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Lafcadio Hearn, *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (Simplified Edition by ChatGPT)

## INTRODUCTION

In the month when this book was first given to readers, the world was waiting in great tension for news about war between Japan and Russia. People in many lands were thinking about ships, guns, and battles on the sea. They were asking what might happen if a nation of the East, using Western weapons and Western strength of will, should stand face to face with one of the great powers of Europe. No one could say what the result of such a struggle would mean for the future of the world. It was clear only that something new was taking place. An Eastern nation was testing its strength against a Western empire.

When people try to guess what may happen in such times, they often look not only at numbers of soldiers or ships, but at the spirit of the nations involved. They ask what kind of people they are. What do they believe? What do they love? What do they fear? The Russian people had already been known to Europe through great writers. For many years, men such as Turgenieff and Tolstoy had shown the inner life of Russia to the Western world. Through books, readers had come to feel that they understood something of the Russian mind and heart.

The Japanese people, however, did not have such well-known voices in Western lands. They needed someone who could explain them to readers who did not know their language or their ways. They needed someone who could look deeply, feel deeply, and speak clearly. In this task, Lafcadio Hearn proved to be a rare guide.

Hearn lived for many years in Japan. During that time he watched, listened, and learned. He did not look at Japan from a distance. He entered into its daily life. He studied its old stories, its customs, its beliefs, and its quiet ways of feeling. His mind was flexible, ready to accept what was different. He had a poetic imagination, and he wrote in a clear and gentle style. Because of this, he was able to describe strange things in a way that made them seem near and real.

The book called “Kwaidan” contains stories and studies of strange things. The word “kwaidan” means tales of the strange or the weird. Yet the strangeness in these pages is not only meant to frighten. It is a different kind of strangeness. When one reads the titles in the table of contents, the names themselves sound far away, like the deep tone of a temple bell heard across water at night. There is a feeling of distance, of another world.

Some of the tales in this book come from long ago. They speak of battles, of spirits, of men and women who lived many centuries in the past. Yet these old stories seem to throw light upon the people of modern Japan as well. The same spirit that moved warriors in ancient times may still live in those who stand upon the decks of ships in a new war. In this way, the past and the present are quietly joined.

Many of the stories are about women and children. These are the materials from which some of the best tales in the world have been made. The girls and wives who appear in these pages are gentle, loyal, and often full of silent strength. The children are bright-eyed and serious. They may seem different from children in the West. Their world is shaped by other customs, other beliefs, other skies and hills. Yet at the same time they are very human. Their love, fear, sorrow, and hope are feelings known everywhere.

The land itself in these stories feels different. The hills, the flowers, the sea, and the small houses are not like those of Europe or America. The names are unfamiliar. The sounds are new. But through Hearn’s way of telling, there grows a sense that beneath these outward differences there is a deep truth. The world may look strange, but the spirit within it is real.

A writer once said that the power of Hearn’s work comes from a meeting of

three great streams of thought. One stream is the religious feeling of India, especially in the form of Buddhism, which has shaped much of Japan's spirit. Another stream is the love of beauty that belongs to Japan itself, seen in its art, its gardens, and its careful daily life. The third stream is the spirit of Western science, which seeks to observe, to understand, and to explain. In Hearn's writing, these three streams come together.

Because of this meeting, his books create a feeling that had not been felt before in literature. There is a sense of calm thought joined with deep emotion. There is beauty, but also a clear eye. There is faith, but also careful study. The result is something rare. Readers feel that they are entering a world at once soft and clear, full of quiet light.

The introduction suggests that if one were to write down all the thoughts that this book brings to mind, most of them would begin and end with the idea of strangeness. Yet this strangeness is not empty or cold. It is like standing at the edge of a forest at dusk. One hears sounds that are not familiar. One sees shapes that are not known. But there is also a sense of life, of presence, of something meaningful.

The stories in this book are not only inventions. Many of them are taken from old Japanese books. They come from collections of tales that were written long ago. Some of them may have had an origin in China. For example, the story called "The Dream of Akinosuké" is known to have come from a Chinese source. Yet in each case, the storyteller has shaped the tale in a way that makes it fully Japanese. He has colored it again, given it new feeling, and set it in the land where he lived.

One story, called "Yuki-Onna," was told to Hearn by a farmer from a certain village. It was given as a local legend. It is not even certain whether that tale had ever been written down before. Yet the belief that lies within it once existed in many parts of Japan, in many forms. Such stories show how old ideas lived in the minds of simple people.

There is also a tale called "Riki-Baka," which was based on a personal experience. Hearn wrote it down almost exactly as it happened, changing only one family name. In this way, the book joins together legend and memory, old text and

living voice.

These pages were written in Tokyo, in January of 1904. The author lived in Japan at that time. He did not write from memory alone. He wrote from daily life, from what he saw and heard around him. Thus the book stands at a meeting point between worlds: between East and West, between past and present, between belief and study.

As the reader begins the tales that follow, it is good to remember this meeting of worlds. The stories may speak of ghosts, of strange lights upon the sea, of bells that refuse to melt, or of faces without eyes. Yet beneath these strange shapes there are questions about sorrow, love, duty, regret, and faith. These are not strange at all. They belong to all human hearts.

## KWAIDAN

### The Story of Mimi-Nashi-Hōichi

#### Part 1

More than seven hundred years ago there was a great sea battle in the narrow water between Honshu and Kyushu. The place was called Dan-no-ura. Two strong clans fought there. One clan was called the Heike, and the other was called the Genji. For many years they had fought each other for power. At Dan-no-ura the final battle came. On that day the Heike were destroyed. Many warriors died. Their women and children also died. Even their young emperor, a small child, was lost in the sea. That child is now remembered as Emperor Antoku.

Since that time, people have said that the sea and the shore at Dan-no-ura are not quiet places. Fishermen tell strange stories. On dark nights pale lights move above the waves. These lights are called demon-fires. When strong winds blow, people say they can hear shouting from the sea, like the noise of men fighting in battle. Long ago the spirits of the Heike were said to be very restless. Ships that passed in the night feared them. Swimmers feared to enter the water, for it was

said that unseen hands might pull them down.

Because of these fears, a Buddhist temple was built near the shore at Akamagasaki. It was called Amidaji. Near the temple a graveyard was made. In that place stones were set up with the names of the drowned emperor and his loyal warriors. Priests performed services for their spirits. After the temple was built, the strange troubles became less. Yet from time to time people still felt that the Heike had not fully found peace.

In that town there once lived a blind man named Hoichi. From childhood he had learned to play the biwa, a kind of lute. He had also learned to chant old war tales. Though he could not see, his skill was great. When he sang of the battle of Dan-no-ura, people wept. It was said that even spirits would weep to hear him.

Hoichi was poor. He had no family and little money. But the priest of Amidaji was kind. He loved music and poetry. Often he asked Hoichi to come and perform at the temple. After some time the priest invited Hoichi to live there. In return for food and a small room, Hoichi needed only to play and chant on certain evenings. Hoichi gladly agreed, and so he lived at the temple.

One hot summer night the priest was called away to perform a service at a house in the town. He went with his young helper, leaving Hoichi alone. The air inside the temple was heavy and warm. Hoichi sat outside on the wooden porch behind his room. Before him was a small garden. Beyond the garden lay the graveyard of the Heike.

Hoichi played his biwa softly to pass the time. The night grew deeper. Midnight came. The priest had not yet returned. The air was still hot, so Hoichi remained outside.

Then he heard footsteps in the garden. Someone came through the back gate. The steps crossed the garden and stopped directly before him. A deep voice called his name in a sharp way, like a soldier giving an order.

“Hoichi!”

The blind man was startled and did not answer at once. The voice called again, louder and harder.

“Hoichi!”

Hoichi bowed his head and answered, “Yes, I am here. But I am blind. I do not know who calls me.”

The voice became calmer. “There is no need to fear. My lord, a man of high rank, is staying near this temple. Today he visited the place of the great sea battle. He has heard of your skill in chanting the tale of Dan-no-ura. He wishes to hear you perform. You must bring your biwa and come with me at once.”

In those days it was dangerous to refuse the order of a warrior. Hoichi quickly put on his sandals and took up his instrument. The stranger took his arm and led him away. The man’s hand was strong like iron. Hoichi could hear the sound of armor as they walked. He thought that the lord who wished to hear him must be very important.

After some time they stopped before a large gate. Hoichi heard the gate open. They passed through and walked across what seemed like a wide garden. Then they climbed stone steps. A woman’s hand guided Hoichi inside. He felt the smooth wooden floor beneath his feet and the soft mats of a large room.

There was the sound of many people in that room. He heard silk clothing move like leaves in a forest. He heard low voices speaking in a careful way. It sounded like the speech of noble people. Hoichi was given a cushion and told to sit. He tuned his biwa.

A woman spoke. Her voice was calm and strong. “You are to chant the tale of the Heike, with your biwa.”

Hoichi bowed. “The whole tale is long. Which part does my lord wish to hear?”

The woman answered, “Chant the story of the battle at Dan-no-ura. It is the saddest part.”

Hoichi began to play. His fingers moved across the strings. The sound of his biwa became like the sound of waves and oars. It became like arrows flying and men shouting. He sang of ships moving across the bitter sea. He sang of warriors fighting bravely. In the quiet pauses he heard soft voices praising him.

“How wonderful!” someone whispered.

“There is no singer like this in all the land,” another voice said.

Hoichi felt courage grow inside him. He sang more strongly. The room became

very still. Then he reached the part where the Heike knew they would lose. He sang of mothers holding their children. He sang of women who chose death rather than capture. He sang of the young emperor, held in his nurse's arms, as she leaped into the sea.

At that moment a long cry rose from all the listeners. It was a cry of deep sorrow. Then came the sound of weeping. Many voices sobbed together. The sound was so strong that Hoichi felt fear. He had never heard such grief.

After a long time the weeping grew quiet. The same woman spoke again.

“We were told you were skillful. But we did not know that anyone could sing as you have sung tonight. Our lord is pleased. He wishes you to come again for the next six nights at this same hour. The same warrior will come to guide you. You must not speak to anyone about these visits. Our lord travels in secret. Now you may return to the temple.”

Hoichi bowed deeply. The warrior led him back the way they had come. At last they reached the porch of the temple. The man left him there without another word.

It was nearly dawn when Hoichi lay down to rest. The priest returned very late and did not know that Hoichi had gone out. During the day Hoichi said nothing about what had happened.

