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TAKAHASHI HIROMI; The Duel at Yamazaki-daira.  
(1967) Directed by: Mr. Fred Chappell. pp. 69.

This is a collection of poems and short stories,  
which mainly deal with life of Japanese people.

THE DUEL AT YAMAZAKI-DAIRA

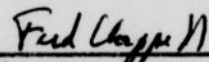
BY

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## INTRODUCTION

The themes I have dealt with in my poems and stories are essential to all nations: struggle for life, love, and death. Those who have little knowledge of Japan or Asia, however, may have some difficulty in understanding them because of the external differences of custom and manners. Although I have tried to give as much information as possible within my works, I am afraid that it may have been insufficient. Taking this opportunity, I should like to give a brief explanation for my poems and stories.

Legacy, which is closely related to The Duel at Yamazaki-daira, is my criticism toward those who live on the past and cannot accept new life and love. Especially in my country people tend to put too much emphasis on physical faithfulness. The mother in the poem, however, is really the cruellest adultress and betrayer, even though she did not have any physical relationship with her lover. The daughter may look promiscuous to an outsider, but she dedicates herself to her present lover like Olenka in Chekhov's The Darling, though unlike Olenka she has her own will and determination. It is actually the daughter who is faithful and has the strength to accept reality.

To a reader who has been raised in a Christian society, the idea of suicide in The Intruder probably sounds "sinful," and he will immediately associate it with mental disturbance. In Japan where suicide is an everyday occurrence, however, people look at it with a rather different attitude. We justify our lives by saying, "Death is an

escape," or "It is harder to live than to die." But is it really so? It seems to me that it is as hard to die as to live because of our instinct to survive. When one deliberately chooses death, there is something more than present psychology can analyze and solve. It does not settle anything merely to point out the causes or give such remarks as "escape," or "cowardice." We have to find an "intruder" from within to prevent this waste of life, for I believe that we are made to live, although I do not know why.

The Quiet Sea deals with the clash of three philosophies of life: the aggressive, the modified, and the conservative, which are represented by Toshio, Yoshio, and the father. None of them are perfect, but we have to cling to some belief to live. The three men are all trying to create a good society according to their own points of view, futile as they may seem.

In The Duel at Yamazaki-daira, the setting is not the modern but the feudalistic Japan of the eighteenth century. This is clear to a Japanese reader by the characters' archaic names, the use of swords which we do not carry today except as art objects, and the reference to a clan government which ceased to exist after the Meiji Restoration in 1867. The reason why I chose this setting is because people in those days had more respect for integrity and had more discipline in their lives. I deeply sympathize with all the characters in the story: Kanemasa, Jurota, Saemon, and Misao, because they are all strong people who tried to do their best in spite of their limitations.

OF SUNDAY AT DUSK  
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## ON SUNDAY AT DUSK

An old professor alone in his room  
Wanted some tea to soothe his dull exhaustion  
After reading Plato all day long.  
Sugar was not there,  
And without sugar tea was tasteless.

He took a walk downtown, twiddling  
His favorite silver-headed cane  
And found at last a dingy shop  
Where everything was a crumbling heap.

"No sir, I don't have any sugar to sell,  
But won't you have a cup of tea with me?"  
Said the old woman with shrivelled breast  
And mouth. The bare electric bulb cast  
A circle of light in the obscene room.

On a tray was a wedding picture, yellow  
With age: strange people's stiff smiles,  
Their eyes unfathomable pits,  
The bride wearing a witch's mask.  
It fell to the floor. The hollow eyes  
Peeped into his; a voice whispered  
That surely he had seen them before.



He blinked his eyes and turned  
To hide somewhere in a corner;  
A white blurred face  
Blocked his way--then the souls  
Of the dead swarming.

The old woman stood among the shapeless shadows  
And laughed without voice, opening wide  
Her toothless mouth. "Now you see it..."  
"Now you see it," echoed the voice.

## LEGACY

I bid farewell tonight to my latest love;  
Sitting before the mirror, I watched memories  
Reflecting, eyes on fire.  
I learned what was running in my blood, my life:  
Trahir, se trahir, you betrayer,  
For at last I opened my mother's forbidden diary.

I do not know what made me save your diary  
That day from the cremating fire,  
Which effaced all the memories  
Of your life  
And love,  
Mother, betrayer.

So you had been Father's betrayer  
All through your life,  
Living on memories  
Kept secret in your diary,  
Yearning only for useless love,  
Nothing left but cinders of uncontrollable fire.

It was Mother within me who set fire  
To my promiscuous love  
And made me a born betrayer.  
Would my life

Be spent like hers in the diary  
Of hollow memories?

Father meant to burn the memories  
When he put the diary  
In her coffin that crumbled in fire,  
To keep his love  
Unrequited, though unstained by the betrayer,  
The only companion of his life.

When my child, still unborn, shall trace my life  
Through my mildewed diary,  
Saved from vanishing memories,  
She will learn about the betrayer  
And the betrayed who lived on the fire  
Of present love.

The bygone memories written in the diary,  
Betrayer of Mother's fire,  
I set them aflame for my new life and love.

## ESKIMO WINTER

I remember the first time  
I went into a blizzard  
With my father. I think we were trying  
To find a midwife, but I've never  
Seen my mother pregnant. It's queer  
The way we remember things.  
My parents met a terrible death  
Together; it was spring and the ice wasn't firm:  
They fell into the sea with dogs, sleigh,  
And all. I think, though,  
They were lucky, because they didn't have to decide.  
Anyhow, it was an awful snow storm when my father  
And I went out, just like tonight. I was wrapped  
Up to my eyes; I couldn't hear a thing,  
Even the sound of cracking whips, except  
The roaring waves in my head. The snow needled  
My face, and between the narrow slits of my eyes  
I saw my lashes frozen like tiny icicles;  
The rest mere blur.  
  
I ought to go out without wasting time like this.  
I hear dry bones chirping; it's my grandson,

Who pokes the fur and licks the ice wall.  
As long as I don't eat, I see no reason  
Why I shouldn't stay. But I imagine it's not right,  
For they know I haven't eaten. I think that's why  
My grandmother went out, a long time ago,  
Opening a fur curtain like this  
And staring at all of us, just once.  
I think she wasn't sad because she wasn't crying.  
I hope she was eaten by a bear, instead  
Of being buried under the snow  
Like a frozen fish, because then  
She is living again. I wish I could leave  
This coat for them, but I can't go far  
Without it and I don't want to be found  
By them. You can eat bears, but not people.  
You think I'm cold but I'm not,  
And I remember the first time I went out  
Into the winter with my father.

## THE INTRUDER

Teruhiko went out to the well in front of the hutte. It was still dark, and when he washed his face with the running water, his fingers grew purple-red with cold, his nose and lips almost ached. He shivered involuntarily but felt refreshed. This was one of the pleasures of mountaineering. The water was cold and clear everywhere, and it tasted most delicious of all the drinks he knew. Nobody could understand this unless he came to the mountain himself.

"Water, H<sub>2</sub>O. Why do the scientists say it is tasteless, odorless, and colorless?" he thought, filling an aluminum canteen with water. "Of course, this is true only of pure water, distilled in laboratories... They say that a perfectly clear stream is avoided by fish. How queer that purity gives no life or joy to us. That should not be, and yet the fact remains..."

The water ran over the mouth of the canteen, drenched his bare feet and sandals, and splashed on his waterproof black trousers. Gazing at the glittering drops, he asked himself whether he was very disturbed. No, he was composed enough to remember the chemical symbols and analysis.

"Why don't you take away your bottle? Are you still half-asleep? Your trousers will get wet," suddenly a loud voice pierced his ears. The landlady, who had come out to draw water for breakfast, was looking at him with a smile.

"The water is so refreshing," he answered hastily and put the stopper on the canteen.

"People from town always say so, though I don't realize it, 'cause I'm using it every day," she said, visibly pleased. "By the way, how many rice balls do you want for lunch?"

"Just one please," he said, going toward the house.

"No, no. A young man should eat a lot, and you might want a snack before noon. I'll make three with lots of salmon in them. Do you like sesame? I'll put in some for you."

"Thanks." He concealed his annoyance. He did not want her to become solicitous. He did not feel like eating and would be unable to eat today. As there must be much water on the mountain after yesterday's heavy rain, he had even thought of carrying an empty canteen with him, but he wanted to be sure. He did not like the feeling when he swallowed pills without some kind of drink. They stuck in his throat for a long time, and he could feel them dissolving little by little and slowly going down to his stomach. Strangely enough, he could taste even now the dry bitterness of medicine. He had always wondered why; he had never heard that the gustatory sense existed in the throat too.

Teruhiko entered his room where the kerosene lamp was burning low. The evil smell of the oil nauseated him a little because he had skipped his supper the night before. The pale blue flame flickered and the black smoke dissolved in the air. Each beam sparkled, with color like a prism, as it fell on the floor.

A yellow drug box stuck out from the half-open knapsack in the corner of the room. He picked up a camera hanging on the wall to put it in, then hesitated. It was nearly new and there must be someone who would be glad to have it. He had bought it a year before when he went

to Mt. Akagi to introduce Yoshiko to Hiroshi. If he could have foreseen what was going to happen, he would never have gone. He checked the camera and case; no name was on it. The landlady would think that he had forgotten it. He hung it up again carefully and leaned against the wall.

Should he write to them before he left? No, what was the use of making a fuss about himself? He held no spite against them, since they had only shown him what was already there, unrecognized before. He would not have wanted to see it if he could have avoided doing so, but what happened had happened. He had loved Yoshiko too deeply and trusted Hiroshi too much just because he had known him for a long time. Perhaps he had liked them in a selfish way, making idols of them. If he had had a family, they would have taught him earlier not to ask too much from anybody, even from best friends and sweethearts. But it was all over now. They must have suffered enough, and if they had not, the matter did not concern him any more. If they were happy together, that was fine with him.

Biting his lower lip, he picked up the knapsack and went to the hall. Though it was early September, the air was chilly in the morning, especially on the mountains. In the middle of the room, logs were burning briskly on the hearth, crackling from time to time. The big kettle, black with soot, was simmering and steaming white. He could feel every ray of heat warming his cold body. The landlady came out from the kitchen and asked about his breakfast, handing him his lunch wrapped in newspaper.

"It's still early and I'm not hungry. You gave me a big lunch.



I'll eat part of it on my way," he answered, tying the strings of his mountaineering boots.

