

THE COLUMBIA ANTHOLOGY OF JAPANESE ESSAYS

Zuihitsu from the Tenth to the Twenty-First Century

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY

Steven D. Carter



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Introduction

This book presents translations of Japanese literary works from the tenth through the twenty-first century that are collectively called *zuihitsu*—a genre of writing that, as Donald Keene notes, “has no close European counterpart”¹ but is generally called “essay” or “miscellany.”

Anyone who has attempted to define the word *zuihitsu* can sympathize with the frustration felt by the modern novelist Dazai Osamu in trying to write one:

Lately I was asked for a *zuihitsu* by a newspaper, so I took courage and set myself to the task. But I kept tearing up whatever I wrote, and even after working on ideas for three or four days, I had ten pages at the most. It seems that I wanted to write a *zuihitsu* so brilliant that I would have readers thinking, “That’s it—he has it right!” But after working at it too long, I no longer knew what was what; I didn’t even understand what a *zuihitsu* was supposed to be.

I rummaged through my book box and took out two books: *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* and *Tales of Ise*. I thought that I could use these books to find the *zuihitsu* traditions of Japan. What an imbecile I am.²

Imbecile or not, Dazai here cagily expresses something fundamental about the *zuihitsu* as a genre: it defies easy definition. And it seems entirely fitting that he should compound the problem by listing one book (*The Pillow Book*) that is almost always defined as a *zuihitsu* along with another book (*Tales of Ise*) that, in modern times at least, is not.³

Bookstores generally shelve books by genre—history, religion, science, philosophy, literature, self-help, and so on. In the library stacks, though, one finds a more complicated mix based on a broad range of subject categories and many more subdivisions. And in real life, books pass by like currents in a river, all jumbled together, which is only appropriate since so many books are themselves jumbles of things. As Mikhail Bakhtin and others have demonstrated, this is particularly true of the modern novel, but one may submit that it is even more true of the *zuihitsu*, a supergenre in which one will often find a mix of subgenres, everything from reportage and travelogue to poetry, literary criticism, biography, confession, journalism—and so on, almost ad infinitum.

Perhaps the best way to introduce the pieces gathered together in this book is to quote some of the things said by a few of their authors, beginning at the beginning, with Sei Shōnagon, a tenth-century lady-in-waiting at the Japanese imperial court, whose *Pillow Book* is generally (although not universally) considered to have inaugurated the *zuihitsu* tradition in Japan. For in several passages, Sei makes comments that go far toward defining her method—or, more properly, her antimethod. The first of these is that she has written her “thoughts alone . . . never thinking that anyone would compare my book with other writings or that I would hear people saying I did a passable job,”⁴ thus informing us that her book is filled with personal and casual musings rather than anything more formal or scholarly. Second is that she has not restricted herself as to subject matter, writing “whatever occurred to me, for the pleasure of it,” and including, she says, “even things that are vulgar or odious.”⁵ And third, lest her other comments be taken to mean that she has given no thought to her audience, she admits that she has “written about things that people find amusing and things that are sure to impress.”⁶ In conclusion, one may put Sei’s comments into one declarative statement: she writes personally and casually, for the joy of it, about anything that comes to mind, providing that she thinks it might impress readers. All that one need add to make the statement complete as a description of her approach is that she excludes anything purely fictional.

Sei is true to her own definition. In her *Pillow Book*, we find a dizzying maelstrom of things— anecdotes, based on her own experience or what she has heard from others; lists of things of interest to her, including everything from “Disgusting Things” to “Waterfalls”; reminiscences; homilies and pronouncements of taste; and what in journalistic jargon might be called opinion pieces—a

presented with little sense of organization.⁷

It is obvious that many later writers of *zuihitsu* were influenced by *The Pillow Book* and by Sei Shōnagon's ruminations on her project. Yoshida no Kenkō (1283–ca. 1350), whose *Essays in Idleness* is second only to *The Pillow Book* in prominence within the Japanese *zuihitsu* tradition, surely must have had that book in mind when he began his own collection with the words “How foolish I feel when I realize that I have spent another day in front of my inkstone, jotting down aimless thoughts as they occurred to me, all because I was bored and had nothing better to do.”⁸ Predictably, Kenkō's collection resembles Sei's in presenting a jumble of anecdotes, homilies, opinion pieces, reminiscences, and even a few lists. The relationship was obvious enough that a hundred years later, the poet Shōtetsu (1381–1459)—who loved both books—would say in his own *zuihitsu* that Kenkō's work was “similar in form to *The Pillow Book*.”⁹

Sei Shōnagon's statements (and her example) were not the only influence on Kenkō, however. Also important was the eremitic tradition represented by Kamo no Chōmei in “The Ten-Foot-Square Hut” (1212),¹⁰ a work that resembles the Western argumentative essay in presenting a meditation on the uncertainty of human existence with “men and their houses” as a motif. Chōmei's work would also cast a long shadow, which would fall on later writers from Shōhaku and Kinoshita Chōshōshi to Matsuo Bashō, Natsume Seibi, Shiga Naoya, and Osaragi Jirō. While remaining casual in style, these works are not as desultory in organization or varied in subject matter as *The Pillow Book*; they are also more subjective in tone and more “confessional” in mode. And it should be added that many Japanese writers of *zuihitsu* also read and were influenced by Chinese works in a variety of genres that might also be translated using the English word “essay,” including most prominently *pianwen* (parallel prose), *suibi* (miscellanies), *guwen* (ancient prose), and *xiaopinwen* (short classical essays). Indeed, the very word *zuihitsu* is a Japanese rendition of the second of these terms, a literal translation which is “following the brush.” Perhaps this can also account for the works within the general category of *zuihitsu* that resemble what in the West might be called expository prose, represented in this collection by works by scholars such as Dazai Shundai, Motoori Norinaga, and Terada Torahiko.