The next night, at the same hour, the warrior returned. Again Hoichi was led to the great house. Again he chanted the tale. And again the listeners wept.

But this time, by chance, the temple servants noticed that Hoichi was gone. When he returned near morning, they told the priest that the blind singer had left the temple in the middle of the night.

The priest called Hoichi to him and spoke gently but with concern. “My friend, it is not safe for you to go out alone so late. Why did you not tell us? Where have you been?”

Hoichi bowed and answered in a quiet voice, “Please forgive me. I had some private business. I could not go at another time.”

The priest felt uneasy. Something about the answer troubled him. He feared that spirits might be involved. He said no more at that moment, but he told the servants to watch Hoichi closely. If he left the temple again at night, they were to follow

him.

## Part 2

The very next night the servants saw Hoichi leave the temple once more. It was raining, and the night was very dark. They quickly lit their lanterns and hurried after him. But Hoichi walked with surprising speed, guided by some unseen hand. Before they reached the road, he had vanished from sight. The men ran through the wet streets, asking at houses where Hoichi sometimes performed. No one had seen him.

At last, as they were returning by way of the shore, they heard the sound of a biwa. The sound was strong and fierce, rising above the noise of wind and rain. It seemed to come from the graveyard of the Heike, near the temple.

The servants froze in fear. In that graveyard, on dark nights, pale lights were often seen. Those lights were said to be the fires of the dead. Yet the music was clear and powerful, and the voice that chanted the battle of Dan-no-ura was surely Hoichi's voice.

Gathering courage, they went toward the sound. In the black rain they saw many pale lights moving above the graves. The lights flickered like candles held by unseen hands. And in the middle of the graveyard, before the tomb of Emperor Antoku, sat Hoichi.

He was alone.

He sat in the rain, playing with all his strength. His voice rose loudly as he sang of the sea battle. The servants shouted to him.

“Hoichi! Hoichi! Come home!”

But he did not answer. He did not even turn his head. He played more fiercely than before.

The servants ran to him and grabbed his arms. They shook him hard and cried into his ears, “Hoichi! It is us! Come away at once!”

Hoichi spoke in a voice of anger. “How dare you disturb me before this noble assembly? Such behavior is not allowed.”

In spite of their fear, the servants almost laughed. There was no assembly. There was only rain, darkness, graves, and ghostly fires. They now understood that Hoichi had been under the power of spirits.

They lifted him up and dragged him away from the tomb. They hurried him back to the temple. There, by order of the priest, they removed his wet clothes and dried him.

The priest demanded to know the truth. "You must tell me everything," he said firmly. "Where have you been? What has happened?"

At last Hoichi told the whole story. He spoke of the warrior who had come, of the large gate, of the noble people dressed in silk, of the weeping at the death of the emperor, and of the promise that he must return for six nights.

When the priest heard this, his face grew pale.

"My poor friend," he said, "you are in great danger. You have not been visiting any noble house. You have been going to the graveyard. The warrior who guides you is no living man. The noble assembly is made of the spirits of the Heike. They have been calling you to sing before them. And now that you have obeyed, they hold power over you."

Hoichi trembled. "What will happen to me?" he asked.

"If you go again," the priest said, "they may tear you to pieces. Even if you do not go, they may try to take you. But we will protect you as best we can."

That night the priest had to leave the temple again to perform another service. Before he left, he prepared Hoichi carefully.

The priest and his helper stripped Hoichi's body. With brushes dipped in ink, they wrote sacred Buddhist words all over him. They wrote on his chest and back, on his arms and legs, on his neck and face. They even wrote on the soles of his feet. The writing covered almost every part of his skin. The holy words were from a powerful sacred text.

When they had finished, the priest gave him strict instructions.

"After I leave, you must sit quietly on the porch as before. You will be called. But whatever happens, do not answer. Do not move. Do not even cough. Sit as if you are deep in meditation. If you move or speak, the spirits will destroy you.

Only if you remain silent and still will you be safe.”

Hoichi bowed and said that he understood.

After night fell, the priest and his helper left. Hoichi sat alone on the porch. He placed his biwa beside him. He folded his hands and tried to calm his heart. The night was silent. Hours passed slowly.

At last he heard footsteps on the road. The steps came through the gate and across the garden. They stopped directly before him.

The deep voice called, “Hoichi!”

Hoichi did not move. He did not answer.

The voice called again, louder, “Hoichi!”

Still he remained silent.

The voice shouted a third time, filled with anger, “Hoichi!”

Hoichi felt his heart beating hard. But he kept his body still like stone.

The voice muttered, “No answer? That is strange. I must see what is here.”

Heavy feet stepped onto the porch. They came closer. They stopped just beside him.

For a long time there was silence. Hoichi felt that his whole body shook inside, though he did not move.

Then the voice spoke slowly, very close to him.

“Here is the biwa. But of the biwa player I see only two ears.”

There was a pause.

“Ah. That is why he does not answer. He has no mouth. Nothing remains of him but his ears. Very well. I will take those ears to show my lord that the command was obeyed.”

Suddenly Hoichi felt strong fingers grasp his ears. The pain was terrible. He felt them torn from his head. Warm blood ran down his neck. Yet he did not cry out. He did not move.

The heavy footsteps went away. They crossed the garden. They passed through the gate. The night became silent again.

Hoichi sat until dawn, blood flowing from the sides of his head.

When the priest returned at sunrise, he hurried to the porch. His foot slipped in

something wet. He held up his lantern and saw blood. Then he saw Hoichi sitting upright, still in meditation, though his ears were gone.

“My poor Hoichi!” the priest cried. “What have they done to you?”

At the sound of the priest’s voice, Hoichi felt safe at last. He began to sob and told what had happened.

The priest struck his own forehead in sorrow. “It is my fault,” he said. “We wrote the sacred words over your whole body—but we forgot your ears. We left them bare. That is why the spirit could see them and take them.”

With the help of a doctor, Hoichi’s wounds were treated. In time he healed. Word of his strange adventure spread far and wide. Many people came to hear him chant. They brought gifts of money. Hoichi, who had once been poor, became well known and comfortable in life.

But from that time he was called Mimi-nashi-Hoichi.

Hoichi the Earless.

## Oshidori

Long ago, in the district called Tamura-no-Go, in the province of Mutsu, there lived a man named Sonjo. He was a falconer and a hunter. From his youth he had lived by bow and arrow. He knew the mountains and rivers of his land. He could walk quietly through reeds and across fields without making sound. He understood the habits of birds and wild animals. Hunting was not only his work. It was the way he survived.

One cold day he went out to hunt. The sky was gray, and the air was sharp. He searched the hills and the fields for many hours. He found no deer, no hare, not even a small bird. His stomach grew empty, and his body felt weak. As the sun began to sink, he decided to return home.

On his way back, he came to a place called Akanuma. There was a river there. The water moved slowly between tall reeds. The reeds bent in the wind and made a soft sound. As Sonjo stepped toward the bank to cross, he saw something in the water.

A pair of oshidori swam together.

The two birds moved side by side. Their feathers shone softly in the dim light. They were close to each other, turning their heads in the same direction, gliding in peace. Oshidori, the mandarin ducks, were known for their strong bond. It was said that they lived always as a pair.

To kill oshidori was considered unkind. People believed it brought sorrow. But Sonjo was hungry. He had found nothing all day. His hunger pressed hard upon him, and his mind grew narrow.

He lifted his bow.

He drew the string back slowly, carefully. The arrow flew. It struck the male bird. The bird cried out once and fell still upon the water. The female bird beat her wings wildly and escaped into the reeds on the far side of the river. In a moment she was gone.

Sonjo waded into the river and took the dead bird. He carried it home. That evening he cooked the flesh and ate it. The taste was good. His hunger was satisfied.

But that night he had a dream.

In the deep hours before dawn, as he lay sleeping, he saw a woman enter his room. She was beautiful and young. Her face was pale, and her eyes were filled with sorrow. She stood beside his pillow and began to weep.

Her weeping was soft at first, but full of pain. It felt to Sonjo as if her tears were cutting into his heart. He tried to move, but in the dream he could only listen.

“Why did you kill him?” she cried. “What wrong had he done to you? At Akanuma we were so happy together. We swam side by side. We harmed no one. Why did you kill him?”

Her voice trembled with grief.

“Do you know what you have done? You have killed me also. I cannot live without my husband. I came only to tell you this.”

She covered her face and wept even more bitterly. Her sobs seemed to shake the air. Then she spoke again, and her words formed a short poem:

“When evening fell,

I called him to return with me.

Now I must sleep alone

in the shadow of the reeds of Akanuma.

What sorrow this is.”

The woman lifted her face once more. Her eyes looked directly into Sonjo’s.

“Tomorrow, when you go to Akanuma, you will see,” she said. “You will see.”

Then she faded from sight.

Sonjo woke suddenly. The room was empty. The morning light was just beginning to show. Yet the dream remained clear in his mind. The face of the woman, her tears, her voice—all felt real.

He sat up and pressed his hands against his head. He remembered her last words: “Tomorrow, when you go to Akanuma, you will see.”

He could not rest. Though part of him told himself it had only been a dream, another part felt deep fear.

As soon as the sun rose higher, he set out again toward Akanuma.

The air that morning felt heavy. The reeds stood still. The river moved quietly as before. When he reached the bank, he looked across the water.

There, swimming alone, was the female oshidori.

She moved slowly. Her body seemed smaller now without her mate beside her. For a moment she did not see him. Then she lifted her head and looked directly at Sonjo.

He felt his breath stop.

The bird did not try to fly away.

Instead, she swam straight toward him. Her eyes were fixed upon him in a strange and steady way. There was no fear in them.

Sonjo stood frozen.

When the bird reached the bank near where he stood, she rose partly from the water. With a sudden movement, she bent her neck downward. With her own beak, she tore open her breast.

The small body trembled once.

Then it fell still.

The water around her became red.

Sonjo stared in horror. His hands shook. The image of the weeping woman from his dream came back to him. He understood.

The woman in the dream had been the spirit of the female oshidori. She had come to him in sorrow. And now she had kept her word.

He fell to his knees by the river.

The wind moved softly through the reeds. The river flowed on as before. But for Sonjo, nothing was the same.

His heart felt heavy with guilt. He had killed not only one bird, but two lives joined together.

He returned home slowly. He did not eat that day. He did not sleep that night.

Within a short time, Sonjo shaved his head.

He became a priest.

