Tenpō 11 (1840), the 8th Month, the 16th Day

These days there are people called “dental implant makers”—they make fake teeth out of stones and such to put in the gap left behind when a tooth falls out. Even if someone’s lost all of their teeth, they can make a full set of them, top and bottom, that look just like the real thing. I once had a tooth fall out and had an implant made, but it must have been poorly crafted, because it irritated my gums terribly; eventually I got fed up and threw the thing away.

Not too long ago another one of my teeth got quite bad, and eating became a real challenge. Even elderly people don’t usually suffer like this, I kept thinking to myself, but I was powerless to fix the problem on my own. It got so bad that my face swelled up, and, desperate to escape the agony, I had the tooth pulled—I felt much better after.

I’d used that tooth my whole life to chew through tough things and to delight in sweet things. When even something so precious suddenly starts causing such misery, though, resentment builds up, and you can’t just wait for it to fall out on its own. I grew to hate it like a bitter enemy; I just wanted to rid myself of it—this agonizing tooth, I thought, is just like a child of a poor family who becomes disobedient and who takes no heed of his parents’ instruction. He’s always causing them such anguish that they are left with no choice but to disown him and throw him out on the streets. Now I can see how one’s own child, whom one had always loved and cherished, could grow terribly disobedient and cause such suffering that they would become simply unbearable—you’d have to throw them out. Even well-to-do clans held together by deep bonds must, I think, know something like this toothache when they quarrel amongst themselves and grow estranged.

One year, in the second month, one of my teeth fell out; I composed this verse:

> もえ出る春ともいはずかなしきは老その森のおちばなりけり
> *moeizuru haru to iwazu kanashiki wa Oiso no mori no ochiba narikeri*

the season of swelling
buds, of sweet young
spring days, is gone—a bitter
sorrow grows as these leaves my
teeth fall from the old groves of Oiso[1]

Tenpō 14 (1843), the 11th Month, the 5th Day

The blind official Sugishima came to me and said: "Maeda Natsukage is putting on a literary gathering.[2] The guests have each been asked to write a tale on the shared theme of 'waterfowl.' The problem, though, is that I have only a faltering command of composition, and there's no way I'll be able to pull off the story I have in mind." He told me his ideas and added, "I was hoping you would perhaps be able to take this material and make a fine tale out of it." I declined his request at first, but later I felt bad about turning down a blind person who had no choice but to ask for my help, and so I sent him a short note to the effect that I would give it a good effort. I'm rather shallow-minded and not much of a writer myself, and here I was trying to give Sugishima's contemporary story a classical reworking: writing even a single good page would give me real difficulty.[3] At least I wouldn't have to take responsibility for the tale; I wouldn't be the one to suffer consequences.[4] Here is the tale:

[1] The poem makes use of an *utamakura*, a famous poetic place, the "woods of Oiso" (*Oiso no mori*), whose name suggests "old age" (*oi*). This sylvan place is linked to a bit of wordplay on *ochiba*, which means both "falling leaves" and "falling teeth." The plain prose sense of the poem runs: "it is no longer the first month of spring, when everything is growing and returning to life, and no longer the spring of my life, either. Even so, in this second month of spring, I suddenly feel a keen sadness at seeing this old tooth fall out."

[2] Maeda Natsukage (1793 – 1864) was a classicist and poet living in Edo; he was the author of a commentary on the *Man'yōshū,* among other works.

[3] Iseki hints here that Sugishima's story concerns contemporary events (*imamekashiki koto*), which she will narrate in an "elegant, courtly" (*miyabika*) register drawn from Heian-period *monogatari*. The tale that follows makes extensive use of language found in the *Kokinshū*, the earliest royally-sponsored anthology of *waka* poetry, and the *Tales of Ise*, one of the best-known classical *monogatari*.

[4] She may mean that the story could easily be taken as a criticism of the Tokugawa government. As the ghost writer behind the story, however, she would not be directly implicated in whatever controversy might follow from the tale's performance at Maeda's gathering.