Still, no formulation is more broadly useful than Sei's in making sense of the *zuihitsu* tradition as it is articulated more generally in the Edo period, which is in many ways the golden age of the *zuihitsu* as a genre. Works like *Tawaregusa* (*Amusements*, 1709), *Mado no susami* (*Window Musings*, 1724), *Hokusō sadan* (*Idle Chats Beneath a Northern Window*, 1801), *Kagetsu sōshi* (*Blossoms and the Moon*, 1803), *Shunparō hikki* (*Shunparō's Jottings*, 1811), and *Unpyō zasshi* (*Clouds of Floating Grasses*, 1843) show the influence of Sei's work (and Kenkō's) in every way imaginable, from their often chatty tone to their eschewing of any unified scheme of organization. Nor is it any surprise that the author of another such work, *Nennen zuihitsu* (*Year by Year: A Miscellany*), Ishiwara Masaakira, writing in 1804/1805, should, when he pauses to say something about the genre in which he is writing, sound so much like Sei and Kenkō: “In a *zuihitsu*, one records things one sees and hears, says and ponders, whether frivolous or serious, just as they come to mind.”¹¹

Even in the twentieth century, the influence of Sei Shōnagon and Yoshida no Kenkō continues, as is obvious in the case of the perplexed Dazai in his essay noted earlier, who says at one point that “*zuihitsu* is not fiction; the writer's words are supposed to be ‘raw.’ . . . To put it in grandiose terms, we always think of myself as reporting to the heavens the true features of the human story.”¹² To be sure, this is not the case for all modern *zuihitsu*, many of which reflect modern assumptions about the self and the personality and read something like memoir or confession, categories that simply did not exist for premodern writers in the same ways. But it is worth emphasizing that the old patterns persist in writers like Nagai Kafū, Uchida Hyakken, and Kikuchi Kan, and even in postwar writers Hiraiva Yumiko and Dekune Tatsurō. In their *zuihitsu*, we again encounter a casual, sometimes offhand style

a freewheeling attitude toward subject matter; and a commitment to stories that purport to be fundamentally factual and not fictional, remembering Dazai's insistence that "in a *zuihitsu* fabrications are not allowed."¹³ This is the mainstream of the *zuihitsu*, in which, as Linda Chan says, the writer casually invites the reader into his world "to sit down . . . for a long chat."¹⁴ The posture of the writer remains modest and "demure," to use a characterization of Sei Shōnagon by Sakai Junko—who is astute, I think, in wryly characterizing that lady as something close to a newspaper gossip columnist.¹⁵

That said, the corpus of *zuihitsu* from the tenth century to the present is both diverse and immense. Doing it justice is beyond the power of any single anthology. Most of the works I have chosen for inclusion from the medieval and Edo periods would probably be on anyone's list, except perhaps the short pieces by haiku poets,¹⁶ which are not included in collections of *zuihitsu* but in my opinion should be. But one cannot assume such unanimity when it comes to covering the past 150 years or so, which present us with virtual mountain ranges of works in the genre, not only by literary figures but also by people from many other professions. Some of the names I have included seem inevitable to me: Kafū, Torahiko, Hyakken, Shiga, Kōda Aya, Kawamori Yoshizō, Mukōda Kuniko, Takenishiro Hiroko, and Dekune, to name the most prominent ones. In my choices of others, as in my choices of specific titles, I have to admit to being guided by my own tastes and interests, which is perhaps not a great sin given the nature of the genre in question. Furthermore, like Osaragi Jirō as he describes himself in "A Bed for My Books," I am one of those people who lives "in a flood of books" and who often finds "what I want to read by rummaging."¹⁷ I cannot claim that my methods in making choices about what to translate have been in any way truly systematic.

One bias that I *did* become aware of early on in the long reading process that led to this book was my preference for things written in a light, humorous vein. When I began reading Japanese literature back in the early 1970s, I got a strong dose of writers like Kawabata Yasunari, Dazai, Enchi Fumiko, Ariyoshi Sawako, and Ōe Kenzaburō—not a cheery bunch, to put it mildly. In time, however, as I read more broadly, I discovered that there was no dearth of light and humorous writing in Japan in any historical period. In this sense, I agree wholeheartedly with Kawamori Yoshizō in his essay "Laughter and Nationality," who rejects the notion that "the Japanese are so serious that they . . . seldom laugh."¹⁸ The evidence of the *zuihitsu* tradition is quite to the contrary, reinforcing Kawamori's contention that "there are plenty of Japanese with a good sense of humor,"¹⁹ as his own essays delightfully attest. This book is partly intended to emphasize that point—and in that sense to revise, only slightly, the canon of Japanese literature as it is known in the West. Perhaps because so many *zuihitsu* are in some sense light and frivolous when compared with so-called serious literature, writers of the genre are all too ready to disparage their own work—mere "useless scraps of paper," to quote Matsudaira Sadanobu.²⁰ Modern scholars of Japanese literature should not be complicit in such a project.