"Be careful. The road is very bad today. Do come back!" the stout woman admonished.

"Yes, I will," said Teruhiko and went out from the lodge.

It was an hour's walk to the place where the ascent began. He went up a gentle slope along the small stream. The water was muddy and swollen because of the rain, and dead brown leaves floated away rapidly. He wondered why so many leaves were on the brook and thought that perhaps the rain had dropped them the night before. The light-green shrubs were growing thick on the roadsides and numberless drops of dew fell as he passed by. Summer vacation was over and nobody else disturbed the silence.

"Just as I expected," he murmured to himself.

He took a short rest in the empty shelter at the foot of the ascent, then started climbing at a quick pace. The narrow path, about a foot wide, was muddy and slippery and looked like a long meandering of cinnamon cookie dough, though it smelled like sulfur. He saw numberless earthworms about five inches long quickly disappear into the ground, frightened by his footsteps. These worms came out in the air after every rain without fail because they could not breathe in the wet earth. He could not stand to see their segmented pale red bodies slithering and wiggling all over the path. They never died; if he cut them in two, each half still moved. He wanted to shut his eyes, but had to watch his steps so that he would not tumble. His boots, covered with reddish-brown mud, became damp

because of moisture permeating the leather, and his feet were slimy with sweat in the woolen socks. He had been walking for about two hours without break and was perspiring all over. He wanted to take off his boots and clean his feet.

Ranges of mountains clad in their late summer green extended endlessly before him. Towering dark cedars covered smoothly the sides of the deep valley before him, and miscellaneous shrubs of lighter green were scattered among them. The floor of the valley was out of sight. A white mist came up over the woods from somewhere near the winding river far below. It obstructed his view for a moment but passed away quickly, driven by an air current. He plucked a rolled leaf of low, striped bamboo, which had tickled his neck and bothered him. Unrolling this string-like young leaf and inhaling its sweet odor, he turned his eyes to the shrubs hanging over his head and then to the sky. It had rained heavily during the night and he had been anxious about whether he would be able to go out the next day. His plan might be frustrated. When he had left the lodge at six that morning the sky had been deep blue. Now it was thin grey and the beams of sunlight were dull, as if filtered through it. He had loved the mountains, the cold air, the deep green, and the clear water. That was why he had taken Yoshiko and Hiroshi to Mt. Akagi. Since then he had lost everything, even his bond with the tranquility of the mountains. Looking at the hazy view before him, he felt somehow that he no longer belonged to it. He was a foreigner in this vast realm, just as he was in human society.

He put his knapsack on his back again. The footing was as bad as

before and the fog began to linger instead of passing away. The peak, which had been visible, now vanished from his sight. His pace became slower but he went on like an ant carrying a heavy load, clutching bamboo grass and tough branches of roadside shrubs to support himself. His face became smeared with mud as he wiped off perspiration with the backs of his dirty hands. Presently the fog began to move rapidly, and became almost like light rain. He put on a sweater and was surprised that he should still take care of himself. Anyway he did not like the feeling of wet clothes.

It was eleven o'clock when he reached his destination at last. The wind, now mingled with rain drops, blew in all directions as if aiming at him. He looked for a place to avoid the rough wind and went behind a huge rock. To his amazement, he found a preceding visitor sitting on his rucksack there.

"Hello. I'm surprised," the man spoke first. "I didn't expect anybody to come here when the road is so bad, unless on urgent business like mine. Boy! you had a hard time. I can tell it from your dirty face."

Teruhiko laughed a little with embarrassment and said, "I have to go back to my office tomorrow. If I miss this day, I won't be able to come back till next season."

"That's a serious situation." The old man moved aside to make room for the newcomer. Teruhiko was obliged to put his knapsack on the ground and sit on it. He wanted to be alone, but there was no other shelter around. Also it would look strange if he did not stay a while with this stranger.

"What time is it?" the old man asked.

"Eleven o'clock," said Teruhiko and put back his cuff.

"There's still one hour till noon, but I'm hungry. Have you finished your lunch already? No? You look hungry too. Let's eat together. My stomach says it's noon."

Teruhiko averted his face and looked at the running streaks of thick fog. The view was completely obstructed and he felt as if he were in a world of absolute solitude--except for the old man.

"Ah, you are anxious about the weather. Don't be worried. It'll clear up in an hour or two. I know because I've lived here for years. It's best to wait till this whimsical fellow decides to vanish," said the old man. Apparently he was pleased to have company to talk with. He opened his lunch box and began to eat with appetite.

Teruhiko felt sick at the smell of the food but unwrapped his lunch too, making a rustling. There were two boiled eggs, besides rice balls, and also a small package of salt for them. The landlady was kind, he thought with a warm feeling, even though he would never meet her again. He took one of the huge rice balls and tried to eat. It had no taste at all, and he felt nauseated again. After a little effort, he gave up and stopped eating.

"I'll bet you are very tired. Your schedule is too tight," the old man said. "Where did you stay last night?"

"At White Birch Hutte," Teruhiko answered in a low voice.

"That's my house! Then you are my customer." Seeing Teruhiko's puzzled face, he continued, "I've been away from home for a couple of days because a man became sick in the transformer station on the other

side of the mountain. He had a slight pneumonia, but the chloromycetin I took him worked like that." He snapped his fingers with a satisfied grin and took a worn-out leather case hanging from his belt and a long bamboo pipe. His fingers were knotty and thick, although his body looked well-knit. He filled the pipe with tobacco and struck a match in a careless manner. The wind blew into this unsatisfactory shelter, and the small flickering fire looked like to be extinguished at once, but he covered it with his left hand and lit his pipe in an <sup>likely?</sup> accustomed way. He drew a deep breath, narrowing his eyes, as if examining the quality of the tobacco, and then slowly puffed out the smoke.

"Do you smoke?" he asked, offering his pipe.

"No, thank you. I don't smoke," Teruhiko said.

The wind was as biting as if winter had already come here.

Teruhiko tried to open his knapsack to find something with which to keep off the wet wind piercing through his thin sweater. He felt his teeth were going to chatter unless he did something. The strings were hard to untie because his fingers were becoming numb.

"It's cold, isn't it?" With a fatherly air the old man opened the knapsack for him.

Teruhiko took out a plastic sheet and wrapped his shoulders with it in the manner of a cape. He was irritated with the old man's meddlesomeness and tried to think of a way to get rid of him.

"I think I'll go down now. I'd like to take the seven o'clock train from Yamagami Station. It'll arrive at Tokyo tomorrow morning," said Teruhiko.

"Do you mean you are going toward the substation?"

"Yes."

"I don't think you can, young sir. Even I had a bad time getting here. The road on that side is worse than on this side and the descent is more dangerous than the ascent, you know. I think you should go back the way you came and catch the train from East Yamagami," said the old man anxiously.

"I see. Then I'll go back the same track, but I think I'll go down now because I want to be sure."

"Do you mind if I go with you? It's always pleasant to have company," said the old man, completely careless of Teruhiko's irritation. "But let's wait a little longer. I know this fog is going to clear up soon, and we have plenty of time."

Teruhiko could not argue with this man who was so confident because of his experience. Slowly he drew near the rock without touching it, for the cold stone would absorb his body heat. It was impossible to make a fire even if there had been any fuel to burn; the strong wind and the light rain would extinguish it. His finger nails were purple and his wet toes ached. He removed his boots and socks and began to rub his feet with both hands.

"Are you that cold?" asked the old man.

"Yes," Teruhiko admitted unwillingly.

The old man hastily took the newspaper out of his lunch package and smoothed the wrinkles. "Let's see." He inserted the paper between Teruhiko's shirt and underwear and patted his shoulder, "How does that feel?"

"Thank you. It's much better," said Teruhiko politely, though

he was bothered at the same time by his companion's too friendly manner.

The old man lit his pipe again and muttered low, "Suicide out of disappointment in love."

Startled, Teruhiko turned around and stared at him.

"I read the heading in the newspaper when I was putting it on your back," the old man smiled a little shyly. "It's foolish to take one's own life, whatever the reason may be, especially if the cause is a love affair. If the young man is persistent enough, the girl might still become his in the end. Who knows? And if she doesn't, he can find another love. There are as many women as stars in the sky."

Teruhiko smiled grimly. The old man sensed his reaction quickly and went on, "Ah, you're thinking I'm not understanding because I'm old and have had no experience in such matters. You're mistaken. I was young and passionate once too." The old man grinned and puffed out blue smoke, which swayed in the wind for a while and vanished.

"It was almost four decades ago that I fell in love with the belle of our village. She was a shy, quiet girl. I took her out on every occasion and at last succeeded in winning her consent to marry me as soon as I came back from Tokyo. Our village was very poor and almost all the young men worked elsewhere. I went off to Tokyo with a light heart, to earn money for our wedding and new home. I worked hard in a rubber factory and saved as much money as possible. It was kind of hard in such circumstances not to drink or go to bawdy houses with fellow workers, but I was young and idealistic then.

"Eighteen months later I received a letter from my mother and learned that my girl had become engaged to the first son of a landlord

in the neighboring village, and was going to marry the next month. My mother didn't know about our relationship. Everything was secret because, as you know, villagers like to dig into a private affair and gossip about it. When the first astonishment and confusion were over, I was so furious that I decided to get even with my betrayers. I took leave from the factory and returned home secretly a few days before the marriage. On the wedding day my parents were of course invited to the feast in the evening. I stayed at home and drank my father's sake without warming it, to kill time. Then I took a kitchen knife and, hiding it in the bosom of my kimono, I slipped out of the house. If I went by the highway, some villagers might see me, and, anyway, that would take too much time. So I decided to take a short cut. Instead of going the roundabout route, I started crossing a single-log-bridge over the river at the edge of the village. Cold sake does not affect one quickly, but when it does, it is terrible, you know. I thought I was sober, but actually I wasn't. The log was slimy with water moss and I slipped in the middle of the river. Thump and splash, and I was in the water. The current was very swift there, and my limbs would not move right because I was drunk. I swam desperately and barely crawled up on the bank, completely exhausted--and sober. I lay flat on the withered grass. I didn't know why, but I wept. Tears flowed down uncontrollably."

The old man stopped speaking for a while and filled his pipe again, his eyes lowered.