## The Story of O-Tei

### Part 1

A long time ago, in the town of Niigata, in the province of Echizen, there lived a young man named Nagao Chosei. He was the son of a physician. From childhood he had been trained to follow his father's work. He studied medicine with care and patience. He was serious in manner, gentle in speech, and respected by those who knew him.

When he was still very young, his family arranged his future marriage. He was promised to a girl named O-Tei. She was the daughter of one of his father's close friends. The two families agreed that when Nagao finished his studies, the wedding would take place.

O-Tei was quiet and kind. She had a soft voice and clear eyes. Though still a child, she understood that she and Nagao were promised to each other. As they grew older, they met often in the presence of their families. They spoke politely, but beneath their calm words there was a quiet bond forming.

But O-Tei's health was weak. In her fifteenth year she became very ill. The illness did not leave her. Her body grew thin. Her breath became short. The doctors could do little. Soon it was clear that she would not recover.

When O-Tei understood that she was going to die, she asked to see Nagao.

He came at once. He entered her room quietly. The light in the room was soft. The air was still. O-Tei lay upon her bedding. Her face was pale, but her eyes were clear.

Nagao knelt beside her.

She looked at him gently and spoke in a weak but steady voice.

"Nagao-sama," she said, "we were promised to each other from childhood. We were to be married at the end of this year. But now I must leave this world. The gods know what is best. If I were to live longer, I might only bring trouble and sorrow to you. With this weak body, I could not be a good wife. To wish to live only for your sake would be selfish. I am ready to die."

Nagao's throat tightened. He bowed his head, trying to hide his tears.

O-Tei continued, "I ask you not to grieve too deeply. And there is something more I wish to say. I believe that we shall meet again."

Nagao lifted his head quickly. "Yes," he answered earnestly. "We shall meet again in the Pure Land. There will be no parting there."

A faint smile touched her lips.

"No," she said softly. "I do not mean the Pure Land. I believe we shall meet again in this world."

Nagao looked at her in surprise.

"In this world?" he asked gently.

"Yes," she replied. "Even though I shall be buried tomorrow. I feel it strongly. If you wish it, I shall come back to you."

Her breathing grew slower, but she continued to speak.

"To do this, I must be born again as a girl. I must grow up. You would have to wait. Fifteen or sixteen years. That is a long time. But you are only nineteen now."

Nagao tried to soothe her heart.

"To wait for you would not be a burden," he said. "It would be both my duty

and my joy. We are bound to each other through many lives.”

She looked at him closely.

“You speak kindly,” she said. “But do you doubt?”

He hesitated for a moment.

“I do not doubt your words,” he said carefully. “But if you are born again in another body, with another name, how shall I know you? Is there some sign you can give me?”

O-Tei shook her head slowly.

“I cannot tell you such a sign. Only the gods know how or where we shall meet. But I am certain that if you are willing to receive me, I shall return. Please remember these words.”

Her eyes closed gently.

Her breathing stopped.

O-Tei was dead.

Nagao remained kneeling beside her. His grief was deep and true. The quiet room seemed empty without her voice. For many days he felt as if the world itself had grown dim.

He had a memorial tablet made with her name written upon it. He placed it in the small family shrine in his home. Every day he set food and incense before it. He prayed quietly for her spirit.

He could not forget her last words. He thought often about her promise to return. He felt both hope and doubt. Yet to honor her memory, he wrote a solemn promise. In that writing he declared that if she should return to this world in the body of a woman, he would marry her. He sealed the promise with his personal seal and placed it beside her tablet.

Time passed.

Though he loved O-Tei, Nagao was his parents’ only son. His family needed him to marry and continue the line. After some time he gave in to their wishes. He married another woman chosen by his father.

Even after his marriage, he did not forget O-Tei. He continued to make offerings before her tablet. He remembered her with quiet affection.

But as the years went by, her face became less clear in his mind. Her voice grew faint like a dream heard long ago. Life moved forward.

Then sorrow came.

His parents died. Later his wife fell ill and passed away. His only child also died.

One by one, those close to him were taken. At last he found himself alone.

The house that had once been full of family felt empty. Each room carried memory. Each memory carried pain.

Unable to bear the weight of his grief, Nagao left his home. He decided to travel, hoping that new places might soften his sorrow.

He walked through many towns and villages. He crossed rivers and climbed hills. Days passed into weeks.

One day he came to a mountain village called Ikao. The village was known for its hot springs and for the beauty of its surrounding hills. Tired from travel, Nagao stopped at a small inn to rest.

A young girl came to serve him.

At the first sight of her face, his heart leaped violently in his chest.

She looked exactly like O-Tei.

## Part 2

For a moment Nagao could not breathe. The room seemed to grow distant. He stared at the young girl as if he were seeing a spirit.

She moved quietly as she brought him water. Her hands were small and graceful. The way she lowered her eyes, the way she turned her head—every small movement brought back a memory from long ago. It was as if the years between had fallen away.

Nagao pressed his fingers into his palm to steady himself. “This must be only a likeness,” he thought. “There are many faces in the world.”

The girl arranged the bedding and set the tray before him. Her voice, when she spoke, was soft and clear.

The sound of it pierced his heart.

After she finished her work, she stood politely near the door.

Nagao struggled with himself for a time. Then he spoke.

“Please forgive my boldness,” he said gently. “You look very much like someone I once knew. When you entered this room, I was startled. May I ask what is your name? And where were you born?”

The girl looked at him steadily.

Then she answered.

“My name is O-Tei,” she said calmly. “And you are Nagao Chosei of Echigo, my promised husband.”

The world seemed to stop.

She continued, in the same gentle voice he remembered from long ago.

“Seventeen years ago I died in Niigata. Before my death, I told you that we would meet again in this world. You wrote a promise that if I returned, you would marry me. You sealed that promise and placed it beside my tablet. Because of that promise, I have come back.”

As she spoke these words, her face grew pale. Her body swayed.

She fell to the floor unconscious.

Nagao rushed forward and lifted her gently. His hands trembled. His heart beat hard within him. He called for help. The people of the inn hurried into the room.

After some time the girl regained consciousness. She seemed confused and weak. When asked what had happened, she could not explain. She remembered only that she had entered the guest’s room and then felt faint.

Nagao said nothing at that moment. But deep within him there was no doubt.

The next day he made inquiries. He learned that the girl had indeed been born in that region some years after O-Tei’s death. Her family knew nothing of Nagao or Niigata. There was no link between them.

Yet the words she had spoken had been clear and exact. She had known his full name. She had known of the written promise sealed and placed in the shrine.

No one else could have known that.

Nagao stayed at the inn for several days. He spoke gently with the girl. She was

modest and kind. She had no memory of having spoken strange words to him. When he carefully asked about her childhood, she spoke only of ordinary things.

She did not remember any previous life.

Yet each time Nagao looked at her face, he saw O-Tei.

At last he spoke openly to her family. He asked for her hand in marriage. After some discussion and agreement, the marriage was arranged.

Nagao married her.

Their life together was peaceful and happy. She proved to be a good wife—gentle, wise, and full of quiet strength. She cared for their home with devotion.

From time to time Nagao wondered whether she would ever recall the moment at Ikao when she had spoken of the past. Once, some years later, he carefully asked her if she remembered fainting when she first met him.

She smiled and said she remembered feeling dizzy, but nothing more.

She had no memory of her former life.

It was as if a door had opened for a brief moment and then closed again.

The memory of the earlier birth had flashed into light at the instant of recognition—and then faded.

Nagao never showed her the written promise he had sealed long ago. He kept it hidden, as a quiet proof of what had happened.

In his heart he felt deep gratitude.

The words O-Tei had spoken on her deathbed had not been empty.

They had met again in this world.

### Ubazakura

Three hundred years ago, in a village called Asamimura, in the district of Onsengōri, in the province of Iyo, there lived a man named Tokubei. He was the richest man in the village. He was also the headman, the person whom others came to when there was trouble or when a decision had to be made. He was known as a good man, careful in his work and fair in his judgments.

In most things Tokubei was fortunate. His fields were wide. His house was

strong and well built. His storehouses were full. People respected him. Yet there was one sorrow in his life.

He and his wife had no child.

Year after year they waited. Year after year no child was born. As Tokubei grew older, this sorrow grew heavier. He had reached the age of forty without knowing the joy of hearing a child's voice in his home.

In their sadness, Tokubei and his wife turned to prayer. In their village there stood a temple called Saihōji. In that temple there was an image of the fierce guardian Fudō Myōō. The people believed that Fudō-sama had great power to answer sincere prayers.

Tokubei and his wife went often to Saihōji. They bowed before the image. They burned incense. They prayed with all their hearts for a child.

At last their prayer was answered.

Tokubei's wife gave birth to a daughter.

The child was very pretty. Her small face was bright, and her cry was strong. She was given the name Tsuyu.

The house that had once felt quiet now filled with joy. Servants smiled. Neighbors came with gifts. Tokubei and his wife felt deep gratitude toward Fudō-sama.

But the mother's milk was not enough for the child. So they hired a milk nurse, a woman named O-Sodé.

O-Sodé was gentle and patient. She cared for the little girl with real love. She held her close, fed her, sang softly to her. As the months passed, O-Sodé grew deeply attached to Tsuyu, as if the child were her own.

Tsuyu grew into a beautiful girl. Her hair was dark and smooth. Her manner was sweet. Those who saw her often said that she was like a flower in spring.

When she reached the age of fifteen, a sudden illness came upon her. Her body grew weak. Her face lost its color. The doctors were called, but they shook their heads in doubt.

It seemed that Tsuyu was going to die.

In that time of fear, O-Sodé suffered greatly. She loved Tsuyu not as a servant

loves a master's child, but as a mother loves her own daughter. Seeing the girl grow weaker each day filled her heart with pain.

O-Sodé decided to pray.

Every day she went to the temple Saihōji. She stood before the image of Fudō-sama. She bowed deeply. She prayed with tears in her eyes.

“Please,” she begged, “let Tsuyu live. Take my life instead. Let me die in her place.”

For twenty-one days she went to the temple without fail. Whether the weather was fair or cold, she went and prayed.

On the twenty-first day something changed.

That very day, Tsuyu's fever broke. Her breathing became calm. Color returned slowly to her face. Within a short time she was completely well.

The house of Tokubei was filled again with joy. The fear that had hung over them lifted like a dark cloud after rain.

Tokubei gave a great feast to celebrate his daughter's recovery. Friends and neighbors gathered. There was food and sake. Laughter filled the rooms.

But on that very night, O-Sodé was suddenly taken ill.

