

AI-Generated Graded Readers

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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice. The text was translated from Japanese into English and simplified using ChatGPT for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

The adaptation aims to improve readability while preserving the narrative content and spirit of the original work.

Source Text

Original work: Shunkinshō (春琴抄)
Author: Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (谷崎潤一郎)

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<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/>

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Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, *A Portrait of Shunkin [Shunkinshō]* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from Japanese by ChatGPT)

Part 1

Shunkin's real name was Mozuya Koto. She was born in Doshomachi in Osaka, where her family sold medicine, and she died on October 14, 1886. Her grave is in a Jodo temple in Shitadera-machi. Not long ago, I happened to pass that way, and I felt I should stop and visit her grave. When I asked a temple worker to guide me, he said at once, "The Mozuya family graves are this way," and led me behind the main hall. Under some camellia trees I saw several old family graves standing together, but none of them seemed to be hers. When I explained that I was looking for the grave of a daughter of that house, he thought for a moment and then took me farther up, toward a steep path on the east side.

Behind the temple, the ground rose toward the hill where Ikutama Shrine stands, and the path climbed that slope. It was a quiet place, full of trees, unusual for Osaka, and halfway up the slope there was a small flat piece of land. There, a little apart from the Mozuya family graves, stood the grave I had been looking for. On the stone was her Buddhist name, and on the back were written her real name, her art name Shunkin, the date of her death, and her age, fifty-eight. On one side I saw another line: "Built by her pupil, Nukui Sasuke." She had kept the family name Mozuya all her life, but she had lived, in truth, as the partner of this man, later called Nukui Kengyo. I could not help wondering if that was why her grave stood apart from the others, as if even after death the shape of her life had remained difficult and unusual.

The temple worker told me that the Mozuya family had long ago fallen into ruin. Only now and then did some relative come to visit the family graves, and almost no one came to Shunkin's grave. Then he said that one old woman, about seventy, still came once or twice a year. She would visit Shunkin's grave first, and then, he said, "You see that small grave there?" He pointed to a smaller stone

standing beside it. The same woman always offered flowers and incense there too, and she also paid for the memorial prayers. When I went closer, I saw that the smaller grave was indeed for Sasuke. It was only about half the size of hers, and even on that stone he was named as “the pupil of Mozuya Shunkin,” as if he still wished to keep the rule of master and pupil even after death.

That second grave moved me almost more than the first. Sasuke had become a great musician, yet even in death he placed himself below her. The two graves stood on a low stone base. A pine tree grew beside Shunkin’s grave, and its branches spread over her stone like a roof, while Sasuke’s grave stood a little away, outside the full shade, as if still waiting beside her in humble service. Looking at them, I could almost see the old life they had lived. It seemed to me that he was still there, near her, not as an equal but as someone who had found happiness in following her. I knelt before her grave, bowed deeply, then laid my hand on the top of his stone and gently touched it. I stayed on that hill until the red light of evening sank beyond the great city below.

From there I could see Osaka spreading out under the dusk. The city had changed completely since the days when Sasuke had lived, and nothing of the old world seemed to remain. Yet these two stones still kept the shape of that strange bond between them. I later learned that Sasuke’s family had belonged to a different Buddhist sect and that the family graves were in his home province, not here. But he had changed sects so that even in death he would not be separated from Shunkin. People said that while she was still alive, the Buddhist names, the places of the graves, and even their balance beside each other had already been decided. The more I looked, the more the two stones seemed less like cold objects and more like two persons still speaking, still tied together by a deep promise. By the time I left, I felt that the hill, the graves, and the falling evening light had already drawn me into their story.

Not long before that visit, a small booklet had come into my hands. Its title was *The Life of Mozuya Shunkin*, and it was this little book that first led me to know her. It was only about thirty pages long, printed on soft Japanese paper, and it seemed to me that Sasuke must have had it prepared for the third memorial

service after her death. The booklet spoke of him in the third person, but I could hardly doubt that the facts came from him and that, in the deepest sense, he was its true author. Through that booklet I learned that Shunkin was born in 1829, the second daughter of a rich medicine dealer in Osaka. It said she was a quick and gifted child, beautiful in face and form, and graceful from the time she was very small. She learned dancing when she was four, and her teacher had been amazed by the beauty of her movements. It also said that she learned reading and writing very quickly and was ahead even of her brothers.

I do not take every word of that booklet as truth. A man who worshiped her as deeply as Sasuke did could not speak of her in a calm and even way. Still, many things suggest that she was indeed beautiful. I have seen the one photograph of her that is said to survive, taken when she was thirty-seven. In it, her face is small and fine, her features soft and delicate, as if each one had been made with great care. Yet the photograph is old and unclear. The surface is blurred, and pale marks lie over it like dust over memory. What I feel most strongly when I look at it is not bright beauty or strong character, but a quiet softness and a strange lack of sharp outline, as if she were already half hidden from this world.

By that time she had been blind for more than twenty years, but in the picture she does not look like a person marked by violence or pain. She looks as if she is only closing her eyes. There is even a faint gentleness in her face, the kind of calm one sees in old images of Kannon. I have heard that this was the only photograph ever taken of her. When she was young, photography was not yet common, and later, after a certain terrible event, she no longer allowed such things. So this one dim image is all we have. A reader may wish for something clearer, but even if you saw the photograph itself, I doubt you would know her much better than you do now. In truth, the photograph may be even more blurred than the picture your mind has made.

I often think about one thing when I look at that old face. The year this photograph was taken was also the year when Sasuke himself became blind. If so, this blurred image may have been close to the last face of hers that he ever saw in the world of light. Did he carry that dim face in his memory through the rest of

his life? Or, as the years passed, did memory grow weaker and imagination grow stronger, until the woman in his heart became different from the woman in the photograph? Did the real face slowly fade, while another, more holy and more beloved face took its place? Standing between the graves and the little booklet in my hand, I felt that this question would follow me further into their story.

Part 2

The booklet goes on to say that her parents loved her more than any of their other children. They treated her like a jewel in their hands, and when she was nine, disaster came. She developed an illness in her eyes, and before long she lost the sight of both of them completely. Her parents were full of grief, and her mother, the booklet says, almost lost her mind from pain and anger. From that time, Shunkin gave up dancing and began to work hard at the koto and the shamisen, turning all her heart toward music.