Most of the pieces translated in this book are by people who are in one sense or another writers—poets, novelists, and scholars, mostly. Also included, however, are a few government officials, some monks, a physician, a painter, a physicist, and the owner of a used bookstore (who later became a professional writer). Among the writers, I have included *zuihitsu* both by "serious" novelists and poets and by "popular" writers of everything from period novels and mysteries to television scripts. Did I do this intentionally? My only answer is the one that Sakai Junko puts in the mouth of Sei Shōnagon when she is asked a similar question: "Whatever you say. I haven't thought much about it."²¹

If after reading my collection any readers feel that I have snubbed one of their favorite *zuihitsu* writers, I invite other scholars to remedy the problem. Far too few *zuihitsu* have been translated into English, and I hope that my anthology will be just the first of many.

Notes

1. Donald Keene, *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature from the Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century* (New York: Holt, 1993), 1.
2. Dazai Osamu, “The Image of an Author” ([chap. 32](#)).
3. As its title would suggest, *Tales of Ise* (*Ise monogatari*) is generally defined by scholars as a *monogatari* (tale) or as an *uta monogatari* (poem tale).
4. Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book*, final section ([chap. 1](#)).
5. *Ibid.*, sec. 134.
6. *Ibid.*, final section.
7. Some textual transmissions seem more organized than others, but the textual history is so confusing that there is no consensus about its “original” form.
8. Yoshida no Kenkō, *Essays in Idleness* ([chap. 2](#)).
9. Shōtetsu, *Conversations with Shōtetsu* ([chap. 3](#)).
10. There are so many fine English translations of this work (by Natsume Sōseki, A. L. Sadler, Keene, Burton Watson, Helen Craig McCullough, and Anthony Chambers, to give an incomplete list) that I have not dared to produce another one.
11. Ishiwara Masaakira, *Year by Year: A Miscellany* ([chap. 17](#)).
12. Dazai, “Image of an Author.”
13. *Ibid.*
14. Linda Chance, “Japanese Essay,” in *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, ed. Tracy Chevalier (London: Routledge, 1997), 431.
15. Sakai Junko, “On *Zuihitsu*” ([chap. 46](#)).
16. Specifically, Matsuo Bashō, Murata Harumi, and Natsume Seibi. These pieces are usually called *haibun*, or haikuesque prose. Not all of them contain haiku, however, and they so resemble writings by Chōmei, Shōhaku, Chōshōshi, and others that not to include them seemed like a dereliction of duty.
17. Osaragi Jirō, “A Bed for My Books” ([chap. 35](#)).
18. Kawamori Yoshizō, “Laughter and Nationality” ([chap. 34](#)).
19. *Ibid.*
20. Matsudaira Sadanobu, *Blossoms and the Moon* ([chap. 16](#)).
21. Sakai, “On *Zuihitsu*.”

BEGINNINGS

The first Japanese literary work to include the word *zuihitsu* in its title is the *Tōsai zuihitsu* (*Musing from an Eastern Study*) of Ichijō Kaneyoshi (1402–1481). Confusingly, however, that book is seldom even touched on by scholars of the genre, mostly, one guesses, because it is a collection of short pieces arranged by topic from earlier works by other people and not by Kaneyoshi himself. Instead, scholars tend to begin their histories of the form with a title from more than four centuries before: *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*. That said, one must quickly add that, as Konishi Jin'ichi points out, the genre of *zuihitsu* did not yet exist in Sei Shōnagon's day.¹ Yet in some ways, this fact seems entirely appropriate, given the way the *zuihitsu* tradition presents us with such a delightful mix of things that can be called an antiggenre. If *The Pillow Book* raises questions about the identity of the form, then perhaps that is all the better, since it inaugurates a tradition in which there is considerable resistance to any established form.

Written at the highpoint of aristocratic power in the mid-Heian period by a woman in service to an empress, *The Pillow Book* offers intriguing glimpses into the everyday lives of the aristocratic elite and was widely circulated in the centuries to come. That it inspired no other writer of the Heian period—unless we take into consideration collections of tales—to write in a similar way is mystifying. But we can be happy that eventually the poet Yoshida no Kenkō (1283–ca. 1350), with time heavy on his hands, followed Sei Shōnagon's lead in producing his own miscellany, *Tsurezuregusa*, literally “Scribbles from Idle Hours,” but widely known as *Essays in Idleness*. Kenkō had been a low-ranking courtier in his early years but was disappointed in his social ambitions. The world he reveals is broader in scope than Sei Shōnagon's and more a product of the reclusive life.

Thus a woman and a man, a lady-in-waiting and a cultured recluse, separated by more than two centuries in time, provided the foundation for a literary form that would live on until the present.

Note

1. Konishi Jin'ichi, *A History of Japanese Literature*, vol. 2, *The Early Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 257. Elsewhere in the same study, he says, “If we could ask eleventh-century readers what *The Pillow Book* might be, they would no doubt reply, ‘A *nikki* [diary], of course!’” (384).