She felt a sharp pain in her body. Her strength left her quickly. A doctor was called, but when he examined her, he spoke quietly to Tokubei.

“She will not live long,” he said.

The family gathered around O-Sodé's bed. Tsuyu, still weak from her illness, wept beside her.

O-Sodé opened her eyes and looked at them gently.

“It is time I tell you something,” she said in a faint voice. “My prayer has been heard. I asked Fudō-sama to let me die in place of Tsuyu. This kindness has been granted.”

Tears ran down Tokubei's face.

“Do not grieve for me,” O-Sodé continued. “I am happy to give my life for Tsuyu. But I have one request. I promised that if my prayer were answered, I would have a cherry tree planted in the garden of Saihōji. It is to be a gift of thanks. I will not be able to plant it myself. Please, I beg you, do this for me.”

Her breathing grew softer.

“Remember,” she whispered, “I was glad to die for Tsuyu.”

With those words, she passed away.

The house that had been full of celebration became silent once more.

After the funeral, Tokubei kept his promise.

He found the finest young cherry tree that could be obtained. It was planted in the garden of Saihōji, in memory of O-Sodé.

The tree took root and began to grow. Its branches spread wide. Its leaves were fresh and green.

When the next year came, on the sixteenth day of the second month—the day of O-Sodé’s death—the tree bloomed.

The blossoms were beautiful beyond expectation.

Their color was soft pink and white.

And the shape of the blossoms was like the nipples of a woman’s breast, touched with milk.

Year after year, on that same day, the tree bloomed.

It did not bloom earlier. It did not bloom later.

Always on the sixteenth day of the second month.

For two hundred and fifty-four years it continued in this way.

The people of the village gave it a name.

They called it Ubazakura.

The Cherry Tree of the Milk Nurse.

## Diplomacy

The execution was ordered to take place in the garden of the yashiki, the large house of a samurai lord. The garden was wide and carefully kept. White sand had been spread smooth upon the ground. Through the sand ran a line of flat stepping-stones. These stones were placed for walking across the garden without soiling one’s feet.

On that day the garden felt heavy and still.

The condemned man was brought forward and made to kneel upon the sand. His arms were bound tightly behind his back. He could not move them at all. His face was pale, but his eyes were open and aware.

Servants carried buckets of water and bags filled with small stones. The bags were placed tightly around the kneeling man. They wedged him in so firmly that he could not fall or shift his weight. He was fixed in place.

The master of the house came to observe. He stood calmly and looked at the arrangement. He nodded slightly. Everything was prepared correctly. He made no complaint.

Suddenly the condemned man raised his voice.

“Honored Sir,” he cried, “the fault for which I am to die was not done with evil thought. I did not act with intent. It was only my foolishness. I was born with little wisdom. Because of that I made mistakes. But to kill a man for being foolish is wrong.”

His voice shook, but it did not break.

“This wrong will not pass without return. If you kill me while I am filled with anger, my spirit will not rest. From that anger will come vengeance. Evil will be repaid with evil.”

The samurai lord listened quietly. He understood well the old belief. If a person dies with strong anger in the heart, the spirit may return to harm the one who caused the death.

But the lord did not show fear.

Instead, he spoke in a calm and almost gentle voice.

“We will allow you to frighten us as much as you wish—after you are dead. But I wonder if you truly mean what you say. Can you give us a sign of your anger after your head has been cut off?”

The man stared at him.

“I can,” he answered.

The samurai looked toward one of the stepping-stones directly in front of the prisoner.

“In front of you is a stone,” he said. “After your head has been cut off, try to

bite that stone. If your spirit can do that, perhaps some among us will feel fear.”

The man’s face twisted with anger.

“I will bite it!” he shouted. “I will bite it! I will—”

There was a flash of steel.

The sword moved quickly and cleanly. The body bent forward over the rice sacks. Blood sprang out in two strong streams from the neck. The head fell and rolled upon the sand.

It rolled heavily toward the stepping-stone.

Then something strange happened.

The head bounced once and struck the edge of the stone. The teeth caught the upper rim. For a brief moment the head clung there, jaws tight upon the stone.

Then it fell.

It lay still.

No one spoke.

The servants stared at their master with fear in their eyes. Their faces had grown pale.

The samurai, however, showed no sign of alarm. He simply held out his sword. A servant poured water carefully along the blade from top to tip. Another wiped the steel clean with soft paper.

The ceremony was complete.

Yet the story did not end there.

In the days that followed, the servants and the people of the house felt growing fear. They remembered the words of the condemned man. They remembered how the head had bitten the stone.

At night they listened for strange sounds. The wind in the bamboo seemed like whispering voices. The shadows in the garden seemed to move with purpose. Each small noise startled them.

They imagined that the spirit of the dead man was waiting to strike.

After some months of living in fear, the chief retainer approached the samurai lord.

He bowed deeply.

“My lord,” he said, “we are troubled. We fear that the spirit of the executed man may seek revenge. We humbly ask that a religious service be held to calm his spirit.”

The samurai listened without anger.

“It is not necessary,” he replied.

The retainer hesitated. “My lord, we saw what happened. The head bit the stone.”

The samurai’s expression remained steady.

“Yes,” he said, “it did. But listen carefully. The danger lies only in the final thought of a dying man. When I challenged him, I turned his mind from revenge to the act of biting the stone. At the moment of death, his whole will was fixed upon that act. That was his final intention.”

He paused briefly.

“And that intention he fulfilled. He bit the stone. Having accomplished that, he had no thought left for vengeance. All else was forgotten.”

The retainer lowered his head slowly.

“So there is nothing to fear?” he asked.

“Nothing,” the samurai answered.

And indeed, nothing happened.

The dead man’s spirit gave no sign.

The house remained at peace.

### Of A Mirror and a Bell

Eight hundred years ago, in the province of Tōtōmi, there stood a temple on a mountain called Mugenyama. The priests of that temple wished to have a great bronze bell made. In those days, temple bells were not only used to mark the hours. Their deep sound was believed to carry prayers far into the world. A large bell required much metal. So the priests asked the women of the district to give old bronze mirrors to be melted down for the bell.

In Japan, a mirror was not a simple object. It was believed to hold deep meaning. Some said that a mirror was the soul of a woman. Old bronze mirrors often had

fine designs on their backs—pine trees, bamboo, and plum blossoms—symbols of long life and strength. Many mirrors were passed down from mother to daughter through generations.

Among the women who brought mirrors to the temple was a young farmer's wife. She brought the mirror that had belonged to her mother, and before that to her grandmother. It was old, but well cared for. On its back were raised designs of pine, bamboo, and plum.

She placed it among the others in the temple yard.

At that moment she felt proud to give it. But later, when she returned home, she began to feel regret.

She remembered her mother showing her the mirror when she was a small child. She remembered how it had reflected her face when she was young. She remembered smiles that had appeared in its surface. She remembered her mother's gentle voice.

The mirror had been part of her life.

Each time she passed the temple, she looked through the railing at the pile of mirrors waiting to be melted. She could see her own mirror among them. She recognized it at once by the pine, bamboo, and plum design.

Her heart grew heavy.

If she had money, she might have asked to give coins instead and take back her mirror. But she had no such money. She began to wish secretly that she could steal it back. Yet she did not dare.

The regret grew deeper.

She remembered the old saying: "The mirror is the soul of a woman." She began to fear that part of herself had been given away without full heart.

Soon the mirrors were sent to the foundry to be melted for the bell.

The metal workers placed the mirrors into the furnace. The fire burned strong and hot. One by one the mirrors melted and became liquid metal.

But one mirror would not melt.

No matter how long it was kept in the fire, it remained hard and solid.

The workers were puzzled. They tried again and again. Still it would not melt.

At last they said, “The woman who gave this mirror must have regretted the gift. Her heart was not free. Her spirit still clings to it. That is why it will not melt.”

Word of this spread quickly through the district.

Soon everyone knew whose mirror it was.

The poor woman felt deep shame. Her private regret had become known to all. People looked at her differently. She felt as if her hidden thoughts had been pulled into the light.

Her shame turned into anger.

She could not bear it.

In that anger and sorrow, she drowned herself.

Before her death she wrote a letter. In that letter she said:

“After I am dead, it will not be difficult to melt the mirror and cast the bell. But to the person who breaks that bell by ringing it, great wealth will be given by my ghost.”

After she died, the mirror was placed again in the furnace.

This time it melted easily.

The bell was cast and hung in the temple yard.

But the woman’s final words were remembered.

In Japan there is a belief that the last wish of a person who dies in anger carries power. People believed that her spirit would reward the one who broke the bell.

So when the bell was hung, people came in large numbers to ring it.

They swung the heavy wooden beam with great force. Again and again they struck the bell, hoping to break it.

But the bell was strong. It did not crack. It did not break.

The priests grew troubled. The ringing became constant. Day and night people struck the bell, ignoring the temple’s peace.

At last the priests decided to end the matter.

They rolled the bell down the hill into a deep swamp.

The swamp swallowed it.

The bell was lost.

Only its story remained.

It was called the Bell of Mugen.

But the story did not end there.

In Japan there is a belief in a strange kind of magic. It is the act of imagining one thing to stand for another. By treating one object as if it were another, people believe that a similar result may follow.

After the bell had sunk into the swamp, no one could ring it again. But some still wished to gain wealth from the woman's spirit.

So they took other objects—basins, pots, or lumps of clay—and struck them as if they were the Bell of Mugen. They imagined that the object before them was the lost bell.

One famous example tells of a woman named Umégaë.

She was traveling with a warrior who had no money. Remembering the legend, she took a bronze washbasin. Holding it firmly, she struck it hard, again and again, calling out for gold.

A guest at the inn heard the noise and asked what she was doing. When he learned of her trouble, he was moved by her story. He gave her three hundred pieces of gold.

After that, many tried the same act.

There was once a farmer who had wasted all his wealth. He made a bell of clay in his garden, shaping it like the lost bell of Mugen.

He struck the clay bell hard, shouting for riches.

As he did so, the ground before him opened.

A woman in white rose up, holding a covered jar.

She said, "Your prayer has been heard."

She gave him the jar and vanished.

The farmer ran into his house and called his wife. Together they opened the jar.

It was filled to the very top with—

No.

That cannot be told.

Jikininki

Long ago there lived a priest of the Zen sect named Musō Kokushi. He often traveled alone through distant provinces to teach the Buddhist law. He did not fear hardship. He walked through mountains and valleys without complaint. He was calm in spirit and firm in faith.