I do not know what illness took her sight, and the booklet does not explain it clearly. Later, however, Sasuke told people that his teacher had suffered twice in her life because other people were jealous of her beauty and talent. He even said once that her eye disease had not been natural at all. According to one dark story, a nurse in the household hated the special love the parents gave to Shunkin and may have harmed her. I cannot say that this is true. It sounds more like the voice of a man who could not bear the thought that such misfortune had happened for no reason.

I think it is wiser to be careful here. Shunkin may well have grown proud, sharp, and difficult partly because she lost her sight so young, but that does not prove the story of the nurse. Sasuke loved her too deeply to judge such matters in a calm way, and when he spoke about her suffering, he often seemed ready to blame the whole world. So I will not repeat that dark story as fact. What matters for us is simpler and firmer than that. At the age of nine, she became blind, and after that her life moved more and more strongly toward music.

The booklet also says that Shunkin herself used to say that dancing had been

her true gift. She is said to have told Sasuke that people praised her koto and shamisen only because they did not truly know her, and that if her eyes had remained sound, she would never have chosen that path. There is pride in such a statement, and perhaps some bitterness too. It sounds like the speech of a person who knew very well that she was extraordinary and could not easily accept the shape her life had taken. Yet even here I suspect a little coloring by Sasuke. A devoted pupil often takes one passing remark and keeps it in his heart until it grows larger than it was at first.

Another voice gives us a different picture. The old woman who visited the graves, Shigizawa Teru, later said that Shunkin had studied music from the time she was five or six, under a teacher named Harumatsu Kengyo. In that time, daughters from good homes often learned such arts early, and Shunkin was no exception. Teru said that by the age of ten she could already play a very difficult piece called Zangetsu from memory, on her own. If that is true, then music was not a second choice forced on her after blindness. It had been in her from the beginning, and blindness only drove her deeper into it.

This seems more believable to me. It may be true that she loved dance and felt its loss sharply, but I cannot think that her gift in music was small or borrowed from sorrow. Rather, I think the seed was there from the start. Because she could no longer look outward freely, she threw herself more fully into the world of sound. She came from a wealthy house and had no need to earn money, so at first she probably did not study with any plan to become a professional teacher. She practiced because she loved the art, and because in music she found a road still open to her.

Once she had entered that road, she moved very fast. The booklet says that by the time she was fifteen, her skill had gone far beyond that of the other pupils in the same school. Even if that claim has been made warmer and brighter by love, I think there must be truth in it. Teru said that Harumatsu Kengyo was a very strict teacher with other students, but Shunkin often said that he had rarely scolded her and had praised her more often than not. Whenever she came, he would teach her himself, kindly and with care. That was partly because she was the daughter of a

rich house, no doubt, and partly because she was a blind girl who moved others to pity, but I think there was a stronger reason than either of those.

Harumatsu had recognized real genius in her. He worried about her health more than a teacher might worry about an ordinary pupil, and if she missed a lesson, he sent to ask after her or even went himself. He openly boasted of her to other students and told them to use the Mozuya girl as their model. When some people said he was too gentle with her, he answered that a teacher is strict only when strictness is needed, and that Shunkin understood the art so quickly that she could advance far even without blows and harsh words. He even said that if he trained her too hard, she might become so great that his professional pupils would not know what to do. Whether that was modest talk or proud talk, it shows how highly he valued her. By this point in her life, before the strange bond with Sasuke had fully begun, Shunkin was already becoming a figure whom others watched with wonder, praise, and perhaps the first signs of envy.

Part 3

Harumatsu Kengyo's house stood in Utsubo, about ten cho from the Mozuya shop in Doshomachi, and every day Shunkin went there for lessons with a young servant leading her by the hand. That servant was the boy called Sasuke, who later became Nukui Kengyo. So this was how his bond with Shunkin first began. Sasuke came from Hino in Omi, and his family too were medicine sellers. His father and grandfather had both gone to Osaka in their youth and had served the Mozuya house, so for Sasuke this was not just a place of work but the house his family had long served with loyalty.

He was four years older than Shunkin and entered service when he was thirteen, which means that she had already lost her sight by then. Later in life he said that he did not regret this. In fact, he thought himself lucky. If he had known her before blindness, he said, then her later face might have seemed lacking in some way. But because he had only known her as she was, he felt no lack in her at all. To him, her face had been complete from the very beginning.

It is easy to understand why the country boy was struck by her. Daughters of rich Osaka merchant houses were often kept indoors, pale, fine-boned, and soft in appearance, very different from children raised in the open country. Sasuke, who had come from a rural town, found all the Mozuya daughters uncommon, but Shunkin affected him most strongly. He felt a strange beauty in her closed eyelids, greater even than in the bright eyes of her sisters. It seemed to him that her face was right just as it was, and that anything different would have made it less perfect. This feeling, I think, lay at the root of everything that followed.

Later Sasuke hated it when people said that his love for Shunkin had begun in pity. He insisted that he had never once looked at her and thought, "How sad," or "How poor she is." Rather, he felt that ordinary people with sight were smaller and poorer than she was. But that was the speech of his old age. At the beginning, what he felt was probably not yet love in the full sense, but a deep, burning worship. Since she was both a young girl and the treasured daughter of the house his family served, even walking beside her each day was enough to fill his heart.

At first he was not the only one who led her to lessons. Sometimes a maid went, and sometimes another boy or young servant. But one day Shunkin said that she wanted Sasuke to do it, and from then on the duty became his. He was fourteen by that time, and he took the task as a great honor. He held out his left hand at the level of her shoulder, palm up, and she placed her small right hand on it. Then he led her the whole way to Harumatsu's house, waited until the lesson ended, and brought her home again.

During those walks she hardly spoke at all. Sasuke too stayed silent unless she spoke first, and he gave all his care to making no mistake. When someone later asked Shunkin why she had chosen him, she answered, "Because he is quieter than the others and does not say useless things." That answer may well have been true. Before blindness she had been lively and charming, but after losing her sight she had grown darker in mood, less ready to laugh, and less willing to waste words. A boy who did his work well and did not trouble her with chatter must have seemed easy to keep near.