Each season here is remarkable in its own way, but recently the clouds had taken on an extraordinary aspect, and the winds blew as though stirred by an inner restlessness, seeking out even the smallest gaps in the house and forcing their way inside; the sound of falling leaves driven against the windows was easily mistaken for a cold downpour.[5] A certain melancholy had gathered in these early winter skies.

A person of some status had secluded himself in this exquisitely quiet place. Though he wasn't that well-known prince so fond of garden islands, the man had arranged for a spacious-feeling pond with a waterfall to be constructed there, and many exquisite rocks had been installed on the grounds—all this gave the impression of a beautiful estate built with an eye for balance and refinement.[6] Now winter's withering winds were gusting, and the radiant foliage blown from the trees gathered like wind-fashioned weirs on the face of the water.[7] Waves beat loudly against the edges of the pond. All this filled the man with dreary thoughts, and he kept himself hidden away in the house. And though he freely chose to pass his days in idleness, the fine pathos of twilight in such a place could bring him no relief from this melancholy; his only comfort was a brazier that warmed his hands day and night. Such was his circumstance.

He did not, of course, live entirely "amid the boulders and crags," and faint whispers about worldly happenings sometimes reached him, yet he never

[5] The description of the wind alludes to a poem found in Episode 64 of the *Tales of Ise*, where the man wishes he could transform himself into the wind such that he could "find a way through the gaps and go in" (*hima motometsutsu irebuki mono wo*) to the room where the woman he is pursing lives.
[6] The allusion here is to a certain cloistered prince that appears in Episode 78 of the *Tales of Ise*.
[7] This description of autumn leaves collecting on the surface of the water derives from *Kokinshū* 303, which speaks of "weirs fashioned by the winds" (*kaze no kaketaru shigarami*).

dwelled on such things.[8] Waiting for others to fall asleep, he sat awake reading through letters and manuscripts.[9] Stirring the embers of the fire, he noticed that it had mostly turned to ash, and he took this as a sign that he should soon go to sleep. Turning away from the lamp, he took his pillow and laid down.

Just then, a man of refined comportment wearing blue hunting robes approached his pillow and said: "It seems that news of my situation has already reached you. For many years, I have been living in a certain marsh in Shimousa Province, but ridiculous things have been happening there, and now the place is full of people making a real ruckus.[10] Your pond is not exactly large, but one hardly feels any human presence here, and it seems like a nice place to live—I think I'll move here." The man must have found this announcement rather sudden and distressing. Just as the visitor was standing up to take his leave, a late-night storm flung hail violently against the eaves, causing a great clamor—the man was suddenly startled awake.

"Oh, I was only dreaming! And yet there's something wondrous about all this. I've heard that the swamp the visitor spoke of has long been ruled by a certain deity, a *mizuki* or something like that—evidently a kind of dragon.[11] That

[8] An allusion to *Kokinshū* 952, which articulates a wish to "live among the mountain crags" (*iwao no naka ni sumaba*) such that one would "not have to hear of the sorrows of the world" (*yo no ukikito no kikoekozaramu*).
[9] The description of the man "waiting for others to fall asleep" (*hito wo shizumete*) derives from Episode 69 of the *Tales of Ise*, where a woman, the Ise Priestess, stays up until everyone around her has fallen asleep, and then sneaks out for a rendezvous with the Imperial Huntsman, who is staying temporarily in a nearby room. This allusion prepares for the appearance of a man in hunting robes in the coming passage.
[10] This cautiously-obscured reference would seem to point to a series of land reclamation projects undertaken by the Tokugawa shogunate in Inbanuma, a marshy area in what is modern Chiba Prefecture. Earlier projects at the site in 1724 and 1785 had failed. Earlier in 1843, the year of this entry, Mizuno Tadakuni (1794 – 1851), one of the most powerful men in the Tokugawa shogunate, directed a group of 60,000 men working for three months to reclaim arable land from the swamp, but this, too, failed. Iseki makes repeated reference to this project in her diary in 1843. For details, see Fukazawa Akio, *Iseki Takako no kenkyū,* 91–103.
[11] The man's remark may suggest that contemporary rumors were circulating to the effect that the shogunate's repeated failures in these land reclamation projects could be attributed to the presence of a local water deity.