One day, while journeying through the province of Mino, he lost his way in a wild mountain district. The path became unclear. The sun began to sink behind the hills. No houses were in sight. The wind moved through the tall grass with a lonely sound.

Musō walked for a long time, hoping to find shelter before night. But the sky grew dark. At last, on a hill lit by the last light of evening, he saw a small hut. It was one of those lonely dwellings built for hermit priests.

The hut looked old and in poor repair. Still, Musō climbed the hill and knocked. An aged priest opened the door. His face was thin and stern.

Musō bowed and asked humbly for lodging for the night.

The old priest shook his head. "I cannot give you shelter," he said harshly. "But if you go down into the valley beyond this hill, you will find a small village. There you may obtain food and a place to sleep."

Musō thanked him and went down into the valley.

There he found a hamlet of only a few houses. Smoke rose from the roofs. Dogs barked as he approached. The headman of the village welcomed him kindly and brought him inside.

Many villagers were gathered in the main room. The air felt heavy with sorrow. Musō was led into a smaller room, where food and bedding were given to him. He was tired and lay down to rest.

Near midnight he awoke.

From the next room he heard loud weeping.

Soon the sliding doors were opened quietly. A young man carrying a lantern entered and bowed respectfully.

"Reverend Sir," he said, "I must tell you that I am now the head of this house. Yesterday I was only the eldest son. But my father died a few hours before you

arrived.”

Musō listened quietly.

“We did not tell you earlier,” the young man continued, “because you were weary from travel. All the villagers gathered here to offer prayers for my father. But according to our custom, no one may remain in this village during the night after a death. We must leave the house and go to another village until morning. The body must remain alone.”

The young man lowered his eyes.

“Strange things always happen in the house where a body is left alone. For this reason we invite you to come with us. We can find you lodging elsewhere. But perhaps, as a priest, you do not fear such things.”

Musō answered calmly.

“I am grateful for your kindness. But you should have told me earlier of your father’s death. Though I was tired, I would have gladly performed the proper rites before you left. Since you must go, I will stay here and chant for the dead. I do not fear spirits.”

The young man looked relieved. The other villagers came to thank Musō for his courage.

Before leaving, the headman said, “If you see or hear anything strange during the night, please tell us in the morning.”

Then they all departed, leaving Musō alone in the house.

He went into the room where the body lay. Offerings of food and drink had been placed before it. A small lamp burned softly beside the corpse.

Musō recited the funeral service. He chanted with steady voice. After finishing the rites, he sat down to meditate.

The village outside was silent. Hours passed.

In the deep middle of the night, when the silence was thick, something entered the house.

It made no sound.

Musō suddenly felt that he could not move. It was as if his body had turned to stone.

He saw a shape—large and shadowy. It had no clear form. It moved toward the corpse.

The shape lifted the body as if it had hands. It began to devour it.

It ate quickly. It started with the head. It consumed flesh, hair, bones, even the burial cloth.

When the corpse was gone, the shape turned to the offerings and devoured them as well.

Then it disappeared.

Musō's body became free again. He remained seated until morning.

At sunrise the villagers returned.

They found Musō waiting at the doorway.

They bowed to him.

When they entered the house and saw that the body and offerings were gone, none seemed surprised.

The headman asked quietly, "Did you see what happened?"

Musō told them what he had witnessed.

The villagers nodded.

"It has always been so," the headman said. "Whenever someone dies, the body disappears if left alone."

Musō then asked, "Does the priest on the hill not perform rites for your dead?"

The villagers looked at him with confusion.

"There is no priest on that hill," they said. "No one has lived there for many generations."

Musō did not argue.

But when he left the village, he climbed the hill again to see whether the hermitage truly existed.

He found the hut easily.

This time the aged priest welcomed him inside.

As soon as Musō entered, the old man fell to his knees and cried, "I am ashamed. I am deeply ashamed."

Musō looked at him calmly.

“You need not be ashamed for refusing me lodging,” he said.

The old man shook his head.

“That is not why I am ashamed,” he said. “I am ashamed because you saw me in my true form. I was the one who devoured the corpse last night.”

Musō remained silent.

The old man continued.

“I am a jikininki—an eater of human flesh. Long ago I was a priest in this region. I performed funeral rites for the villagers. But I did so only for payment. I cared only for the food and clothing I received. I did not perform the rites with true compassion.”

His voice trembled.

“Because of that selfishness, after my death I was reborn as this being. Now I must feed on the bodies of the dead. Every corpse in this district must be consumed by me.”

He bowed low before Musō.

“Please have pity. Perform a Segaki service for me. Pray that I may escape this state.”

As soon as he spoke these words, he vanished.

The hut also vanished.

Musō found himself kneeling alone in tall grass beside an old stone grave. The grave was of a type used for priests.

He understood.

He performed the proper prayers.

And then he continued on his journey.

## Mujina

In Tokyo there is a slope called Kii-no-kuni-zaka. The name means “Slope of the Province of Kii.” No one seems certain why it is called by that name. On one side of the slope there is an old moat. It is deep and wide, with green banks rising steeply above the water. On the other side stands the long wall of an imperial

residence.

Today the place is bright with lamps and busy with traffic. But long ago, before there were street lamps and carriages for hire, the slope was lonely after dark. People avoided it at night. Even those who lived nearby would walk a longer road rather than climb Kii-no-kuni-zaka alone after sunset.

The reason was simple.

There was said to be a mujina there.

The last person known to have seen the mujina was an elderly merchant from the Kyōbashi district. He told his story many years ago, before his death.

One evening he was returning home late. The sky had already grown dark. He hurried up the slope, wishing to reach a brighter part of the road.

As he climbed, he noticed someone crouching near the edge of the moat. It was the shape of a woman. She sat alone, her back bent, her body shaking as if she were weeping.

The merchant was a kind man. At once he feared that she might be thinking of throwing herself into the water. He slowed his steps and approached her carefully.

She wore fine clothing. Her dress was neat and proper. Her hair was arranged in the style of a young woman of good family. Her long sleeve was raised to her face as she sobbed.

“O-jochū,” the merchant called gently, using a polite form of address, “please do not cry so. Tell me what troubles you. If there is any way I can help, I will gladly do so.”

The woman did not answer. She continued to weep.

He stepped closer, careful not to frighten her.

“This is no place for a young lady at night,” he said kindly. “Please, speak to me. You must not remain here alone.”

Slowly she rose to her feet. But she kept her back turned to him. Her sleeve still covered her face.

The merchant grew more concerned. He placed his hand lightly on her shoulder.

“Please,” he said softly. “Just tell me what is wrong.”

At that moment the woman turned around.

She lowered her sleeve.

She passed her hand across her face.

The merchant screamed.

The face had no eyes.

No nose.

No mouth.

It was smooth and blank like an egg.

In terror he ran.

He ran up the slope without looking back. The night seemed endless. The road ahead was dark and empty. His breath came fast and hard.

After some distance he saw a faint light. It flickered like a firefly in the distance. He ran toward it with all his strength.

The light came from the lantern of a soba vendor, who had set his small stand by the roadside.

The merchant rushed to him and fell to the ground, gasping.

“Ah! Ah!” he cried, unable to speak clearly.

The soba seller looked down at him roughly.

“What is the matter with you?” he asked. “Were you attacked? Did robbers trouble you?”

“No,” the merchant gasped. “Not robbers. I saw... I saw a woman by the moat. She showed me—” He shuddered. “I cannot say what she showed me.”

The soba seller leaned closer.

“Was it like this?” he asked.

And with that, he wiped his hand across his own face.

The merchant saw that the soba seller also had no eyes.

No nose.

No mouth.

At the same instant, the lantern went out.

And there was only darkness.

Rokuro-Kubi

Nearly five hundred years ago there was a samurai named Isogai Heïdazaëmon Takétsura. He served a lord of Kyūshū called Kikuji. Isogai came from a line of warriors. From childhood he had shown great strength and skill. He learned sword fighting quickly. He became strong in archery. He handled the spear with ease. Those who trained him were surprised at how fast he improved.

When war came in the time of the Eikyō conflict, Isogai fought bravely. He showed courage in battle and loyalty to his lord. Because of this, he received high praise and honor.

But later the house of Kikuji fell into ruin. His lord lost power and land. Isogai was left without a master.

It would have been easy for him to enter the service of another lord. Many warriors did so in such times. But Isogai felt deep loyalty to the one he had served. He did not wish to offer his sword elsewhere for gain.

So he made a great decision.

He cut off his hair and became a wandering Buddhist priest. He took the name Kwairyō.

Yet beneath the robes of the priest, his heart remained that of a samurai. He did not fear danger. He traveled alone through wild places. He went to regions where other priests were afraid to go. At that time the roads were unsafe. Robbers were common. Travelers often vanished. But Kwairyō walked calmly, trusting in his strength and faith.

One evening, while traveling through the mountains of Kai province, he lost his way. The sun went down behind the hills. Darkness began to fall. The forest grew quiet and deep.

Kwairyō decided he would have to sleep outdoors. He found a flat place beneath the trees and prepared to rest. But before he settled himself, he noticed a small house not far away.

The house stood alone. A faint light could be seen within.

Grateful for shelter, he walked toward it and knocked.

After a moment the door opened. A young woman stood there. Her face was

pale but beautiful. She bowed politely and invited him inside.

“Reverend sir,” she said, “please come in. It is not safe to remain outside at night.”

Kwairyō stepped inside. The house was simple but clean. Soon another woman entered the room. She also was young and graceful. Both women moved quietly and spoke softly.

They prepared food for him and laid out bedding. They treated him with kindness and respect.

Kwairyō thanked them and asked, “Is there no man in this house?”

One of the women lowered her eyes. “There is no man here,” she replied. “We live alone.”

Kwairyō nodded but felt some concern. A house with only women in such a lonely place was unusual.

After he had eaten, the women asked him kindly, “Reverend sir, will you please tell us some stories from your travels? We are often lonely here.”

Kwairyō agreed. He spoke of distant provinces, of temples and mountains, of villages and cities. The women listened closely. Their eyes shone in the lamplight.

As the night grew deeper, their voices became softer.

At last they prepared to sleep.

Kwairyō lay down in the guest room. Yet he did not sleep at once. Something in his heart felt uneasy. He reminded himself to remain calm.

In the middle of the night, he woke.

The room was dim. The lamp had burned low.

Then he saw something that made his breath stop.

One of the women was no longer lying beside her bedding.

Instead, her body lay still on the mat—but her neck had stretched long and thin. It had become like the body of a snake.