Still, I doubt that silence alone explains everything. Shunkin was quick, proud,

and unusually sharp in feeling, and I cannot help wondering whether she had already sensed, even then, the special devotion in the boy beside her. Yet whether she knew it or not, Sasuke felt that in her eyes he was hardly a full person. He was almost only a hand for her to rest on. When she wanted something, she often did not say it clearly. She might move slightly, make a face, or drop a few dark words like a riddle, and if he failed to understand, she would at once become displeased.

So from the start Sasuke had to watch her every movement with complete care. He felt as if she were always testing how closely he attended to her. Her natural pride as a spoiled daughter of a rich house had now mixed with the difficult temper that blindness often brings, and she left him no time for carelessness. Once, while waiting at Harumatsu's house for her lesson to come, he failed to notice that she had gone off alone to the toilet. Usually he understood at once and followed her there, waiting outside and helping her when she came out. But that day he was late, and when he ran to her in shame, trembling in his voice, she only said, "It is all right." He already knew that such words did not really mean forgiveness, and that to serve her well he would have to learn not only what she said, but what she truly meant.

Part 4

There were many small moments in those early days that taught Sasuke how hard it was to serve her well. One summer afternoon, while they were waiting for her turn at Harumatsu's house, she said quietly, "It is hot." Sasuke answered politely, "Yes, it is hot," but that was not enough. After a little while she said it again, and only then did he understand that she wanted him to fan her. When he found a fan and began to move it behind her, she seemed satisfied, but whenever his hand slowed even a little, the same soft complaint came again: "It is hot."

In such scenes, Shunkin's will showed itself in a strange way. She did not always command clearly, yet she expected to be understood at once. Her stubbornness and selfishness were real, but they were sharpest with Sasuke, not with everyone alike. Because he tried so hard to please her, she grew more

demanding with him, and because she grew more demanding, he felt more deeply chosen. What another servant might have taken as cruel treatment, he accepted almost as a sign of favor.

By leading her each day to Harumatsu Kengyo's house, Sasuke naturally began to hear the music taught there. When the time for her lesson came, he would lead her upstairs, place the koto or shamisen before her, and then withdraw to wait. Yet even while he waited, he kept his ears open, always ready to return the moment the lesson ended. In this way the sounds of the school entered him little by little, and his love for Shunkin made him want to love everything that she loved. Without quite planning it, he began to train himself through listening alone.

When he was fourteen, he started saving small gifts of money and tips he received in order to buy a shamisen of his own. By the next summer he had managed to get a cheap practice instrument. He carried the neck and body up to the servants' sleeping room in secret and hid them separately so that the head clerk would not notice. At night, after the others had fallen asleep, he put the instrument together and practiced by himself. At first he played hidden inside a closet, in darkness and heavy summer heat, and he did not mind the dark at all, because he liked to think that Shunkin too lived always inside such darkness.

Even after he was later allowed to practice openly, he had the habit of closing his eyes when he played. Already, as a boy, he wanted to share her world as much as he could. He had no music book, no marks to guide his fingers, and no teacher beside him, so he had to depend entirely on his memory of what he had heard. Yet he was able from the start to match the tuning well, which shows both a fine ear and an unusual gift. He listened, remembered, and tried again and again, as if the sound itself were pulling him forward.

For about half a year no one knew what he was doing except a few boys who slept in the same room. Then, one winter night before dawn, Shunkin's mother rose and heard someone softly playing the piece "Yuki" somewhere in the house. Later it happened again, and at last the adults found out that Sasuke had been waking around three in the morning, taking the shamisen to the rooftop drying place, and practicing there in the cold air until the east began to grow pale. When

he was discovered, he was called in, badly scolded, and his shamisen was taken away. That should have been the end of it, but at that moment an unexpected voice spoke in his favor.

Someone in the inner rooms said that they wanted to hear how much he could really play, and the first person to say so was Shunkin herself. Sasuke was frightened rather than glad. He thought she would surely be angry that a mere servant had dared to copy the art that belonged to her world, and he feared he would be laughed at. Still, once Shunkin had said she wanted to hear him, there was no escape, and he was called into a room in the family quarters to perform before her, her mother, and the others.

He had somehow taught himself five or six pieces, some easy, some difficult, in no proper order, only by catching what he could with his ear. He played everything he knew with all the courage he had, and those who listened were surprised by how much he had learned in secret. Afterward, Shunkin said that from then on she herself would teach him when he had free time. Her father allowed it, and Sasuke felt as if he had risen into the sky. From that day he began to call her “Teacher” during lessons, and she in turn called him simply “Sasuke,” setting strict rules of master and pupil between them. What the adults may have intended as no more than a game to ease the loneliness of a blind girl had now taken firm shape, and neither of the two children was going to leave it behind.

Part 5

What had begun as a kind of game did not remain a game for long. As months passed and then years, both teacher and pupil grew serious. Shunkin went each afternoon to Harumatsu Kengyo’s house, received her lesson for half an hour or an hour, and then came home and practiced until evening what she had learned there. After supper, when the mood took her, she would call Sasuke up to her room and make him play for her. In time this stopped being an occasional thing and became a daily rule.

Once she had taken the place of teacher, she held to it with complete force.

She made Sasuke call her “Teacher” during lessons, and she treated him not as a fellow child from the household but as a real pupil whose every mistake had to be corrected. If he did not understand something quickly enough, she would cry out, “No, no, that is wrong. Play it again. Even if it takes all night, you must learn it.” At times she called him a fool and struck his head with the plectrum. It was not rare for the boy to end the lesson in tears.

People in the house heard those scenes from below. The little teacher’s sharp voice would sound late into the evening, and sometimes the servants were startled by it. But however childish the whole arrangement may have seemed at first, it had already passed beyond the point where anyone could simply laugh it away. Shunkin did not pretend to be a master. She truly meant to rule, correct, and drive her pupil forward. Sasuke, for his part, accepted this not with resentment but with a kind of thankful pain.

Such severity was not as strange in that time as it may sound now. In the arts, pupils were often trained with terrible harshness, and blows were not uncommon. People spoke of actors, chanters, and musicians who had been beaten, wounded, or driven to the edge of collapse by their teachers. The old idea was that skill entered the body only through repeated suffering. In such a world, Shunkin’s violence toward Sasuke was extreme but not wholly outside the custom of the age.

