

The Diary of Iseki Takako

Tenpo 11, eighth month, sixteenth day (September 11, 1840)

So-called “tooth implanters” specialize in crafting teeth from stone and other materials and inserting them where people have lost their teeth. They can even make complete sets, top and bottom, that closely resemble real teeth for people whose teeth have all fallen out. Some years ago, when I lost one of my own teeth, I had a replacement crafted, but perhaps because it had been poorly made, it made my gums ache, and it caused so much discomfort that I ended up throwing the implant away. But recently, the decayed tooth has gotten much worse, and I’m having trouble eating. Even for an older person, it probably should not be this bad, but in any case, there’s nothing that can be done.

The pain from my tooth caused my face to swell up, and since I could not bear the pain, I deliberately pulled it out and threw it away. If nothing else, I did feel a little better. Over the years, my tooth and I had tasted both the bitter and the sweet, or should I say, bitten the tough and tasted the sweet, and after all we’d been through I’d come to think of my tooth quite dearly. But once it started to cause me trouble, I became angry, and I couldn’t even wait for it to fall out on its own.

When I thought of pulling it out because I hated it like a bitter enemy, this problematic tooth reminded me of the very unfilial children of lowborn parents. Though their parents try to guide them, the children will not listen, and since they continually cause their parents to suffer, the parents give up and say they’re disinheriting them, and end up casting them away. At first, you think of your children as exceptionally worthy and important, but after suffering from their cruel lack of filial piety, you come to resent the misery they cause and may even drive them away.

Among people in general, there are families who seem to be on close terms with the outside world, but distant with each other—this is how it felt with me and my tooth!

Some years ago, in mid-spring, I composed a poem upon losing a tooth:

I shall not call it a blossoming spring,
for I still mourn the fallen leaves in Oiso Forest.¹

Tenpo 14, eleventh month, fifth day (December 25, 1843)

Sugishima Kōtō² visited me and said, “Maeda Natsukage³ is hosting a literary salon. The theme is ‘waterfowl,’ and each of us will write a story.⁴ Since my composition skills are rather faltering, I don’t think I’ll be able to express what I would like to say in an aesthetically pleasing fashion. But I’m thinking of such and such. Could you please put something together along those lines for me?”

Although I initially refused, I felt bad being badgered by a blind person, so I said, “Well, I’ll give it a try,” and wrote it for him. I meant to transform this fashionable, contemporary theme into a timelessly elegant work. But given my lack of skill with the writing brush, my shortcomings were laid bare even though it was only a short, one-page piece. The story goes like this:

Though the four seasons have their intemperate moments, these days, the way the clouds seem to hang in the air is truly out of the ordinary. The wind rages fiercely, seeking any gap in

¹ “Oiso” is a pun on “aging,” and “fallen leaves” is a pun for “lost teeth.” The juxtaposition of spring and autumn visuals contrasts the cyclical time of the seasons with the unidirectional time of human life. The Oiso Forest, in Shiga Prefecture, is a frequently-used rhetorical placename (*utamakura*) in traditional Japanese poetry.

² Sugishima is the family name; Kōtō was a rank used within the Edo-period guild licensing system for blind men. The personal name is not given.

³ A prominent literati; 1793–1864.

⁴ As seen in the resulting story, waterfowl are traditionally associated with winter in Japanese poetics.

the walls to penetrate. The sound of fallen leaves blown against the windows could be confused for a cold drizzle, and our ever-accumulating discomfort seems a perfect fit for the wintry sky.

There once was a highborn man who chose to dwell in a secluded place. Though he was not “that island-loving imperial prince,”⁵ he had a pond built, complete with a waterfall and as large as his heart desired, then installed many beautiful boulders within. The overall appearance was quite the spectacle.

But though he had built it with great care, the blustery, cold winter wind blew the fallen foliage on the surface of the pond into a blockade of leaf litter and churned up waves on the water. The poor weather dampened his interest in the pond and led him to stay cooped up inside instead. Lost in his own thoughts, the characteristic sadness of the twilight there brought him no comfort. His only solace was the brazier he tended day and night. The prolonged solitude only deepened his depression. Of course, it wasn’t like he was living in a cave, but even though the goings-on of the world were faintly audible to him, he felt no real attachment to any of them.⁶ While waiting to fall asleep, he glanced over his letters and stirred his fire, which had mostly turned to ash, as if signaling that it was time for bed. Turning his face away from his lamp, he put his head to his pillow.

After some time, a man wearing blue hunting robes and with a clean, crisp air to him came over to the sleeping man’s pillow and said, “Word of your reputation reached me some time ago. I have lived in such-and-such a lake⁷ in Shimotsuke Province for many years. But an unbearable situation has come about, with some rowdy intruders causing great disturbance. Though the pond

⁵ A figure appearing in Chapter 78 of *The Ise Stories* (Ise monogatari).

⁶ A reference to *Kokinshū* poem number 952.

⁷ Probably Lake Inba-numa, Chiba Prefecture. Iseki notes the ongoing public works projects associated with managing the lake levels elsewhere in her diary, making this entry an oblique political commentary.

here before you is not as large as my own, there are few humans around, and so I shall dwell here henceforth.”

When he heard this newcomer’s pronouncement, the sleeping man was in agony, thinking this turn of events was more than he could endure. As soon as the man in blue departed, the late-night storm was punctuated by the violent sound of hail bouncing on the roof, abruptly startling the sleeping man awake.

“It was all a dream!” he told himself. “That said, it’s still rather foreboding. I’d heard that there was a kami who ruled that lake from long ago. It was called a *mizuchi*, which I think is a kind of dragon. It spoke to me in the dream I had just now, saying that it wanted to relocate to this pond. How awful it must be to live with such a disgusting creature! I had an unnecessary pond dug, and now I’ve gotten myself into real trouble!”

Quite beside himself, he quaked and shivered in horror while cursing the length of the still-early night. It became hard to separate dream from reality, and he seemed to see the images of his mind’s eye directly before him. Something that looked like a dragon from a work of art, of immeasurable height and with a glare so formidable it was impossible to match eyes with, crawled about the environs of the pond. As it did, its scales glinted like gold, and lightning flashed in every direction. Since even trying to speak of this terror was not easy, waves of fear rushed over the man, who was dripping in sweat despite the chill of the winter dark.

Thinking to himself that the night must be over, he finally heard the cock crow and the sound of the temple bells at dawn. As their sound reverberated through his bed, his will strengthened a bit, and he decided to inspect the state of the pond. He roused himself as his bedroom got progressively brighter, but still deeply unsettled, slowly unlatched the screen doors and surveyed

the pond. The sky had cleared, and the dawn sun reflected off the frost like moonlight, illuminating the surface of the pond.

Some unusual water birds were crowded together atop the water, shaking the frost from their feathers. They raised a noisy commotion with their honking as they broke up the ice at the water's edge.

“Unbelievable! The man wearing blue that I saw said he was going to change into these birds, and then things indeed happened as I saw them in my dream. Even children have heard tales about these kinds of phenomena. I was shivering in fear to my core, but it all passed so quickly!” Talking to himself, he composed the following poem:

Though I caught not their sleeve color in my dream,

I realized this morning that they transformed into blue-feathered waterfowl.⁸

As he stood there absent-mindedly, something startled him. He watched the ducks flutter their wings and take off in a flock, and composed again:

My dream last night—too strange to believe—

took wing this morning, as waterfowl from the pond.⁹

⁸ “Caught not” is a pun on “birds,” and “morning” is a pun on “manifestation.”

⁹ “Took wing” is a pun on “dragon,” and again “morning” is a pun on “manifestation.”