At the end of that long neck was her head.

The head moved freely through the air.

The eyes were open. The mouth was open.

It floated toward him.

Kwairyō did not cry out. His heart beat fast, but he remained calm.

The head came closer. It seemed to sniff the air around him.

He understood then what these beings were.

They were rokuro-kubi.

In the day they appeared as ordinary women. But at night their necks stretched, and their heads wandered.

The head moved above him, then circled slowly. Its long neck twisted like a rope.

Kwairyō kept still.

He reached quietly for a cord beside him.

When the head came close again, he acted.

With great speed he seized the neck and bound it tightly to a heavy post in the room.

The head struggled and hissed. The long neck twisted violently. But the cord held firm.

The body on the mat began to move. It writhed in pain, but it could not rise.

Soon the other woman awoke. She saw what had happened and cried out.

“Release her!” she pleaded.

Kwairyō stood firm.

“You are not human,” he said calmly. “Tell me the truth.”

The second woman fell to her knees.

“We are cursed,” she said. “Long ago, in a former life, we committed great wrong. Because of that sin we were born as rokuro-kubi. By day we live like women. By night our true nature appears.”

Her voice trembled.

“If you kill us, we cannot complain. But please understand that we did not choose this fate.”

Kwairyō looked at them carefully. He saw fear, but not evil hatred.

After a long silence, he loosened the cord.

The neck slowly returned to normal length. The woman lay still and weak.

Kwairyō rose and prepared to leave.

“You must live quietly,” he said. “Do no further harm. Seek repentance.”

Without waiting for more words, he stepped outside into the night.

The air was cold and clear. The forest was silent.

When dawn came, he looked back.

The house was gone.

Only trees and grass remained where it had stood.

### A Dead Secret

Long ago there lived a samurai who served a powerful lord. He was known as a man of strict honor and deep loyalty. His face was stern, and he spoke little. Those who served under him feared his anger but trusted his sense of duty.

This samurai had one daughter. She was quiet and gentle. Though she lived in a house where discipline was strong, she had a soft heart. She obeyed her father without question.

In the same province there was another young samurai. He was brave, sincere, and deeply in love with the daughter. The two had known each other since childhood. Their families were of similar rank. It was natural that their affection grew into a promise of marriage.

But fate turned against them.

The young samurai became involved in a quarrel that ended in violence. A man was killed. Whether the act was done in anger or self-defense mattered little. The law was strict.

He was condemned to die.

The news reached the young woman. Her heart broke. She begged her father to help him. But the father’s face did not change.

“The law must be obeyed,” he said.

The execution was ordered.

On the appointed day the young samurai was brought forward. He did not cry or protest. His face was calm. Before kneeling, he asked for one final request.

“Permit me to see her once more,” he said.

The father hesitated.

After a long pause he agreed.

The daughter was brought before the condemned man. She knelt before him, trembling. Their eyes met. No words were spoken at first.

Then he spoke quietly.

“Do not grieve. Remember me with kindness.”

She bowed her head. Tears fell upon her sleeves.

The guards separated them.

The execution was carried out swiftly.

The daughter did not cry aloud. She returned to her room and closed the door.

In the days that followed she seemed calm. She performed her duties. She obeyed her father. But her face grew pale.

One evening she entered her father’s chamber and bowed deeply.

“Father,” she said, “I ask permission to become a nun.”

The father looked at her sharply.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because my heart has left this world,” she answered.

He studied her face. He saw no rebellion there, only quiet determination.

After a long silence he said, “Very well.”

She shaved her hair and entered a temple. She lived there in prayer and silence.

Years passed.

The father grew older. He began to feel the weight of time. One night he fell ill. The illness did not leave him.

He sent word to his daughter.

She came at once.

She entered his chamber. He lay weak upon his bedding. His eyes, once hard, were softer now.

He motioned for her to come close.

“There is something I must tell you before I die,” he said.

She knelt beside him.

“The man who was killed,” the father whispered, “was innocent.”

Her body stiffened.

“It was I,” he continued slowly, “who caused his death. I ordered it. The young samurai was blamed to protect another. He accepted the charge in silence.”

The room seemed to grow cold.

“He did so to protect me,” the father said. “I was involved in a matter that would have brought shame upon our house. He gave his life to preserve our name.”

The daughter did not speak.

“I have carried this secret all these years,” the father said. “I could not reveal it while living. But I could not die without confessing it.”

His breathing grew weaker.

“Forgive me.”

With those words, he died.

The daughter remained kneeling beside the body. Her face was pale, but no tears fell.

The secret had been buried for years.

Now it had risen.

Yet it rose too late.

### Yuki-Onna

Long ago, in a village of Musashi province, there lived two woodcutters. One was an old man named Mosaku. The other was a young man named Minokichi. Though not related by blood, they worked together like father and son.

One winter evening they were returning home after a long day in the forest. Snow had begun to fall heavily. The wind grew strong and cold. Soon the storm became so fierce that they could not continue their journey.

They reached a small hut used by woodcutters for shelter. It stood alone near a frozen river. The men decided to stay there for the night and wait for morning.

They closed the door tightly and lay down to rest.

During the night Minokichi awoke. The cold felt sharper than before. The door of the hut stood open, though they had closed it carefully. Snow drifted inside.

He tried to rise—but found that he could not move.

A white shape stood near Mosaku.

It was a woman dressed in white. Her skin was pale like snow. Her hair hung dark and long. Her breath was like white mist in the air.

She bent over the old man.

Minokichi watched in silent terror. He could not cry out.

The woman leaned close to Mosaku's face and breathed upon him.

After a moment she straightened.

The old man did not move.

The woman then turned toward Minokichi.

She approached him slowly. Her face was beautiful but cold. Her eyes were strange—clear and distant.

She bent over him.

Her breath touched his face.

It was colder than ice.

Minokichi thought he would die.

But she paused.

She looked at him carefully.

Then she spoke in a voice soft as falling snow.

“I intended to treat you as I treated the old man. But I will spare you because you are young. You are handsome, Minokichi.”

His heart seemed to stop when she said his name.

“But if you ever tell anyone what you saw tonight—even your own mother—you will die.”

She moved toward the door.

The snow blew inward again.

Then she was gone.

Minokichi lost consciousness.

When he awoke in the morning, the storm had ended. The door was closed. Sunlight shone upon the snow outside.

Mosaku lay beside him.

He was dead.

Minokichi said nothing of what he had seen.

He told the villagers only that the old man had died in the storm.

Years passed.

Minokichi grew into a strong young man. He worked hard and lived quietly.

One evening, as he walked home, he met a young woman traveling alone in the snow. She was dressed in light clothing and seemed lost.

He spoke kindly to her.

She told him her name was O-Yuki.

She had lost her way.

He offered to guide her to the village.

When they reached his home, his mother welcomed her warmly. The young woman stayed the night.

The next day she did not leave.

She remained to help with housework.

She was gentle and beautiful. Her face was pale but warm with life.

Minokichi fell in love with her.

Soon they married.

O-Yuki proved to be a good wife. She worked hard and spoke kindly. She bore him many children—bright, healthy children.

Years passed in happiness.

Minokichi never forgot the night in the hut, but he kept the memory hidden in his heart.

One night, after many years of marriage, Minokichi sat with O-Yuki beside a lamp.

He looked at her face in the soft light.

A strange feeling rose in him.

“You are very beautiful,” he said. “You remind me of someone I once saw long ago.”

She looked at him calmly.

“Who?” she asked.

He hesitated.

Then he spoke.

“When I was young, I saw a strange woman on a winter night. She was dressed in white. She stood in a hut and breathed upon an old man, who died. She spared me. She told me never to speak of it. I have never told anyone—until now.”

O-Yuki’s face changed.

Her eyes grew cold.

The soft warmth left her expression.

She stood up slowly.

“It was I,” she said.

Her voice was no longer gentle.

“I spared you because you were young. I told you that if you ever told anyone—even your own mother—you would die.”

Minokichi trembled.

She looked toward the sleeping children in the next room.

“But for their sake, I will not kill you. If you are ever unkind to them, I will return.”

Her form began to grow pale.

The light from the lamp flickered.

A cold wind passed through the room.

And she vanished.

Minokichi never saw her again.

But he cared for the children with great devotion.

He never forgot her words.

### The Story of Aoyagi

Long ago, in the province of Echigo, there lived a young samurai named Tomotada. He was traveling through the mountains in winter on official business. The snow lay deep upon the roads. The sky was gray and heavy. The wind blew sharply across the fields.

As evening approached, Tomotada feared he would not reach his destination before night. He searched for shelter. The mountains around him were silent and white. No village could be seen.

At last, through the falling snow, he noticed a small house standing alone among thin trees. Smoke rose faintly from its roof. Grateful for any refuge, he approached and knocked.

After a moment, the door opened. An elderly woman stood there. Her face was kind but lined with care.

Tomotada bowed deeply and asked for lodging for the night.

The old woman hesitated, then nodded. "Our house is poor," she said softly. "But you may enter."

He stepped inside. The room was simple and bare. A small fire burned in the hearth. Soon another woman entered—young and very beautiful. She bowed politely. Her name, he later learned, was Aoyagi.

Aoyagi prepared food for him. Her movements were quiet and graceful. Her face was pale like winter light, yet warm with kindness. Tomotada felt a strange calm as he watched her.

The storm outside grew stronger. Snow beat against the walls. It was clear that he could not continue his journey that night.

After the meal, he spoke with the old woman. She explained that she and her daughter lived alone. They owned little land and had no men in the house.

Tomotada felt pity for them.

That night he lay awake for some time. He thought of Aoyagi's gentle face. He felt a deep attraction that surprised him.

In the morning the storm had lessened. Tomotada prepared to leave. But before he stepped outside, he turned to the old woman.

"If you will permit," he said respectfully, "I wish to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage."

The old woman looked at him carefully. She seemed troubled.

"You are a samurai," she said slowly. "We are poor and low in rank. Our lives are simple. It would be difficult."

Tomotada bowed again. "Rank does not matter to me," he replied. "I have seen your daughter's virtue. That is enough."

The old woman closed her eyes briefly. Then she nodded.

"If Aoyagi agrees, I will not refuse."

Aoyagi lowered her head shyly when asked. She did not protest.

Thus the marriage was arranged.

Tomotada remained in the house for several days. When the roads cleared, he brought Aoyagi with him to his own province.

They lived together in peace. Aoyagi proved to be a loving wife. She spoke little, but her presence filled the house with quiet warmth. Tomotada felt great happiness.