The Pillow Book

SEI SHŌNAGON

Outside sources tell us little about Sei Shōnagon, only that she was of the Kiyohara lineage, the daughter of Motosuke (908–990), and the granddaughter of Fukayabu (precise dates unknown)—both major literary figures—and that she was married for a time and had several children. Our only certain dates for her life come from her famous Makura no sōshi (The Pillow Book) itself, which reveals that in 993 she entered the service of Teishi (976–1001), consort to Emperor Ichijō (980–1011; r. 986–1011), and left court upon or soon after Teishi’s death in 1001. Thereafter, Shōnagon—or “Minor Counselor,” the name by which she is known in her book, probably because some male relative held that title—lived in relative obscurity. She died sometime between 1025 and 1027, probably in Settsu Province.

Reference works often call her an essayist, but we really have no idea what Shōnagon thought she was writing. Most likely, she thought of her book as a diary of sorts, a place to record important and interesting events from her life at court, along with anecdotes about others, a number of short jottings of a more pedantic and essayistic sort, and her famous lists of the things—tangible and not—things that made up her world. Whatever her motives, her precedent would be of supreme importance in the history of the zuihitsu form, influencing, in particular, Yoshida no Kenkō, Shōtetsu, and Edo-period writers such as Tachibana Nankei and Ishiwara Masaakira, who followed her in producing desultory, seemingly formless works that are hard to categorize.

The numbers of the following selections are from the edition edited by Watanabe Minoru (see bibliographic reference at the end of this chapter).

* * *

1

In spring—dawn. As daylight steadily spreads, the mountain rims redden and thin streaks of purple cloud trail off into the sky.

In summer—night. When the moon is out, of course. Also fine is a dark night of jostling fireflies, though I am moved as well by the faint glow of just one or two flitting by. Even rain on a summer night is delightful.

In autumn—evening. Shining brightly, the setting sun approaches the mountaintops, and everything—down to crows hurrying off to roost in sets of three or four, or two or three—stirs the heart. And more captivating still is a line of wild geese, looking tiny in the distance. I will not attempt to describe the feeling one has listening to the sound of the wind and the cries of insects after the sun goes down.

In winter—early morning. The morning after a snowfall goes without saying. But equally pleasing is a white scene of heavy frost—or, if not that, then a brisk cold that has servants bustling about kindling fires in braziers and delivering glowing charcoals. Toward midday, however, when the cold has broken, I find the sight of coals burned down to white ash disagreeable.

4

It breaks my heart to think of parents sending a precious son off to become a monk. What a pity to be dismissed by people like a scrap of wood! For food, he gets dull monastic meals¹ and is denied virtually everything else, even sleep. Being young, he is bound to be curious, yet he is berated for the slightest offense, even for not averting his eyes when offered a peek at a woman.

Worse still is the life of an exorcist,² who truly seems to suffer. How uncomfortable he must feel when, after giving his best efforts, he nods off for a moment, only to hear a voice complaining all he does is sleep.

Of course I'm talking about the past; nowadays monks have an easier time.

26

Things that make the heart race: Baby sparrows in their cage. Passing by a place where a baby is playing.

Burning incense and then lying down to rest. A place on a Chinese mirror that's gone a bit cloudy. A man of consequence who stops his carriage and sends a messenger in.

You wash your hair, put on makeup, and dress up in fine scented robes—an exciting feeling even if you are not going to meet someone.

On a night when you are waiting for someone, you hear the rain, maybe, or something rattling in the wind, and suddenly you are alert.

41

It's a day in the Seventh Month when the wind is blowing hard, the rain is coming down, and the air is cool enough to forget about your fan. What a delight it is at such a time to pull over a thinly padded robe that still smells a little of sweat and get beneath it for a midday nap.

48

Oxen should have a small patch of white on their foreheads—along with bellies, feet, and tails of pure white.

49

As for cats, I like them black on top, with all-white bellies.

50

I like my footmen³ and outrunners lean and on the slim side. The same goes for all the men in my employ, in fact—especially when they are young. Fat ones look too ready to nod off.

51

A page boy should be small, with well-groomed hair, trimmed up properly and with a nice sheen. He should have a pleasant voice, respond respectfully, and behave smartly.

52

An ox driver should be a large man, with lots of unruly hair, a red face, and plenty of spunk.

55

Young people and infants should be chubby. Provincial governors and others of a certain status should also be well filled out.

58

Waterfalls: Soundless Falls.⁴ Descending Falls.⁵ (How splendid to think that the reverend retired sovereign⁶ visited there!) Nachi Falls—which I hear is in Kumano⁷—is most impressive. Rumbling Falls⁸ must make a fearsome sound.

68

Things that bear no comparison: Summer and winter. Night and day. A rainy day and a sunny day. A person's anger and that same person's laughter. Old age and youth. White and black. Someone you love and someone you hate. It's the same person, but a man you once loved seems like another person altogether once your feelings have changed. Fire and ice. A fat person and a skinny person. A person with long hair and a person with short hair.

69

In the middle of the night, something disturbs night crows⁹ roosting in the trees, and a few tumble from their perches while others hop around in the branches, cawing in sleepy voices, giving a rather different impression than they do in the daytime—and a less unpleasant one.

