Fujiwara approaching from the Emperor's residence. Fujiwara is elderly and stiff, with long pendulous ears and a snout with bristly whiskers. When he speaks, he uses ancient, obscure colloquialisms such as, "One sardine is better than a mackerel twice cooked", "You can't make *okonomiyaki* without breaking eggs", and "Why put two bushels in a one-bushel sack?" Most of the time no one has any idea what he is talking about. I myself am convinced he grew up on board a ship. Fully three-quarters the way along the path he stopped in mid-stride as if some thought of great importance had just occurred to him. He knit his brow, twisted a finger in one ear, and then turned as abruptly as a soldier and went stalking back again.

How embarrassing! I simply could not repress my laughter. Hearing me, Fujiwara whirled around and eyed the blind. This, of course, only made me laugh more. After a moment, he nodded to himself and a smile appeared on one side of his seam of a mouth. He whirled around and continued on his way.

Splendid old wizard! I have no idea how anyone can be intimidated by him. He must have very oddly formed knees, I imagine.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

As long as you are near
I can live without seeing you,
but if that you
were farther away,
I fear I could not bear it.

Tabito's tale¹

Soon after Ōtomo's departure, Tabito went down to pay a visit to Yoshino. When he returned, he came to visit. We sat next to the brazier and he told me the strangest of stories. While he was there, drinking saké in the pleasant rooms of the upper palace and composing poems to celebrate the fall colours, there came into the house a bearded man dressed in such finery that the other men marveled at his appearance.

¹ This entry and all the others which make mention of Lord Ōtomo Tabito are suspect. Tabito led a brilliant military career and was much renowned as a poet. More importantly here, he was the father of Otomo Yakamochi, Lady Kasa's lover. Unfortunately, Tabito died in the year 731, 16 years before Lady Kasa's pillow book was even written. Tabito was, more than likely, inserted into the text by a later scribe as a way of giving more value to the work by forging another solid link with history. This entry, and the others, have not been extracted from the present edition because, first of all, Tabito is rather charming, Khayyam-esque and rotund as his name; and, secondly, because his presence demonstrates the cumulative, malleable nature of history. Were we to know nothing other of ancient history it would not occur to us that he did not belong here. History, the archaeologist soon learns, is rarely as safe as when it is beneath the soil. When it passes through men's hands it is likely to be smudged. And this is Tabito, a smudge, delightful as he may be. To remove him and every other suspect entry in the pillow book might very well leave us with nothing.

“On top of flowered orange trousers he wore three under-robos of unlined silk and a doubled black and red over-robe with a pattern of hollyhocks bordered by a golden Chinese frieze. He wore a tall court head-dress and a magnificent scabbard of worked silver that shone in the light of the candles.

“He entered the room without introducing himself and knelt down on the mat to pick up a bowl. He poured this bowl full from a nearby jug and, holding it high for all to see, swiftly inverted it. The lady of the house gasped. But, much to everyone’s amazement, nothing fell. The bowl was empty.

“Well, you can imagine. All the men in the house burst out into cheers and laughter, assuming that it was some form of entertainment that had been arranged for them.

“So to emphasize his feat, the man filled the bowl again and, as he had done the first time, turned it upside-down above the floor. And again the bowl was empty. He repeated the trick several times, always refilling his bowl from the same jug. Then, when the jug was finally empty, the bearded man put down the bowl and lifted the jug on high instead. This provoked sudden mirth, for we all expected that he would invert the empty jug as he had done the cups and that this time, conversely, it would be full.”

Here, Tabito paused to take a drink from his own cup. He held it up high and turned it just a little so that several drops fell onto the mat. This was to make me laugh. Like a guilty child he downed the cup.

“Now where was I? The bearded man, in his fabulous trousers and splendid over-robe, is kneeling before his audience with the jug held high above his head. All are waiting in silence, overcome by the tension this man has created by his silent show. At this moment

a smile comes over his face, for the audience is his alone. But his eyes do not smile. He watches sternly the men seated around him. He reaches up with his free hand and perches the base of the jug precariously upon his fingertips. The vessel, which everyone assumes to be full, though they have seen with their own eyes that it is empty, is wavering in the air. Upon the flared mouth, glistening in the light of the tapers burning in the room, a drop of steely liquid trembles.”

And then Tabito groaned. He lifted his weight from the floor. “I’m afraid I have to be going now, Kasa,” he said.

“What?!” I cried.

“Yes, I am sorry but I do have to return home for dinner. The women will be upset if I’m late.”

“But the jug!” I protested. “What about the strange man and the jug?”

Tabito shuffled towards the door, wedging his ivory tablet down into his sash. “Oh that,” he said nonchalantly. “We Ōtomos are good storytellers, aren’t we? You should learn not to be taken in by such fancy tales.” And with that he left the room. He groaned again as he stepped down from the veranda. I listened to his footsteps across the gravel and several minutes later, the greeting call of the guards at the eastern middle gate.

Kuchime and Mumyo

The young Prince Asaka adores the cats in the palace and he was worried when he noticed Kuchime and Mumyo fattening. He wondered if the Inner Catering Bureau were

feeding them too much. I listened as Princess Takano explained to him that they were pregnant.

A koto made of paulownia

Koto has decided that she will only play a koto made of paulownia wood. She saw Emperor Shōmu playing one which he received from China and she decided that she no longer cared for the one she had. Of course, her instructor from the Music Bureau was furious.

“How can she make such demands?” he cried at me, standing on my veranda with the rejected koto in his hand. Of course, I had heard everything that had gone on between them and decided not to get involved. I hardly care for the fact that every time Koto does something to infuriate, discomfort, or insult someone, they come to me for an explanation. I am not her mother, after all. Fujiwara is the worst. He comes to me repeatedly, complaining that Koto is too ornery or cold— “always blowing east one day and west the next”—and that it is *my* duty to see that she behaves.

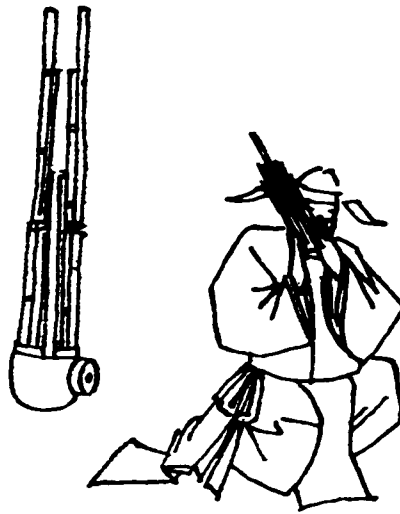
I told the music instructor to let her play a paulownia koto if that was what she wanted.

The music instructor sprayed saliva across his robe. “Why doesn’t she just play a golden one!” he cried. “Do you think I can just go down to the East Market and pick one up for a couple of coins? She says if she can’t play a paulownia harp, then she will only play *sho*.”

“Then let her play *sho*,” I replied.

“She *can't* play *sho*! *Sho* is only for men to play. It's not a woman's instrument. It's not proper.”

Really, it was all I could do to get the exasperated man off my veranda. I have an idea that Koto finally got her way though. I heard someone playing *sho* very badly on the west veranda several evenings ago.



9. *sho* (thirteen-pipe flute)

The Festival of the Young Herbs

When you arrive at the Festival of the Young Herbs, you may not notice that there is a festival going on at all. All that will be seen are women and men in everyday dress picking herbs from the meadows on Nara Hill. Here and there are officials from the Imperial Storehouse, collecting what is found. Everyone goes about their work quietly and seriously, searching through the grasses for the seven lucky herbs. By morning's end, there are several baskets full. These are taken to the Inner Catering Office where they are stewed with rice to make gruel, a bowl of which is offered to the Emperor.

In the early morning

In the early morning I open the door several inches to get the breeze. It is still dark under the eaves of the houses but the sky is beautifully illuminated. The edge of the veranda is wet with dew and so are the stone walks. Above Nara, in the east, Kasuga Hill and Nara Hill look like sleeping animals with their heads tucked under. Imagining the opposite slopes, I see them turned green-gold by the sun and all sorts of birds and deer are calling to one another there. How beautiful it must be! Still, I could not stand to have such commotion every morning. It would be like living beside the West Market. Here in the palace, the morning creeps in like a favourite tawny cat. It nuzzles and rubs against you with its soft fur, and for a few dreamy minutes you look admiringly upon it before it goes away again.

The Great Purification

Few ceremonies are as demanding as the Great Purification. “An assembly of Imperial Princes and officials, who have attained ritual purity by fasting and continence, gather by the main gate of the Imperial Palace and perform a Shintō service to purge all His Majesty’s subjects of their impurity and sin... In addition, a life-size figure of the Emperor is washed in a river, so that all Imperial impurities may be removed.”¹

¹ Morris, p. 162.

Chamberlain Fujiwara is so ridiculous!

Emperor Shōmu has many, many scrolls. If all the scrolls in his collection were put on display there would not be a bare wall in the entire palace. The Emperor likes very much to look through these things when he is not studying scripture. He admires the *imamekashi* [‘in vogue’] Chinese craftsmanship and occasionally sets out a piece in the State Halls for everyone to admire. To come to my point—which is the foolishness of Chamberlain Fujiwara—the Emperor decided to display a scroll in the East Precinct Garden for a recent banquet. This particular scroll was received from a Chinese ambassador. It depicts an amorous scene from a text called the *Yū Fang Pi Chūeh* [‘Secret Prescriptions of the Bedchamber’] and because of its subject matter was hung in the Small Pavilion across the pond from the Main Pavilion.

When we arrived and everyone was mulling around, waiting for the Emperor and Empress to arrive, Prince Odai came to ask me if I had seen the scroll. Prince Odai is only fifteen but he is already an incurable gossip; as soon as Ki, Heguri, and Gorii saw him talking to me they gathered around to hear what he had to say. He told them there was an amusing scroll in the Small Pavilion and made several gestures with his hands which I will not trouble to describe. Of course we all burst out laughing and decided to go over and see it. Prince Odai took it upon himself to be our guide, though we could hardly have got lost following the path around the pond.

Well, certainly nothing but praise can be given for such a magnificent scroll. The marbled grey paper is so thick and heavy that one believes it must be a slab of stone. In fact, there were several arguments about the paper that night, disputes as to whether or

not such paper could be made in Yamato. I think it quite goes without saying that such paper could only come from China, but there were several stubborn men, Lord Tabito included, who said they had seen better made right here in Nara. The paper had a red border with silver embroidery depicting waves on the sea. On the matter of the painting itself, at least, there was no argument. No Yamato painter can equal in skill the master of Chang'an who created this scroll. Instead of the same gardens and bridges and men poling barques beneath the willows of Lhasa that one sees so frequently, this scroll depicted a simple room, a tray upon the floor with wine cups and cakes, and, upon a bed of robes, a very comely man, half-dressed, copulating with a woman. Certainly, we all laughed, but no one could disregard the simple beauty of the scene: the figures were like two bent stamens at the centre of a flower. Each was so balanced, the man's little hands poised so lightly upon the woman's hips, that it seemed as if there were no force or motion in their lovemaking at all. Their faces were impassive as Bodhisattvas. Who has known love like this? It was almost saintly, their lovemaking; one had the feeling that the scene was not sordid at all, but rather, sacred.

When Fujiwara arrived, he pushed his way through the crowd of admirers and his face, once he was close enough to make out the details of the figures, showed his surprise. When he turned his head, as a dog will do when it is curious, we all burst out laughing at him.

When we heard the Emperor arrive, everyone rushed back to the Main Pavilion. Later on that afternoon, during the meal, I glanced out at the pond and noticed, on the path by the eastern fence, the grey and pink robes of Fujiwara gliding past the reeds. This I could

not resist making known to everyone, that Fujiwara had returned alone for another look at the *Secret Prescriptions of the Bedchamber*. In the midst of great laughter, Tabito bade all the women turn over onto their hands and knees for Fujiwara's return.

I sent him the beginning

I sent him the beginning of the well-known poem:

Come to me, my dearest,

Come in through the bamboo blinds!

but he has not yet responded with the rest. Silly man, could he have forgotten? How is it that he can be so concerned with a collection of poetry and yet cannot remember the final lines to such a simple poem as that?

A bit of news

A bit of news... [This sentence is largely illegible.]

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

To have loved you who loved me not,

Was like going to a great temple,

To bow in adoration,

Behind the back of the famished devil.¹

¹ Images of demons were kept in Buddhist temples as a warning to show what state of existence a man might be transmuted to in the after-life through disbelief and evil conduct. To worship these images is, of course, absurd, degrading, and useless.

Things that disgust

Centipedes. Millipedes. Live crabs in a pile. A single man. A rough hand at writing. The sound of workmen speaking beyond the walls. White teeth. Curly hair. Coloured nails. More than anything, one's own ignorance.

A man's heart.