Years passed.

One day, political trouble arose. Tomotada's lord fell from favor. Lands were taken. Many retainers lost their positions.

Tomotada was ordered to leave his home and travel again on duty. Before departing, he spoke to Aoyagi.

"I must go," he said. "It may take many months. But I will return."

Aoyagi bowed. "I will wait," she said softly.

He left.

His journey was long and filled with hardship. Snow, rain, and danger lay upon the roads. But his thoughts often returned to Aoyagi's calm face.

At last, after many months, he returned to his province.

But when he reached the place where his house had stood, he found only emptiness.

The house was gone.

The land was bare.

A single willow tree stood there, its branches thin and bending in the wind.

Tomotada felt confusion and fear.

He searched the area. He asked villagers what had happened.

They told him that no house had stood there for many years.

"There has only ever been that willow tree," they said.

Tomotada stared at the tree.

Its branches moved softly in the wind.

He stepped closer.

He touched its trunk.

At that moment, a voice seemed to whisper in the rustling leaves.

It was Aoyagi's voice.

"I was born of this willow," it seemed to say. "For a time I took human form to be your wife. But my nature is of the tree. When you left, I could not remain. Now I have returned to what I am."

Tomotada fell to his knees.

He understood.

The old woman had not wished for the marriage because she knew the truth. Aoyagi was not fully human. She was a spirit of the willow.

The wind passed through the branches like a sigh.

Tomotada bowed deeply before the tree.

He never married again.

And he never forgot the gentle woman who had been his wife.

### Jiu-Roku-Zakura

In the district of Iyo, in the province of Matsuyama, there once stood a cherry tree of strange and sorrowful fame. It was known as Jiu-Roku-Zakura—the Cherry Tree of the Sixteenth Day.

The tree grew in the garden of a samurai family. It had stood there for many generations. Its trunk was large and old. Its branches spread wide, shading the house in spring and summer.

In earlier years the tree had been famous for its blossoms. Each spring it bloomed richly, covering itself with soft pink flowers. Neighbors would come to admire it. Its beauty was spoken of in the district.

But as time passed, the tree grew older.

At last it ceased to bloom.

Spring after spring came, and no flowers appeared. Leaves came and fell, but no blossoms returned.

The family felt deep regret. They remembered the tree's former beauty. They hoped each year for a miracle.

The head of the household at that time was an old samurai. He had grown up beneath that tree. As a child he had played under its branches. As a young man he had admired its blossoms. Now, in his old age, he looked at its bare limbs with sadness.

He was more than ninety years old.

One year, when spring arrived again and the tree showed no sign of bloom, the old samurai made a decision.

He dressed himself carefully in his formal robes.

He called his family together.

“This tree has been with our house for many generations,” he said. “It has shared our joys and sorrows. Now it has grown old and lost its strength. I am also old. I have lived my life fully.”

His family did not understand his meaning.

He walked slowly into the garden.

The sky was clear. The air held the first warmth of spring.

He stood beneath the bare branches of the cherry tree.

He bowed deeply before it.

Then he drew his short sword.

In calm and steady manner, he performed seppuku.

He died at the foot of the tree.

His family cried out in horror. They rushed to him. But it was too late.

They buried him beneath the tree.

The day of his death was the sixteenth day of the second month.

That very year, on the sixteenth day of the second month, the tree bloomed.

Its branches were covered with blossoms more beautiful than ever before.

The flowers opened fully, rich and abundant.

Those who saw it were filled with wonder.

Each year after that, on the sixteenth day of the second month, the tree bloomed.

Not earlier.

Not later.

Only on that day.

And always with full and perfect blossoms.

The people of the district said that the spirit of the old samurai had entered the tree.

His life had given it new life.

So it was called Jiu-Roku-Zakura.

The Cherry Tree of the Sixteenth Day.

### The Dream of Akinosuké

Long ago, in the district of Gōshū, there lived a man named Akinosuké. He was the son of a wealthy farmer. Though he had no official position, he lived comfortably and spent much of his time in pleasure.

Near his house stood a large cedar tree. It grew beside a quiet garden path. Its trunk was thick, and its branches spread wide, casting cool shade in summer. Beneath that tree Akinosuké often sat with friends, drinking sake and speaking lightly of life.

One warm evening he drank more than usual. His friends laughed and talked loudly. At last, overcome by wine, Akinosuké lay down at the foot of the cedar tree and fell asleep.

As he slept, he had a dream.

In his dream he saw a procession approaching his house. Many men dressed in fine robes carried banners and walked in order. They came directly to him and bowed.

“We come from the King of Tokoyo,” they said. “Our lord invites you to his palace.”

Akinosuké felt surprise and joy. He rose and followed them.

They led him down a road he had never seen before. Soon they reached a great

gate. Beyond it stood a palace of shining beauty. Its walls were bright. Its gardens were filled with flowers. Music sounded softly in the air.

Akinosuké was brought before the king. The king received him kindly and spoke with him as if he were already known and honored.

“You are welcome here,” the king said. “I have chosen you as husband for my daughter.”

The princess entered the hall. She was gentle and beautiful. Her face shone with quiet grace.

The marriage was celebrated with great joy. Music and laughter filled the palace. Akinosuké felt happiness beyond anything he had known before.

After the wedding, the king appointed him governor of a distant province within his kingdom.

“Go and rule wisely,” the king commanded.

Akinosuké and his wife traveled to the province. The land was rich and peaceful. The people obeyed him gladly. He governed with care and justice. Years passed in calm prosperity.

He and his wife had many children. His life seemed full and complete.

For twenty years he lived in that province.

Then sorrow came.

His beloved wife fell ill and died.

Akinosuké mourned deeply. He ordered that she be buried upon a hill overlooking the land they had ruled together. Each day he visited her grave.

His heart felt empty.

Soon after her death, messengers arrived from the king.

“Your term of service has ended,” they said. “You must return to the capital.”

Akinosuké felt confusion and grief. But he obeyed.

He returned to the palace. The king received him again with kindness.

“You have served well,” the king said. “Now you must return to your former place.”

At these words, the palace and all within it began to fade.

The walls grew thin like mist. The king’s voice became distant.

Akinosuké felt himself falling.  
He awoke beneath the cedar tree.  
The night air was cool. His friends still sat nearby. Only a short time had passed.  
He sat up slowly, confused.  
The dream had seemed longer than a lifetime.  
He told his friends what he had seen.  
They laughed.  
“You slept only a little while,” they said.  
But Akinosuké felt that the dream had been real.  
He looked at the cedar tree.  
Near its roots was a small hole in the ground.  
Curious, he took a stick and gently opened the hole wider.  
Beneath the tree he saw a great nest of ants.  
As he watched closely, he saw tiny structures within—small passages,  
chambers, and open spaces.  
In the center was a larger space like a hall.  
Akinosuké felt a strange chill.  
He understood.  
The palace he had seen in his dream had been the world of ants beneath the  
cedar tree.  
The province he had governed had been a small mound of earth near the roots.  
The grave of his wife had been another small mound nearby.  
Twenty years of joy and sorrow had passed in a moment beneath the tree.  
Akinosuké bowed his head.  
The dream had shown him the fleeting nature of life.  
Long years may pass like a single breath.  
He never forgot what he had seen.  
And from that day forward, he lived more thoughtfully.  
Often he sat beneath the cedar tree and watched the ants at work.  
Their tiny lives moved with purpose.  
He no longer laughed lightly at time.

He understood how small and brief all things are.  
The cedar tree stood quietly above him.  
And beneath it, the ants continued their endless labor.

### Riki-Baka

In a certain province there once lived a man known by the name Riki-Baka. The name meant “Riki the Fool.” He was called this by everyone in the village.

From childhood Riki had been slow in learning. When other boys understood quickly, he remained confused. When they worked efficiently, he made mistakes. Yet he was not wicked. He was gentle and honest. He wished to do well, though he often failed.

His parents worried about his future. They feared that after their deaths he would not be able to care for himself. They tried to teach him farming, but he forgot instructions. They tried to teach him simple trade, but he became lost in numbers.

As he grew older, the village children laughed at him. Even some adults mocked him kindly but without respect.

Still, Riki bore no hatred. He smiled easily. He worked as best he could.

One day his parents both fell ill and died within a short time of each other.

Riki was left alone.

He inherited a small piece of land and a simple house. But he did not know how to manage them properly. He planted at the wrong time. He forgot to repair fences. His crops failed.

Soon he had little to eat.

One winter night, cold and hungry, he went to the temple at the edge of the village. The temple priest knew him and felt pity.

“Reverend,” Riki said, bowing awkwardly, “I am not clever. I do not understand many things. But I wish to do something good. Is there a way for me to gain merit?”

The priest looked at him kindly.

“If you wish to gain merit,” he said, “repeat the name of Amida Buddha with a

sincere heart. Even a fool may gain salvation through faith.”

Riki nodded eagerly.

From that day he began to repeat the holy name constantly.

As he walked, he whispered it. As he worked, he murmured it. Even when he lay down to sleep, the words moved softly from his lips.

The villagers noticed.

At first they laughed.

“Riki-Baka has found something easy to do,” they said.

But Riki did not mind.

He continued faithfully.

Seasons passed.

Though still poor, he seemed calmer than before. A quiet light appeared in his face.

One evening, after a long day, Riki lay down in his small house. He felt weak from hunger, but peaceful.

In the middle of the night he saw a great brightness fill the room.

He opened his eyes.

Before him stood Amida Buddha, shining with gentle light.

Riki sat up in wonder.

“Riki,” the voice said softly, “your faith has been simple and true. Though men call you fool, your heart has been pure.”

Tears filled Riki’s eyes.

“I do not understand much,” he said. “But I believed.”

The light grew warmer.

“When your life ends,” the voice continued, “you shall be reborn in the Pure Land.”

The brightness slowly faded.

Riki lay back down.

The next morning the villagers found him.

He had died quietly in his sleep.

His face wore a gentle smile.

The priest came and performed the rites. Many villagers attended the funeral. Some felt shame for having mocked him. They remembered his simple devotion. And from that time, when they spoke of him, they did not laugh. They said, “Riki-Baka may have been foolish in this world. But perhaps he was wiser than we knew.”

### Hi-Mawari

In a small town there once lived a poor woman and her only son. The boy’s name was Hi-Mawari. From childhood he was quiet and serious. His eyes were bright, but his face often looked thoughtful beyond his years.