Even so, what passed between them had a special character of its own. Shunkin’s temper rose and fell from day to day. Sometimes she scolded openly, and that was in a way easier for Sasuke to bear. At other times she would say almost nothing, only draw her brows together and strike one hard note on the third string, or else make him play alone while she sat listening in silence. Those silent lessons were often the hardest of all, because he could not tell from her face or voice whether he was coming closer to success or falling deeper into failure.

One night, while they were working on a difficult passage from Chaondo, Sasuke simply could not grasp it. He made the same mistake again and again, and at last Shunkin put down her shamisen and began to teach him with sharp sounds from her mouth, beating the rhythm hard on her knee with her hand. Still he failed to learn it. Then suddenly she became completely silent and turned cold toward

him, leaving him with no sign at all. He could neither stop nor escape, so he kept trying, guessing, and playing alone before her.

The longer it went on, the worse he became. His mind grew confused, cold sweat broke over his body, and the notes turned wild and empty under his fingers. Yet Shunkin sat there with her lips closed and the lines between her brows deep and fixed, giving him no word of release. This lasted for more than two hours. At last her mother, Shige, came upstairs in her nightclothes and gently separated them, saying that such zeal had gone too far and would only harm their health.

That scene shows something important about both of them. Shunkin had a cruel and stubborn will, and once she fixed on a thing, she could push it far past ordinary limits. Sasuke, on the other hand, did not turn away even when he was frightened, humiliated, or worn out. He remained before her, trying until thought itself began to fail him. Their lessons were no longer lessons alone. They had already become the place where power, devotion, pain, pride, and love were being tied together so tightly that neither of them would later be able to pull free.

Part 6

Shunkin's parents had begun to worry seriously about the effect Sasuke was having on her. It was true that he kept her calm in many situations, but it was also true that he accepted everything she did and never pushed back. Because of that, her temper only grew stronger, and her roughness grew with it. They must have feared that if things continued in the same way, she would become more and more difficult, proud, and twisted in spirit.

So, when Sasuke was eighteen, her father made a new arrangement. Sasuke was entered properly into the school of Harumatsu Kengyo, and Shunkin was no longer allowed to teach him directly. From then on he was freed from ordinary shop work and went openly as Shunkin's hand-guide and also as a fellow pupil under the same master. Sasuke himself wanted this, of course, and the head of the Mozuya house worked hard to get his family in the country to agree. In truth, I think Shunkin's parents had another thought behind all this. Since it would be

hard for their blind daughter to make an ordinary marriage, Sasuke may already have seemed to them a good possible husband.

Yet the thing did not become simple when it was given a clear path. Even after he became a proper pupil under Harumatsu, Sasuke still stood below Shunkin in the house and before others. At times, as an older pupil, he would help her review a piece, but outside that he remained almost only her guide and servant. Their closeness did not become more open; in a way it became harder to see. Anyone looking from the outside might even have thought there was too much distance between them rather than too little.

And then, when Shunkin was seventeen, she became pregnant. The family was shocked, and when they asked her who the father was, she refused to answer. She said only that she and the man had promised not to speak each other's names. When Sasuke's name was suggested, she rejected it at once with proud anger, asking how she could possibly think of such a servant in that way. Because she had already refused the idea of marriage with Sasuke before, her parents did not at once believe he was the father.

Still, they could not stop at that. Sasuke too was questioned, and at first he kept saying that he knew nothing. But when he was pressed harder, his fear and confusion made him seem guilty. He began to cry and said that if he spoke, Shunkin would scold him. Even then he would not clearly confess, but what he did not say was almost as clear as a confession. He seemed to want them to understand without forcing him to break the promise he had made to her.

Since the family did not know what else to do, they sent Shunkin away quietly to Arima, saying she was going there for rest and treatment. She stayed there from May until October with two maids attending her, while Sasuke remained behind in Osaka. There she gave birth to a boy. People later said that the baby looked exactly like Sasuke, and that at last the truth was plain. Yet even after this, when Shunkin and Sasuke were brought face to face, both of them denied it. She turned sharply on him and warned him not to say anything that would trouble her, and he at once shrank back and swore that such a thought had never entered his mind.

At that point the matter could no longer be brought into order by simple truth.

The family, seeing what had happened, felt both shame and relief. If the father was indeed Sasuke, then at least the child had come from someone already close to the house. So they tried once more to settle things by marriage, thinking it better to make the hidden bond lawful before gossip spread too far. But Shunkin refused again. She said that even if her body was limited, she would not go so far as to take a servant as a husband, and she added that she had no wish to marry the father of the child either.

Her coldness toward the child was even more striking. When her parents begged her to think of the baby, she answered that if marriage was impossible, then the child should be given away wherever they pleased. She said calmly that a woman who meant to live alone had no use for such a burden. So the infant was sent away and raised elsewhere, and the whole affair was covered over as much as possible. Before long Shunkin was back again, with Sasuke leading her to lessons as if nothing had happened. By then, I think, the relation between them was already an open secret, though one that no one could force into a simple name.

Part 7

After the child had been sent away and the talk in the house had quieted down, the bond between Shunkin and Sasuke did not become gentler or more ordinary. If anything, it grew stranger and tighter. It was not the peace of husband and wife, and it was not even simply the order of teacher and pupil. Their lives had become joined, yet the form of that union remained unequal, sharp, and difficult, as if love itself had taken the shape of service.

I think that by this time Sasuke had passed beyond the wish merely to please her. He wanted to exist only in relation to her, to be useful at every moment, and to make his own body part of the world around her. Shunkin, on her side, did not soften because of this devotion. She used it. The more perfectly he served her, the more natural it became for her to demand that he understand everything without being told, and to feel injured when he failed even in the smallest point.

So their closeness moved into the daily needs of the body. This was not

tenderness in any simple sense. The body, in Shunkin's world, was another field where order had to be exact and where Sasuke's loyalty had to prove itself again and again. He was expected not only to guide her, carry things for her, and answer her moods, but to care for her with a kind of nearness that would have embarrassed ordinary people. Yet to Sasuke such nearness was no shame. He accepted it almost as a holy duty, and because he accepted it so completely, Shunkin came to treat it as her right.