A man's heart is a shameful thing. When he is with a woman whom he finds tiresome and distasteful, he does not show that he dislikes her but makes her believe she can count on him. Still worse, a man who has the reputation of being kind and loving treats a woman in such a way that she cannot imagine his feelings are anything but sincere. Yet he is untrue to her not only in his thoughts but in his actions and his words. The woman, of course, has no idea that she is being maligned.¹

Hateful things

A seam coming unstitched. Violet or orange in the wrong season. Carriages that push ahead at a festival and spoil the view. The *shikkongo shin*. A drop of ink at the end of a very long letter. A drop of soy on a very expensive silk. Ill virtue in a beautiful person. Arriving at Nara Field to watch a match of *kemari* that was scheduled only to find that no

¹This entry is identical to one found in *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* (Morris, p. 144), revealing clearly that Kasa's pillow book was still in circulation in Shōnagon's time.



10. *shikkongo shin* ['thunderbolt bearer'] ca. 733, Todai-ji Temple, Nara

one is there. Poor people and the houses they live in and the smell of their millet cooking as one passes down a narrow lane. One hears footsteps upon the veranda late at night but it only turns out to be night service from the Inner Catering Office or a wayward guard. Even more hateful when it turns out to be a gentleman who has come to visit someone else and one is forced to listen to them all night. Pickled jelly-fish that has sat too long in the sun. I detest dried shark. A visitor leaping up right away, as if he had urgent business elsewhere. An infection that tickles at the back of the throat. Liars. Beggars. Nuns. Tonsures. Thin dogs. Soldiers. Commoners thatching themselves like their huts against the snow or rain, walking along Scarlet Phoenix Boulevard like so many piles of mulberry bark and reeking of boiled persimmon juice. The smell of the ditches in the height of summer. Anything that swarms.

Composed on the occasion of my drunkenness

I drank too much last night and my head is throbbing. It makes me acutely aware of Koto in the corner behind her curtain, plucking her eyebrows and whimpering from the pain.

For the appointment of Ōtomo

For the appointment of Ōtomo Yakamochi, now Governor of Etchū Province, a ceremony was held at the Great Supreme Hall. This was the thirteenth day of the seventh month. It should have been an enjoyable occasion, and for many, I suppose, it was.

On the first level field are assembled all the lower officials and men of lower rank. Mats have been laid out for them and, because it is hot, there are red parasols for those in the first three rows. In front of these are the eight towering standards of the ministries, their banners and flags brightly dyed—mustard yellow, red, white, green, and black—all stirring gently in what little breeze there is on the afternoon.

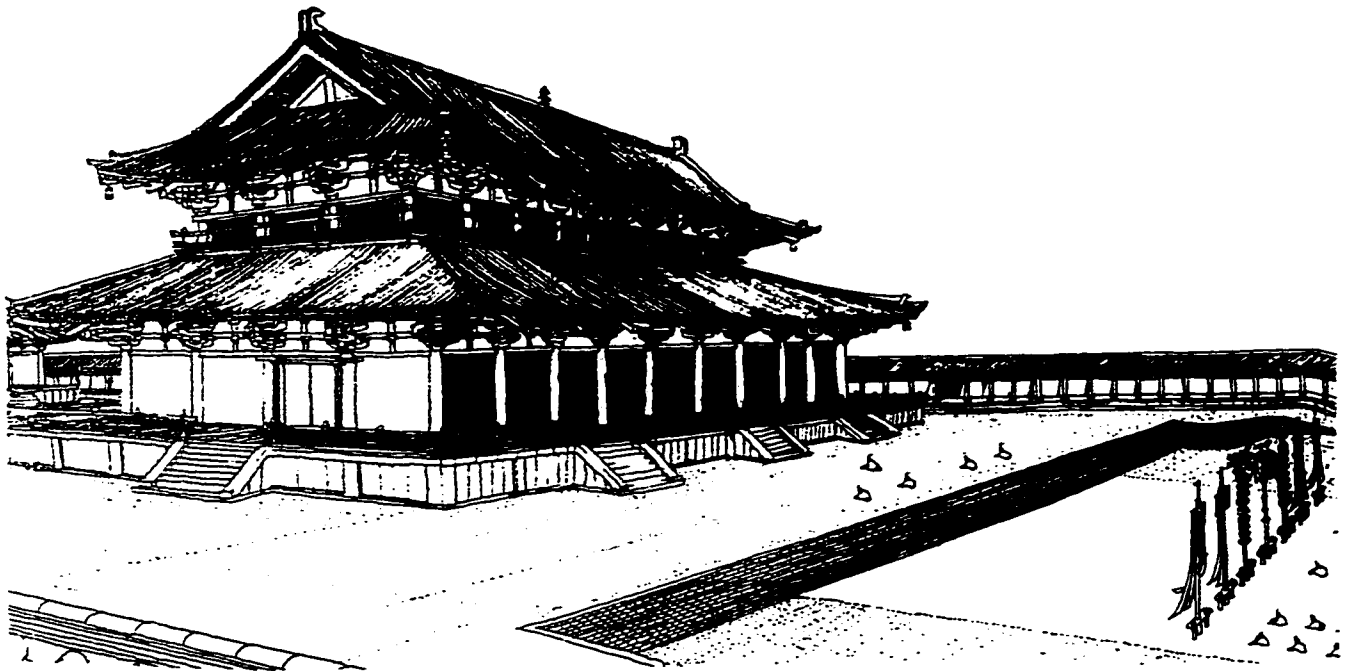
Of course, I watched from far behind, underneath the colonnade. When I first arrived, I was surprised to find that so many ladies had chosen to come to this ceremony; it was very hot and there were other, more elaborate, ceremonies one might have wished to view at another time.

We all sat in the shade of the columns and looked out across the blinding white gravel of the plaza. Sitting next to me was the Lady Momoé and how tearful she became when

the ceremony began!¹ I asked her twice to be silent, but she only shook her head and covered her eyes with her handkerchief. Yet another of Yakamochi's conquests left in a poetic mood.

I shall never write another poem.

On the terrace, all the high officials come to take their places in front of the hall. Led by the Ministers of Right and Left, they walk up the ramps on opposing sides and file



11. Forecourt of the Great Supreme Hall

across until they met at the centre. One spot remains empty in between them. This is the place of the Chamberlain Fujiwara, who dodders over to the spot only after everyone else

¹ Lady Momoé of Kawachi, to Ōtomo Yakamochi

To this day I have not forgotten
the moon on that pitch-black night,
for my thoughts of you
have known no lull.

is already seated. He is an unbearable eyesore, the height of pretence in an already turgid scene.

I looked around as everyone waited for the old fool to be seated. Behind me, further under the shadows of the gate, there were several attendants and, against the bright sunshine beyond, I could see the silhouette of an elegantly attired woman leaning against one of the columns. It might have been Lady Abé, or Princess Yamaguchi.¹

I found it strangely enjoyable, sitting there, listening to all the sobbing going on around me, that so many others should be crying when I was not. I felt I would retch when I thought of how seriously I had believed in our courtship.

When Chamberlain Fujiwara has finally taken his place in the first row upon the terrace, Emperor Shōmu appears. His scarlet robes match the parasols and the Chinese columns, yet how tiny he seems. He comes forward, raises his ivory tablet, scatters salt over the stairs and is seated again. Then it is another eternity for Fujiwara to get back to his feet, approach the stairs, make whatever address it is he is supposed to make, and then turn to the assembly and call out Yakamochi's name. Of course, from such a distance I cannot hear anything but I understand from long experience exactly what is happening. Midway along the third row, one of the red parasols wilts like a single flower in a crowded field. One glimpses Yakamochi then, dressed in yellow, passing through the

¹ Princess Yamaguchi, to Ōtomo Yakamochi

Not wanting others to see
that I long over you,
I find each day troubled
with half-stirred desires.
I cannot go on like this.

maze of parasols and seated men. He emerges at the right and ascends the ramp onto the terrace. He meets Fujiwara at the centre where they exchange formal greetings and then they both turn to face the Emperor, kneeling down before the stairs.

It was at this point, when the Emperor was to confer his decree, that I had had enough. They were all cruel, insistent men, prolonging my grief in the most elaborate and meaningless way. All that ritual was hollow as a locust shell. I went back through the colonnade to my carriage and told the driver to take me away.

“Where?” he asked.

“I don’t care,” I told him. “Take me anywhere. Just take me for a drive.”

The Court

Emperor Shōmu, son of the Emperor Mommu. Empress Kōmyō. Empress-Abdicated Genshō, mother of Emperor Shōmu. Princess Takano, daughter of Emperor Shōmu and Empress Kōmyō. Prince Aki, great-grandson of the Emperor Tenji. Princess Ki, daughter of the Emperor Temmu. Princess Minabe, elder sister of the Empress Gemmyo. Prince Ichihara, son of Prince Aki. Prince Funado, grandson of the Emperor Temmu. Prince Kadobe, great-grandson of the Emperor Temmu. Prince Atsumi. Prince Yuhara, grandson of Emperor Tenji. Prince Takayasu. Prince Odai. The Chamberlain Fujiwara. The Fujiwara Ministers of Right and Left. Soon to be named Commander of the Dazaifu, Tachibana Moroé. Vice-Commander of the Dazaifu, Lord Ki. Deputy Vice-Commander of the Dazaifu, Ono Oyu. Poet of State, Otomo Tabito. Administrator General, Tajihhi Mahito. Judicial Administrator, Tan Maro. Scribe, Shi Ohara. Deputy Scribe, Yamaguchi

Wakamaro. Judicial Scribe, Ya Sakunamaro. Deputy Judicial Scribe, Den Umahito. Shinto Head Priest, Ko Imajiki. Pharmacist General, Cho Fukushi, also known as Ko Gitsu. Secretary of Calculation, Shiki Omichi. Provincial Administrators and Deputy Provincial Administrators, Ka Hachimaro, Saeiki Ko'Obito, Ono Kunikata, Kadobe Isotari, Ho Ama, Ono Tamari, Ko Oyu, Den Makami, Hamishi Momomura, Ōtomo Yakamochi. Minister of Palace Rites and Peerages, Kiyu Ono. Minister of Education, Ki Kiyohito. Minister of the Emperor's Private Office, Takahito Tsuki. Director of the Imperial Property Bureau, Hozumi Oyu. Assistant Director, Ti Amo. Head of Palace Guards, Hanishi Mitoshi. Chief of the Music Bureau, Amadeo Mosaruto. Inner Catering Office Chief. Great Catering Office Chief. Deputy to Inner Catering Office Chief. Deputy to Great Catering Office Chief. Assistant to the Inner Catering Office Chief's Deputy, Junichiro Yamanaka. Minister of Dances, Mikiru Baruisniku. Minister of Finance, Bidu Gātsu. Under-secretary to the Minister of the Left, No Budi. Under-secretary to the Minister of the Right, No Ono. Director of the Sewing Bureau, Ugo Bosu. Director of the Saké Bureau, Shinske Hakutsuru. Overseer of Palace Grounds, Yare no Kubota. Orderly of the Great Supreme Hall, Yumihara Oe. Chief of the Bureau for the Construction of Todaiji Temple and Surrounding Environs not under the Jurisdiction of Kofukuji Temple, Akira Mizoguchi. Court Scribe Deputy Junior Third Rank, Bedi Shuwoodo. Ladies-in-Waiting to the Empress Kōmyō, Sakanoe, Harumi, Kasamura, Shimano, Kawari, and Mite. Ladies-in-Waiting to the Ex-Empress Gensho, Kashiharajingumae, Yoshino, Koriama, Gakuenmae, Tanabe, Joyo, Momoyamagoriomae, Omiya, Takanohara, Doshisha, and Tsuruhashi. Ladies-in-waiting to the Princess Takano, Gorii, Ki, Heguri,

Hisako, and Kasa. Oh, Minister of This. Minister of That. I get so very bored of the Palace Lists.

The 'morning face' boy

There is a young man of the Asagao¹ family who walks past the East Wall just before the second watch every afternoon. Unless there is some annoying noise, one can hear his voice, a warbling, rhythmic half-chant that he utters as he walks up the avenue. I have only actually seen the boy twice, when I happened to be outside the palace at the time. What I can remember of him is that his face is quite normal, unlike the distorted features of others that are similarly afflicted by demons. His eyes are always roving, seldom stopping to dwell on any one particular thing. Once, last winter, I saw him walking ahead of us through the snow as Princess Takano and I approached the Akatainukai Gate in her carriage. Every several steps, he was touching the packed-earth wall compulsively, like a ritual. It seemed that had he not touched the wall, that if someone, perhaps, had stayed his hand from doing this, it would have been of grave consequence to him. The rapture in his face, the "aaah, ha! aaah-ha!" he muttered as he walked, the regular touch upon the wall, there was something strangely inviting about it all. I wanted to try it too, to emulate him as I imagine a child would have.

This idea I did not bother to tell Princess Takano.

On the other occasion that I saw the 'morning face' boy pass by the gate, his eyes seized upon the brass rings of the open doors. One hand went immediately to his mouth

¹ Literally, 'morning face', not, as some scholars have suggested, 'mourning face'.

and he hesitated a moment. It was clear that he wanted to touch them. He stepped closer and reached out to stroke the shining brass. Then, immediately he had done it, he spun around and went out of the gate, continuing down the east face of the wall. Now the guards at Akatainukai Gate are rude and cynical, always drunk by night and making ridiculous comments to passers-by during the day. I do not know why anyone suffers them. Still, they left the 'morning face' boy in peace. As I think on it, I am inclined to believe that the nature of the boy's "calling" garners him this respect. His "duties" are as regimented as anyone's in the palace, and only slightly more ridiculous. No one would think twice about making fun at Lord Tabito's or the Chamberlain Fujiwara's expense, but the 'morning face' boy is a model of discipline.