His mother loved him deeply. They had little money. She worked hard each day, sewing and washing for others. Hi-Mawari helped as much as he could. He gathered firewood. He carried water. He did small tasks without complaint.

Yet even as a child, he was different from other boys.

While others laughed and played loudly, Hi-Mawari would sit alone and look toward the sky. He would watch the sun move slowly from morning to evening. He seemed drawn to its light.

One day his mother asked him gently, “Why do you stare at the sun so often?”

He answered simply, “Because it is warm. It shines on everyone. It does not choose who to warm.”

His mother smiled, though she did not fully understand.

As he grew older, Hi-Mawari’s health began to weaken. He grew thin. His breathing became short. A sickness slowly took hold of his body.

The doctor came and shook his head.

“He may not live long,” he said quietly.

The mother felt her heart break. She cared for her son day and night. She cooled his forehead. She gave him water. She prayed at the temple for his life.

Hi-Mawari knew he was dying.

One evening, when the sun was setting, he asked to be carried outside. His

mother lifted him gently and brought him to a place where he could see the western sky.

The sky burned red and gold. The sun sank slowly behind the hills.

Hi-Mawari looked at it with calm eyes.

“Mother,” he said softly, “when I am gone, do not be sad for too long.”

Tears ran down her face.

“How can I not be sad?” she whispered.

He smiled faintly.

“The sun will still rise,” he said. “It will still shine on you.”

That night his breathing grew weaker.

Before dawn, as the first light touched the sky, Hi-Mawari died.

His mother cried out in sorrow.

The villagers came to comfort her. They helped prepare the body. They spoke kind words.

Days passed.

The mother remained alone in the house. Each morning she looked toward the sun and remembered her son’s words.

One day, as she walked near the place where her son had often sat, she noticed a small plant growing in the earth.

She had not planted it.

Its leaves were green and fresh.

She cared for it without knowing why.

The plant grew quickly. Its stem rose tall and straight. At the top formed a large round flower.

When the flower opened, it was bright yellow, like the sun.

And as the sun moved across the sky, the flower turned to follow it.

The mother watched in wonder.

“Hi-Mawari,” she whispered.

From that day she felt less alone.

Each morning she greeted the flower. Each evening she saw it turn toward the setting sun.

The villagers noticed it too.  
They had never seen such a flower before.  
They gave it the name Himawari—the sunflower.  
And whenever they saw the flower turn its face toward the light, they remembered the quiet boy who loved the sun.  
The mother lived many more years.  
Though she missed her son, she found comfort in the bright flower that followed the sun across the sky.  
And in that gentle turning, she felt his presence still.

### Hōrai

In old Chinese stories there is mention of a land called Hōrai. It is described as a place of perfect beauty and endless life. The land is said to lie far away across the sea, beyond the reach of ordinary ships.

The air of Hōrai is said to be pure and sweet. No cold wind blows there. No snow falls. Flowers bloom without fading. Trees remain green in all seasons.

In Hōrai there is no sickness.

There is no death.

The people of that land never grow old.

Their faces remain young and calm. Their bodies do not weaken. They live in joy without fear of loss.

In that land there is no sorrow.

There is no anger.

There is no hunger.

The fruits grow easily. The rivers flow clear and gentle. Birds sing without fear. The sky is always bright.

There are said to be golden palaces and shining towers. Music fills the air without effort. Time passes without burden.

Many ancient rulers of China heard these stories. Some believed them strongly. They sent ships to search for Hōrai. They hoped to find the secret of endless life.

But no ship ever returned with proof.

Some said the land cannot be found by ordinary means. It can be seen only by those who are pure in heart.

Others said it was only a dream of the human wish to escape suffering.

The idea of Hōrai traveled from China to Japan. Poets wrote of it. Artists painted it. People imagined a world free from pain.

Yet in real life, sickness and death remain.

Winter comes.

Leaves fall.

Faces grow old.

Because of this, the story of Hōrai became more than a place. It became a symbol.

It represented the deep wish of people to find peace beyond change.

In temples and gardens, small models of Hōrai were sometimes made. Stones were shaped into islands. Tiny trees were placed upon them. These were meant to show the imagined land of immortality.

But those who looked closely understood something.

Even the stones would wear down.

Even the small trees would die.

Nothing in this world remains unchanged.

So the dream of Hōrai is not about finding a land without death.

It is about the human heart.

It is about the longing for calm and beauty in a world that moves and fades.

Hōrai may not lie beyond the sea.

It may lie within the mind.

A place where fear grows quiet.

A place where the thought of death does not cause terror.

The old stories speak of golden towers and endless youth.

But the deeper meaning speaks of acceptance.

For even if Hōrai cannot be reached by ship, the dream of it has comforted many hearts.

And in that comfort, there is a kind of peace.

## INSECT STUDIES

### Butterflies

In old Japan there was a belief that butterflies were more than simple insects. It was said that they could be the souls of the living or the dead. When a butterfly entered a house, people sometimes felt wonder or fear.

In the district of Matsumura there once lived a young samurai. He was engaged to be married to a girl from a nearby family. They had grown up knowing each other. Their marriage had been arranged with care. Both families approved.

The young woman was gentle and kind. She had a soft voice and calm manner. The samurai felt great affection for her.

But before the wedding day arrived, the girl fell ill.

The illness came suddenly. Her body grew weak. Doctors were called, but they could not cure her.

Within a short time she died.

The samurai was filled with grief. He felt as if the world had lost its color. He could not forget her face.

Each day he visited her grave. He brought flowers. He stood silently and prayed. Months passed.

One evening, as he sat alone in his room, a white butterfly entered through the open door.

It flew slowly around the room. It moved in small circles, as if searching.

The samurai watched it carefully.

The butterfly came close to him and hovered near his face.

A strange feeling touched his heart.

He stood up and followed it.

The butterfly flew out of the house. It moved down the path toward the graveyard.

The samurai walked behind it.

The night air was cool. The moon shone softly.

The butterfly led him directly to the grave of his lost bride.

It settled upon the stone.

The samurai felt tears rise in his eyes.

“You have come,” he whispered.

The butterfly remained still for a moment.

Then it lifted its wings and flew upward into the darkness.

From that night on, the samurai believed that her spirit had visited him.

He felt less alone.

But there is another story of butterflies.

In a certain village there lived an old woman. She had no children. Her husband had died long ago. She lived quietly in a small house.

One day a great number of white butterflies gathered around her dwelling.

They filled the air like falling petals. They settled on the roof and walls. They covered the garden.

Neighbors gathered in surprise.

“This is a strange sign,” they said.

The butterflies remained there through the day.

The next morning the old woman was found dead in her sleep.

The butterflies had vanished.

The villagers spoke softly among themselves.

They said the butterflies had come to carry her spirit away.

Such stories spread from village to village.

Whether true or not, they gave comfort.

When people saw a white butterfly enter their home, they sometimes felt that a loved one had come near.

And in that gentle movement of wings, they found peace.

So butterflies became symbols of the soul.

Light.

Fragile.

Yet able to move between worlds.

## Mosquitoes

In old Japan there was a belief that even small creatures might carry hidden meaning. Among these creatures were mosquitoes.

During the warm months, mosquitoes filled the evening air. Their thin voices could be heard near water, in fields, and inside houses. Their bite brought pain and restlessness.

Yet there were people who listened to their sound with strange attention.

It was said that the thin singing of a mosquito might sometimes carry a human voice.

Long ago there lived a man who had lost his wife. He loved her deeply. When she died, his heart grew empty. He lived alone in sorrow.

One summer night, as he lay awake, he heard the high, thin sound of a mosquito near his ear.

At first he brushed it away.

But the sound returned.

It seemed different from the usual sound.

He listened more carefully.

In that thin cry he thought he heard words.

“Do not forget me,” the sound seemed to say.

The man sat up suddenly.

The mosquito circled near his face.

He did not strike it.

He whispered softly, “Is it you?”

The insect hovered in the air.

The man felt that his wife’s spirit had taken this small form to visit him.

From that night on, he did not kill mosquitoes that came near him.

When he heard their thin voices, he listened.

Whether the sound carried true words or only his own longing, he could not tell.

But in the small sound he found comfort.

There was also an old tale that mosquitoes were once human.

It was said that in a distant time, a man died filled with greed. Even in death he wished to take from others.

Because of this desire, he was reborn as a mosquito—always seeking blood.

The thin cry of the mosquito was said to be the sound of endless hunger.

Such stories taught lessons.

They reminded people that even small desires can bind the spirit.

In the quiet of summer nights, when mosquitoes move through the dark, some think of these old beliefs.

The sound is small.

The life is brief.

Yet even such a tiny being may carry memory, sorrow, or warning.

So the people of old Japan did not see mosquitoes only as pests.

They sometimes saw in them the shadow of human longing.

A thin voice in the dark.

### Ants

In Japan there is an old belief that even the smallest creatures live according to laws that humans often fail to see. Among these creatures are ants.

Ants move quietly along the ground. They build hidden homes beneath trees and stones. Their lives seem small, yet their labor is steady and without rest.

There was once a man who lived near a field where many ants had built their nest. Each day he passed by them without care. He thought of them only as insects beneath his feet.

One summer afternoon he sat in the shade and watched them more closely. He noticed how they moved in lines, each carrying a piece of leaf or grain larger than its own body. They did not quarrel. They did not wander without purpose.

Their work was silent and patient.

The man felt sudden curiosity. “What do they see?” he wondered. “What is their

world like?”

That night he dreamed.

In his dream he became small—so small that the blades of grass rose like tall trees around him. Before him stood the entrance to the ants’ home.

He entered.

Inside he saw chambers and tunnels. Ants moved in order. Some carried food. Some cared for eggs. Some guarded the passages.

In the center was a large chamber where the queen lay. She was larger than the others. Around her the ants worked carefully and with respect.

The man watched in amazement.

Though he could not understand their speech, he felt their unity. Each ant lived not for itself alone, but for the whole nest.

When he awoke, he remembered the dream clearly.

He returned to the field and looked again at the small creatures moving across the earth.

He no longer saw them as meaningless.

He thought of how short human life can be. He thought of how much time is spent in pride and anger. The ants seemed wiser in their simple purpose.

From that day he walked more carefully.

He avoided stepping upon their paths.

And sometimes he would sit quietly and watch them at work, feeling that in their small world there was a lesson about patience and shared effort.

For even creatures that live beneath notice may hold a mirror to human life.

Small bodies.

Quiet labor.

Endless persistence.

The ants continued their work without knowing they were observed.

And the man continued his life with a little more humility.