96

It was when Her Majesty was residing in the Office of the Empress,¹⁰ on a bright moonlit night sometime just after the tenth of the Eighth Month. Having asked Ukon no Naishi¹¹ to play the lute, Her Majesty was sitting just inside the portico. The others were chatting and laughing, but I sat apart, leaning against a nearby pillar, waiting on my lady in silence.

“Why so quiet?” asked Her Majesty. “Please say something. Are you so sad?”

“No—I am just looking deep into the heart of the moon,” I said.

“That says it all,” was her reply.¹²

101

Some men in the Courtiers' Hall¹³ sent me a branch of plum, but with the blossoms all fallen, asking “What do you have to say?”

“How soon have the blossoms scattered!”¹⁴ was my reply.

After this, a whole group of courtiers who had gathered in the Black Door Room¹⁵ began chanting that poem, which His Majesty overheard.

“What a superb response,” he declared. “Far better than composing a poem of one's own.”

102

One day around the end of the Second Month, the sky grew dark and a few snowflakes appeared tossed about on a strong wind. One of the groundskeepers¹⁶ came to the Black Door with a message which I went to receive.

“From Consultant Kintō,” the man said and gave me a piece of pocket paper¹⁷ on which I read the

final two lines of a poem:

Truly the air today
has the feel of spring.¹⁸

sukoshi haru aru / kokochi koso sure

Yes, I thought, he has captured today's scene well, and began racking my brains for some beginning lines to complete the effort.

When I asked who was with the consultant,¹⁹ the names were all imposing ones, and of course there was Kintō himself, which meant I could not just toss something off. Feeling not up to the task on my own, I wanted to talk to Her Majesty before replying, but she was with the emperor in private, and the messenger was asking me to hurry. I realized that taking too much time would only make things worse, so I gave in, and with a trembling hand scribbled down these lines and sent him on his way:

In a cold sky,
one takes them for blossoms—
swirling flakes of snow.

sora samumi / hana ni magaete / chiru yuki ni

Afterward I was rather downcast, wondering how the men would judge my poem—wanting to have a word on the one hand but not wanting to know if it turned out they hated it. In the end all I ever heard was from the captain of the Left Guards²⁰ (who was a middle captain then), who reported that Toshikata²¹ had proclaimed, “Let's make Shōnagon a handmaiden.”²²

111

Things that sound better than usual: On New Year's Day, an oxcart, or a rooster calling. At dawn someone clearing their throat—and the same goes for the sound of a musical instrument.

112

Things that lose by being painted: Pinks. Sweet flag. Cherry blossoms. Men and women described wonderful in tales. And as for things that gain by being painted: Pine trees. Autumn fields. Mountain villages. Mountain paths.

113

Winter should be cold and summer hot beyond anyone's experience.

124

It is in the Ninth Month, and the skies have cleared after a night of rain. How captivating is the light of the morning sun gleaming in raindrops fairly overflowing on the plants in the garden. And the way raindrops cling to half-ravished spider webs in the open-weave fences and the eaves above, looking like so many strings of white pearls—that is also charming and beautiful.

As the sun rises higher, dew weighing heavy on the bush clover falls and the branches recoil though no hand has touched them—a truly captivating sight. Having said that, though, I think it equally interesting that to other people this may be of no interest at all.

134

Things with nothing to recommend them: A person who has not only bad looks but bad character and

well. Cleaning starch that has gone rancid.²³ People will hate my mentioning such things, but at the late date I cannot restrain myself from recording them.

And should I not mention the bamboo fire tongs used for a parting fire?²⁴ These things do exist after all. I never thought anyone would ever read my jottings, so I have decided to just write whatever occurred to me, even things that are vulgar or odious.

148

Disgusting things: The underside of something sewn. Baby mice, still hairless, turned out of their nests. The seams of a leather garment before the lining's been put on. The inside of a cat's ears. A especially filthy-looking place in the dark.

A person of no consequence taking care of a passel of children. A man who has spent a long time looking after a wife he doesn't much care for must feel disgusted.

150

People who seem to have a hard time: The wet nurse of an infant who cries all night. A man involved with two women who gets jealous looks from both sides. An exorcist grappling with a stubborn spirit he had expected a ready triumph, but things aren't going well, and he bears down even harder so as not to end up a laughingstock—truly a dilemma.

A woman loved by a man who is unreasonably suspicious.

Someone of consequence in the house of a man of high office cannot have an easy time of it—although he still has it easy.

A person upset over something.

157

Things that don't bode well: A flighty young man adopted as a son-in-law neglects his wife and then stops visiting at night.

A man known for lying puts on a good face nonetheless and is given responsibility for something important.

A sailboat heading off in strong winds.

A person of seventy or eighty years who has been feeling poorly for some days.

159

Things that are close but distant: The Miyanobe Festival.²⁵ Siblings who don't like one another—relatives who don't. The twisting path on the way to Kuramadera.²⁶ The last day of the old year and the first day of the new year.

160

Things that are distant but close: Paradise.²⁷ The path a boat takes. Relations between people.

171

A place where a woman lives alone moves the heart best if it is forlorn: everything rundown, earthen walls crumbling, pond grass growing in the pond—if there is a pond—and mugwort running rampant in the garden court, or if not that, at least some green grass growing up here and there through the

gravel. For such a place to be well kept up and in fine repair, with the gate shut tight and everything in its proper place, is detestable.