"It was late autumn and the night air was very chilly. I began to shiver but couldn't move somehow. I felt humiliated and my



bitterness left. Till then I had resented my sweetheart's impatience and faithlessness. I thought I was betrayed cruelly and totally unexpectedly in spite of my love. But I was suddenly reminded of what I had done to her. She had asked me again and again to write to her, even a single line, but I didn't. The factory was busy and I had my duty. I was too certain about our love, and perhaps I was lazy too. I was sure that she would remember me, forgetting that she needed some token of my love. It was quite natural for her to worry that I was becoming cold and to lose her confidence in me. I realized that it had been when the marriage arrangement was going on that she had asked me to see her, but I was too foolish to guess the meaning...I kept thinking such thoughts in the dark. I don't know how long I remained there, but suddenly I returned to myself, surprised by my own sneeze. I stood up shivering but absolutely sober. Revenge now seemed ridiculous and nonsensical. Besides, I had lost my knife in the river. I went back to Tokyo and to the factory the next day."

Teruhiko gazed at the tanned wrinkled face of his companion. He was not sure whether he was being told a true story or a big joke. The old man seemed to misinterpret his questioning look.

"You are wondering about my present wife. Yes, that's my beautiful girl. Now you are smiling. You can't imagine such a love affair with her, can you? But she is the heroine. The man she married was a notorious libertine. He was a pretty good husband for the first several months, but soon he was bored with her and returned to his old tea houses and brothels. He had plenty of money and had no difficulty getting women. Well, after three years of matrimony, he

suddenly died in his current mistress's house. Unexpected heart failure. My wife was still beautiful and young and had no child. When the mourning was over, I married her. Some sneered at me because she was a widow and I had had no experience with marriage before, but I didn't care. We were happy together and we still are." The old man chuckled.

The wind had calmed down and the mist was clearing away. Far in the distance they could see ranges of dark blue and purplish mountains with white streaks of perpetual snow; or it might be the first snow of the coming winter. The sun light began to show through, though it was still dull and cloudy from the remaining fog, which was sinking toward the bottom of the valley. In the basin between small hills in the east, numerous square rice paddies were beginning to turn yellow. The maples and lacquer trees were already partly red. Autumn came early at this altitude.

"Mountains are whimsical and devilish. Even in mid-summer, it's not rare that people are frozen to death," said the old man, nodding his head in agreement with his own remark. Teruhiko felt very tired and was silent. The old man seemed not to notice. "Shall we go down now? The wind has quieted down," he said abruptly, after waiting for Teruhiko's answer to his proposal.

"I should like to take some pictures before I go down," said Teruhiko, glad finally to find a good excuse.

"Yes, the colors are beautiful now. I'll leave you alone then. But don't take another route. The road is not safe, I tell you. Stop in our house when you come back and have some tea with us."

Teruhiko watched him going down the mountain path quickly, as if he were walking on a paved street. If Teruhiko did that, he would be unable to walk for several days. Soon the old man vanished among the green shrubs. Walking back and forth on the small rocky peak, Teruhiko considered what he should do now. If he did not show up, the old man would try to find him, and if he took the other route against advice, he would have to meet the people in the transformer substation, so that the old man would not become suspicious. But according to the map there was no good place after the station. Fiddling with the plastic sheet absentmindedly, he became exasperated. Trapped and betrayed again, he could do nothing else but go back to the lodge, to his dingy boarding house, and to his company, politely greeting everybody he met. Nothing was allowed to him--not even death. He grabbed his lunch, threw it at the place where the old man had been sitting, and stamped on it furiously. When he saw the white rice coming out from the broken newspaper, however, he suddenly stopped, almost frozen with shame. How precious food had been when he was young and always hungry in the orphanage. Now he was trampling on it. He picked up the crushed rice, wrapped it in the plastic sheet and put it back into the knapsack.

Slowly he began to climb down the mountain, not paying attention to the scenery nor to his own thoughts. Something was going on in his brain, which had lost its receptivity, his mind whirling and groaning like a heavy wheel. His eyes obstinately lowered and his mouth tightly shut, he went on mechanically, without caring where he was going. He had walked about an hour when he noticed that the narrow road was becoming mushy and stopped short. A small lake,

which he had not passed before, lay ahead. It looked like liquid copper sulfate, very blue and clear. Tall reeds at the waterside were covered with dark yellowish fur floating like fermentive foam. He had taken a wrong path at the fork about two hundred yards back. The lake, or rather a swamp, was not on the map, nor was the narrow lane. Probably it was known only by the country-folk. When he had been here a couple of years before, the leader of his party had not mentioned it.

The wet ground sank under his feet and he had to keep walking so that his boots would not become stuck. Standing at the edge of the water, he felt like swimming, as freely as he wished, without any clothes. There were no other people around and he had no reason to hesitate. He dipped his hand in the water; it was not too cold for swimming. Cutting some reeds, he put his knapsack on them. As soon as he had taken off his clothes, he walked into the water. The bottom was slippery and some half-rotten twigs of sunken shrubs hurt his soles. He jumped as if diving into a small pool and began to swim for the middle of the lake. A light and dark pattern of ripples passed over the huge yellow rocks underneath as he went on. There were no fish or water-bugs, which usually followed people fearlessly when they saw human beings in their territory. Long water plants were swaying slowly, covered with furry water moss. If his feet became caught in them, that might be the end of his life. He remembered Coleridge's Ancient Mariner and thought how awful it would be to be caught by seaweeds and to die alone.

When he came to the middle of the lake, he looked around and found an inlet that seemed to lead to another lake. Reeds had covered the view from the bank. He began to swim toward it, though he was a

little tired and cold. Closing his eyes except to check direction, he swam in the dark and felt the water push back his strokes, touch and rub his body coldly but softly. He amused himself for a while like a little child, but suddenly he was in the inlet.

He held his breath for a moment. In the middle, the water was copper sulfate blue as in the other lake, but toward the shore it turned to dark purple and the very edge was bright yellow. He could not tell whether this was the color of clay or of water moss. Under the grey sky, the whole lake looked as if it were cursed by the devil himself, and he became keenly aware that he was alone. Still he did not turn around, but kept swimming slowly, counting his strokes. One, two, three, four...The next moment he was caught by a cold swift current, which pulled him toward the center of the lake. He recalled at once hearing about a bottomless lake with a very strong current, from which, if one was caught by it, he could never escape. It sucked its victim and even the body did not float up.

He felt an acute pain in his heart and sank under the water. Struggling with both arms and coughing hard as he had gulped the pungent water, he jumped up frantically. Looking for the inlet, he wildly opened his eyes, blurred with water. If he could not escape immediately, he would die with cold and fatigue, even if not drawn to the bottom of the lake. He swam with all his strength against the strong current, for he must get away, but he was being pulled back. His shoulders ached, his feet were going to have cramps any moment, and his bones scraped at the joints as if there were no balls or sockets. The heavy water resisted, hugged him from behind, and dragged him

tenaciously. He could not see the inlet any more but kicked, floundered and struggled.

Just a little more, a tiny bit, he kept encouraging himself, but he felt he was becoming slower and slower. When his limbs had become too stiff to move, he suddenly plunged into warm water. Looking up more frightened than before, he saw that he had entered the other lake. He shrieked before he realized, and, raising his hands, sank under the water, which swirled around his body. Again he rose to the surface. Tears rolled down with the dripping water; wet hair covered his eyes. He shoved it off with his hand and looked for a place to land. The banks in this section protruded over water like dungeon walls and could not be climbed.

Had he had a little more energy, he might have been able to jump and catch some shrubs, but this was impossible for him. He should have eaten lunch, he should have known better than to swim alone in a strange place, but it was too late. Fatigue and dizziness made him sink again, but he came back to himself as he gulped water and pain pierced his head through his nose. If he wanted to live, he had to swim back to the place where he had entered the water. He was indifferent about his life, but he was afraid, very afraid and wanted to get away from this lake by some means.

His legs did not kick, his arms did not stroke, and the water was not heavy any more. He no longer felt cold or pain. A strange numbness made him sleepy, and he did not care what might happen to him. But he kept moving, sticking his head above the water, wiggling slowly without stopping. The wind blew by him over the surface of the lake. Leaves

of the pale green reeds rustled. Still he moved, alone like an old wharf rat.

When his feet touched the slimy bottom of the lake, he dropped on his face, but scrambled up desperately, turning the water brown with mud. He crawled up to his clothes and fell on them. His pale back rose violently as he gasped for breath, and his throat whistled hoarsely. His whole body shook spasmodically. He was conscious of everything and yet seemed far away without really reacting. Little by little his breath became calmer, his fit of cramps passed away, and he opened his eyes as if he had wakened after a long nap, tired rather than refreshed. The blue water ominously lay before him. He sprang to his feet as if he had touched burning coal, grabbed his clothes, knapsack and boots and ran away, tottering with his remaining strength, till he came back to the fork and threw himself on the grass. His boots rolled over and fell on the road, now dry under the sun. Lying on his back, he squinted at the sky and then closed his eyes.

His tears had stopped, fear had left; only physical fatigue remained. He knew he had missed his last and best opportunity; it was gone forever. Had he drowned, people would not have suspected his intention. They would have thought his death was due to the recklessness of a young man; poor fellow, he did not know how dangerous the lake was, they would say. He had failed again, but somehow he could not cry. His teeth chattered with cold and his skin was covered with goose-flesh. He became aware that he was stark naked. Standing up slowly, he put on his clothes and boots. The wrist watch clicked in the pocket of his trousers. He did not remember when he had put it

there. It was only four o'clock. He looked for his sweater but it was not there. Apparently he had dropped it while running, but he did not feel like going back for it. He opened his knapsack, hoping to find it there, and saw instead the yellow box of sleeping pills. Involuntarily he shuddered and threw it as far as possible over the gliding slope of green shrubs. It hit several branches and vanished, clattering.

Teruhiko sat on the grass again, dropping his head between his knees. His chance was gone forever. He knew that he could not try again after experiencing that fear, unless he was caught unexpectedly. Did the old man go back to Tokyo because he had come to understand the meaning of life or because he was forsaken by everything, like himself? Things must have been easier for him to bear for he had his parents at least. Probably he was given some enlightenment; he seemed to be happy and content with his wife. But nothing was left in Teruhiko except weariness. He was going back to society out of despair and resignation.

He began to walk down the path as if nothing had happened, staring at his muddy boots moving steadily. Dust rose as he trudged along.

"Hello! I came to meet you because you were so late." The old man's voice rang in his ear.

Teruhiko looked up, half jumping, and stammered, "I took the wrong direction at the fork."