When you left

When you left, you took my composure and my courage with you. I did not know what to do with myself. I should have stayed in one place, but I could not keep still. I wandered aimlessly. I walked through Nara, full of places so intimately bound to memory that they stung. I wanted desperately to be lost. I kept walking. I passed over a hill and into a valley. I came to a station. I caught the first train to Osaka and lost myself in the crowds.

This week we took our bath¹

This week we took our bath together in the morning, Lady Koto and I. Koto is the youngest at court and we all admire her figure. I told her so at the bath but she did not seem pleased.

“I still don't know how to dress as you do,” she said.

This, lamentably, is true. Koto receives very poor reviews at court because of a terrible eye for colour. She has made several horrible combinations since she came here and I have had to pull her back into chambers before she makes a fool of herself in company. She tells me then that she hates the court and wants to leave. I daresay she would get her silly wish if I let her dress herself.

Protesting his very good intentions

Protesting his very good intentions, the Chamberlain Fujiwara has taken to visiting Lady Koto in order to “instruct her on proper court etiquette.” In theory I suppose this is considered part of his job, but like so many other things, it is just not done. Still, there is no arguing with a Chamberlain. So Koto is plagued and it is all I can do to protect the girl from his lechery; she follows me now everywhere I go. Sooner or later, I imagine, she will have to relent to him.

¹The Japanese habit of bathing everyday had not yet developed. Chinese medical journals of the period recommended one bath every five days.

If I were a man

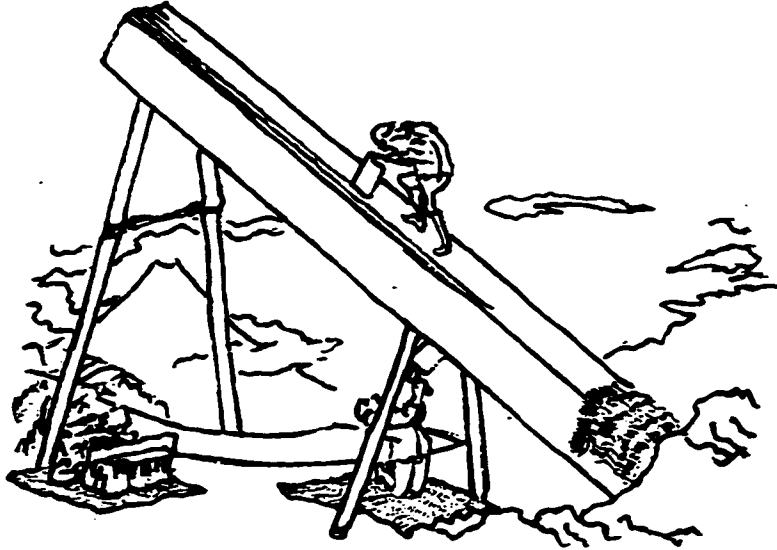
If I were a man I would be attracted to a woman by her figure, not her clothes. But men are shallow. All they care for is a new texture, an elegant ensemble, a brow free of hair, and well-blackened teeth. Is it not the body beneath the clothes that deserves more appreciation?

At sunrise

At sunrise, the Emperor Shōmu made his way to the Eastern Precinct Garden and, facing towards Isé Shrine, made obeisance to the heavens, praying to the *kami* and to his ancestors for a prosperous reign and subjugation of all evil spirits. It was a cold morning and as we stood watching our breath rose in front of our faces. We gathered our sleeves together into our fists to keep them closed from the cold air. The Emperor's prayers were somewhat shortened, however, when he got up off the stones at the water's edge and complained that he was cold. He was shivering in his robes and I could see the taut lines of his neck, his usually congenial face closed to the cold like a flower.

Things taken for granted

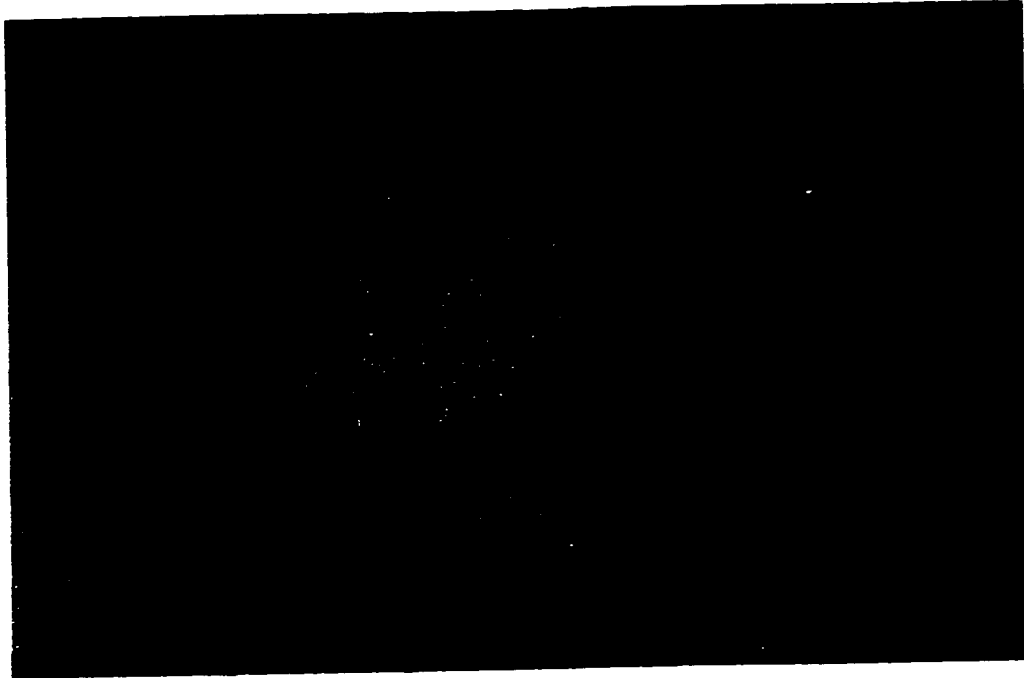
Life. Death. Peace. Husbands and wives. Sometimes even lovers. The absence of disease. Mirrors. Earlobes. Reading light at night. Tree leaves in summer. The availability of ink. The origin of ink. The ingredients of ink. The backs of knees. The labour put into a floorboard



12. Sawyers (from Hokusai's *Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji*)

Once again

Once again the Chamberlain Fujiwara has found occasion to impose his presence upon Lady Koto and it seems quite obvious to everyone that he has chosen her for his newest affair. It is the last morning of the year and several of the ladies of the Empress' household are expected to pick the winter-blooming camellias for the Devil Chase. These are used, along with ointments and saké, to reward the Devil Chaser after he has finished making his way through the palace, twanging his bowstring, shooting arrows into the air, and striking his buckler in order to expel evil spirits before the New Year's celebrations begin. This is the finest of spectacles and I enjoy it greatly. The Devil Chaser is always caparisoned in red with a gold mask and this evening it will be his duty not only to cleanse the palace but also the site of the Todai-ji.



13. Camellias and Ridgepole Finial

In any event, this morning Fujiwara came rushing along the veranda calling out for Koto and I in a great panic.

“Kasa! Where’s Kasa?” he was demanding into the open doorways. He calls my name because he does not want to make it so obvious that Koto is the real object of his attentions. Everyone is well aware that there is no love lost between Fujiwara and I. Koto looked at me plaintively, but from the sound of Fujiwara’s voice I knew immediately that there was no point in trying to conceal her.

“Oh, no,” Koto groaned. “Kasa, not again. What can he possibly want this time?”

His shoes clopped up to our door. I could see his head-dress above the curtain of state.

“Kasa! Is Lady Koto there with you?”

“No,” I called back to him. “She’s just gone to use the toilet.”

“Oh you are sly,” he replied, “I already checked there. Is this coffee? Oh, it’s cold. I really have no time. Koto, put on your best *karaginu* and come down to State Halls within the hour. One of Komyo’s women has taken ill and won’t be picking camellias.”

Hisako, kneeling with some sewing in her hands, listening intently, fell back across her robes most dramatically. I could not help but laugh.

“What?!” snapped Fujiwara immediately. “What’s going on behind there?”

“Why me?” Koto whined.

Fujiwara was instantly indignant. “*Why you?*” he repeated sternly. “You are given the chance to proxy for one of the Empress’s ladies and you ask *why you?* Does Kasa discourage you? Boons unexploited soon become impediments, my girl. Do not leave your *kaki* too long on the tree.” Koto rolled her eyes. “Not *everyone* cares about their prospects for the future but Kasa’s is certainly no model to follow.”

Koto only stared blankly at the ceiling.

“Noon then,” said the Chamberlain.

“Noon then,” Koto repeated.

Then several days

Then several days after the Tooth Hardening, a rumour was spread that Emperor Shōmu was ill. At the Bestowal of the Ranks on the fifth day, he had appeared in good spirits, but the Chancellor and Ministers of Right and Left were responsible for conferring the new ranks on those who had been promoted and the Emperor did little more than sit beneath his baldachin and watch. But on the seventh day, at the Ceremony

of the Blue Horses, which everyone knows to be one of the Emperor's favourites, for it was he himself who imported the custom from China, our Emperor looked very pale and at one point I even wondered if he were asleep. It was frightening to think that he could have been ill then, for this procession of horses is the most reliable assurance of maintaining one's health in the following year.

Camellias

When Koto returned in the afternoon she related to me how Fujiwara had instructed her how to pick camellias—"reach, yes, that's it, no that one is too high for you, little girl, yes that one over there, hurry up, lazy girl, one day fishing and two days to dry the nets! now twist, place it there, just there in the basket"—how embarrassed Koto was! All the while, the Empress Kōmyō's ladies had regaled themselves of the spectacle.now twist, place it there, just there in the basket"—how embarrassed Koto was! All the while, the Empress Kōmyō's ladies had regaled themselves of the spectacle.

Emperor Shōmu is sick

Emperor Shōmu is sick and Empress Kōmyō is beside herself with worry. Even Princess Takano cannot console her and she is constantly going from the Emperor's chamber to Yakushi-ji temple for another prayer, to the Bureau of Medicine for a new remedy, to the

Bureau of Divination to check the melons¹, and then back to see the Emperor again, never stopping to eat, sleep or bathe. This morning she got so upset at the Yakushi-ji priests that she told them she would build another, more effective temple.

Lady Koto has been

Lady Koto has been chosen to take part in the Tooth Hardening. She and two other specially appointed virgins will taste various types of spiced wine before presenting them to Emperor Shōmu. Radishes, mirror-shaped rice cakes, melons, snow crabs, and other similarly auspicious foods will then be presented to the Emperor in order to “harden his teeth” during the coming year. In the ensuing banquet, the three virgins always end up drinking a great deal and are pursued by the gentlemen of the court. This is why the ceremony is sometimes referred to as, simply, the “hardening. The day she was notified of her appointment, Koto came to me in tears, completely in the dark about what was expected of her. The veranda was empty. Mount Ikoma brooded low on the horizon beneath an empty sky. Closer at hand, three crows presided over the yard from the roof of the Empress’s Domicile. “Why me why me why me!” Koto pleaded, breaking the day’s repose. I sighed and tried to take an interest in the teary-eyed creature kneeling before me. It was, of course, more than likely that Fujiwara had a hand in her election. I explained the mystery in the

¹ Although their use in prophesying the future has diminished considerably over the years, melons are still treasured in Japan. A single cantaloupe costs between 30 and 100 American dollars in a Japanese supermarket. The record price paid at auction for a cantaloupe deemed “perfect” in sweetness, shape, colour, and scent was \$1500, bought by a distraught husband for his dying wife.

simplest terms possible: "For Fujiwara to take your virginity is all very well, Koto, a fine anecdote, but it's a matter of prestige if he does so on the night of the Tooth Hardening."

The girl looked positively horrified. "How can you be so... so..."

"The only way to make him lose interest would be for someone to beat him to the prize," I continued, sounding very matter-of-fact even to myself, as if these things had never been new to me. "The problem is, who would dare to do it? You may be pretty, but stealing from a Fujiwara would be political suicide."

Koto let forth something between a sigh and a moan. "Couldn't we spread a rumour?"

"Easiest thing in the world," I replied, "but you still have to fail the examination."

"Examination! What kind of examination?" she wailed.

"How frightful!" I exclaimed. It was absurd to be sitting there discussing the problem of the girl's virginity with such gravity when in a month's time, or two months, or however long it would take before she came to her senses, we would be laughing about it. "Do I really have to explain it to you, Koto?" I asked. "Look, just find some guard or other and seduce him. The clerks from the Saké Bureau are easy prey. So long as you don't have any compunction ruining a man's career, you'll fail the test and Fujiwara will lose all interest."

Koto stared down at the mat with her fine little hands clenched pink as flower buds. "And what if I'm already in love with someone?"

"Well then I hardly need to explain things, do I?"

She thought a moment, and hesitated, and then shook her head. I felt that there had been a brief moment when she might have told me something, but the tension returned to her face

and the window into her thoughts was gone. “Perhaps I don’t need anyone’s help at all,” she said.