One story shows their relation very clearly. On a cold occasion, Shunkin told Sasuke to warm her feet against his chest. He obeyed, as always, but at that time he was suffering from a bad tooth. The pain in his face was strong, and while he was serving her he secretly pressed one cheek against the soles of her feet to cool it for a moment. He must have thought that she would never notice. But Shunkin noticed at once.

Then came one of those terrible speeches of hers that struck deeper because they mixed sharp intelligence with cold displeasure. She told him that she had said he might warm her with his chest, not with his face. The soles of the feet, she said, may have no eyes, but that makes no difference between the blind and the seeing; they can still feel well enough. Even from his manner in the daytime, she said, she had already guessed that he had trouble with a tooth, and from the different heat and swelling on the two sides of his face she could tell what he had done. If he was in pain, he should simply have said so. She was not, she told him, a mistress who knew nothing of pity for a servant. But to pretend loyal devotion while using his master's body to cool his own aching cheek was, in her words, a hateful piece of selfishness.

That speech was cruel, yet it also reveals something very exact about her. She was not dull to his condition. On the contrary, she felt everything quickly, almost fiercely. But because she felt so much, she turned even sympathy into command. She could have let the matter pass. Instead she chose to expose him completely, to show that nothing escaped her and that his very cleverness in service would become blame if it slipped for an instant from pure obedience. Sasuke suffered under such attacks more deeply because he knew that she had seen through him

so perfectly.

The same sharp pain came whenever another form of jealousy touched her. If Sasuke was kind to a young female pupil, or helped one of them in practice, Shunkin did not always show open anger. Often she did something worse. She became colder, more exact, and more quietly malicious. Because she did not speak the jealousy plainly, Sasuke had no easy way to defend himself. He could only feel the edge of it in her tone, in her silence, and in the sudden weight of her displeasure.

In such moments, what bound them together was exposed in its real form. It was not free affection between equals. Shunkin wanted him near, but she did not want to lower herself by asking for him in the open language of love. She wanted his complete attention, but not in a way that admitted need. So the need appeared as discipline, blame, testing, and ownership. Sasuke, for his part, understood this language better than any other. Since he had long ago learned to treat even her harshness as favor, he accepted these wounds too as signs that he still belonged to her.

This is why it is not enough to call Sasuke merely a servant, nor enough to call him merely a lover. He stood in a place where service became passion and passion became obedience. Shunkin too cannot be understood if we call her only cruel. Her cruelty was real, but it sprang from pride, fear, sensitivity, and a refusal to admit dependence in any ordinary way. The two of them had gone past common relations and entered a world of their own, where even a foot placed on a chest, a cheek hidden against a sole, or a word spoken to another pupil could carry the full force of love and pain.

Part 8

A blind unmarried woman may live richly, but there are natural limits to such luxury. Fine clothes and fine food alone cannot explain a household with five or six servants and expenses that ran high month after month. In Shunkin's case, one great reason was her passion for pet birds. More than anything else, she loved

bush warblers. Even in our own time, a bird with a truly fine song can cost a great deal, and there is no reason to think matters were very different then.

Her favorite bird was called Tenko. Its cage was always placed by the window beside the alcove in her sitting room, where she could listen closely to its voice. When Tenko sang beautifully, Shunkin was in good spirits, and because everyone in the house knew this, the servants did all they could to encourage the bird. They sprinkled it with water and watched the weather carefully, since it sang best on clear days. When the sky was dark or the air heavy, the bird was quieter, and Shunkin too became more difficult.

The rhythm of the seasons entered her moods through that bird. Bush warblers sing most often from the end of winter into spring, and as summer comes, the number of songs slowly falls away. So too, her brighter days became fewer when the season changed. In spring the house might breathe more easily, because Tenko would sing and she would listen in pleasure. In dull weather and in the warmer months, however, a kind of heaviness settled over her, and the people around her had to bear it with care.

To keep such a bird alive and singing well was not easy. A bush warbler can live long in captivity, but only if it is looked after with great attention, and an inexperienced hand may kill it quickly. When one bird died, another had to be bought and trained. The first Tenko lived until the age of eight, and after its death there was a long period in which no worthy successor could be found. At last another excellent bird was raised, and Shunkin gave it the same name, loving it with no less care than the first.

What matters here is not only her fondness for birds, but the meaning she found in them. She would make her pupils listen to Tenko's singing, and then she would explain what they were hearing. A bird born nameless, she said, could through training attain a beauty of voice unlike that of wild birds in the mountains. Some people might say that such beauty was artificial and therefore lower than natural beauty, but she did not accept that. To her mind, training, discipline, and repeated practice could create a beauty higher and more refined than what nature gives by itself.

This idea was very close to the center of her life. She believed in cultivated beauty, beauty formed by patience, control, and art. A wild song may be lovely, but Shunkin preferred a voice shaped and polished until it reached a kind of perfection. In that, the bird stood near the heart of her music, and perhaps near the heart of her treatment of Sasuke as well. She demanded from people what she demanded from sound: not mere life, but form, discipline, and exactness.

So her household was not only expensive. It was an artistic world arranged around her taste, her ear, and her moods. The servants did not merely keep rooms clean or bring food. They also helped maintain the conditions of this little kingdom of sound, watching the birds, carrying things, adjusting themselves to weather, season, and temper. Pupils too, when they gathered, did not meet only a hard music teacher. They met a woman who could turn even the song of a caged bird into a lesson about art.

Yet this elegance had its darker side. The same bird whose voice delighted her could rule the peace of the house, and the same taste that seemed refined could become costly, demanding, and oppressive to those who served her. In that sense, the birds were not separate from Shunkin's character at all. They were part of the atmosphere she made around herself, beautiful and delicate on the surface, but held up by constant effort, constant expense, and the constant nervous attention of the people nearest to her.

Part 9

After some years of this unclear relation, a new stage began. When Shunkin was twenty, Harumatsu Kengyo died, and she took that moment to become independent. She left her parents' house and set up her own home on Yodoyabashi Street, and Sasuke went with her. By then her skill was already fully recognized, and Harumatsu had long treated her as someone ready to stand on her own. He had even given her the art name "Shunkin," taking one character from his own name and helping her forward in public performances.