"Wasn't there any marker? Somebody must have taken it away again. I have to set it up at least twice a season. Isn't that a shame! I'm glad you did not swim there. There is a hidden current



in the lake; it's like an air-pocket. A few years ago a young man from Tokyo died while he was swimming with his friends."

"Is that so?" Teruhiko asked, sounding interested.

The old man explained the sad accident in detail, but Teruhiko only pretended to be attentive. As soon as he heard about the death of another man, he felt very strange that he was saved by his luck and by his instinctive determination to live. He did not die though the other man did. There must be some meaning in this...

"You forgot your camera."

"Yes, I was mad at myself when I opened my knapsack after you left. I missed a fine chance, didn't I?" Teruhiko answered, smiling cheerfully. He was glad that he had left it in his room and that he had not written to either Yoshiko or Hiroshi. It was all over; he was going back to Tokyo tomorrow.

## THE QUIET SEA

The beach was still dark, but the boats at the pier were already animated with people preparing for sailing out. Their clumsy figures, swollen with bulky quilted coats, gave an impression of strange sluggishness in spite of their quick, agile movements. The thick and heavy water, muddy with thawing from the mountains, tapped and jostled the small vessels tenaciously. Untying a mooring rope, Toshio raised his head to read the day's weather. It was his habit, though they had to go out, rain or snow. The sky was enclosed by hanging clouds like dirty cotton waste, and there was no rift at all as far as eye could reach.

"Snow today," Toshio said to his father, who was checking the tools on the afterdeck.

"Don't grumble, Toshi. If the weather is bad, they won't show up," answered the father in a hoarse but penetrating voice, peculiar to an old sailor.

"But you can never tell. Remember when the Kimuras were caught. It was snowing that time."

"H'm..." Without paying further attention, the father began to put a wire around the handle of a long rake to fix the loose iron head. This was not the first time he had repaired it; the salt brine would eat the temporary metal fixtures one after another. If it had been washed with fresh water every time they used it, it would have lasted longer, but by the time the family returned to the beach, they were too tired to do anything. Besides, if they had time, they had to take good

care of the net. That was more important than the rake, which was used only for gathering fish on the deck. Breathing on his numbed fingers, chapped and knotty with hard labor, he continued working.

Toshio threw the rope into the boat and jumped aboard. The morning air was piercing and he could feel the cold current coming through the nostrils to his lungs as he breathed deeply. The engine was creating a dull vibration and his elder brother Yoshio was busy in front with the meters and gauges. It took a long time to make the old boat ready to go.

"We must buy a new engine," said Yoshio, a little irritated, and thought of his coming marriage with a feeling of mixed bitterness and joy. They could buy one, if the money spent for his wedding and the feast could be spared. Yoshio wanted to save expenses unnecessary according to his idea of rational and sensible planning, but his father rejected his modern ideas on the grounds of custom, community obligation and fear of boycotting by the villagers.

"Aren't you going to be married next month?" Toshio said in a teasing voice.

"Yes, but expensive wedding gifts and a big party are absurd and unreasonable. That kind of thing is the reason we are always poor. I wish Father would change his mind and break the useless customs, but he is stubborn," answered the elder brother with a sigh. His engagement had been arranged between the parents of the two families. Like any young man, he relished the idea of passionate love, but he accepted the girl whom his father had chosen for him. He liked her modesty and kindness, though she was not beautiful, and he was sure that she could live in

harmony with his parents. As the first son of the family, he was well aware how strong these old customs were and was determined to make the best of the present circumstances.

Toshio leaned on the greasy wooden wall, closing his eyes and folding his arms. His body shook lightly and this made him sleepy again. The air smelled strongly of crude oil and fish in the cabin and pieces of fish skin and meat were stuck everywhere, hardened like stone. Had they been city people, they would have been unable to stay there any longer. He remembered the inspector from Tokyo, who had visited his village two months before to find out the actual circumstances of fishing problems in Hokkaido. The man's brown suit had fitted him perfectly, and his well-combed hair, parted neatly on the left, smelled of scented tonic. Straining his tall slender body, he had tried not to stumble over the ropes and fishing tools scattered everywhere in the boat. Nevertheless his tight trousers were too narrow to allow him any strenuous action. Every time he touched something, he pounded his clothes hastily but furtively.

The embarrassed mayor apologized repeatedly and looked at his villagers with displeased eyes as if it were a serious fault that they had not cleaned their vessels before the inspection. The visitor protested generously and said that he wanted to know the real situation, that he was glad to have the opportunity to see conditions as they were. The fat mayor touched his short-cut grizzled hair and wiped his forehead again and again with a towel hanging from his belt. He tried to explain in unaccustomed polite language, but faltered and broke off awkwardly. The government official nodded to him kindly and condescendingly, but left

the sickeningly dirty-smelling place as soon as he had a chance.

That night a party was held in honor of the visitor at the mayor's house and all the villagers were invited. Women prepared food in the kitchen, while the men feasted in the parlor. The mayor's wife served the principal guest herself but often returned to the kitchen to supervise the women. Every time she appeared, she told them in a nervous voice to take good care of her best china, showing the gold fillings in her front teeth. They answered obediently but paid little attention; they were too happy with unusually good food and sake.

In the parlor, when all the fishermen became a little shaky and noisy, the inspector spoke out that he wanted them to pay attention to him for a while. Under the dim electric light his pale face was slightly flushed with liquor. The people, who had been stuffing themselves with rare dainties and good sake, happily and unceremoniously, became very quiet and looked at him uneasily. Not noting their furtive glances, he began to speak fluently, in an easy manner. The government was employing utmost zeal in negotiations with Russia about fishing and territorial water problems, and the fishing near Russian waters should be given over for the time being to create a situation favorable to Japan. The nation had no power to prevent the Russians from capturing those who fished illegally before the negotiations were settled between the two countries, since they had a right to do this. He concluded that the committee was very sympathetic with the troubles of fishermen but wanted them to be patient and to understand the difficulties of the political circumstances. At last he asked if there were any questions.

An awkward silence fell for a while. The man nodded appreciatively. People were about to reach for food and drinks when Toshio stood up abruptly and asked, stammering a little in his effort to speak out, when the negotiations would be settled. The inspector answered with ease and civility that it would take a month. Surprised glances of the villagers were turned on Toshio. He wanted to ignore them, but forgot the questions he had prepared. His father, who was sitting next to him, pulled him down to his seat. The party started again. People ate and drank eagerly; dishes tinkled merrily.

Leaning against the cabin wall, Toshio recalled the flushed face of the government official. "We want you to understand..." he remembered bitterly, knitting his brows.

"The inspector from Tokyo said that the negotiations would be settled in a month. It's already March now. Are they thinking that we can live without food? How can we earn money if we don't go to sea?" asked Toshio indignantly.

Setting his eyes on the course of the boat and guiding the helm, Yoshio answered in a calm voice, "We are out to sea every day anyway. We don't have to obey them. Just pretend to follow what they say."

"You take it very calmly, brother. We've always needed to be careful of being captured. Once we are caught, we don't know when we can go back home! What will happen to our family and your girl? The government official told us not to go fishing because this would put Japan at a disadvantage, but I want to know how long the negotiations will take."

"These important men are always like that," said the father, who had come to the cabin to avoid the wind. Gazing at the puffed smoke of

his long pipe with narrowed eyes, he continued quietly, "It can't be helped. You know, yield to the powerful."

"Father, I am sick of your old wisdom," Toshio retorted peevishly, his former indignation enkindled. "Why didn't you let me speak freely to the man? Why not tell him our thoughts and feelings openly? We should have got a promise to protect us from the Ruskies."

"There's a proper order for events. You should not speak before the village elders."

"But they weren't going to say anything. That's why I didn't wait. And we have an equal right of speech whether we are old or not. It is specified in the law."

"You saucy, disobedient... Don't show off your learning! Who sent you to school in poverty because you wanted to go?"

"I'm thankful for your generosity, but this question is different. The government should understand our situation. We have to claim our rights. We are poor because you village elders are subservient to them. But they are public servants, you know. We must break through the hard crust of conventionality. Let's start with Yoshio's wedding. Make it simple and reasonable and stop exchanging wedding gifts. Then we can buy a new engine with that money."

"Village tradition must be observed!" shouted the father, striking his hand with his fist.

"Must we starve because of the confounded tra-di-tion?"

"Cut it out, Toshi. It's too much," Yoshio interrupted without looking around.

"Why, you don't want to hang on to the senseless customs, do you?"

This is a good chance. Let's settle about your wedding ceremony now and make it a rational one."

"Not now. You have to understand your father's position," answered his brother in a pacifying tone. "I know exactly how you feel, but you're too impatient. It takes time to break long established customs."

Toshio drew a deep breath to protest, but held his tongue sulkily. He looked slowly from the wrinkled profile of his old father to the silent back of his brother and went out of the cuddy with sounding steps and a bang of the door. He was sick of their philosophical resignation. They were hopelessly passive and conservative.

It was still winter on the sea in early March. The wind cut his rough sunburned skin and he felt as if his nose was going to freeze, even though he protected it with his covered hand. Finding a leeward nook between coiled manila ropes, he sat on a cover of waterproof canvas and looked in the direction of the beach. There the village women had stood to see their men off, warming themselves with a small bonfire of cast-up twigs and exposed to the cold, dry morning wind. Wrapped up in heavy coats, they had looked like a herd of bears, but now their clumsy figures and even the empty beach were out of sight.

The boat was running with a monotonous rumbling sound of the engine, leaving white foam behind and drawing a long curve on the surface of the Okhotsk Sea like the exhaust vapor which a jet plane makes in a clear sky. Only the water below was dark and sticky like oil, and the waves, though quiet now, could turn wild and fierce like wolves, with a change of weather. The steady rocking motion of his body made Toshio



feel drawn to slumber. The other boats that had left the pier at the same time were now scattered, though making for the same direction. No light leaked through the thick grey sky. Occasional drifting ice disks curled at the edge like lotus leaves passed by, carried by the swift current. Spring was far away on the Okhotsk Sea. If the weather had been fine, the black mass of Sakhalin could have been seen in the northwest, but today nothing was visible except heavy hanging vapor. The fitful groaning sound of the engine resounded low over the dark sea under the oppressive sky.