Flowers

The delicate red petals that form the inner envelope around the camellia’s stamens stay sheltered while the outer ones are torn by the wind. Syringa. Pinks. Short, fleshy, brown tubers. Chrysanthemums protected by paper hoods; the dew drips from the petals onto the paper, and when the hood is removed, the scent remains there. Lotus leaves, spread out upon the water. Water-lily. Cherry blossoms and plum blossoms, but these are not proper flowers so I will not consider them here.

Onion flower, longest lived of all the flowers. Hollyhock, that gives a hot feeling in summer. Wisteria, much prettier than its namesake.¹

Just as she said

Just as she said she would, her faith in our ailing Emperor as strong as ever, Empress Kōmyō has begun construction of a temple. Now, instead of spending her days by the Emperor’s bedside, she watches the painfully slow process of the temple’s construction and takes part in the blessing of every single timber. Today the Princess and I accompanied her. The climate brought about in the palace by Shōmu’s illness is dour and the thought of leaving the palace for a little jaunt was welcome. I had little idea of the tedious day we all would end up spending.

¹ *fuji-hara* (‘wisteria field’): an acidulous reference to the Chamberlain Fujiwara.

The Empress's viewing room is a box-like room in a tree, propped above the ground on wooden beams. The Princess and I, along with the Empress's ladies-in-waiting sat up in this box in two rows with the Empress seated just in front of the first row, peering down through the bamboo blinds at the construction going on beneath. We were all rather talkative at first but the Empress's silence and doleful demeanour soon made us uncomfortable and before long no one spoke.

For a time I was amused by the workmen's rough language and the way they gulped their food down at meal time; a dance troupe could not have been better synchronised. As the day wore on, however, and Kōmyō's silence and the incessant tinkling of her Buddhist rosaries weighed upon us all, I began to feel uneasy and wished that I had worn something lighter than the heavy brocade I had on. I grew sleepy. Several of the Empress's ladies-in-waiting, who were forced to endure this torture *everyday*, had actually fallen asleep. It was at once sad and amazing to watch how they could retain their posture and yet be sound asleep. And should Empress Kōmyō even budge, but straighten a sleeve or put a finger to her brow, they were all as instantly attentive as if they had never taken their eyes from her.

After spending the better part of the day on high, we were finally taken for a tour of the temple construction by the architect. He explained that the ground here was sacred. Not so very long ago, there had been a Shinto shrine on this spot which had burnt down in a fire. Far from making the ground unfit for a Buddhist temple, it only made the ground more sacred. While the architect spoke, I looked at the clutter which surrounded us. The foundation had already been laid and large pillars were being prepared for erection. I thought that the practical work would be done first and the decorating later, but at the same

time that the pillars and beams were being cut to length, the more fanciful and detailed work of ornamentation was being done too. Here was a rough-hewn beam integral to the structure of the temple, painstakingly smoothed by a half-naked carpenter from the provinces, and not ten yards away was a master carver from China at work on a whimsical transom of egrets, dragonflies, and picotees. Quite remarkable!

The design of the temple is *imamekashi* in the utmost. “With such an advanced temple built in his honour,” the architect was saying, “the august Emperor cannot fail to regain his health.”

The Festival of the Weaver Star

No festival is more charming than the Festival of the Weaver Star, when the Emperor and the Court seat themselves in his garden to watch the meeting of the Herdsman and the Weaver. “Because of her love for the Herdsman, [represented by the star Altair] the Weaver [Vega] neglected her work on the clothes for the gods, while the Herdsman neglected his cattle. As a punishment the Emperor of Heaven put the two stars on opposite sides of the Milky Way, decreeing that they should be allowed to meet only once a year, namely, on the 7th of the 7th month, when a company of heavenly magpies forms a bridge that the Weaver can cross to join her lover. The magpies will not make their bridge, however, unless it is a clear night; if it rains, the lovers must wait for another year.”¹

¹ Morris, Ivan, p. 162n.

An overheard conversation

Walking past the Morning Assembly Halls, I overheard Tabito and Sakimaro discussing the merits of a book they had both read. I could not see either one of them, for they were behind the wooden partition that conceals the dressing-room, but I recognised their voices well enough and stopped to eavesdrop for a while. Several clerks saw me there with my ear to an interstice in the fence and joined me to benefit from the learned men's conversation. Sakimaro was telling Tabito, in that unmistakable nasal whine that sounds like the sougning of an adze against dry wood: "It was a sordid waste of my time. One shouldn't read such a romance without some perspective on the author's life, so as to see how all events and personages are extracted from reality. Do you remember *The Great Voyage*, and how each character's name was an anagram for a real person's? Very fine book, that."

"Tripe!" Tabito cried out very close, and at least one of the clerks with his ear against the wall recoiled in alarm. "You call yourself a Buddhist?" he continued. "Good grief, you give a man no credit for his imagination. You, Sakimaro, so certain that you'll be a celebrated falcon in the next life and you don't believe in imagination? What good is a romance if it's only going to rehash history?"

"You leave out all the humdrum things," answered the sougning voice of the administrator.

"Well, that's altogether different territory," Tabito replied. "Your idea of humdrum and my idea of humdrum are two different things. Wasn't it you who wanted to—good grief, is there someone beyond the wall?"

The clerks bolted. I took a step away just as Tabito delivered a booming kick to the fence. I hurried on my way towards the State Halls. Later on, I told Princess Takano the details of the conversation and she was most amused. She took Tabito's side of the argument but I could not make up my mind.

A pilgrimage

On the third to last day of the twelfth month we made a pilgrimage to a mountain temple. It had not been entirely necessary, this pilgrimage, but Koto had just failed the exam and wanted to avoid any recriminations which Fujiwara might have brought upon her. I myself was merely hoping to see some snow as there was none in Nara at the time. We left, as is the custom for such a pilgrimage, at midnight, and as we were crossing the Horokawa by way of Amagatsuji Ferry the moon was shining brightly on the water.

"Let's swim to the moon," Koto said. And it did look as if we really could swim to the moon then, for there was only a slim barrier of dead reeds separating the water and the sky. Behind us, the Imperial City of Nara was quiet in sleep. Only once did we hear the keepers of the clepsydrae calling out the hour. On the far side of the Horokawa we continued on by carriage. We drove up into the hills, rattling into the blue tide of the sky one moment and plunging through wet forests the next. This drive by moonlight was unlike any other I have had; I could not keep our direction or progress sorted out in my mind. It seemed to me that we were going around in circles until we entered a fog and I lost track of our direction completely. Spectres of stones and trees and wayside shacks reared up before us. I found it quite frightening but Koto was in the best of spirits, truly she seems to thrive when she is

away from court, very strange. When we finally reached the temple and saw that the sky was lightening above us, and the demure lanterns of the approach were limned against the morning mist, I was very much surprised that we had reached our destination after all. It seemed that we were so very far from the reality of Nara somewhere down below us and across the valley. We met the head monk who gave us special slippers to wear before we were shown to our cell and promptly fell asleep.

In the afternoon, the head monk awoke us and we went with him to the Buddha Hall. This is a busy time for pilgrimage and the corridors of the temple are crowded with people. It can be uncomfortable to be among such a throng. The boys charged with conducting our devotions and the monks whom we had hired to say our prayers for us were very helpful and did a good job of clearing the way. The best thing, as anyone with any experience visiting temples knows, is to be preceded by some person of quality down a corridor, that way the commoners have already been cleared ahead of you.

We passed the days with our devotions and watching the other visitors arrive and depart. On the third day we were asked by the head monk to stay awake the whole night as a measure of devotion. I was not enthusiastic about the idea of listening to the monks snore all night but Hisako and I amused ourselves inventively and the night was passed without tedium. We devised elaborate personalities for the characters of the old tales and wrote hilarious letters to one another in their hands. We regaled ourselves in this way and I was very much content until Koto became suddenly pensive. I was giggling over the absurd poem I was writing when I noticed that she was watching me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I wish we could stay here.” she said. “Or anywhere away. Anywhere but Nara.”

“Anywhere *but* Nara? Whatever for?”

“So I wouldn’t be harassed. It could be just you and me, and no ceremonies to go to, no camellia picking rituals or men knocking at your door in the middle of the night.”

Personally, I could not imagine what would be more delightful than all that, but Koto is still young. She has no feelings for men yet. “Do you promise that we’ll go on pilgrimage again?” she asked.

I nodded. “Of course, why not?”

“Soon?”

“Yes, soon, Koto. We’ll go on pilgrimage all you like.”

Luckily, it was already the fourth quarter and the candle’s light was being gradually dimmed by the light from the open window. I set about writing a letter, as I often like to in the early morning. When Koto saw me writing, she asked me if it was another letter to Yakamochi. I did not bother to reply, for she knew very well that it would be nothing else.

“How is it you can forgive him so much?” she said suddenly.

“Forgive him?” I wondered aloud, looking up from the page. “Forgive him what?” The girl stared at me with the strangest expression. “What are you talking about?”

She lowered her head. “Nothing,” she replied. “Perhaps I’ll go see if... ” And with that she got up and left. Such a strange girl! Later that day we left the temple. I was in great spirits, looking forward to seeing by daylight the frightening route we had taken by night. The thought of returning to the palace made me happy, but in front of Koto, who so detested going back, I tried to conceal my good humour.

A lady of the court

A lady of the court has been admonished for adultery. How can it be that a woman should forget the old bond of love and form a new one?

Under Bigamy the law says:

A woman who, having a husband, leaves him for another man shall be liable to penal servitude for one year. The offending man shall, after one hundred lashes, be separated from her.

The Imperial Rescript says:

Righteous husbands and faithful wives shall be accorded benevolence and bounties.

One wonders, though, if righteous husbands, by their righteousness, discourage faithful wives.

The Chamberlain searched

The Chamberlain searched long and hard for the one who had stolen his 'plum'. Sometime during his 'courtship' of Lady Koto, someone else had visited her and he was livid. Lady Koto, of course, would not say a word. Her insouciance was brilliantly affected and the Chamberlain was all the more incensed. "If you didn't want it to happen," she said simply, never taking her eyes from her needlework, "you shouldn't have left me alone." And there was nothing that Fujiwara could do. She had not once left the Princess's Domicile without Fujiwara himself having taken her and the register of the Inner Gate revealed no

suspects to have entered the Imperial Domicile. Fujiwara came to question me and I told him the truth, that I did not know how she had managed it.

Thus, a wall of ambivalence greeted the Chamberlain Fujiwara and his feeble imagination could not find the crack. When I made his search known throughout the court, it became an even greater source of embarrassment to him than the initial loss had been. Of course, thereafter, he considered me, who had no hand whatsoever in the affair, the principal architect of his humiliation.

The white cat

The white cat of Asaka's comes around the corner from the Empress's domicile. It stops and its eyes widen at the commotion of *kemari*¹ in the yard. It is somewhat startled, and unsure whether to continue into the open. Halted there, it smells the veranda post, as if the certainty of the scent of urine will becalm it and encourage sound decision. When I look up again from the page, the cat has disappeared. So it is as always, I have sacrificed one for the other.

*Caught in a traffic jam*²

For the trip to Yakushi-ji temple from the palace I took the ox-drawn carriage of Lord Hirotsugu. Even though no one can see inside, it is a privilege to ride in Lord Hirotsugu's

¹ An ancient game very similar to modern-day Association Football.

² In Kasa's time there were sometimes as many as 300 carriages in the main avenues of the city; often they were stuck in massive traffic jams. *Karuma araso* ('road rage') was common during processions and other ceremonial occasions when people struggled to get their carriages into advantageous positions. Full blown brawls between attendants and outriders were not infrequent.

carriage. Only the Emperor's and Empress's carriages are more impressive. Indeed, just as in a royal carriage, one must climb a sort of stairway to enter it, and once ensconced inside, the passengers ride high above the surrounding carriages.

We exited through Scarlet Phoenix Gate and started down 1st Row Avenue, past the university and Lord Yasumaro's mansion, but we got only as far west as Fourth Column Road before we were stopped in traffic. As I learned later on, Lady Aoi had just finished her dedication of the new Lotus Sutra and all the carriages returning from her mansion were turning at that very intersection where the carriages on their way to Yakushi-ji were passing. Somehow they had got interlocked, ox to groaning ox, wheel to axle, and the attendants



14. Scarlet Phoenix Gate

were crying out at one another to give way, each driver unwilling to move backward as a matter of personal pride. Those behind only tried to push through at the edges, whereupon they met up ox-nose to ox-nose with other carriages coming in the opposite direction. Some

of those caught several rows back then attempted to turn around in order to take another street. This, of course, only locked the carriages even more firmly together, putting several knots in what was already a tangled rope. The shouting increased into a clamour. Several smaller, hand-drawn carriages managed to squeeze past on the left and right but the more prestigious carriages were far too wide and would have put a wheel in the ditch. By now, there were commoners gathering to watch the commotion at the centre of the intersection and their intrusions into the problem only made matters worse.