177

When I began my service at the palace, occasions for embarrassment were many, and I was often close to tears. Night after night, I would attend Her Majesty from behind a low-standing curtain, and she would deign to show me pictures, holding them out to me, though I was so overwhelmed that I could barely bring myself to put forth my hands and receive them. “See what is happening here,” she would say, or, “Look at this now, look at that.” For light we were using an oil lamp on a low-standing tray, so I felt as if my hair were under a scrutiny more rigorous than in the daytime, but still I put every effort into looking. It was a cold time of year, and the brief glimpse I had of her hands against the backdrops of sleeves of pale rose-plum hue was truly splendid. To one so recently come up from home, so lacking in experience, it seemed nearly beyond belief that the world could have such people in it.

At dawn one day I was anxious to withdraw, and Her Majesty quipped that I was shier than the goats of Kazuraki,²⁸ but still I kept my eyes down, not wanting her to get even a side glance at me, and pushed off raising the shutters. When some serving women bustled in to put them up, however, she was listening and intervened, sending them away, though smiling at my expense. Then she asked me a few questions and continued trying to draw me out, finally saying, “You must be ready to go home, so run along—but be back early tonight.”

No sooner had I begun edging away on my knees than servants were there to put the shutters up, and lo, snow was coming down. A lattice fence stands in front of the Tōkaden,²⁹ making the garden space seem narrow, and it was beautiful in the snow.

At midday, messengers came one after another, asking me to come up soon and reassuring me that in such a snowstorm I needn’t worry about being seen. For her part, the senior lady in my cohort also began to hurry me along. “This is no good—you really can’t stay holed up this way. For Her Majesty to favor you this way, to invite you in so conspicuously, why, that is a sure sign of favor. Disappointing her will not do.” So, however beside myself with worry, I gave in and went. The fire huts piled with snow were a novel and captivating sight.

There in Her Majesty’s rooms sat the usual square brazier, but none of her women were encroaching on her space. Just one senior lady sat nearby. The empress herself had a round brazier of incense-wood, lacquered with a pear-peelings pattern.³⁰ In the next bay, a number of women were crowded around a long brazier with their Chinese jackets pushed back off their shoulders. Seeing them so at ease made me envious. Passing letters about, getting up, sitting down—everything they did was so nonchalant as they chatted away with smiling faces. I was intimidated just thinking about how I could ever get along in such a world. Farther inside, three or four women seemed to be looking at pictures.

After a while, we heard a man in a firm voice announcing that “His Lordship” was arriving. Thinking it would be Lord Michitaka,³¹ some women began to ready the room, picking up anything lying about. As for me, I thought I really should leave but was too taken aback to move quickly, so I withdrew a bit farther inside, still curious enough, however, to peek out through a gap in the curtains.

It turned out that it was not Lord Michitaka but rather Major Counselor Korechika.³² He was wearing a formal robe and trousers of purplish red that stood out beautifully against the snow. Sitting down near a pillar, he said, “These past few days I have been in confinement,³³ but with all this snow I was concerned.”

“I should have thought the roads would be ‘gone beneath the snow,’ ”³⁴ Her Majesty said. “Why do you persist?”

He laughed. "So you would regard me as 'a person of true feeling,' of course."³⁵

Such an elegant exchange, I thought—something that had the ring of an old romance.

Her Majesty was wearing white robes, with a scarlet jacket of Chinese damask over them. The way her hair cascaded down was like something I had seen in a painting but never in reality. It all felt like a dream.

Lord Korechika began to chat and banter with the ladies. Listening to them responding without a hesitation and standing up to his blandishments, I felt almost dizzy and began to go red in the face in spite of myself. Korechika picked up a few nuts and offered some to Her Majesty as well.

Suddenly he seemed to be asking who that was behind the curtains, and, no doubt encouraged by what he heard in response, he stood and came my way. Surely he will pass by, I thought, but then there he was, right next to me, saying something, asking whether what he had heard about me before I came to court was true or not—while I, who had been embarrassed just glimpsing him in the distance, from behind a curtain of state—I simply couldn't believe that I was right there facing him, indeed, that any of this was even happening. Had he so much as glanced at my carriage as he passed by in an imperial procession, I would have put down the inner blinds and hidden behind my fan to be certain I would not be seen. Yet now, here and now, as I sat bathed in sweat and wondering what had possessed me to enter myself into court service—now I was supposed to answer his questions?

Next thing, he snatched away the fan that had been shielding me so well, leaving me ready to cover my face with my tresses but knowing all the while how desperate I must look. Inside, I was hoping he would just go away, but instead he kept examining the fan, asking who had commissioned the painting on it and showing no intention of giving it back—while I sat there with my head down, using the sleeve of my Chinese jacket as a shield, which was bound to get white spots on it and leave my face a piebald mess.

After an eternity, Her Majesty must have realized what an agony I was in, for she said to Korechika, "Come over here, tell me whose writing this might be."

"Give it to me," he said, "and I will take a look."

"No, you come here," she replied.