The cabin door opened and the old man came out. They were now at the fishing place. Toshio stood up and helped his father prepare the net. On the deck of the other boats fishermen were working busily too. The dull noise of the machine stopped and the vessel began to round slowly. Shouting encouragement and raising splashes and smoky sprays, the two men threw the purse seine in the cold sucking water. It remained on the surface for a moment but then disappeared quickly under the churning sea, drawn by the weight of the absorbed water. By the time they finished letting down the whole net, it was noon, though they could not tell by the sun on this cloudy day. In the cuddy Yoshio had already made a fire in a small portable stove, and the good smell of dried fish, roasted on the grill, floated on the air. They went inside and opened their lunch boxes full of rice and some slices of salty pickles. Taking the cork from a thermos bottle, Yoshio poured hot tea in the square lids of the aluminum lunch boxes. Its light green flavor mingled with the pungent taste of pickles was refreshing to their cold bodies and the wavering white steam tickled their benumbed reddish noses. Warming their hands

over the fishy smelling stove fire and gossiping about village women, they ate with hearty appetite.

When the two brothers went outside after the meal, the sky was still dark but snow was not falling. Their father remained in the cabin this time. The boat began to move slowly and the circle of the moored net grew small as they skillfully pulled in the net rope. Waiting for the right moment, they turned the wooden handles of the crude tackle with all their might. It creaked and squeaked and their foreheads were dripping with perspiration. When the boat stopped completely, their father joined them to help. The purse seine heavy with big fish came up to the surface and the three of them quickly took it aboard. The deck was drenched with dripping water from the wet net, and their feet were ice cold in spite of their woolen socks and rubber boots. Under the nylon meshes, the fish jerked and leapt and their skins glittered like newly smelted silver ingot, though there was no sun. They heaved light sighs as they finished drawing the net. Their bodies ached slightly but without taking a rest, they began to pull out the caught fish and to sort them.

Their ears, which did not rest even when they were working hard, caught the sound of a fast running ship in the distance. They stopped their busy hands, startled, exchanged anxious glances, and turned around. Their fellow fishermen had noticed it too and were looking in the same direction, standing up straight and worried. A black spot appeared vaguely through the dim air. It quickly approached, growing bigger and bigger every moment. In a few minutes, its outline became clear. Immediately they saw what it was but could not move for an instant.

"The guard boat!" somebody cried with a shriek, which rang through the boats, breaking the weird spell of silence and immobility.

Yoshio darted to the cabin precipitately and started the engine. Toshio and the father rushed after him as if driven by a devil. Standing by him, they wriggled their hands impatiently, touched the handle and the meters, drew back, walked around Yoshio, stopped short and watched intensely with tightly closed mouths Yoshio's quickly moving hands. The old man picked up a rope from the floor and began to wind it with shaking hands. Their boat was deadly slow. Toshio ran out of the cuddy, unable to stay there any longer. Dropping the rope, the father followed him absentmindedly. The inspection ship was now in full view, its black hull, its funnel, and its red flag. It seemed to increase its speed every minute as it drew nearer and nearer. The other boats were running away at full speed a little ahead of them. The small vessel of the three men fled frantically, but it was slow, very slow.

"Can't you make it go any faster?" Toshio cried involuntarily.

"How can I with this damned old engine?" his brother shouted back.

Cleaving and cutting the waves, the ship came up like a black snake. The father and son stood paralyzed on the stern, clutching the gunwale and fixing their eyes on the approaching ship like frozen statues. They saw several men on the deck exchanging words boisterously. The wind whistled and passed by their unfeeling cheeks and bare hands, but they felt no cold.

Suddenly they lost their footing and almost groveled on the floor. Their boat convulsed like a man in a fit of acute pain and shook violently. Did it hit a big ice drift or did it strike an unexpected hidden rock?

The tottering men turned forward with frightened looks. There was nothing ahead. They looked at the deep water but found nothing unusual there either. The next moment they darted to the cabin, their faces distorted with unspeakable fear. As they rushed inside, repulsively stuffy warm air hit their cold bodies, and the sour, poignant smell of grating metal pierced their noses. At the driver's seat Yoshio was clattering the helm fiercely and banging the meters like a mad man.

"Damn it! The piston has burned out," he cried.

Toshio thrust him away without a word and sat down. He turned the engine key wildly, kicked the gears, clattered the helm just as his brother had done. Nothing happened. Yoshio was right. The boat was old and could not be forced. The piston had broken because they had forced it to work recklessly. The engine hissed without response, except for a hollow and empty sound. Toshio struck a glass cover in despair with his clenched fist. It cracked and the broken pieces fell on the floor, reflecting the dull, metallic light of the day. He groaned between his teeth. For a moment the father and the sons were completely motionless, as if time had suddenly ceased to pass; they stared into space before their eyes. The boat proceeded on its remaining momentum for some time, but soon stopped helplessly, like a man short of breath. Waves rolled and pitched the powerless vessel, teasing and torturing it. The three men dropped their head on their breasts; they felt like squatting on the floor, lacking strength to remain standing. Nothing could be done. They went out of the cabin as slowly as men making for their place of execution.

The other boats were as small as leaves and quickly vanished in

the misty air without leaving any trace. The black ship, which had made a circuit to cut off retreat, came closer, now decreasing its speed like a snake attacking its fascinated victim. In the biting wind the three stupefied men kept standing. They saw a number of fat and stout Russians on the deck of the ship. Leaning on the rail and eating red apples, they rudely stared at their captives as if they were observing curious animals in the zoo and spoke with one another garrulously, commenting on these wretched beings with uncanny, unintelligible patter.

The ship's engine stopped and it slid on the surface of the water noiselessly. It turned the bow and lay motionless at last, a little ahead of the small fishing boat. The three men were still standing in the same place, nailed to the deck. The fish they had caught lay motionless and dead on the freezing planks. Smoking a big pipe in a leisurely way and with the coil of a manila rope slung over his shoulder, a man came to the stern of the other boat. He threw the rope with skillful hands. A sharp hook attached to the end of it caught the bow and firmly bit into the wooden side like an eagle's claws. Quickly he stretched the rope and tied it to an iron ring on his stern. Puffing at his pipe again, he leaned on the rail at ease. He was going to watch the rope and the captives. The others went inside, grinning and chattering noisily. One of them threw the core of his apple as he withdrew. It fell on the water in front of the three fishermen.

"Go to hell!" Shouting inarticulate words and flourishing his arms, Toshio ran to the cuddy. The other two looked at his back with amazement. He reappeared immediately with a kitchen knife in his right hand and made for the rope at the bow.

"What are you going to do?" cried Yoshio, trying to stop his brother.

"Get out of my way! Don't bother me. I will cut the rope," Toshio gasped, his face red with anger.

"You silly fool, calm down! The engine is broken. We can't run away," the father roared at him, joining Yoshio to stop the frantic boy.

The three men struggled like a group of lunatics, turning round and round. They shoved, pushed, thrust, and scratched one another. Toshio grazed his forehead with the knife as he fought distractedly. A streak of blood rolled down his face, but he felt no pain. The old man tackled his legs and Yoshio pinned him down on the floor; he was panting and blowing.

"Let go your hold! Stop it!" Toshio shouted to his brother as he kicked and writhed.

The father opened his son's tightly gripped fingers one by one, wrenched away the knife, smeared with blood, and threw it. On the half frozen wet planks it clattered and slid; the sound echoed painfully to their ears. Toshio suddenly became quiet.

"Take it easy. Bear and obey like an ass. Then they will return us to our own country sooner," said the old man in a trembling voice, as if to persuade himself. He turned his face away from his son and leaned on the bulwark, fatigued and unable to continue speaking.

Yoshio loosened his hold absentmindedly and looked up at the dark, wrinkled face of his father, old and small. Toshio stood up abruptly, shaking himself free from his brother's hold, but staggered as if he were drunk. Closing his eyes and straining his body, he tried to steady

himself in vain. Like a crumbling tower, he fell on the deck. Tears rolled down from his eyes and entered his mouth as he sobbed voicelessly, burying his head in his hands. The blood and tears were warm and salty. Yes, there was nothing to do but endure like a yoked ox. He felt suffocated and his breast ached with inexplicable, swirling pain.

Yoshio looked from his convulsing back to the exhausted profile of his old father, clenching his fists and biting his lower lip till it turned white. The apple core, soaked by the oily, heavy water, touched and then left the half-rotten side of the small boat, insatiable.

## THE DUEL AT YAMAZAKI-DAIRA

### I

Jurota walked in the morning mist, which stuck to his dirty cotton clothes like bothersome flies. Tiny dew drops resting on his hair, tangled and red with sunburn, made him look as if he had come out of a dust shower. His sandals were so thin that it made little difference whether he wore them or not. Jurota himself did not understand why he bothered with them; it just happened that he had seen them on the step stone at the inn where he had spent a night. Twelve years ago on the same day, he had stayed there to visit his old town, but no one recognized him, as Jurota expected. People in the inn received traveler after traveler, all stricken with poverty, irritated and hot-tempered. Often young girls were heard crying to run away from panders, and occasionally men died at night. But as long as the proprietors received money for their little services, they did not dig into private affairs.

He had changed much in twenty-two years, wandering about wherever he could find a job. When he had first left the town, he was twenty-three; the frail look of slender youth had not yet left him, although he was a strong man, the second strongest in the town. Even twelve years ago when he came back, he still kept that youthfulness. His eyes were black and his hair was not yet red mingled with white; the sheath of his sword had not been damaged, and its ornamental gold



dragon still survived. Now he had a few streaks of white; the sheath had no dragon on it any longer; the chape was lost, and the black lacquer coat was peeling at the point. It was four years ago that he had parted with the dragon. He had been sick for a long time and nobody hired him as a bodyguard because nobody wanted to be troubled with him in case he should die. For the first time in his life, Jurota cursed poverty. Since Misao had chosen the sheath for him twenty-two years earlier, right before a fencing match, it had received compliments wherever he went. He loved the gracefully twisted shape of the dragon and its delicate shade of gold, which never looked gaudy. He did not sell it, but put it in pawn, hoping that he would be able to recover it when he became well, but his illness lingered and by the time he had saved enough money, it had been sold. Jurota remembered the broker very well. Rubbing his hands with a knowing air, he had apologized and wrapped two silver coins in paper.

"What is this? Did I ask for money?" shouted Jurota, trembling with anger.

"Sir, please don't misunderstand me. Of course I know what you want is the gold dragon, but you must understand it's sold. So would you take this as a sign of my apology?" said the man. His frightened but obsequious manner showed that he was accustomed to this kind of incident; in his eyes was a sneer.