What a wait we were in for! We knew it the moment we got stopped. Usually such traffic is cause to be upset, especially when it is hot and all one can think of is the shady garden one has left behind and the bamboo grove around the temple to which one is proceeding. But Lord Hirotsugu's carriage is sumptuous and very stately. The magnificent view turns everything into a spectacle. Looking forward through the lattice window we could see across the thatched roofs of the other carriages right up to the tumult of the intersection. I myself have been caught several times at the very crux of the impasse and it can be a most frightful scene: the attendants, ignoring the orders of their betters, all leap from their carriages to beat one another with ox-whips and sticks. But in the sanctuary of the Hirotsugu carriage, I was quite happy to observe the fighting from afar.

Lady Hirotsugu is courteous and soft-mannered and her husband, Lord Hirotsugu, is unorthodox as only a member of such a branch of the Fujiwara family could afford to be. One of his stranger notions was to equip his carriage with a hinged panel in the roof; what he calls a "moon-window." Stuck in this traffic jam, he was much desirous of opening the panel to see the commotion from still higher up. Of course, neither Lady Hirotsugu nor I

would be induced to put our heads through the roof so Lord Hirotsugu remained there for the duration, standing up straight in the centre of the carriage with his head and head-dress out the roof, conversing with his driver, directing obscenities at the other drivers, and updating us occasionally on any developments in the situation.

Lady Hirotsugu took the opportunity to ask me what the state of my affair with Ōtomo was. I had been asked the same question by several other women, and to each one I had always replied that I had broken with him, but that he still wrote me every week asking for my forgiveness. With Lady Hirotsugu, curious as a child is curious, which is to say, without premeditation or intent, I told the truth:

“I broke with him. And I haven’t heard a word since.” I worried the hem of my over-robe. “I would like to think that he cannot put his feelings into words.”

Lady Hirotsugu smiled sympathetically. “Do you still believe in him?” she asked me.

“I believe in what he could be,” I replied.

She regarded the rosary in her hands. I thought that there was something sad about the way she looked at them, but it cleared and she smiled. “Well, Kasa, he will not be the first man to be saved by a woman’s devotion” and she swung the rosary at Lord Hirotsugu’s knees.

I was sorry when Lord Hirotsugu returned from his spot in the clouds to tell us that we were on the move. The men began leaping from their perches on the carriage wheels to take up their positions on the step-boards and we saw several of the wounded carried past and laid on the other side of the ditch.

“How delightful!” he cried once he had replaced the panel in the roof. “Soon everyone will have a scenic Hirotsugu moon-window!”

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

I dyed my dress
with the violet grass
that grows on the field of Tsukuma,
but before I could wear it,
its colours were exposed and faded.

I remember

I remember the time you came through the garden in the rain with a poem that you had written. You had left your notebook out and the rain had ruined it. I said it was not important, you could write me another or recopy it. But you disagreed. You said it was more poetic that I take this one, washed out as it was. I said it looked like an inkblot. You told me it looked like a watercolour. I’m sorry, I don’t remember what I did with it.

Time

I can hear the keeper of the clepsydrae calling out the hour. Time is measured only in the capital. Etchū is as far off as heaven.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

In the loneliness of my heart,

I feel as if I should perish

Like the snow

Upon the pines in the long, long afternoon.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

A moment of silence

is soon prickly with questions.

Was I such a bore

that you had to choose another?

I saw Lady Sakanoé's Elder Daughter

I saw Lady Sakanoé's Elder Daughter in the State Halls Compound today. I wanted to stop and talk to her, to see how she would respond, but when she saw me she hurried past with barely a nod of acknowledgement. Only as much as I expected.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

One may die from longing, too.

Like the hidden current

in Minase River,

unperceived, I grow thinner

with each day.

Naniwa

In place of the Emperor, who is far too ill, Tabito went to Naniwa to see off the envoys for China and to bestow upon them the Sword of State. When he returned he came to see the Princess Takano and I and he told us about the trip.

“From the windy height of Mount Ikoma,” he told us, “there are fabulous views of the Nara Valley on one side, and Naniwa on the other. On the Naniwa side, one looks down



15. Naniwa, Osaka today.

over the Yodogawa River and feels great repose. The delta, as most deltas are, is very wide and flat and the noble river spreads in wavering lines of silver across the fields. In the distance the estuaries flare onto the white tapestry of the Inland Sea.

“By midday one is approaching the town. The first thing one sees is the old palace, and then the embassies of Silla and China which have fallen into disrepair. Beyond the clutter of shacks and shops crowding onto the road is a forest of masts. There are many ships in the harbour, anchored amidst a sea of green reeds. When the ships arrive or depart they appear to be sailing across a vast field of grass. When the fishermen pole their craft out to the open water, one sees no boat beneath them. There were a great many people congregated there when I arrived.

“It was just like a festival,” Tabito told us. “Isn’t it odd how a perilous sea voyage can make people so happy? You would think China were nothing more than a festival going on just across the Yodo.”

Tabito presented the Sword of State to the Ambassador and they had taken the ceremonial cups together. Usually these cups are left empty, but Tabito insisted it was his duty as the Emperor’s proxy to drink them full. Then he smeared the crab’s eyes with salt and read a poem.

Composed on the occasion of the Embassy to China

From time immemorial,
it has been said that the
Land of Yamato is a god-given land
where the word-soul brings weal

and the *Kami* reign.

You humble men,
obedient to the sovereign's dread command,
set out this day from
windy, wave-bright Naniwa.

Until you return,
I will sweep the shores of Mitsu Beach
with a washerwoman's besom.

I will wait in a shack
sipping oft-diluted dregs of saké,
saving the best for your return.

I will climb the fragrant pines
of Mitsu and watch
the black, wind-woven sea
for your return.

I can hear the fisher-maids
in their tiny boats
rowing out to sea—
Lying in my fisherman's bed

I shall hear the sound of your oars.

When the Ambassador boarded and the three ships finally eased away, several people crowded onto the docks tumbled into the water. Tabito and his men had to push back the crowd in order not to fall in themselves. They watched as the vessels were carried slowly south by the current, across the meadows of reeds. When they reached the open sea, and their masts had diminished by the distance, the sails unfurled like three small white flowers on the horizon, one after the other, in perfect succession. A cheer went up in the crowd.

“At that moment,” Tabito recounted, “I felt the most profound unease, as if I had been out there on those white waves myself.”

“That’s not unusual after eleven cups of saké,” said Princess Takano, a quip which we both took great delight in.

“Bah!” Tabito laughed. “It wasn’t that. It was the endless fields of the delta, and the windswept sea, and the mountains of Awaji, and the tiny ships... it gave me shudders. Naniwa felt like the beginning of the end of the world. Where could one go after Nara? I truly believe now that... well, that there is no *after* Nara. Nara will be the capital forever, the one and only capital, and you can hang me from Fukurokuju rafter and I won’t change my mind.”

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Even the sands uncounted of a long beach

that takes eight hundred days to travel—

Could they at all outnumber

my thoughts of love and regret,
O guardian on the shore of the sea?

*Coffee*¹

Much ceremony is made of taking coffee in the mornings. By the sound of their bell, we know the coffee-men are coming. There are five men who serve the coffee. They dress in red robes and matching silk hats and they come very slowly along the verandas for they are all blind. Only blind men are chosen to serve coffee, as no one is suitably dressed to receive in the early morning. The man who leads the way holds the bell and the one behind him carries the mill. Two men are needed to carry the large pan of coals upon which sits the water pot, and the last man carries the bowls. Once they have mounted the veranda and started serving at the first partition the scent of the coffee carries and everyone gets very anxious for them to arrive, always peeking out the doors, listening for the sound of the berries crackling in the mill. If one has a lover visiting he will often postpone his departure when he hears them coming.

They must know the palace better than anyone, these men. The man with the bell slides the door open for the rest, never searching for the door seam at all but reaching out with perfect confidence, as if he could see exactly what he was doing. The other men follow him in by the sound of his feet.

¹ Tea was not introduced until the ninth century, and even then was considered a purely medicinal beverage.

The coffee-men are greatly respected in the palace and they all hold one of the lower ranks. I rarely drink coffee. I simply enjoy watching. Should I ever have to leave, I will miss them as much as anyone.

I harbour a secret intention

I harbour a secret intention that this pillow book will reach beyond my cloistered world.

Now the illness

Now the illness of Emperor Shōmu seems more serious than anyone had thought. There are many kinds of sickness and I wonder if even the Bureau of Astrology are certain what is the matter. This morning they placed several large *manekineko* at the door to the Emperor's



16. *manekineko*

apartment in the hopes that good spirits will be welcomed inside. Certainly there is a shortage of good spirits now. The palace is a quiet, eerie place. No one practices music. The royals do not go to Nara Hill for hunting nor for sport. When the snow falls, there are no

snow mountains built and it melts where it is in the warmth of the afternoon sun. I saw Prince Asaka looking under the verandas for his white cat, but one of the nurses came to find him and bring him back indoors. Even the coffee-men bring no joy in the morning. Gone are their little jokes about one's pretty knees, or compromising state of dress. Now their doleful file through the yard reminds one only of a funeral procession. I see Lady Awatame taking her coffee upon the veranda across the yard. She cups the steaming bowl to her face and stares across the opposite roofs to the white morning sky and the ever-changing Mount Ikoma, now lying very flat on the horizon.¹ Normally, she would not take her coffee outdoors in the chill of the first month, but the palace is quiet and we two are the only people out. I too stare to the north-west, past Mount Ikoma, but in my mind I am seeing the Province of Etchū.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Strong rooted, like the sedge
on the base of the rocks
in the Nara Mountains,
are the feelings we bound our hearts with.
I cannot forget.

¹*The Maiden Awatame, to Ōtomo Yakamochi*

Is there no way
For us to meet again?
Next time I shall hold you with sorcery
To my white cloth sleeves.

That very afternoon, Fujiwara

That very afternoon, Fujiwara came to our Domicile with a retinue of Imperial Guards. He quite rudely opened one of the doors without first calling and took several paces into the room. Through the interstice of a curtain of state I saw him peering over the bamboo screens trying to find someone. “You must all come to the Emperor’s quarters,” he called out to the ceilings. “You needn’t ask why because I myself have no idea. Just put on your best robes and some make-up—you especially, Gorii, and don’t keep me waiting.”

“Emperor Shōmu?” I stuttered, totally confused, my head still pounding from the night before.

“Well, who do you think?” he barked. “Who is that? Is that you Kasa, you silly creature?” He stalked back out the door. “Bad enough that he ask for all of you, but to send *me* on the errand...” Hardly a minute went past before I heard him stamp in again. “Are you ready yet? What do you mean, keeping the Emperor waiting?”

Fujiwara would tell us nothing and we only learned later on that everyone in the palace was to be summoned to pray at Shōmu’s bedside. So we were all alarmed and we were all quite literally shaking when we arrived at the Imperial Apartment, completely in the dark about why we were being called there. My own knees and elbows were clammy with perspiration and I could not catch my breath as I stood before the entrance. The brass doors opened inwards into darkness and noise and the smoke of thousands of sticks of incense burning. Through the murk I could see down the centre of the room many Chinese screens arranged to form a corridor. All along this corridor were the Emperor’s Imperial Guard,

about twenty of them at intervals of several feet, all of them twanging their bow-strings to ward off evil spirits. Behind them, I could hear the whispering of the gallery, several rows of high officials and women of the Fujiwara family that peered through the interstices of the screens. At the end of the corridor, in a haze of smoke, was another collection of doctors and diviners, all huddled around the Emperor's bed. The Chamberlain Fujiwara preceded us down the corridor of guards, stopping four times to kneel down and pray along the way. Each time, I looked to left and right, and felt a great many eyes upon me. The twanging of the bowstrings surrounded me and I had a vision then of a lonely traveller on a dark path who hears, in the moment before he is struck down, the soft, evil chorus of bows in the trees around him.

When finally we had reached the end, the cluster of men in robes and Chinese caps parted and I could see through the haze the form of the august Emperor lying upon a kind of dais surrounded by cushions. He was laying on his side covered by a green robe and several tablets with mantras written out upon them had been laid across his body. At the head of the bed was a screen depicting bone white egrets stalking pink crayfish in waters of nacre. One of the men nearby leaned over him: "The Ladies in attendance to your daughter, Lord," he whispered.

The Emperor's eyes opened and he stared around him wildly, as if he had come back from very far away. The tablets clattered to the ground. And though I was frightened to death, I felt like crying for him, who looked so much like a frightened child that had awoken in a different place from where he fell asleep. His is the kindest of faces, the Emperor's, but in

that moment of uncertainty, it was the saddest. He blinked several times and, seeing the semi-circle of doctors around him, calmed down.

He coughed and turned his head to look at us. When he spoke, his voice was gravely and hoarse. “Well, Kasa, Ki... Gorii,” he coughed again, “un-mis-ta-kable as ever. You’ve come to pray for me have you? You know I’ve been having visions all this time, sleeping and awake. I’d like for someone to write them down. What a wonderful thing to have a book of dreams, heh? But I can so seldom find the energy to recount them.” He took a deep breath and clearly limned against the sheet were the bones of his torso. “Such a pity,” he continued, suddenly tired again, “all wasted. I shall probably recover fully and not remember a single thing.”

He seemed to think about this for some time, staring straight ahead, until his eyelids once again began to flutter and sink—opened suddenly with the same wild fear that subsided to fatigue in its turn, the eyelids fluttering, closing, a butterfly contemplating flight and deciding better.