"But this lady won't let me go!" he said—a witty and fashionable thing to say, but so inappropriate given my status that I felt utterly mortified. Her Majesty then took out an album of draft-style calligraphy and began to look through it with him.

"I wonder about this one?" was the next thing he said. But then he went on, "Let's ask our lady there; surely she will recognize all the fine hands of the day," and continued trying to get an answer out of me, saying the most outrageous things in the process.

As if one such person wasn't enough, now someone announced another, this one also wearing formal robes, and he was an even more lively sort who proclaimed things in comic fashion and got laughter in response.³⁶ As they regaled my lady with stories about this or that courtier, I thought I must be listening to fantastic beings or angels descended to earth—though as the days went by and I gained experience in service at court, I learned this was not so unusual. All the other ladies looking on must have felt the same way when they began court service, and no doubt they too became accustomed to such things over time.

One day when Her Majesty was talking with me, she asked, "Do you truly care for me?"

I replied most respectfully, "My lady, how could I not?" As it happened, though, someone in the Table Room³⁷ sneezed loudly, just at that moment.

"Oh, how awful!" Her Majesty said. "You've been caught in a lie—that's all there is to that,"³⁸ and proceeded to go inside.

"Me, lie about such a thing," I thought to myself, "when my feelings go well beyond merely caring

for her? No, it was not I that lied but the sneeze. And who could have done such a horrid thing? Sneezing is not polite, after all, and a person usually exercises more restraint—and at such a time! But I was still so new to service that despite my frustration I could not bring myself to convey my feelings.

When dawn came, I went back to my room, and soon a letter came, in an elegant hand written on thin, pale-green paper:

How, I wonder—
how could I ever have known
that you had lied—
if not for the God of Correction
assisting me from the sky?³⁹

ika ni shite / ika ni shiramashi / itsuwari o / sora ni tadasu no / kami nakariseba

The note said these were Her Majesty's words. My own reaction was a confused mix of joy and chagrin, and a desire to chastise the woman who had sneezed the night before:

Whether pale or rich,
a flower's hue we must assess
with our eyes.
How dismal to be misjudged—
and by an upturned nose!⁴⁰

ususa kosa / sore ni mo yoranu / hana yue ni / ukimi no hodo o / miru zo wabishiki

“Pray present this to Her Majesty,” I wrote. “Surely the Diviner's God⁴¹ will judge aright.” After I sent the reply back, however, I remained upset and from time to time lamented that that sneeze had come just when it did.

183

The midday heat is beyond bearing and you simply must find a way to escape it, but your fan is doing no good and you're reduced to sticking your other hand in ice water. But then comes a letter on fine paper of a deep red hue attached to some Chinese pinks in full bloom, and you think of how hot he must have been writing it, and realize that his feelings cannot be shallow after all, and before you know it that fan you simply could not do without has been laid aside.

185

What a delight it is, when staying near a broad avenue, to hear something from outside and discover there is a man passing by in a cart with the blinds up, enchanted by the dawn moon, intoning the lines of a poem—“On goes the wanderer, beneath the lingering moon.”⁴² Hearing a man chanting poetry while going by on horseback is also a delight.

At such a place, one may also hear a man chanting, accompanied by the flapping of mudguards, only to discover, when you put your work down and get up to see who it is, that it is just some clod of common birth—truly disappointing.

187

For a man visiting a lady in court service to eat in her presence is just horrid, and the woman who gives him food is just as bad. If the one he loves shows she is ready to offer something, he's obviously going to take it—one can't expect him to close his mouth and turn his face away as if he were repulsed by the idea!

When a man is so thoroughly drunk that he has to stay over, I don't give him a thing to eat, not even warmed-up, leftover rice; and if he should think me heartless and decide never to visit again—we then, so be it.

If one is at home and someone from the kitchens brings something in, there's nothing for it, but still one wishes they wouldn't.

211

Just after the twentieth of the Ninth Month, I was on my way to do pilgrimage at Hasedera,⁴³ staying in a flimsy little house. I was so worn out that I soon fell fast asleep, but how moved I was to wake late into the night and see moonlight from a window shimmering whitely on the robes of people sleeping near me. It is at such times that people are wont to compose poems.

215

In bright moonlight, crossing a stream, the ox pulling your carriage splashes through the water, as shattering crystal into pieces—a delightful sight.

216

Things that are better big: Houses. Provision bags.⁴⁴ Monks. Fruit. Oxen. Ink blocks. If a man's eyes are too small, he looks too like a woman—though eyes big as metal bowls are menacing. Braziers. Ground cherries.⁴⁵ Kerria flowers. Cherry blossom petals.

217

Things that are better short: A piece of thread for a quick sewing job. The hair of lower-class women. The speech of an unmarried daughter. Lampstands.

223

Taifu no Myōbu,⁴⁶ a wet nurse in Her Majesty's service, was departing for Hyūga Province.⁴⁷ Among the fans she received as gifts was one that on one side had a scene of sunlight shining brightly on the buildings of a provincial seat and on the other a fine dwelling in the capital deluged by heavy rain—with a poem movingly written in Her Majesty's own hand:

You must leave us now,
going off toward the sun.
But do remember—
that here in the capital
the rains will still weep down.

akane sasu / hi ni mukaite mo / omoiideyo / miyako wa hanarenu / nagame suran to

How much Myōbu must have wished not to leave such a mistress behind!