From this point on, she was no longer only a gifted pupil in another person's

school. She became a teacher with her own house, her own pupils, and her own little world. This gave her more freedom, but it also brought more eyes upon her. A beautiful blind music teacher living apart, with Sasuke always beside her in his strange half-servant, half-pupil place, could hardly fail to stir curiosity. What had once been hidden inside the Mozuya home now stood much closer to the open talk of the city.

I think this is important. While she remained inside her family house, her pride and harshness were largely a private matter. But once she had a house of her own and men began to gather as pupils and visitors, her beauty, her fame, and her difficult nature all became part of one public image. Some came for music. Some came because of her name. And some, no doubt, came because they wished to look at the famous blind beauty and stay near her if they could.

Among those who moved in that circle was a rich young man named Ritaro. He seems to have been one of the men most drawn to her, though not in any quiet or noble way. One spring, when there was an outing to view the plum blossoms, he acted as the leader of the party, and there were also comic entertainers and geisha with him. Shunkin went with Sasuke at her side, as always. Even in such a cheerful scene, however, the place of Sasuke beside her stood out too clearly.

During that outing, Ritaro kept pressing cups of sake on Sasuke. Sasuke was troubled, because he had little strength for drink and, more than that, he was not supposed to drink without Shunkin's permission when away from home. If he became drunk, he would fail in the one duty that mattered most, guiding her safely. So he tried to pretend to drink while secretly pouring much of it away. But Ritaro quickly noticed and began to tease him in a loud and ugly way.

He called out that on a day of plum viewing even Sasuke should be allowed to relax, and he added that if Sasuke became useless from drink, there were plenty of other men who would gladly take his place as Shunkin's hand-guide. Those words matter. They show that Sasuke's place near her was already known and envied by others. Men who desired Shunkin or even only wished for the honor of being close to her could not help seeing Sasuke as a favored man, even if his favor came in the form of service and hardship.

Nor was jealousy limited to one man. Later evidence suggests that many pupils knew of Sasuke's odd position and felt bitter about it. Some longed for Shunkin themselves. Some simply hated the sight of his careful devotion, which may have looked humble but in fact placed him closer to her than anyone else. Even those who were not as bold or shameless as Ritaro could quietly resent the happiness they believed he possessed.

Because of this, I do not think Shunkin's later disaster can be understood as the act of a single enemy alone. She had many chances to gather resentment around her. Her beauty drew desire, her pride gave offense, her sharp tongue wounded people, and Sasuke's constant place at her side reminded others every day that they were shut out. Before any open attack came, the air around her was already full of hidden heat: love turned sour, wounded pride, envy, and the wish to punish not only Shunkin herself, but also the man who seemed to live nearest to her.

Part 10

The disaster came on the last night of March. By then Shunkin had already gathered around her not only admiration but also offense, desire, jealousy, and wounded pride, and one of those dark feelings at last took form in action. The exact hand that moved that night has never been proved beyond doubt. Some suspected one man, some another, and Sasuke himself seems never to have spoken the name of any enemy with certainty. Yet whatever uncertainty remains about the attacker, there is no doubt that the blow was aimed at Shunkin's beauty itself.

The little booklet tries to soften what happened. It speaks in a way that suggests the injury was serious but not beyond repair, as if the truth could still be held within decent words. I do not believe that account. The whole tone of that passage feels careful in the wrong way, careful not for truth but for devotion. A man like Sasuke, who worshiped her face and later built his whole life around not seeing its ruin, would naturally wish to hide the full ugliness of what had been done.

Other testimony is harsher and more believable. According to those who heard

the story from people close to the house, the attacker slipped into the kitchen first, lit a fire, boiled water, and then carried the iron kettle into Shunkin's sleeping room. This means the act was prepared in advance. It was not the clumsy violence of a thief surprised in the dark, nor the blind anger of someone striking without thought. The purpose from the beginning was to destroy her face.

On that night Sasuke was sleeping, as usual, in the next room beside Shunkin's chamber. He woke to a sound in the dark and heard a low moaning. The small night lamp had gone out, and when he lit it again and carried it with him beyond the screen, the room looked strangely undisturbed. Nothing seemed scattered or broken. Only an iron kettle had been left near her pillow, and Shunkin lay there in bed, groaning in pain.

At first Sasuke thought she had seen some terrible dream. He went near, calling to her and trying to wake her, but as he bent over the bed he suddenly cried out and covered his eyes with both hands. In a broken voice Shunkin told him that she had been made hideous and begged him not to look at her face. Even in that agony, what came first to her was not fear for life, but horror at being seen. Sasuke, shaking, moved the lamp away at once and said that he would not look, that he had closed his eyes. Hearing this, she seems to have lost the last of her strength and fell unconscious.

From other evidence, the injury was terrible. The attacker had tipped the boiling water from above so that it fell straight down over the front of her head and face. She did not recover consciousness until the next morning, and it took more than two months for the burned flesh to dry and heal over. A woman so proud of beauty, so sharp in feeling, and so unable to bear the smallest disorder in her surroundings had been struck in the one place where she was most defenseless. If the story had ended only in bodily pain, it would already have been cruel enough. But for Shunkin, the meaning of the injury was worse than the pain.

This is why I cannot accept any neat account that leaves her beauty more or less safe. If the damage had been slight, why would she from that point hide her face from others and refuse to let herself be seen? Why would the surviving photograph have become, in effect, the last image allowed to stand in place of her

real features? No, the truth must have been far more severe. The face that had gathered admiration, envy, and worship was ruined past repair, and with it a whole order of life was broken in one night.

Yet even here something must be said carefully. The destruction of her face did not destroy her power over Sasuke. If anything, it drove their relation into a still stranger form. But that belongs to what followed. For the moment, the story stands at the edge of a darkness deeper than any before it: Shunkin lying burned and senseless, Sasuke with his eyes covered, the lamp turned away, and the kettle still beside the pillow like the cold remains of a deliberate, patient hatred.

