

Celebrating the Birth of a Beggar's Grandchild (September 1806)

In the village of Fukawa in Shimosa Province, right by Raikenji Temple is the grave of Tanaka. There, four or five straw mats had been laid out, occupied by an old man who was cajoling passersby to drink with him. A child sat alongside him grinding miso. Intrigued by this peculiar sight, I hid in the shade of a tree and looked on.

The man was gushing about the birth of his first grandchild. I caught sight of a graceful, kind-looking woman with hemp rope wound around her hairpiece. Her face wore a wistful expression, akin to dianthus flowers dripping with rain.

It was not a scene you would expect to witness in the thickets. I was mystified—it was as though a fantastical folktale had come to life. Thinking that a mischievous forest sprite was playing tricks on my eyes, I asked a villager to shed light on the matter and discovered that the man was a beggar. He asked for alms by the village gates, making ends meet with his meager earnings.

The common belief is that only kings and nobles are the ones who can truly revel in life's pleasures, but I do not think that that is necessarily true. If you do not amass wealth, you will not be targeted by thieves, and if you do not erect a home, there is no fear of it burning down. I will venture to say that it is preferable to be happy as a beggar rather than eke a living by serving others. To people like that man, resplendent garments may seem as insignificant as sparrows, mosquitoes, or flies flitting by. Now, how would discerning eyes distinguish this beggar's family life from that of an ordinary household?

Tonight, the family should come together to hold celebrations customary to the newborn's seventh day, and pray for his long life and prosperity.

Lessons learned

From a newborn baby

Evening dew

Scraggy Cherry Blossom Trees (Spring 1806)

Bestowed with a bout of wet weather, the woodlands and fields burst into green overnight. A handful of flowers began to blossom, prompting villagers to go out and about.

Today, once again
The air is ripe
With rumors of cherry blossoms

Just as spilled water never goes back, fallen petals never return to the trees. I lament that our bodies await the same fate, and yet how strange it is that I keep yearning to write poems about flowers in spring and the moon on an autumn night.

Off to see
Cherry blossoms
Kimonos tucked behind

Clusters of teahouses
Burgeoning overnight
Like cherry blossoms

Lying in a row
Discussing
The faraway cherry blossoms

Still
No divine punishment
Shower of petals

My village, Kashiwabara, is tucked in a remote corner of the Shinano region. Unlike those in warmer regions, the cherry blossom trees there are scraggy, each appearing as mere shadows of their ideal form. With flowers bereft of luster and no visitors to be seen, it is rather a bleak sight to behold. Compared with cherry blossoms elsewhere, they are as haggard as hermits.

Flowers they may be

Yet, one can hardly call them

Cherry blossoms

The Old Farmer (March 1822)

The owner of these fields told me that when he woke up this morning, he saw flocks of waterfowl taking off from the distant rice paddies. “Every year, those ducks and cormorants come here and stay for a night,” he explained. “After they depart, the dropworts begin turning green and not long after, it becomes warm enough to wear only a kimono with short sleeves. Yet, in all these years, I have not written a single poem or painted any pictures. I have gotten old doing nothing but tending to my fields. It is indeed a shallow way to live, don’t you think?”

“I beg to differ,” I replied. “In my sixty years, never have I grown a single grain of rice. Despite being called a good-for-nothing moocher, strangely enough, my long life has been free from punishment. Now that is the very picture of disgrace.” My words were met with hearty laughter.