Jurota kicked the money, slapped the broker's cheek and walked out of the shop fiercely. The man put both his hands on his left cheek and stared at Jurota's back in blank surprise that the trash of a samurai did not take the money. Later when Jurota became more composed,

he smiled an embarrassed smile and said to himself, "At the age of thirty-nine, you are still a child, aren't you? Maybe you should have taken the money to satisfy the poor man." He recalled the broker's wide-open mouth and laughed loudly. Yet he felt sad for a while and consoled himself that memory was enough and what was important was the sword itself, not the ornament.

After this, however, he often drew his sword at night in his own room and gazed at its graceful curve, the wave pattern on its blade, and its clear glitter under the light of an oil lamp. Then he put the blade to his cheek and felt its smooth surface. There was something about it that made him feel as if he could embrace it like a beloved woman. There was no chip on the edge of the blade; Jurota had never wanted to kill anybody. He always used the back, even when there was real danger. Some of the gamblers and bouncers were professional murderers. Every time they saw Jurota use the back edge of his sword, they either smiled slyly or grew red with anger and fought more desperately, like wounded wolves. Jurota, however, did not use the right edge, not because he wanted to discipline himself under threat of immediate death, but because he did not like to see blood, although he usually had to see it anyway. If Jurota found an oily smear of blood on his sword, he quickly sent it to a sharpener to have it cleaned.

The morning mist began to clear and he saw the familiar stone marker ahead. He could not read the characters on it yet, but he knew what it said--Masakicho, the place where he was reared by his foster parents, who had taken him to their home as soon as he was born,

because they were unable to have a child of their own and preferred to save this poor baby rather than to adopt a boy from their relatives. Jurota's real parents were peasants and happy to give him to the Komine family, even though they were told not to see their child again under any circumstances. The adoption meant an unusual advancement for the baby, and had they not had this offer, they would have had to "thin him out" since they were too poor to add another mouth to their already huge family. The Komines named the boy Jurota, loved him and reared him carefully in spite of their relatives' objections. Jurota proved to be worthy of their love, for he became a distinguished student at a fencing school where all the samurai children in Masakicho went. Mr. Komine took him to formal meetings when permissible and introduced his adopted son to the seniors of the clan government. Mrs. Komine, on her part, had already begun to look for a wife for him. Whenever she saw a girl from a proper family, she always pondered whether the young lady would grow up to be good enough for him, and if she did, whether her parents would accept a proposal of marriage. But of course Mrs. Komine was sure that they would like her Jurota very much.

Things went on smoothly until an epidemic of cholera spread in Masakicho during the summer that Jurota was sixteen. The Komine family contracted the disease too because of a watermelon they had one evening, and the foster parents died one after the other within two weeks. Jurota was in bed for a month and all necessary arrangements for the funerals were made by the relatives, who had always wanted to oust the peasants' son. They had lots of second and third sons who shared the blood of the Komine household.

"Why should an outsider inherit the government position and everything? After all, blood is thicker than water." This was what they thought and said openly. In the beginning Jurota felt bitter about the situation, but since he was young and the master of the fencing hall, Kanemasa Sasaki had said he would help him to find a good opportunity, he left the Komine household, though he still retained the family name by permission of the relatives, whose conscience was pricked in spite of their reasoning. Jurota had already been teaching younger students for Kanemasa and it was more convenient for him to stay at the school. A room next to Saemon's was assigned to him. Saemon Nakayama was one of those second sons who were destined to be hangers-on unless they found a rare opportunity to work in the clan government or were adopted by some family to maintain its family line. He was the most promising student in Sasaki Fencing School, and Kanemasa was thinking of marrying him to his only daughter, Misao, in the future and giving him the school when he himself became old. This was twenty-two years ago when Misao was only thirteen and Saemon twenty.

Jurota passed the marker stone and entered the town. It was six o'clock and he could hear housewives preparing breakfast and the cry of a peddler of bean-curd for morning soup. The odor of a family meal was dear to him since he had rarely had an opportunity to dine with a family after he left Masakicho. A black dog came running out of a side alley and suddenly stopped to sniff at him.

"Do I smell that bad?" said Jurota to the dog, stroking his own unshaven chin. The mongrel looked up at him for a while as if waiting for his pat or food, but seeing that he was going to give

neither, it left him abruptly. Passing familiar streets and alleys, Jurota came to the hall. He stopped short before the gate and stared at the entrance with sorrow. The path was swept clean of fallen leaves and was watered just as it had been twenty-two years before. One of the students always cleaned the pathway in the morning before breakfast.

"Hello there!" Jurota cried at the door.

"Coming!" With that greeting, a young man appeared from inside. "What do you want?" He looked at Jurota's shabby clothes dubiously, suspecting him to be one of those wandering fencers who made challenge visits to fencing halls to earn their living.

"Will you give this letter to your master?" Jurota took out a piece of folded paper from the sleeve of his kimono. There was no name or address on it.

"Yes."

"That's all. Saemon will know what to do with it."

Involuntarily Jurota looked in toward the kitchen and saw a plump, middle-aged woman directing the maids. She was dressed in a greyish blue kimono. He thought that she must be some widow from the Sasaki household helping Misao, because she bore a faint resemblance to Mr. Sasaki, who would probably be dead by now. Without waiting longer, however, he turned and left the gate hastily. He was afraid that he might see Misao.

## II

Saemon was shaving in his room when the young man brought the letter. "Sir, it was a strange fellow. I think he is about forty,

but his hair is red and dusty and he stinks badly. You should have seen his feet. I bet he hasn't taken a bath for months."

"Really?" Saemon turned over the letter to see the sender's name and immediately knew that it was from Jurota. He opened it without changing his expression; there were only three lines.

Tomorrow at two o'clock  
at the same place.

Jurota

"Thank you. You may go," said Saemon, nodding to the young man and looking at the cartel again after he was gone. The handwriting had not changed but the huge letters written in thick India ink somehow gave an impression of strength, and for the first time he thought he might lose. Shaking his head, he dismissed the absurd idea quickly; after all, he had never been defeated by Jurota. Misao brought in a tray, put it before him and asked what news he had received.

"Well, the sharpener says that he has found a rare sword. It doesn't have the maker's name on it, but he thinks it was done by Osafune or one of his followers... He wants me to come to his store tomorrow afternoon."

"It's unusual to find an Osafune nowadays," said Misao in a tone of surprise, and began to serve breakfast.

This was the woman who had caused him so much joy and suffering. How proud he was when he finally married her! He tried hard to make her love him; after a few years, especially when she became pregnant, she began to treat him tenderly, and he was filled with happiness then.

But as soon as the baby was born, her whole affection seemed to be directed toward the new creature. He had never received such beautiful smiles from her as the ones she gave to the baby, and often he was seized with violent jealousy, though he was ashamed of himself. Sometimes when he saw her in reverie, he suspected that she was still dreaming of Jurota. But he could not do anything about the matter. All he could do was to practice desperately.

Saemon looked at her veined hands and saw the effects of age with resignation, though he did not betray his thoughts to his wife. The beautiful girl he had so fiercely pursued and won was now a middle-aged woman with crow's feet, and freckles under her eyes. She had suddenly begun to put on weight after she passed thirty. When she looked down, her chin became double, and her legs were thick under her greyish blue kimono. She still retained some of her old charm and grace of movement, but to one who had known her captivating beauty in her younger days, she was a different woman, a plain, satisfied matron. And Saemon was going to risk his life again for her sake. He recalled the duel of twelve years ago. Misao had just given birth to their daughter Yayoi and was in bed because of hemorrhage. He went into her room before he left for the appointed place, not because he was afraid he might be killed, but because he wanted to make sure that his wife was there. She was sleeping and did not hear him, when he sat beside her. Her long undressed hair spread over the pillow and her pale forehead was perspiring slightly. He wiped it softly with his hand. She twitched her eyebrows a little and uttered a low moan. Saemon felt a sudden desire, but restrained himself. When he was fighting with Jurota, her

white face came back to him again and again and reassured his victory.

Yayoi came in with a tea pot. "Good morning, Father. Here's your tea." She poured it for him and looked at him, waiting for his smile.

"What do you want, Yayoi?" said Saemon, as if he did not know.

"When will you teach me fencing? You always say 'sometime soon, but never keep your promise.'"

"I prefer that you practice music and calligraphy," said Misao.

"But Mother, they are so tedious."

"No one will want to marry you if you continue to act like this," said Misao in a grave tone.

"There are some women who have become famous by their prowess. I'll teach her how to use a short sword," said Saemon, laughing.

"You are spoiling our daughter, my dear," said Misao, still feigning seriousness, and Yayoi smiled knowingly. They stood up and carried away his breakfast table. Watching Yayoi walk like a boy, Saemon felt warm. She was not a pretty girl as Misao used to be. In fact, he knew that people said behind his back it was unlucky that she should take after her father instead of her mother. Nevertheless she was vivacious and strong-willed, unlike her brother Kaneharu, whom Saemon had sent away from home to attend another fencing hall so that he would receive proper training. His teacher once remarked that Kaneharu had talent but lacked spirit to use it. Often Saemon wished that the two children could have been exchanged, and he knew that Misao also had the same thought. Yes, he still loved Misao, or maybe it was love for his children, but in any case Saemon felt he had to win again.



He went into the training hall and taught his students as usual. In the afternoon, however, he had practice matches with his assistant masters for the first time in a long while. Though most of them were much younger than he, they tired easily, and as Saemon hit them with his bamboo sword, they winced in spite of themselves and shouted loudly, "You win!" Wiping his body with a towel offered by one of his assistants, Saemon felt reassured. His skill and endurance had not declined; he would defeat Jurota as when they first fought before Kanemasa and then twelve years ago alone at Yamazaki-daira.

Saemon spent the evening in reading, according to his regular schedule. Though he had never been interested in literature or philosophy, he had become an avid reader several years ago after he stopped fooling around with geisha girls and courtesans; he had felt lost and sought for something to fill his emptiness. Today he was reading an introductory book on zen written by a famous monk who had died about fifty years earlier. His eyes followed the lines, but when he stopped to think about what he had read, he had to admit that he understood nothing. He turned the same page again and again and felt helpless. He had often accompanied Kanemasa to meditation while he was young, but he used to wait impatiently for the end. Pretending to be deep in thought, he would scheme a way to wheedle some money out of his sister-in-law behind his brother's back, or to woo a new geisha. Kanemasa was a man of good conduct, but he did not reprimand Saemon for his debauchery; sometimes he even made fun of it.