“Time for you to go,” whispered the Chief Diviner. “He must sleep well while it is light. We followed him as he dropped to his knees and retreated down the corridor. The circle of robes clustered around the Emperor shut like a cabinet door.

Once we were back outside, the sun was blinding and I had the feeling of waking up from a nightmare. I almost stumbled from the veranda and several Imperial Guards were called upon to take us back.

Prince Asaka's cats

There are kittens everywhere now that Kuchime and Mumyo have given birth. Princess Takano, who is not at all fond of the filthy creatures, has ordered that they be taken to live in the East Palace and that they be kept there by the Inner Catering Office. Prince Asaka was greatly angered by this. He likes to play with the kittens very much and though I was not sorry to see them go, I did feel sorry for the feelings of the little prince.

When I saw him his face was very round and red and he marched through the yard in his robes like an angry little cabinet minister.

I called to him. "What's the matter with Asaka-chan today?"

He glared at the blind a moment before he walked over, pushed the blind aside and climbed in. He sat down right across the brazier from me and put his hands upon his knees.

"Takano-chan's got rid of the kittens," he told me unhappily.

"Oh really?" I replied innocently. "What did she do with them?"

Asaka seemed not to have heard me. "There were *seven*," he said, "and the orange one was the eighth."

I nodded solemnly.

Then Asaka's face brightened a little. "Why don't you ask for a kitten, Kasa?" he asked. "The woman from the *kofun*¹ said she would take one."

"We'll see Asaka-chan," I replied. "Kittens require a great deal of care."

He looked at me skeptically.

¹ "tumulus"— Just north of the Nara Palace Site are several key-hole shaped tombs surrounded by large, deep moats. *Kofun* is the name given to the period preceding Nara (360-710).

“What woman from the *kofun* anyway?” I asked.

“The woman from the *kofun*,” he replied in a burst of laughter. “There’s only one woman from the *kofun*!”

This I found perplexing. “Asaka-chan, what does this woman look like?”

“She’s tall.” He looked away from me and toyed with some excelsior that was on the floor next to the brazier. “And she wears white.”

I stared at the boy in wonder. Had he seen the same woman I had seen that night? Had he actually spoken to her? Then a thought struck me and I almost laughed out loud at my own gullibility. “But that was Lady Nakatomi, wasn’t it, Asaka-chan? She’s not from the *kofun*. She got married at the State Halls, don’t you remember? She asked you if you would like to be married someday too.”

The child frowned. “Not *her*,” he said. “The woman from the *kofun*. She was here last night while everyone was drinking. She said she would take one of the kittens to live in the *kofun* and I could come visit.”

I must have looked quite perplexed at that moment. Asaka frowned and scrambled to his feet. He picked up a handful of the wooden shavings and marched away, tumbling the shavings from one hand to the other. At the end of the veranda he shrieked and hurled the shavings into the air.¹

Later on, I learned that he had told the same story to several others, including Princess Takano. She came to find me and ask what it was all about.

¹ This “Prince Asaka” of the present text is not the prince of the same name found in the history books. That Prince Asaka, Emperor Shōmu’s son, died in 744 at the age of seventeen and was elegized by Yakamochi, among others.

“Asaka-chan’s been telling me all kinds of frightful stories about a woman in a white robe that wants to take one of his cats. Just who this woman from the *kofun*, anyway?”

To comfort the Princess, I tried to make light of Asaka. “Next week he’ll meet a unicorn on Nara Hill,” I told her. “He’s just making up stories.”

“Perhaps.” She put a finger to her lips and bobbed back and forth on her heels as she always does when she does not understand something. She was not convinced. “It’s troubling,” she said. “Perhaps we’ll keep a close eye on Asaka-chan for a while.”

In Ancient China

In ancient China, the Emperor Taitsung of Wei prohibited the use of saké, but those who continued to drink it in secret referred to white saké as ‘wise man’ and pure saké as ‘sage’.¹

A letter

I was writing a poem yesterday afternoon on the east veranda. It was a pleasant day, as nice as I have seen in this month though nothing to compare with the rich, windy days of autumn. When Koto passed by, coming from the luncheon thrown for the monk Dōkyō, a favourite of Takano’s lately, she saw me and asked what it was I was writing. It was nothing of any importance, I replied. She stopped and stood there watching me from the stone path. I did my best to ignore her.

¹ In ancient Japan, saké was not as strong as it is nowadays, probably averaging between 7 and 10% alcohol. But due to a number of factors, not least of which was the absence of fats from the Japanese diet, it was extremely intoxicating, addictive stuff, the equivalent of a modern illicit drug.

"I don't believe it," she blurted all of a sudden. "You said you would never write him again."

This was embarrassing. I began to fold the delicate white paper of the letter.

"Show me it," Koto demanded.

I continued folding.

"You're afraid to show me. I can see your hand shaking." Swiftly she came onto the veranda as I tried to slip the letter in my sleeve. "You'll just wrinkle it so you may as well just show me." She grabbed me by the forearm. "Kasa, show me!" she cried, clawing at my sleeve. Her hands twisted at my wrists and I cried out in pain. I wrenched my arms away and crawled frantically across the floor, the letter still crumpled in my hands.

"You would have shown me if it had been for anyone else," she hissed.

I straightened my over-robe. "And what of it? What can you possibly know, you child?" I demanded, panting. "So he's been seeing other women, you tell me? So he's going to marry Sakanoé's Elder Daughter? What has that got to do with love?"

"That's pathetic."

"No," I responded, "what is pathetic is losing my devotion to a rumour."

"Rumour!" she laughed. "It's common knowledge! How could it not be with every woman in the palace pining for him?" She got to her feet, brushed herself off, and went down the veranda. When she came to the end, the lining of her robes flashed yellow as she stepped down into the sunlight.

When the Chief Diviner

When the Chief Diviner arrived in the doorway he carried with him his ivory tablet and a melon. No one had expected him to choose to use a melon and furious whispering like the sound of wind in tree branches could be heard up and down the room. In such a grave case, a diviner tends to turn to the more reliable and prestigious method of roasting a tortoise shell upon an open fire. What with the killing of the tortoise, the knife inserted under the shell and slid swiftly around to separate it from the body, the rich blood streaming down the blade, and then the loud cracking of the shell in the fire, all this provides for a much more drawn out spectacle than the slaying of a melon. But the Chief Diviner chose to read a melon and his decision was much criticized. In discussion with the other ladies later on, I found myself defending the choice. Sometimes I suspect the motive of a priest who continually chooses tortoise shells and looks down upon melons. The Chief Diviner's decision revealed his contempt for spectacle and his concern for the accurate prediction, regardless of the tastes of his audience.

In any case, the melon was placed upon a wooden block and without any ado, the Chief Diviner brought a hammer down swiftly upon it. It squelched and broke each way into several chunks connected by a smattering of seeds and juice and orange flesh. Everyone expected, myself included, for the Chief Diviner to spend a great deal of time examining the results of his hammer and picking over the seeds and chunks of fruit to divine their meaning, but no sooner had he smashed the melon, he dropped the hammer and cried out, clapping his hands with delight.

“Good tidings for our Emperor! Good tidings for the Emperor of the Land of Yamato!”

A cheer went up in the room and I was almost trampled on as the crowd leapt to their feet and pushed against the line of Imperial Guards to gain a better view. Two of the other Diviners rushed immediately forward and removed the block of wood with the melon upon it. With the block held between them, they scurried down the corridor of guards and out the door. Everyone strained overtop of one another to get a look at the melon as it went swiftly past. Once a melon has been deciphered, it is of no use. The melon, I was told, was taken immediately to the fire that had been prepared for the expected tortoise shell and was pitched directly into the flames. Once the melon is gone, everyone disputes just exactly what they saw and wish they had one more chance to see it, to better understand what it was the Diviner saw.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

I too shall;

let him not forget.

Let there never be a time

when the winds cease to blow

upon Tananowa Cove.

A fire

A fire destroyed one of the buildings at Kofuku-ji temple. It started in the afternoon and burned through the night. The next morning, Princess Takano and the rest of us went over by carriage to see it. During the night we had watched the great tower of smoke, glowing

orange by the light of the fire, but in the morning there was only a dismal grey pall over the entire city. We went around by the south in several carriages, past Sarusawanoike Pond and then up the hill. As we came closer, the smoke swept past us and stung our eyes. There was a great chain of men in the trees between the pond and the temple, conveying buckets of water, and they all had cloths tied to their faces.

Closer to the blaze, I watched amazed as the sun beamed into the dense smoke, creating its own architecture of shafts and columns and overhangs, the lines unwaveringly straight against the spinning cataracts of smoke pouring from the eaves. It was ineffably sad and beautiful. All around us drifted the char, dropping down from the sky among the finer ash. The soft silver paper of moths, millions of them that had been drawn to the fire in the night, lay scattered upon the ground. No temple has never been paid such silent, touching homage.

Everyone back at the palace was very upset. But it really did not matter. All of the important relics and sutras, the soul of the temple, had been taken away for cataloguing several days before.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Pining in my wait for you,
like the pines on Toba Mountain
where the white bird flies,
I have gone on longing
through these months.

A bonze

A bonze came to visit us in the palace today. He was rather short and curiously dressed in black and his tonsure had begun to grow out. In all, he had a very ramshackle, dishevelled appearance, like a dog afflicted with the mange. He had come to show the Empress Kōmyō a skull which he had brought from Maizuru that resounded like a bell when struck with a small hammer, but since the Empress was busy worrying over the new temple she would not audience him. When Princess Takano saw the man leaving disappointed she took pity on him and invited him to her apartments instead. The bonze was very much pleased by this and he came immediately over, holding up the skull on a stick. This object immediately stole our attention. It had a clear shine and “spoke” with a pleasing, ringing voice. When it chimed, everyone’s attention was stolen from the self-conscious remarks of the stuttering monk.

With the monk there had also come an insect collector and a *philosopher*, but they too were ignored. All were engrossed by the skull and hardly paid them any attention at all.

A poem

The fishing fires far away
on the plain of the sea,
Oh make them brighter
that I may see the Land of Yamato.

The supervisor of the East Market and his deputies

Several winters ago, the supervisor of the East Market was appointed to a one-year position in the Dazaifu. Of course, there are few men who relish the thought of leaving the court, especially to go as far as Kyushu, but the positions there are well-paid and the man actually looked happy upon the day of his appointment. He made a great many preparations for his stay and when he departed, he left his holdings in Nara in the charge of three deputies. The senior deputy was responsible for three-fifths of the man's merchandise and lands, the middle deputy for three-tenths of the merchandise and lands, and the junior deputy for one tenth.

When the supervisor returned from the Dazaifu the next spring, he reckoned his accounts with his deputies. The senior deputy rendered him the account books for his year of absence and the man was pleased to find that not only had the rents been raised on all his properties, the sale of foodstuffs had been transferred from the market to direct bartering with the Fujiwaras. In all, his normal income for the period had almost doubled. The middle deputy had much the same in the way of good news. He had bought out the workshops of several competing craftsmen (one of them the Chinese sculptor who did the transoms for the Empress's temple) from the West Market and had installed them in one workshop in the East Market. Working in unison, the business these craftsmen had begun to generate was several times more profitable than the separate stalls which the middle deputy had originally sold to buy them.

When the junior deputy timidly provided his records for the period, the East Market supervisor was upset. All was as he had left it. There were seven hundred Chinese coins and

four stalls in normal operation. The junior deputy could have been sleeping for the past year and he would have made as much profit. Now, at court, such a return would not have merited any punishment, but without any hesitation whatsoever, the East Market supervisor dismissed the junior deputy from his service.

Having lived all his life in the market, the junior deputy, or ex-junior deputy, I should say, left the East Market and, naturally enough, made his way to the West Market. There one may see him today, singing and playing *sho*. Whenever I am down at the East Market, which is not often, I admit, I look for him and once I dropped a coin for him upon his mat. He is destitute, certainly, but in a strange way admirable, or as admirable as a commoner may be, for now he does what the others did not do: he makes something out of absolutely nothing. Of the marketplace, he makes a stage. Out of the air, music.

Still, if only he had those coins back—this is the thought which must torment him mercilessly.

To keep the Emperor

The hours past midnight are the most dangerous, when evil spirits are abroad and those unwary may be infected. To keep the Emperor awake, the coffee men have been directed to change their hours. They are now making their rounds at two o'clock in the morning. Obviously it makes no difference to them whether they serve by day or night, but for the rest of us it is somewhat upsetting. No one questions this measure of solidarity, but one certainly hopes that Emperor Shōmu will recover soon.

The Festival of the Golden Trowels

On the third day of the eighth month there was the Festival of the Golden Trowels, although, this year, the trowels were all made of silver as every available ounce of gold has been used in the gilding of the *Daibutsu*. A small coffret filled with coins, virtu, and *mokkan* granting various favours is buried somewhere within the palace grounds. The Bureau of Divination and the Confucian University, working harmoniously together, develop seven series of seven riddles each, for a total of forty-nine riddles. The solution of each riddle is the location of the next, except in the case of the seventh riddle, whose solution is the location of the coffret itself. There are seven teams, counting four members each, drawn from the seven pre-eminent families of Nara. Each team starts with one riddle. When a new riddle is found, the old one must be deposited in its place, in order for the Bureau of Divination and the University to verify later on that the progression of solutions was not influenced by chance. This is an important rule, as there have been cases in the past when a team, entirely by accident, has stumbled upon a riddle further advanced in the consecution or one from another series and, whether by ignorance or treachery, have assumed it was the riddle for which they were looking. Each member of the team, I hardly need to point out, carries a golden trowel with which to excavated the prize. No shovels are allowed for they are a brute instrument and could easily damage the coffret as it is being unearthed.