Part 11

More than ten years after Shunkin's death, Sasuke told someone close to him the full story of how he lost his sight, and from that account the deeper truth of those days becomes clear. On the night of the attack, after he moved the lamp away and Shunkin fell unconscious, her fear did not leave her. Again and again, in fever and half-dream, she begged that no one should see her face and that the matter be kept secret. When people tried to comfort her by saying that the burns would heal and that she would return to her former appearance, she rejected such words at once. She said that a face so badly burned could never remain unchanged, and from the moment her mind began to clear, she clung even more fiercely to the one request that mattered to her: no one, above all Sasuke, must look at her.

The doctors alone were allowed to see the wound. Whenever the medicine or bandages had to be changed, everyone else was driven out of the room. Sasuke, therefore, had seen her ruined face only in that first shocking instant by the pillow, and even then he had not truly looked. The sight had struck him like something not human, something between flesh and nightmare, glimpsed only for a moment in the shaking light of the lamp. After that, he saw only the bandages, with the holes for her nose and mouth left open.

Yet if Shunkin feared being seen, Sasuke feared seeing almost as much. Each time he came near her bed, he tried to keep his eyes closed or to turn them away.

He refused every chance to learn how the injury was changing from day to day. I think this is important. His later act did not come from one sudden impulse alone. It had already begun inside him as a refusal, a shrinking back from the ruined face, but also as a desperate wish to protect the older face that still lived in memory.

As her body slowly healed, one day came when Sasuke was alone in the sickroom with her. By then she was stronger, and her thoughts were clearer. Suddenly she asked him, in a voice that seemed forced out of her, whether he had seen her face. Sasuke answered that he had not, because she had forbidden it and he would never go against her word. Then she said something that broke the last of her pride. Soon, she told him, the wounds would be healed enough for the bandages to come off, and the doctors would stop coming. Other people did not matter, but if even he had to see that face, she could not bear it.

This was too much for her strength. She began to cry, pressing her eyes through the bandages as if she could push back the shame and pain by force. Sasuke too could only weep. Still, through those tears he answered in a way that showed he had already made a decision. He told her not to worry, because he would make certain that he did not see her face. There was something so firm in his voice that it must have sounded less like comfort than like a promise made to fate itself.

Some days later, when she had left the bed and the healing had gone far enough that the bandages might soon be removed, Sasuke acted. Early one morning he secretly brought a mirror and a sewing needle from the maids' room. Sitting upright on his bedding, he looked into the mirror and pushed the needle into his own eye. He did not know any exact medical method. He only wanted the quickest and least painful way to make himself blind. He found that the white part was hard, but the dark center was soft, and after two or three tries the needle went in deeply enough. At once the eye clouded over, and he understood that sight was leaving it. He did the same to the other eye, and though shapes remained dimly visible at first, within ten days both eyes had gone dark.

After some time, when Shunkin was able to sit up, Sasuke made his way into the inner room by touch and bowed before her. He said, "Teacher, I have become blind. For the rest of my life I will never see your face again." Shunkin answered

only, "Sasuke, is that true?" and then she fell silent for a long while. Sasuke later said that no moment in all his life gave him deeper joy than those few minutes of silence. He felt as though, at last, he had done something that reached the very center of her heart.

I do not think we should explain too quickly what happened in that silence. Perhaps Shunkin had never truly wished him to go so far. Perhaps she had only cried out from shame and terror. But to Sasuke, her words sounded like gratitude trembling at the edge of tears, and in that stillness he felt something in both of them change. The bond that had long been divided by rank, by habit, and by the hard form of master and pupil seemed to melt and run together. He remembered the dark closet where he had once practiced shamisen as a boy and imagined sharing her world, but this was not the same. Now, he thought, he had at last entered the world where she truly lived. The outer eyes were gone, and another kind of sight had opened inside him.

When he looked toward the pale shape of her bandaged head, he did not think of bandages at all. What appeared before him was the old Shunkin, the beloved white face from before the attack, gentle and shining in his fading vision like a holy image. Then he told her everything. He said he had prayed morning and evening that some disaster might fall on him too, because he could not bear to remain unharmed while she suffered. He said that the god had heard his prayer, that he was not unhappy now, and that all he could still see was the dear face that had lived in his eyes for thirty years. If the attacker had hoped to destroy that face and wound them both, then the attacker had failed. By making himself blind, Sasuke said, he had turned the evil plan to nothing.

Shunkin answered at last that she was glad, deeply glad, that he had understood her heart. She said that she did not know whose hatred had struck her down, but that while she could bear other people seeing her, she could not bear it if he did. Sasuke answered that hearing those words was worth more than the loss of both eyes. He said he was not unhappy at all, but happier than ever, because the enemy's trick had been defeated. And when he had spoken those words, the blind teacher and the blind pupil held each other and wept.

Part 12

The person who knew best how the two lived after that turning point was a woman named Shigizawa Teru. She entered Shunkin's house as a live-in pupil in 1874, when she was twelve, and by then the strange peace that followed the disaster had already taken shape. To people outside, the household must have seemed full of trouble and inconvenience. Both master and attendant were blind, and every ordinary action took time, care, and habit. Yet those who watched closely felt something else there as well: not mere hardship, but a calm, close life in which the two seemed to move around one another with a quiet understanding that had grown beyond speech.

Sasuke was forty-one when he blinded himself, and blindness at that age must have been far harder than blindness from childhood. Even so, Teru said that he cared for Shunkin so exactly that it seemed as if his hands could reach every place of need before she spoke. Shunkin too would accept no one else in his place. She said that an ordinary seeing person could not manage the details of her life properly, because only Sasuke knew her body, her habits, and the order of her days through long practice. So even after both had lost sight, she still relied on him for dressing, bathing, massage, and the most private parts of daily care.

This meant that Teru's role in the house was a strange one. Though she was there to serve Shunkin, in many matters she actually served Sasuke more directly, bringing things, preparing what was needed, and making it possible for him to continue his own service. At mealtimes she had to help more openly, but in most other things she stopped at the edge of the inner world the two of them shared. When Shunkin bathed, for example, Teru accompanied them only as far as the bath door, then went away and returned when they called. By then Shunkin would already be dressed again. What passed between them in those hidden intervals was left undescribed, but Teru felt that, difficult as it all looked, they were not merely enduring the trouble. They seemed, in some quiet way, to take deep satisfaction in it.