Closing the book with a sigh, Saemon wondered what his father-

in-law felt and thought at his age. When he had supposedly passed the age of dissipation, Saemon yielded to his weakness again after he had played the part of faithful husband and successor for more than a decade. Misao suddenly began to seem old at that time. He knew neither his wife nor he could stop her aging unless by a miracle, and yet he suffered. He simply could not bear to watch her slowly losing her beauty. He stayed away from home as much as possible and sought young women, but things were not the same as when he was young. The wilder he grew, the more dissatisfied he became, as if he were drinking salty water to quench his thirst. Naturally he tried to keep his faithlessness secret from Misao, but he stayed out too often and Masakicho was a small town. Once when he came back late at night, a little unsteady with much sake and in high spirits because a geisha whom he had been trying to win finally yielded, he saw his wife standing under a plum tree in the back garden. There was nothing weird or mysterious about her and yet he shuddered and hesitated to go near her. He was tempted to run inside, pretending to be unaware of her existence, but instead walked toward her slowly and timidly. She was not crying, only breathing deeply with her right hand on her obi. Saemon stood in front of her and peered into her face; Misao averted it, probably to avoid his smelly breath.

"Night dew is bad for you, Misao. Let's go to bed." Saemon finally spoke up, laying his hand on her shoulder.

"Yes," answered Misao in a hoarse voice. That was all she said. After that he stopped going to playhouses, suddenly realizing the uselessness of his petty struggle to avoid his age, as well as the

suffering of his wife.

Saemon heaved a deep sigh and went to bed after blowing out the lamp in his study. He could not sleep, however, and time went by. He heard the temple bell strike two. Misao was lying in the next bed, but he could not tell whether she was asleep or not as he could not hear her breathe. Quietly he rose from his bed and went into the practice hall. He wanted to suppress his uneasiness; mechanically he took a bamboo sword from the wall and began to practice alone. First he tried to be quiet so that people would not be disturbed, but gradually he became absorbed in the movement of his muscles.

"Ei!...Yah!...Toh!" From time to time he shouted involuntarily to keep his balance. He began to sweat and the bottom of his night kimono stuck to his legs and hindered his free action. Breathing heavily, he put the practice sword back and wiped his face with the sleeve of his kimono. He went to the well in the back garden and bathed. The cold water ran down over his shoulder, stomach, and legs and splashed on the gravelled ground as he tilted the pail again and again. The moon was hazy and he thought it might rain tomorrow. Drying himself with a towel he found in the hall, he decided to burn the note from Jurota and leave a letter to Misao next morning in case anything should happen to him, though he was determined to beat Jurota.

"Is there anything special tomorrow?" Misao asked as he slipped into his bed.

"Nothing. Somehow I couldn't sleep tonight, so I decided to have a midnight training. Maybe it's because I haven't had practice matches for a while. But I feel better now."

"I hope nothing is wrong with you."

"Don't worry," said Saemon, already half asleep.

The next morning he woke up later than usual. It was drizzling and cold, and toward noon the rain turned to fog. He had a new piece of bleached cotton cut for his loincloth, wore a new pair of white socks and put a new white towel in his bosom to use for his frontlet. Misao asked him a few times to postpone his errand since the weather was not good, but Saemon laughed and said that he was not made of sugar. As she kneeled looking up at him in the entrance, with her hands on the floor, Misao seemed depressed.

"What's wrong with you? You look as if you were bidding farewell to a sentenced man," said Saemon, secretly frightened.

"Oh, I have a slight headache. I think it's the weather, but I shall be all right. Do please come back early," said Misao, smiling faintly.

"Yes, I will. Take care." Saemon walked out quickly.

### III

Misao watched Saemon vanish in the fog but did not move from the doorway for a long time. She felt sick at heart, just as she had twenty-two years ago, when Jurota was defeated. She knew that her husband was telling a lie because the sharpener had never asked the master of fencing hall to come to his store. Such a request was unthinkable. She had seen Saemon reading a letter when she took him his breakfast the morning before. He did not show it to her, but she caught a quick glance at the handwriting. It was not from a woman, but why should he

be so secretive about it? Maybe a geisha asked a man to write for her so that Misao would not be suspicious. Besides, Saemon had certainly behaved peculiarly. He had not practiced at midnight for years; just that was rather special in itself. Also he had had her prepare new underwear for him before he left. This could certainly mean that he was going to meet a new woman, but somehow Saemon looked so gloomy that such an affair seemed unlikely. Misao had often seen him assume a grave air when he went out to see his mistresses, but almost always she found uneasiness in his eyes. Today, however, she could detect no sign of guilty conscience, although she thought he looked too serious for merely going to the sharpener to buy a new sword. A duel? If it was, he would not hesitate to tell her. She was the daughter of a samurai and knew how to behave on such an occasion. When Saemon had stopped staying out with women several years ago, she thought he had reached the age of reason at last as her father had said he would. She wanted to run after him, to question him and find out the truth, but hesitated, since she did not want to be accused of being a domineering wife, especially as she was the heiress of Sasaki Fencing School. She believed that a man should have a little freedom from his family and that imposing on one's husband brought little good to the wife, but still she wished Saemon would tell her the facts. Yet Misao could not decide whether it was jealousy that tormented her. As soon as she closed the sliding door of her room, she began to sob silently, throwing herself on the floor.

"Ah, Father, why didn't you let me marry Jurota? What's so important about keeping the family line and name? I don't care a thing

about them..." Misao recalled the first time Jurota began to live in her house; she was still a child. Unlike Saemon, who would go out with other fellows when he had free time, Jurota stayed home to study. Sometimes if Misao asked him repeatedly, he played with her, though he seemed to be bored, in spite of trying to look interested. Her nurse said this was not proper, but Kanemasa let her play with Jurota. This continued until she became fifteen and began to act like a grown-up woman. She had already attracted the attention of many young men, and it was not long before she was called the belle of Masakicho. When she was seventeen, the first son of a minister for the clan government asked for her hand, but Kanemasa declined because she was an heiress. Some said that he was crazy to refuse such a match, but he told Misao that the son was notorious for his looseness. Misao used this as an excuse when her father told her that he intended to marry her to Saemon. She knew that Kanemasa looked upon Saemon as his successor but had foolishly ignored the fact that he might become her husband. Recently Saemon had been hanging around her with amorous eyes. Once he even tried to take her hand, pretending to give back the fan she had dropped; yet he often stayed out with prostitutes. Jurota, on the other hand, led a quiet life. Of course he did not have much money to play like Saemon but, with his good looks, it would not have been difficult to have an affair with a geisha who would spend her own money to have a lover like him. Jurota never tried to follow her; on the contrary, he seemed to avoid her. Although Misao had not said anything about Jurota, Kanemasa was aware of her attachment to him.

"You are a woman and don't know what a man is. I like Jurota as

much as I do Saemon, but he is too serious. I am afraid he lacks the flexibility to be the leader of this hall. Saemon may look a sinner to you, but he is more large-scaled than Jurota. If you were not an heiress, I wouldn't mind marrying you to Jurota since you like him better, but I have already promised Saemon to give the hall to him. A man like this often becomes a good husband because he has had enough of women and knows better about them, while a man like Jurota tends to lose his footing, once he makes a false step," he said to Misao, trying to persuade her.

It was after this that Misao made an advance to Jurota. Before, her maidenly bashfulness had kept her from showing any sign, but she was desperate and needed positive proof. One day when Saemon was away with his friends, she found Jurota strolling in the garden. Forgetting about the reproach she would receive from the others if she was seen, she called Jurota to the verandah where she was standing.

"Yes, miss." He came to her reluctantly and stood before her without looking at her. Misao blushed and waited for him to say something more, but he obstinately kept silent as if waiting for her order.

"Jurota!" she cried in despair.

"Yes, miss." He looked up at her, startled.

"Stop that 'miss,' will you? Don't you know how I feel? Don't you have a heart?" whispered Misao sharply.

"Yes--no. Pardon me, I remember that I have to clean the entrance." He turned around to walk away.

"Are you running away because you don't like me?" said Misao,

almost crying. Jurota stopped short and looked back at her with a sad smile. She felt her face becoming warmer and warmer, but kept her eyes up to meet his.

"Yes, miss, I like you...I thought you liked me too...But everybody knows that Saemon is going to inherit from Mr. Sasaki. This is right, because he is the best fencer," said Jurota stammering.

"That's none of my business."

"What do you mean?"

"My father will not force me to marry against my wish. Saemon can have the hall if he wants it."

"But, miss--"

Misao quickly extended her hand to stop him, although she was amazed at her own boldness. Jurota seized it in spite of himself but dropped it at once, as he heard somebody approaching, and left her with a bow.

They tried to hide their feelings from others, but people naturally kept watch on Misao. It was not long before Saemon noticed meaningful glances between the two; sometimes he saw them engaged in short conversations. It was strange that Saemon had never thought Jurota might become his rival. Probably it was because he knew Jurota as a young boy and had taught him fencing, or because Jurota was not so fine a fencer as he was. Once he realized the situation, however, he became furious with violent jealousy. He mistreated Jurota, taking every opportunity and excuse. He beat him even after Jurota cried out, "You've done me," feigning not to have heard it or to be too late to stop. He left Jurota in the snow to practice alone, saying this was done by a



certain famous fencer. Misao saw black bruises all over Jurota's body when he was taking a rest between practices. She burned with anger and hatred toward Saemon and often told Kanemasa what Saemon was doing to Jurota behind his back, but Kanemasa only said that if Jurota was man enough, he would beat Saemon some time, and would not scold Saemon for his cruelty.

Her affection toward Jurota grew deeper and he returned it with equal warmth. Knowing her fondness for flowers, he often brought them to her. Usually he carried only one flower of a season in his sleeve and handed it to her without saying anything or put it in front of the sliding doors of her room when she was away. Misao felt this simple token of love more precious than any other, since if he should be caught doing this, he would be laughed at or might even be beaten to death by Saemon. She used all the strategies she could command to change Kanemasa's mind: silence, sighs, and tears. Finally her father yielded and said that he would marry her to the stronger of the two. Misao was disappointed when she heard this, but reasoned that at least Jurota had an opportunity and that chance often ruled, especially in an important match. Both Saemon and Jurota practiced as if possessed; Jurota made remarkable progress during this time, and even Kanemasa said that he might win after all.