224

I was in seclusion at Kiyomizu Temple,⁴⁸ and Her Majesty sent a messenger all the way up there just to deliver a note to me. It was written in draft script, on Chinese paper of reddish hue:

“How often I hear
the temple bell ring at dusk
from a nearby mountain!

Surely she must know
how often I think of her . . .

yama chikaki / iriai no kane no / koegoto ni / kouru kokoro no / kazu wa shiruran

and yet . . .”⁴⁹

You do take your time.

I was traveling, and had neglected to bring any proper paper along, so I wrote my reply on the purplish-red petal of a lotus flower.

232

Falling things: Snow. Hail. Sleet is unpleasant, but a delight when it falls with white snow. Snow looks fine on a roof of cypress bark, especially when it’s on the verge of melting. It’s also delightful when not much has fallen, just enough to fill the grooves between the roof tiles, making them appear like black mounds. Rain showers. Hail, on wood-plank roofs. Frost is also pleasing on wood-plank roofs or in gardens.

236

Clouds: White clouds, as well as purplish red clouds, black clouds—all are delightful. Rain clouds buffeted by the wind. The greatest delight is when dark clouds gradually vanish in the growing light of dawn—“Hues that depart with morn,”⁵⁰ as the Chinese poem says. A thin wisp of cloud in front of a bright, full moon is moving.

245

Truly terrifying things: Thunder in the night. A thief breaking in right next door. If a thief comes into your own house, you’re too overcome to stop and think about what’s going on. A fire nearby is also terrifying.

248

Surely nothing in this world could be more disheartening than being disliked. Who would be crazy enough to conclude, “Well, let them hate me!” and just give up? Yet the sad fact is that in the natural course of things, at court and even in the family circle, there are those who will be liked and those who will not.

Among the highborn, but also among the lower classes, people are quick to favor a child who is always noticed because of doting parents. And when the child is worthy of such care, it seems so logical that we conclude it couldn’t be otherwise. But I find it especially moving when parents favor over a child who is really nothing special simply because they are its parents.

I can think of nothing more to be desired than to have the affection of those one serves, of one’s parents, and of all others with whom one has dealings in life.

251

People who get angry at gossiping mystify me. How can one not talk about other people, after all? Aside from one’s own concerns, the affairs of other people offer the best targets for one’s wit.

Still, gossiping does feel mean; and if the victim hears of it, there may be resentment—which can do one harm. Thus when the person is somebody one dare not alienate, one thinks better of it and keeps one’s mouth shut—even if in other circumstances one would come out with it and enjoy a good

laugh.

279

A taboo or something⁵¹ sends you home the long way around, and you arrive late at night, your jaw clenched and aching against the cold. Yet how delightful it is, as you settle in and pull the brazier close, to stir the fire and find some coals still brightly blazing, with not a burned-out spot to mar them. On the other hand, how hateful it is when you are so lost in conversation that you fail to see the fire about to go out, and someone rushes in to put new coals in and revive it. If the coals are placed on the outside, with the fire still burning in the center, that is fine; but I find it irritating if someone rakes the old coals aside, stacks new ones up in a pile, and lights a fire on top.

280

Lots of snow had fallen, yet strangely the shutters were still down. Coals had been stirred up in the braziers, and we were gathered around them chatting.

“Shōnagon,” Her Majesty said, “is there snow on Kōro Peak?”⁵²

She laughed when I promptly ordered the shutters raised and the blinds rolled up.

Some other women said they knew the poem and might have thought to refer to it in their own verses but had not made the connection, concluding that I was just the sort of person who should be in Her Majesty’s service.

281

The boys who assist yin-yang masters⁵³ really know their job. When the master goes out to perform purification service and begins reading from the scripture, others may slack off, but when the time comes to pour saké or water, the boy will always run over to perform his tasks without being told. I admire how they know the procedures so well that their master need never ask for anything, and I find myself wishing I could find someone so smart for my own employ.

. . .

In these pages, I jotted down things I had witnessed and the thoughts of my heart while I was away from the palace at home, with nothing better to do and with no intention that anyone else should ever see what I had written. Because I knew it might prove an inconvenience in some quarters, I meant to keep my book hidden, but in that task I failed, to my own chagrin: the thing has gotten out.

The palace minister⁵⁴ presented Her Majesty with a quantity of paper. “What should we write on it, I wonder?” she asked. “In His Majesty’s chambers they are making a copy of *The Book of History*.”⁵⁵

“Why not make a pillow of it?” I said. She responded by saying, “As you wish, then—take it away” and presented it to me. And so I proceeded to fill the paper—and a nearly endless quantity of it there was—with idle musings, most of them worthless and nonsensical.

For the most part, I have written about things that people find amusing and things that are sure to impress—poems, for example, but also topics like trees, grasses, birds, and insects; and I had thought that what I wrote would be bound to have people jeering at me. “My—it’s worse than we thought they would say, “How wanting she is in taste!” But the truth was that these were my thoughts alone: I simply wrote whatever occurred to me, for the pleasure of it, never thinking that anyone would compare my book with other writings or that I would hear people saying I did a passable job. Yet it seems that some people are saying I have quite put them to shame, which strikes me as strange indeed.

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