Money, however, had become a real problem. By that time the Mozuya main house had begun to fail, and the monthly support from Doshomachi came less regularly than before. If the old flow of money had remained strong, Sasuke might never have needed to take on more than the work of serving Shunkin. But the world would not leave them in that perfect inward state. He had to think about the household, and Shunkin had to think about it too, however little she may have wished to lower her mind to such matters.

So Sasuke gradually took over more of the teaching work and supported the household with his own effort. This did not mean that Shunkin ceased to be the center. Rather, he worked as an extension of her world, protecting it and keeping it alive. Even then he remained, in his own mind, below her. The grave later calling him her “pupil” was not a false pose made after death. It reflected the order he never abandoned while living. He could earn, manage, and instruct others, yet still feel that all value in his own art came from her and flowed back toward her.

It is curious, then, that he never formally married her. One might think that after such long shared life and after the old barriers had all but vanished, husband and wife should at last have become their public name. Teru heard from Sasuke himself that Shunkin had gradually softened on this point. But Sasuke did not want it. He could not bear to think of her as a poor injured woman to whom he must show kindness. He could not accept a Shunkin lowered by pity into ordinary human need. The woman he loved had to remain the proud Shunkin of earlier years, not someone changed into softness by suffering.

This, I think, helps explain everything that followed. Sasuke had shut his outer eyes in order to preserve an inner image, and from then on he lived inside that chosen vision. If Shunkin changed after the attack, he would not fully admit it. If age, illness, or disappointment altered her, he turned instead toward the eternal figure he had fixed within himself. That is why marriage in the common sense may have seemed wrong to him. Marriage belongs to the daily world of change, compromise, and mutual need. Sasuke wanted something less equal and more absolute. He wanted to go on living as the devoted pupil of a woman who must remain forever beautiful, forever high above him.

Yet this inward hardness did not make their artistic life weaker. On the contrary, I suspect it may have deepened it. The more Sasuke withdrew into that interior image of Shunkin, the more completely he centered his whole being on her sound, her taste, her way of feeling music. Those around the school later said that the Shunkin line cared most of all for tone color and expressive depth, not merely quick technique. Whether the great disaster itself opened some final gate in her art, I cannot prove. But it is not impossible that after beauty had been driven inward, music too became inward and more penetrating. At the very least, the house that Teru entered was no ruined remnant. It was still a living school, held together by discipline, memory, and a love that had become almost impossible to separate from art.

So the years after the attack were not simply years of hiding. They were years in which the two of them built a sealed world and learned to live inside it with astonishing steadiness. Outsiders might see only blindness, trouble, and wasted chances. But from within, the life seems to have had another meaning. Sasuke had chosen not to see ruin, and Shunkin had accepted that choice as the deepest proof of understanding. Around that decision they arranged their days, their service, their teaching, and their silence. What remained now was not the violence of the turning point, but the long afterlife of it, moving quietly toward the final autumn.

Part 13

In early June of 1886, Shunkin became ill. A few days before that, she and Sasuke went down into the small inner garden and opened the cage of a skylark they loved. Teru watched them from nearby. The blind teacher and her blind pupil stood hand in hand, lifted their faces to the sky, and listened to the bird's voice falling from far above. The skylark kept singing as it rose higher and higher into the clouds, and when a long time passed and it still did not come back, both of them grew uneasy.

They waited more than an hour, but the bird never returned to its cage. From that day, Shunkin was no longer cheerful. Soon she fell sick, and by autumn her

condition became grave. On October 14, she died suddenly when her heart failed. The date is the same one cut into the stone I saw on the hill, and when I think back to that quiet grave, it seems to me that the lost skylark had already carried something of her spirit away before the body followed.

After her death, one of her bush warblers, the third Tenko, still lived on in the house. Sasuke did not recover from grief for a very long time. Whenever he heard the bird sing, he wept. When he had leisure, he burned incense before the Buddhist altar, then took up either the koto or the shamisen and played a piece called Shunnohten, one of Shunkin's finest works and perhaps the one into which she had poured her deepest heart.

The words of that piece are short, but the music around them is rich and difficult. It seems to move through melting snow in the mountains, the sound of running water, the wind in the pines, spring mist, plum blossoms, and the voice of a bird flying from branch to branch. While Shunkin was alive, Tenko would answer it with joyful cries, as if trying to compete with the sound of the strings. The bird may have heard in it the valley of its birth and the wide light of the natural world. But I cannot help asking where Sasuke's soul traveled when he played it after her death.

For years he had trained himself to hold Shunkin within the world of touch and inward vision. Now perhaps he tried to fill that loss through sound. It may even be that for a man like Sasuke, who had long lived as if seeing her only in a dream, the exact hour of parting could never be wholly fixed. Other people lose the living face and keep only memory. Sasuke, in a sense, had already been living with memory alone long before death came.

There was also the matter of the children. Besides the child I mentioned earlier, Shunkin and Sasuke had two sons and one daughter. The daughter died soon after birth, and the two boys were both given away as infants to farm families in Kawachi. Even after Shunkin's death, Sasuke did not try to bring them back, and the children too did not wish to return to the home of their blind father. So in old age he had no heir, no wife, and no family life in any ordinary sense.

At last, on October 14, 1907, exactly twenty-one years after Shunkin's death

and on her memorial day, Sasuke died at the age of eighty-three, cared for by his pupils. I think those twenty-one years must have changed the Shunkin inside him again and again. The woman he held in his heart at the end cannot have been exactly the same as the living woman who once sat before him. Perhaps she had become even more clear, more beautiful, and more absolute the farther she moved away from common life. If so, then the lonely old man was not living only with memory, but with a being made from memory, worship, loss, and desire.

I have heard that when the Zen priest Gasan of Tenryuji learned how Sasuke had put out his own eyes, he praised the act as the work of a man who, in one instant, cut off both inner and outer sight and turned ugliness into beauty. I do not know whether I can agree so simply. I only know that the two graves still stand side by side, and that even now, when I remember them, I feel that Sasuke's dark world was filled to the end with a Shunkin no one else could ever see. Whether that was wisdom, madness, love, or all three together, I leave to the reader.