The morning of the hunt, in a ceremony at the State Halls, the Emperor bestows upon all teams the right to enter any office, abode, or enclosure on the palace grounds in search of riddles. The only places off limits are the Emperor's own apartment and the melon garden. This right of entry leads to a great deal of damage being done by the more inept teams who

come foraging through one's room or garden searching for riddles which are not there. Last year, the Fujiwara team all but destroyed Pebble Beach and the young cryptomerias planted around it in the belief that they had correctly interpreted "I long for Mitsu Beach", when of course, considering the ideogram used, the reference was to a pine tree somewhere or other. After the teams are given permission of entry, it is time for the caching of the riddles and of the coffret itself. The team members are blindfolded and everyone assembled in the State Halls must face the south until the doctors and professors have returned. I always feel sorry for these men, for, having returned from hiding the forty-nine riddles and burying the coffret, they are sent to a field beside the Horokawa River in Amagatsuji. Possessed of the locations, they are not allowed to remain in the palace for the hunt itself and, thus, can never witness the ruckus of the search nor the jubilation of the winning team at the final discovery. They are only allowed to return once the search is complete, in order to verify the win. I remember once when it took two full days to find the coffret. The palace was in a state of chaos and we were all very glad when the Sakimaro team finally solved their series of riddles. The poor doctors and professors, stuck outdoors on the banks of the Horakawa River for two days, came back looking very sunburned and haggard.

This year, the day of the hunt dawned clear and warm... but this is just another anecdote of my invention and I wonder if I haven't already related enough of them.

I dream of his return

In the course of some unconscious needlework I dream of his return and go over each detail of that day with the greatest of precision. I get up on the morning and go about my

toilet. It is spring when he returns so I wear many layers of translucent scarlet and fern under-ropes and an over-robe of deep, lustrous forest green. I dress very carefully, making sure that each layer reveals the one beneath it at the hem. I knot my hair in a Chinese mirror, pluck my eyebrows, and blacken my teeth. Just dressing takes two calls of the watch or more, for I savour every detail and set it perfectly in my imagination, like stones in the foundation of a palace, so that that Moment when we are reunited, when it comes, has all the solidity and weight of something approaching reality beneath it. In this way, its rapture will be as fully realized as the banaisic details preceding it. The coffee arrives and breaks the reverie for a moment. I must be careful sipping it because it is hot, the edge of the cup warming my lower lip, and the burbling sip of liquid and air before setting it down on the veranda—this endless veranda! the boards that resound with the footsteps of everyone who has entered my life! When I look forward to the sea, the veranda stretches to eternity at either side. An ant-borne shred of philodendron leaf mimics the sail of a yacht, shudders as it crosses the frets of sand beneath the veranda...

Things that are beautiful

Evening is falling. The seagulls turn orange as they wheel in the last of the sun. Higher up, three giant, black fruit bats stroke toward the mainland in a crooked file. They will gorge on fruit for the night and return to their caves by morning. The water is quiet. Music drifts from a yacht at anchor. These things are beautiful... but this is only momentary. Dwelling on them too long allows memory to seep in and tinge their attraction with melancholy. In the

Land of Yamato, beauty has always gone hand in hand with melancholy. I wish I had been the one to break from tradition.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Distant are the grassy plains of Manu

In Land's End:

Men say you can conjure them

In your heart, and yet—

On the fourth night of the first month

On the fourth night of the first month, the Emperor dedicates a light to the Deity of the North Star. Tapers are lit in honour of the Great Bear and a banquet is held during which young men and women dance and disport themselves.¹ This year, the festivities were uncommonly sombre; Emperor Shōmu's condition had worsened in recent days and no one was in the mood for levity. The banquet would not have gone on at all had Shōmu not insisted upon it. Though no one felt like celebrating, there was no choice but to do as he said. The night of the banquet was cold and clear. It started at the East Precinct Garden and most everyone, quiet and pensive, drank even more than usual. The supplies of saké in the Main Pavilion soon ran out. A group of gentlemen decided they would escape the dour scene by going to the Saké Bureau themselves to find more. As they were leaving, Koto

¹ These dances later evolved into a sort of orgy and were abolished, after which only the innocuous, but tedious, lighting of the tapers remained.

came to find me where I was seated near the Healer stone. She suggested we go up to the Saké Bureau with the rest to get warm. It was a change of heart for her, who had been avoiding me since she had caught me writing the letter, and so I went, content that we should at least be on friendly terms once again. We arrived at the bureau and, still somewhat awkward around one another, drank a little more than was necessary for good humour. It was then that Koto's affections began to reveal themselves in more obvious terms and gestures than ever before. Perhaps I should have realised the truth earlier, but I had always stolidly believed that she looked upon men as the intimidating but inevitable locus of her affections and upon me as a kind of mother at court. It became apparent that night that the locus of her affections and the court mother were mixed into one and the same person. I write this now with complete detachment, knowing what was to happen, but at the time, in the warmth and aroma of the Saké Bureau, I was not inclined to be hard on the girl. She could be charming when she wished, not the indifferent or rebellious or childish Koto, but composed and affable. I smiled at her and let her put her hand in mine and listened to all the carefully-worded explanations of her feelings. There is no denying that she is beautiful, I thought, and it is no secret that I like beautiful things best.

We were sitting on a bench before the arched gap in the wall where the water conduit from the well enters the brewery. All around us were courtiers and ladies, seated on casks, rice bales, and troughs. In the centre of the room, a drum of wine had been cracked open and one of the bureau's clerks filled proffered bowls with a ladle. Every now and again, among the murmurs and the sighs, someone would break into moaning, into a kind of drunken dirge

for the ailing Emperor. The Inspector-General Uamakai of Saikaidō was one among several who dropped to his knees on the floor and lamented.

“How incensed was our Emperor
that day we went out to sport in Saho Vale,
leaving the palace unattended!
Confined within the palace
for thirty days thereafter,
how we yearned for the heady fields of spring!
And now that I remember it,
how dear was our Shōmu to us then,
like a stern father!”

At first it was melancholy to see a man so carried away by grief, but the moaning and shouting soon became a strident competition among the courtiers to better one another in the outpouring of emotion. It started out confined to mere moaning and wailing, but when Prince Yuhara leapt up with his sword drawn, the mourning became physical. He cried out:

“With the bounteous wine the doughty warrior
blesses,
striking at it with the point of tempered steel,
Drunk am I now—I!”

And he brought his blade down with both hands upon the clerk’s ladle, narrowly missing the young man’s hand, and shattering the ladle into the barrel. The clerk fell backwards with a shout and everyone was on their feet in an uproar. The tensions of the drunk found a sudden

release and violence flowered forth on every side. I saw Tajihi Kunihiro strike out at a tall stack of white barrels with his foot; it folded inward at its centre and collapsed abruptly around him. The wooden, rope-knotted barrels, fragile by virtue of their weight, were then pinioned on swords, sent hurtling across the room, smashed against the heavy wooden pillars or the stone floor. Those struck by the flying shards of wood or doused in wine instantly lashed back with their fists and sword-hilts and the paddles used for stirring the young saké. There seemed no exit from the mêlée that erupted around us. I backed away towards the wall. My eyes were streaming with frightened tears and yet I felt like laughing at the impossible suddenness of it all. I truly believe I would have been crushed by a barrel had not Koto, with the ingenuity and agility of her youth, stepped forward into the conduit and pulled me behind her. We ducked through the access in the wall and found ourselves standing in the darkness. From outside, the bureau resounded like a drum with the commotion and Koto and I hurried past the well and through the bureau gate. Men rushed past us, flooding towards the centre of the action like jubilant moths to a fire. It was only the next day I learned that the bureau had actually been destroyed. During the massive, drunken brawl that ensued, the bureau was set on fire by smashed oil-lamps and the building was razed.

Koto and I hurried away. We walked past the Sewing Bureau and up to Akatainukai Gate.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Koto replied, still gripping my hand. “Why don’t we go outside the palace? Have you ever seen the moon from Nara Hill?”

I hadn't and for good reason. "It's not a good idea, Koto. There are footpads everywhere beyond the walls. And the hairy Ainu."

The girl laughed. "How silly you are sometimes, Kasa. There's no one out there. At the moment, we're safer outside the walls than in them." From the din of the saké bureau it sounded as if she might be right. The Akatainukai Gate was unmanned, for all the guards had passed us on the way and it was no trouble to open the small inset door within the gate. I followed Koto through and found myself in the street.

The sandy road was bounded on one side by the packed-earth walls of the palace and on the other by the disordered clutter of house and bamboo fence that marked the edge of the city. The moon lit up an uneven, fuscous plane of rooftops sloping gently down towards the Sahogawa. Koto began to walk north. We walked in the wheel ruts where there were fewer stones to worry our feet. The sound of our slippers on the gravel seemed inordinately loud in the silence. Before us, the wall on our left met up with First Row North Avenue. Beyond this was the wood.

"Shall we go in?" Koto asked me when we had come to the crossroad.

I replied in a whisper that she was crazy. Nothing whatever would induce me to go into the woods around the *kofun* by night.

"*Kofun* nothing," said the girl brazenly. "Let's go see the moonlight on the moat." And with that she crossed the avenue and disappeared into the trees. "Aren't you coming?" she called back.

"Koto!" I hissed. "Koto, come back here!"

Only the crepitation of her footsteps remained, and these receding quickly. I came to the edge of the road. Between the trees, the pale thread of a path stuttered through the moon-shadows. Already diminished by the distance between us, the Koto's ghostly figure glowed luminescent in the moonlight before disappearing altogether. I stepped carefully through the brush and followed the path after her.

“Koto!”

I stumbled over roots and stones but felt little pain, only the soles of my feet numbed by the rocks and the pounding of my heart which echoed in my ears. I could feel the cold sweat below my neck and across my breasts. At another copse I stumbled into the shadows and there before me, of a sudden, was a tenuous network of silver filaments. I imagined it to be a spider's web but my out-thrust arms found only air in front of me. I stopped walking and the web, slightly trembling in the moonlight, seemed to give way at its centre and recede outward in concentric rings, slowly disappearing into the trees. I stared at the fabulous apparition until it was gone. Then there came a small, uncertain sound and a new web erupted into view and began to propagate outward from its core as the other had done.

It was the reflection of moonlight upon agitated water; the moat of the *kofun*.

Koto's voice emerged from the darkness. “Over here.” I followed the voice down to the banks of the moat. “Are you alright?” she asked. She was standing facing the water. She tossed another stone and another spider's web spread across the water.

I hardly knew where to start, I was so furious with her. “Whatever did you run away like that for?” I demanded.

“You wouldn't have come.”

“Of course I wouldn’t have come,” I replied harshly. “This is no place to be in the middle of the night.”

The girl did not reply. She put one hand to her neck, and slowly inching the robes downward, she revealed a pale breast. I only noticed now that she was wearing no over-robe and that her top-knot was undone, the sheen of her hair slid past her waist. “I understand that you love Yakamochi now,” she said. “Or at least, I acknowledge it. But could you ever love me, Kasa? In the same way?”

They seem very abrupt and awkward these words, they glare in the darkness, and it seems to me that there has been some crucial detail left out. But the detail was in Koto’s own mind, she had been dreaming of that moment for months and she was determined to say those words no matter how out of place they seemed. I tried to answer her in the gentlest way possible. I undid my over-robe and stepped forward to wrap it around her. “No,” I said.

The girl hiccuped. The odd noise erupting from her throat startled me. She gasped for air. “Koto—” She spun away before I could finish. My over-robe she flung into the moat behind her as she fled back up the path in tears. I did not follow her.

What had seemed to me a straight course from the road to the moat of the *kofun* turned out to be a network of deer trails through a hundred unfamiliar copses. I tried to make my way by the moon but there was never one path which led in the direction I wished to follow, and soon enough the moon disappeared behind a bank of cloud. And so I was forced to take a hundred detours, each time hoping that the trail would swing around and lead to the road. So it was that I became lost in the forest north of the city all night, wandering through the

trees only in my white under-robles, and shivering with cold. Finally I could stumble no further and I collapsed in a small clearing to await the dawn. I can hardly say if I slept then, it seemed that sleep crept around me, came over me by turns, and I would come to with a fright, forever, unsure of where I was. Sometime in those hours of mixed consciousness I felt the soft, cold touch of snow flakes falling upon my face and arms.