deity must have appeared to me in a dream to announce his intent to move to my pond. It will be terrible to live with such a frightening creature! This is just what happens when you put in an unnecessary pond—you make your own misfortune." This sudden fright left him shaking uncontrollably, lamenting that so much of the dark night was still to come. Hardly able to distinguish dream from reality, visions rose up from the depths of his mind: something like the dragons one sees in paintings—unfathomably large, its eyes almost unbearable to behold—slithered around the pond, its scales gleaming like gold, lightning flashing in every direction, utterly terrifying.[12] Even this description can hardly convey the awful fear that gripped him. On such a terribly cold winter's night, he was drenched in sweat, desperate for day to break.

At last, he heard the faint cry of the rooster; the dawn temple bells echoed by his pillow.[13] He worked up a bit of courage and thought to himself that he should quickly go look at the pond. The gaps in the blinds were already beginning to glow white with the morning sun as he got up. Still frightened, he somehow managed to quietly open the bedroom's double doors. He looked out over the grounds: at some point the sky had cleared, and the dawn moon's light fell coldly on the frost and shimmered on the surface of the pond, where a crowd of

[12] The description of the man as "hardly able to distinguish dream from reality" derives from a pair of morning-after poems in Episode 69 of the *Tales of Ise*, already alluded to just before the appearance of the robed visitor, that wonder if the previous night was "a dream or real" (*yume ka utsutsu ka*).

[13] These dawn bells may derive from a famous line composed by Bai Juyi beneath Mount Lu's Incense Burner Peak: "The bells from the Temple of Lingering Attachment—I lie on my pillow and listen" 遺愛寺鐘欹枕聽 (*Baishi wenji* 978). This line was included in the *Wakan rōeishū*, the most important literary primer in premodern Japan, and is alluded to in the "Suma" chapter of the *Tale of Genji* and in many other poems and tales.

extraordinary waterfowl was floating. The birds brushed the frost off their feathers; cracking the ice along the edge of the pond, they cried out.

"Ah! There are so many of them! The man I saw dressed in blue robes must have been this flock of birds, transformed, showing up in my dreams. Yet I've been so childish: I've been keeping up with the latest chatter, and I spent the night fearfully trembling at so many baseless phantoms born of my own mind."

Muttering to himself, he composed the following:

> 夢なりし人の袂をみづ鳥の青羽にけさはおもひあはせぬ
> *yume narishi hito no tamoto wo mizudori no aoba ni kesa wa omoiawasenu*
>
> in my dreams they escaped
> my notice, the sleeves
> of that man—by morning's
> new light now obvious:
> the blue plume of waterfowl[14]

He was pacing about when he saw a flock of ducks, seemingly startled by something, suddenly take flight, their wings beating loudly:

> かしこしと見し夜の夢は池のおもにけさ水鳥のたつにぞありける
> *kashikoshi to mishi yo no yume wa ike no omo ni kesa mizudori no tatsu ni zo arikeru*
>
> that dreadful dragon beheld
> in a midnight dream dissolves
> in the dawn—flying up
> from the pond, ducks'
> wings drag on morning air[15]

[14] The plain sense of the poem is: "I didn't notice it last night, but I realize now, in the light of morning, that the sleeves of the man who appeared in my dream and the feathers of these waterfowl are one and the same thing."
[15] The poem is built around a bit of wordplay on *tatsu*, meaning both "dragon" and "to rise up." This device superimposes the two images on each other: the dragon (*tatsu*) from the dream vision is gone, and in its place are the more mundane, easily-startled ducks that fly up (*tatsu*) from the pond. Like many such devices in Japanese poetry, this has no exact equivalent in English, but something of the effect can be created with similar forms of wordplay.