

17. A Beggar Celebrates the Birth of a Child  
the ninth month of Bunka 3 (1806)

In the district of Fukawa in Shimōsa Province, next to a burial mound in the rice fields beside Raiken-ji Temple, a group of people had laid out four or five rush mats. An old man urged saké on his companions, while a child sat grinding bean paste. Thinking it strange, I slipped behind a tree to take in the scene more closely. I heard someone laugh as she spoke of the birth of a first grandchild. The voice belonged to a rather elegant, gentle-looking young woman. Wearing a hairpiece wrapped with hemp, she appeared somewhat beaten down, like a pink-blossom wet from rain. Her worries were clearly visible in her face.

What an unexpected sight in this gloomy, weed-choked patch of land! It was as though I had come across some strange supernatural gathering, or an illusion conjured by a fox or a tanuki.

When I inquired of a villager, I learned that this was the family of an old beggar who lives in the area. Standing outside the nearby houses, taking in a copper here and there as alms, he makes his way through this world.

Ah, but their joy in life must be as that of kings or nobles! With no wealth to guard, they are untroubled by thieves. Without a house of their own, they have no fear of fire. They happily nurture their spirits in a way that those who hold a stipend could never match. Embroidered silks and lavish brocades must be to them of no more concern than a sparrow flitting past, or a mosquito or horsefly.<sup>1</sup> Even the keen eye of Li Lou could not fully apprehend the charm of such a life!<sup>2</sup>

Tonight they had come together as a family to celebrate the seventh night since the birth of their first son, and to pray for future generations.

<i>akago kara</i>	From a newborn
<i>ukenarawasu ya</i>	we now know well—
<i>yoru no tsuyu</i>	dew in the night

76. Scraggy Cherry Blossoms  
spring of Bunsei 3 (1820)

Blessed by the rain and dew, the grasses and trees erupted in green overnight, and here and there flowers came into bloom. Groups of people set out gingerly to have a look.

<i>kyō mo mata</i>	Again today,
<i>sakura sakura no</i>	rumors of
<i>uwasa kana</i>	“cherry blossoms, cherry blossoms!”

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to the *Zhuangzi*, “Imputed Words” (*Yuyan*), where the image of sparrows, mosquitoes, and horseflies flitting before one’s eyes serves as a metaphor for that of little concern.

<sup>2</sup> Li Lou, whose name also appears in the *Zhuangzi*, was a man with famously keen eyesight said to have lived in the time of the Yellow Emperor.

Flowing water does not come back; scattered blossoms never return to the branch.  
Although I've experienced such regret in my own life, I remain transfixed each time I gaze upon  
flowers in the spring or the moon in autumn.

*sakura e to*                    On his way  
*miete jinjin*                to gaze on cherry blossoms,  
*bashori kana*               robes hoisted

*chaya mura no*            A village of tea stalls  
*ichiya ni wakishi*       sprung from the ground overnight  
*sakura kana*               for cherry blossoms!

*nenarande*                 Lying side by side,  
*toomi zakura no*         judging cherry blossoms  
*hyōgi kana*               from afar

*hitoshizuku*              A single drop  
*atama nadekeri*         from the cherry blossoms  
*sakura kara*              caresses my head

*ima made wa*              Thus far  
*bachi mo atarazu*       have I escaped punishment—  
*hana no ame*              a rain of flowers

Now that I think of it, my home of Kashiwabara lies in a remote corner of Shinano.  
Unlike the provinces nearer to Kyoto, the cherry blossoms here are scraggy and gaunt—a  
shadow of the real thing. No one asks about them; the flowers lack luster, and there is something  
somehow shabby about them. Compared to other blossoms, they are like recluses who have left  
the world behind.

*hana nagara*              Flowers they may be,  
*sakura to iu ga*           but to call them cherry blossoms  
*hazukashiki*              seems improper

89. The Old Man Who Watches the Fields  
the third month of Bunsei 5 (1822)

The master of the house also told me that as he set out early this morning, he saw a great  
flock of water birds take flight from the distant rice fields.

“Every year, the geese and ducks stop for one night in these parts before flying onward.  
From then on, the water celery grows greener with each passing day, and the air warms enough  
to take off a layer of robes. But it's an empty existence, isn't it, spending one's life farming and  
watching the fields, never composing a single poem or painting a single picture?”

“Not at all,” I replied. “I’ve made it sixty years without ever producing even one grain of rice—a parasite subsisting off the labor of others. Yet somehow, strangely, I’ve managed to avoid punishment so far. What a shameful state of affairs!”

For the first time, the master roared with laughter.