

The Diary of Iseki Takako: Volume I

August 16, 1840 (Tenpō 11)

Denture makers are skilled artisans who craft replacements for lost teeth using materials such as stone. They can recreate full upper and lower sets that closely resemble natural teeth—even in cases of complete tooth loss. About a year ago, after losing my teeth, I had replacements made. But soon after, my gums began to ache—a discomfort I attributed to poor workmanship. Frustrated, I threw them away.

Lately, my condition has worsened, making eating extremely difficult. I doubt even the elderly endure suffering like this—yet no remedy can be found. When my face swelled from the remaining bad teeth, I took matters into my own hands. In desperation, I pulled them out myself, hoping to escape the agony. Strangely, relief followed.

I had cherished my teeth—biting into tough foods, savoring sweets. But as the pain took hold, resentment grew. Waiting for nature to take them was unbearable. What I had once prized had become my greatest foe—my own teeth, my enemy. Their relentless torment reminded me of unfilial children—those who, despite their parents' earnest guidance, bring only sorrow. In such hopeless cases, a parent may be driven to disown a child—not out of cruelty, but from grief, from quiet despair.

My troublesome teeth felt much the same. Even the bitter conflicts that tear apart the most respected clans seemed no worse than the suffering they inflicted upon me.

When my teeth fell out in February, I felt compelled to write this poem:

This is no springtime
of fresh buds on waking trees—
only sorrow lies
in fallen leaves that drift
from a forest old and dry.

The Diary of Iseki Takako: Volume III

November 5, 1843 (Tenpō 14)

One day, Sugishima—a blind man—approached me.

“Maeda Natsukage is hosting a literary gathering. The theme is ‘Waterfowl,’ and each participant must compose a story on that subject,” he said.

“But writing isn’t my strength—I struggle to shape the thoughts in my heart. Would you consider writing something on my behalf?”

I wasn’t particularly inclined to help, but the blind man’s earnest request stirred my sympathy.

“Well, I’ll give it a try,” I replied.

Still, crafting something elegant and modern with my unpracticed brush and modest thoughts was no easy task. Even a single page might turn out dull. But at least the weight of responsibility did not rest entirely on me. In the end, this is the story I wrote:

It was around ten o’clock at night. Though late, the sky refused to settle. Clouds churned with unnatural turbulence, and the wind slipped restlessly through every gap in the eaves. Leaves rattled against the windowpanes with such force, they might have been mistaken for sudden rain. The loneliness swelling within me echoed the desolation of a winter sky.

A nobleman—deliberately seeking solitude—had built himself a quiet residence. He was no imperial prince famed for his love of island vistas, yet he had crafted a broad pond adorned with waterfalls and scattered beautiful stones throughout the grounds. The effect was subtle, refined—a landscape of quiet charm.

But as the seasons changed, trees shed their leaves, and fallen foliage settled thickly upon the water, weaving a lattice of autumn color. Waves along the shore stirred uneasily, and overcome with melancholy, the nobleman began to withdraw from the world.

It was not that he had chosen isolation; rather, the very nature of the place steeped him in quiet. As dusk fell and loneliness crept in, his only companion was the brazier—a constant presence through mornings and nights alike. Though he lived far from others, faint echoes of the world still reached his ears—whispers of something he could never quite let go of.

As he leafed through books meant to soothe the heart, he stirred the dying embers, watching the heavy pile of ash shift and settle. It seemed to whisper: *It's time to sleep.* Turning his pillow to face south, he lay down, the warmth of the brazier comforting his back.

Before long, a man appeared at his bedside. Clad in pale blue hunting robes, he carried himself with calm dignity.

“Please listen closely,” the man said. “For many years, I have dwelled in a certain marshland in Shimōsa Province. But now, an irreparable disturbance has arisen, and the people there are troubled. This pond before your residence may be small, yet it remains tranquil and undisturbed. It seems an ideal place to settle. I hope my sudden visit hasn’t startled you.”

With that, he turned to leave. As he did, the wind rose with a roar, and hail pelted the eaves. The nobleman awoke with a start.

“A dream... yet how terrifying,” he muttered. “I’ve heard there’s a deity in that marsh—a *mizuchi*, a kind of dragon. Was it this creature that spoke to me in my dream, seeking to make its home here? If so, there is no way I can live alongside such a fearsome presence. I’ll have this pond dug up to see what lies beneath the water.”

He shuddered at the thought, resentful of the long night ahead. As sleep eluded him, dream and waking blurred. Vivid images took hold—an immense dragon-like figure, reminiscent of those in ancient paintings, crawling along the shore. Its sheer scale defied reason. Golden scales shimmered as bolts of lightning flashed in all directions. Words like *frightening* felt inadequate. He trembled again and again, drenched in sweat despite the winter cold, wishing only for dawn to break.

At last, the faint crowing of a rooster reached his ears. The temple bell chimed softly nearby, its steady toll grounding him. Rising, he noticed the room growing lighter and turned toward the pond.

He slid open the door. The sky had cleared while he slept. Frost sharpened the waning moon's glow, and its light shimmered on the water's surface. There—countless unfamiliar waterfowl jostled for space, floating in the moonlight. They shook frost from their wings, cracked the ice along the shore, and called to one another.

“Ah,” he murmured, “how dramatic I was. The man in blue robes—was he this very waterfowl, appearing in my dream in another form?”

Reflecting on the fears he had nursed since childhood—fears born of old tales and idle gossip—he suddenly saw how foolish they had been.

Gazing at the birds before him, he whispered a poem, a realization unfolding in the hush of morning light:

I dreamed of his sleeve—
this morning, it became the
blue wings of a bird.

I gave it no thought at all,
in the hush of morning light.

As he stood there muttering, a sudden flurry startled the birds. Ducks burst into flight, wings beating in unison, as if reciting:

Last night's solemn dream,
I beheld it with deep awe;
on the pond's still face,
waterbirds rising aloft—
thus the dream finds its pure truth.