When the sky began to lighten, and the close, opaque shadows of the forest slowly gave way to grey perspective, I made my way down from Nara Hill. The snowfall had been light and it was not difficult to keep my balance. I no longer worried about following the helter-skelter paths but picked my way through the undergrowth until I emerged at the site of Todai-ji Temple. Protected by the roof of thatch, the thighs of the *Daibutsu* were only dusted with the snow, two small hills of bronze in the middle of a landscape that had turned white. It was still the early morning when I followed First Row North Avenue down to the city walls. I was hoping that Akatainukai Gate would still be unmanned, but the small door had been locked. I was forced to sound the bell and suffer the rudest of interrogations from a bearded face that appeared in a hole in the gate. You're not Kasa, Kasa's a pretty one.

A temporary lapse, I assure you. Let me in.

As I made my way down past the Sewing Bureau I witnessed the destruction that had been wrought the previous night. All around me was the detritus of the fighting and the fire. There were smashed barrels and swords and *mokkan* scattered across the street, robes, rinds of pork fat, head-dresses, shoes, an inkstone, tapers, and broken vessels of all kinds. The smell of smoke and boiled saké drifted over everything. I entered the Imperial Domicile at the nearest point to my chambers, praying there would be no one already awake to witness

my humiliating return; I could only imagine the rumours. From the gate to my own apartment I needed only to follow the stone path past the azaleas and around the south end of Takano's apartment. I walked quickly up the path and around the corner.

Two figures stood on the veranda. For a moment I thought I could turn around without being noticed but, just then, Takano's head jerked to the side and her eyes reflected her astonishment. "Kasa!"

"Well, well," the Chamberlain Fujiwara said amusedly, his hands on his hips. "The morning nets all sorts of strange fish."

I rushed forward to them. "Princess, I apologize. I was at the Saké Bureau when a fight started and Koto and I—"

"Now, now, Kasa," the Chamberlain drawled with a tone of mocking magnanimity. He turned to Princess Takano. "She needn't explain anything, need she Princess? It was all very mixed up last night and I'm sure there's a very good explanation. One which everyone will be delighted—"

"But Kasa, your robes," exclaimed the Princess. And she cringed slightly.

"You just hurry home now, Kasa," continued the Chamberlain. "We'll make sure the coffee-men come to visit you first."

I wanted to explain further, to vilify Koto for leaving me stranded in the woods, but the horrified look on the Princess's face was too much to bear. I looked down at my torn robes and rushed past them down the path.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Longing for you
leaves me helpless with despair.
I lean against a little pine¹
on Nara Hill, grieving.

Sounds of water

The sound of the stream in the North Palace Garden is lovely, but one cannot help thinking of the servants working to keep it running. Through the interstices of the fence, one can see them ferrying buckets from the canal, flickering back and forth like ghosts while the bright, gay banquet goes on. The crackling of water falling from the eaves in the fifth month. A curtain falls into a trough between the flat, black stones. It is always a disappointment to pick one of these gems up and see how, as it dries, it becomes just another common stone. After the first week of rain one no longer hears it. The screaming of children when the downpour starts. The twanging of the bowstrings during a thunderstorm. Rain upon the roof. The best is the drumming of the tiles in the State Halls. Thatch is more demure and cedar shingles sound too hollow. Tiles are most dramatic, especially when they fill the empty hall with their moaning. The plashing of hands in the silent moonlight. Silence.

¹ One of the very rare instances of a translatable pun, common to both English and Old Japanese.

I was sent

I was sent home yesterday under a pretext of monthly defilement. Until the Prince Asaka is found, I am not to leave the house. My parents were pleasantly surprised to see me when I arrived at the door. They prepared my room with a new mat and hung many plum blossoms around the door. They asked me over and over what the meaning was of my coming home. Had I come to tell them that I should be married? Had I received an appointment of some sort? Had I been dismissed from court? I told them it was only the monthly defilement but they did not believe me. In two years at court this was the first I had been sent home alone.

This morning, when I opened the screens onto the garden, the sun was shining very brightly and the little bamboo, wet with dew, shone even as brightly as those of the palace. This was small consolation for being absent from Nara Palace.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Not even in my dreams

did I imagine it:

that I would be returning

once again

to my native village.

A messenger came from the court

A messenger came from the court. He handed Father a letter and asked him to read it to me aloud, but Father assumed that I had been disgraced in some way or another, I can only guess, and thought this was a letter expelling me from court. He dropped to his knees and swore he could not read it. This annoyed the messenger very much. He took his identification tablet from his sash and smacked Father on the shoulder with it, telling him to get to his feet and do his duty. But Father could not.

“Whatever my daughter may have done, Lord, forgive her.”

My mother was paled with fright and the messenger extremely embarrassed to be addressed as “Lord”. He stooped over and snatched the letter back. He unrolled it and read it out loud. The first half of it was full of a great many ritual prefixes, after each of which, Father moaned louder. I could not understand their import, or, rather, made no effort to understand, because I was breathless and dizzy and the sight of my father weeping was too much to bear. Yet in the end, when the messenger finally reached the text of the thing, it was only a letter from Lord Tabito, informing my family that he was coming for a visit. Father stared with eyes wide as soy saucers at the disdainful messenger and leapt to his feet. “Lord Tabito?” he asked. “Lord Tabito is coming here?” He whirled around and embraced my mother and I. “Lord Tabito!” Then he turned to the messenger and tried to take his hands in gratitude. But the messenger stepped away from him and refused to stay another minute in our house. Father offered him all sorts of gifts but the man would have none of it and left immediately.

It was not long after the messenger took his leave that Tabito arrived himself. Apparently, he had sent the messenger as soon as he heard of my accusation. Once he was done with the visiting formalities with my parents, we left the house by the rear gate and walked beside the river.

After a long while spent thinking, keeping me in insufferable suspense, Tabito asked me this question: "How much do you love your mistress?"

The river was very low and the grasses, rustling in the chill wind, were their pale, fulvous brown of winter. On the opposite bank, only several yards across, a grove of bamboo creaked and groaned, sharp cracks echoing as the tall spires clashed in the wind. I continued down the path. "You too?" Lord Tabito. His short stout form swam before me. I felt the interrogation beginning again.

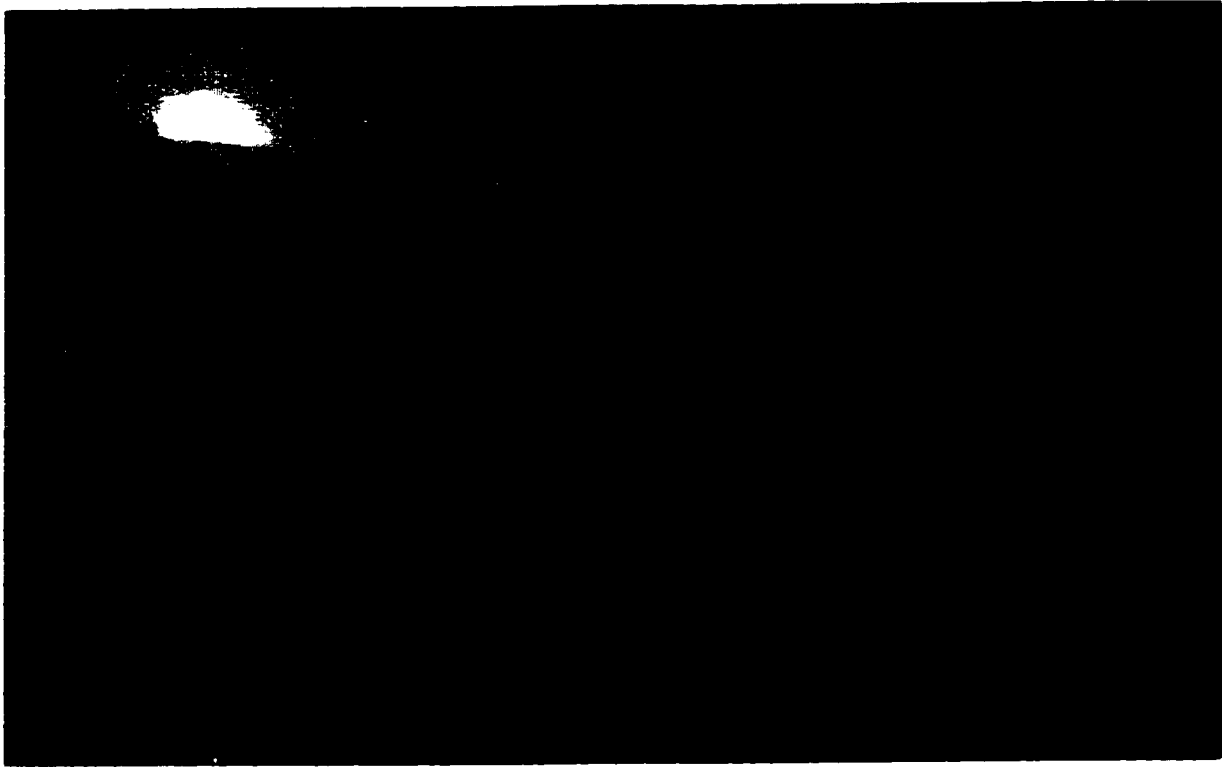
"Your devotion, Kasa, is what Fujiwara is going to use against you. If the Prince turns up, fine... But what if he doesn't?"

I could not breath. My chest was full to bursting of fear and it was suffocating me. "But he's just *lost* somewhere. He's gone to the *kofun* with his cats. He'll come running into the palace this afternoon telling more stories about fairies!"

"And women in white robes, perhaps?"

Beyond the bamboo grove, the Nara Plain stretched far to the south. A fuscous line above the horizon was the only indication that the flatlands gave way to the mountains of Kai. In the west, the sun was setting over Mt. Ikoma.

"But Princess Takano," I blurted out, "she'll protest my innocence."



17. Mt. Ikoma

“How can she, Kasa, when with her own eyes she saw you enter the palace yesterday morning, your clothes in tatters? And besides, what will she attest to after all? Your allegiance?”

I sobbed. I could not help it.

“Were you really dressed only in white?” he asked.

“I gave my over-robe to Koto,” I whispered. “She was cold.”

“Indeed,” replied Tabito. He rubbed his tired eyes. “Another useless witness.”

At Amagatsuji Bridge we turned around and went back along the Sahogawa. It all seemed too far-fetched to me then, and even now. I want to burst with laughter. In the next room, my parents are overjoyed. They have been paid a call by the great Lord Tabito of the

Imperial Court of Nara. When his carriage comes tonight they will be thrilled. What an honour to be paid the family!

I will stop here.

But the light flickers, a draught catches the flame and sends the shadow of my brush dancing across the page once again.

I was held in thrall

I was held in thrall that moment when she entered the bath, the first morning together. She was doubled up, her breasts against her thighs and her fingers poised on the tiles, caught between the cold air and the water's scalding heat.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

Not knowing

I am in Uchimi Village,
where they pound their sleeves
on the fulling block,
he does not come to see me,
though I wait for him.

In times past

In times past, the twelfth day of the second month was the Festival of the Damsons. Because there are so few damson trees left, there is not much of a ceremony to be had. Most

people in the palace do not even know what a damson looks like. I remember one from my childhood which grew just beyond the stile, although even it was looking in a hump-backed, unhealthy way. Anyway, because of the lack of damsons, the festival was to be cancelled this year. Hearing this, Emperor Shōmu was upset. He ordered the priests and Confucian scholars from the Bureau of Ceremonies to his bedside and lectured them, with all the poise he was capable of mustering in his condition, on the importance of retaining the features of the Shinto calendar. They were not to be dropped but perpetuated in different form or melded, if necessary, with new ceremonies from China or events from the Buddhist calendar.

The Confucians complained: “This is a problem, Lord. How can we have a Festival of Damsons when there are no damsons?”

“Damsons or not, the festival goes on.” This was the Emperor’s final decision.

The Bureau of Ceremonies had great difficulty in deciding upon a suitable substitute for the damsons until one of the priests came upon an innovative solution. So it is that on the morning of the twelfth day of the second month there are no banquets or parades scheduled, there are not costumes to be assembled, no feasts to be prepared, but everyone in the palace goes about his usual activity bearing in mind that whatever he chooses to do, whatever is in his routine for the day is an integral part of the ceremony. This leads to a general feeling of good humour among the inhabitants of the palace. It is no longer a penance for the officials to get up with the sun and ready themselves at the Morning Assembly Halls. The rice bale and persimmon basket seem not so heavy as usually. The flashing sea is kindly in the eyes

of one standing on the beach. One wishes the Festival of the Damsons could go on much longer.

To Ōtomo Yakamochi

If it were death to love,
I should have died for you—
Just once.

Where the egrets stalk the clear, shallow waters

Where the egrets stalk the clear, shallow waters of the Sahogawa live many crayfish. The young are pale pink, almost white, and the older ones are coppery red. The children hereabouts catch them by an ingenious method. They attach a piece of dried squid to the end of a length of thread. Facing the sun, with their shadows thrown away from the water, they dangle the bait on the sandy bottom and wait for a crayfish to amble over and grasp it with a claw. Once the crayfish has hold of this delightful treat he will not let go of it for anything. The child, then, has only to pull gently on the string, lifting the crayfish from his element, dangling by one claw in mid-air. Then the child shakes the crayfish onto the grass and taunts it to snap twigs or watches as it flails, turned over on its back. The crayfish always seem to end up getting crushed in one manner or another, for this is the cruel way of children who have not yet been taught compassion. So the crayfish is killed by what it craved. There are always many cats waiting to carry away the remains.