A week before the match, Kanemasa asked Misao to go to the sharpener to get a sword he had sent. With her maid, she tried to select a proper gift for Jurota and at last chose a sheath with a gold dragon on it. That evening she had her maid leave it in his room secretly. The next morning when she passed him in the corridor, he

smiled and thanked her with a slight nod.

## IV

The day came at last. She wanted to see the match, but did not have enough courage. Sitting in her room with her hands tightly clasped, she prayed and prayed for Jurota. The house was awfully quiet and she heard either Saemon or Jurota let out a yell to keep time. She stopped her ears with the sleeves of her kimono and waited, though hearing the muted sound of the bamboo swords hitting each other.

"Strike on the forearm. The game is up!" Kanemasa's voice rang out, then Misao heard the general stir of the people congratulating Saemon. She burst into tears. When Kanemasa came into her room to let her greet Saemon, she was beside herself. He sat by her and, stroking her back, said tenderly, "You are still young and think that love is everything, but when you grow older you will see that it is something like the measles. Once you overcome it, you don't suffer from it again." Misao, however, did not stop crying for a long time. He patiently waited for her to calm down, and when she finally did, he murmured as if to apologize, "Maybe I don't understand what love means to you because I am a man. If your mother were alive, she might have let you marry Jurota. Probably I was wrong, but a promise is a promise."

That evening Misao succeeded in meeting Jurota at a nearby temple with the help of her maid. Her eyes red with tears, she asked him to run away with her. "Do please take me from this place. I cannot possibly live with Saemon."

"Misao-sama, I love you with all my heart and you will always remain my only love, but I cannot run away with you. I promised to abide by the result of the match; I gave my word of honor. Besides, you need a comfortable life because you have been reared in wealth. You don't know what it is to be poor."

"Why should we keep such an unreasonable promise? I am ready to bear any kind of hardship."

"But then what are you going to do with your father? He'll be left alone without your care."

"I'm sure he will soften once we are married. He will let us come back, if we don't try to impose on him. He can adopt Saemon and let him take care of the hall too."

"No, I can't do it, because I have an obligation toward my master."

"Don't you have any obligation toward me?"

"Yes, but..."

"Oh, Jurota, don't be so stubborn."

At last he said that he would figure out how to run away from Masakicho, and they went home hastily so that people would not become suspicious. The next morning, however, Jurota was gone without leaving any trace. A few days later, the maid brought her a letter, which was addressed to Misao inside. Jurota apologized for his inability to take her with him for the same reasons he had mentioned at the temple. He also said that he would make a pledge to her that some day he would beat Saemon, even if it might cost his life.

That was in the autumn, twenty-two years ago. The letter was

still hidden in the back of her mirror. She had married Saemon and hated him in the beginning, but gradually became accustomed to him. He completely stopped his dissipation after he was married and was very kind to both Misao and Kanemasa. Especially after their son Kaneharu was born, in the third year of their marriage, she became absorbed in rearing the child and stopped thinking about Jurota. He was put away in the corner of her heart like an old kimono at the bottom of a chest. She decided her father was not mistaken in his judgement about Saemon.

A few years later, after Yayoi was born and she had begun to notice age coming, however, Saemon began to go out again. Kanemasa was still alive then and often she complained to him. A shade of sadness passed over his face but he told her to wait.

"It's his age, Misao. When a man passes forty, he often grows impatient because he sees that youth has left him. But soon he becomes tired of fooling around with young women because he realizes that doesn't make him any younger. He comes to know life is as it is."

Kanemasa died when Yayoi was four. When he was alive, Misao had some one to whom she could confide her sufferings and complaints, but after his death, she was left absolutely alone. Kaneharu was already away from home and she had only one child to take care of. Sitting in front of the mirror, she often thought of Jurota in those days, without feeling guilty. She even reread the letter, which she had forgotten for a long time. Then Saemon had suddenly stopped his misconduct a few years before, just as Kanemasa had told her he would,

and she began to stop remembering Jurota again.

Misao thought it was shameful to think about her old lover when she was already over forty and had two growing children, and especially since Kaneharu was almost Jurota's age when he had left; but in spite of repeated reproach against herself, the youthful face of Jurota haunted her eyes. She took out the letter for the first time in a long while and held it tight.

"Mother, will you show me how to tie a bandage around my ankle? I fell while I was practicing with Goro." Suddenly Yayoi rushed in with a piece of white cloth. Seeing her mother crying, she knit her brows. "Mother, is there something wrong?"

"Nothing, Yayoi. I was thinking about your grandfather."

"I don't remember much about him."

"You were too young." Misao recovered her composure and began to tie the bandage. "What did you do, Yayoi, to be grazed like this?"

"Oh, I slipped when I was fighting with Goro."

"When will you start behaving like a girl? You are old enough to be a lady. If you go on like this nobody will want to marry you. Besides, Goro is busy. Don't pester him. He has to practice himself."

"I don't pester him! He says he likes to play with me, Mother." Yayoi pouted.

V

Jurota was lying on the grass under an oak tree, watching dew drops falling from the points of brown-green leaves. He thought it

strange that he should feel so detached on the day of a duel of twenty-two years' standing. The old scar on his left arm ached dully because of the damp air, and he thought of himself twelve years ago. He still had a dream then of winning Misao back and was determined to succeed; his frustrated love toward her flared up and he fought with all his strength. He had wanted to take her in his arms when the duel was over. Today Misao was still with him, but he had no desire to touch her; he merely wanted to look at her and feel her presence.

"I'm growing old," Jurota muttered, but clicked his tongue at once. "Nonsense!" He wondered why he was there to fight so desperately. Was it love or revenge? Saemon said last time after they fought, that Misao had had a second baby. He could not forget the feeling when he heard it, as if ice cold water had been poured all over his body. He knew he could not win her now, even if he defeated Saemon, because a mother's affection toward her children was something that could never be destroyed, and children needed a father. Why was he there then, and why had he spent his life training himself constantly in such dire poverty? He heard the light sound of sandals crossing the field and sat up to meet Saemon. Since people rarely came to Yamazaki-daira, Jurota knew it was his old rival. He had put on a little weight and his hair too was mingled with white. Jurota felt no resentment or envy and wanted to greet him like a dear old friend.

Saemon looked at his adversary, dressed in tattered kimono. His hatred toward him had melted a long time ago and as he noted Jurota's emaciated features, he felt a keen pain in his heart.

"Hello, I haven't seen you for a long time. How are you doing?"

The words came out by themselves.

"Not very well, as you see. You look fine," answered Jurota in an equally warm tone.

"It still isn't two o'clock, is it?"

"No, we don't have to hurry."

Saemon sat down and began to prepare himself beside Jurota, who watched him put a frontlet on his head and a sash to hold up his sleeves, as if he were sending his dear friend away on a dangerous mission. The white of Saemon's socks was vivid against the wet grass. He also gave furtive glances at Jurota while busying himself. Under the shabby kimono and pleated trousers, Jurota's arms and legs were swollen with muscles and his feet looked as firm as the roots of the oak tree. The sunburnt face showed no sign of excitement or impatience, unlike twelve years ago. Saemon felt a kind of awe toward Jurota. The mist had vanished but the sky was low with grey clouds. They sat side by side, staring at the ground in front of them without speaking.

Abruptly the dull sound of the temple bell rang over the field. The two men sprang to their feet and jumped away from each other like incandescent sparkles of molten iron. Their swords made a swishing sound when drawn from their sheaths. Jurota threw his sheath away as he dashed toward an advantageous place. Running toward his own place, Saemon was immediately reminded of the historical duel between Musashi and Kojiro on Ganryu-jima Island. When Kojiro had discarded his sheath, Musashi had jeered, "Kojiro, you think you won't use it any more!" Kojiro was killed. Saemon wanted to cry, "Don't you remember Ganryu-jima, Jurota?" but as he saw his opponent hold his sword in front of

his face, Saemon could not open his mouth. He felt the blood draining from his cheeks and his armpits wet with dread, for the first time in his life. "I am going to lose," Saemon said to himself bitterly. The quiet, relaxed posture of Jurota showed no fear of death or desire to win; he was as impersonal as a reed in the wind. "Damn!" Saemon growled and turned red with anger.

Jurota saw fear on Saemon's face and for a second a sense of deep satisfaction almost made him tremble, but it disappeared at once, as he watched Saemon grip his hilt tighter. "Why do we have to fight?" The same question came back; he felt no joy, but somehow he could not stop. Jurota edged up to Saemon, who stepped back inch by inch. Out of desperation, Saemon charged upon Jurota. Their swords clashed heavily; the two men separated like flying birds and watched for their next opportunity. With exact timing, Jurota rushed toward Saemon, who received him desperately. Their swords were caught at the guards and grated sharply as the two men pushed and struggled with all their might, staring into each other's eyes. Again the clink--and they were away.

"Jurota, you have done!" Saemon cried in his heart, without envy now. Time passed; still they glared at each other with bated breath. Suddenly the cloud was rifted and weak sunlight came down in broken shafts.

"Toh!" Saemon yelled, and jumped.

"Oh!" Jurota ran aside and swept with his sword. The two blades twined and clashed. Saemon fell on his knee and Jurota heard the dull sound of his own sword cutting into flesh. Blood gushed and



spotted his clothes; the nauseating smell spread in the air. Jurota gazed at his crimson sword as if his mind were far away and then watched Saemon slowly fall on the ground in his own blood. Jurota threw away his sword, shuddering, and bent down to hold his opponent in his arms.

"Saemon, the wound is slight!" cried Jurota automatically and began to tear the sleeves of his kimono to tie the wound. "Don't move from here. I will call a doctor."

"Don't go away, Jurota. I won't live more than an hour." Saemon smiled faintly and continued in a whisper, "I don't know why I didn't kill you last time. I could easily have finished you off."

"I didn't mean to give you such a deep cut. I really didn't mean to kill you," cried Jurota. He sat on the ground and put Saemon's head on his lap. The wounded man groaned and a contortion ran over his face and body.

"I'm sorry. I won't move again," said Jurota painfully.

"Never mind. If I groan, that means I'm still alive."

"Forgive me...I don't know anything any more. I hated you and wanted to get even with you for a long time, but honestly that kind of feeling ceased a long time ago. Sometimes I even forgot about you. I don't know why I came back at all. It's not because I wanted to have Misao back or because I wanted to kill you. Today I wasn't even thinking of fighting when you came."

"I don't know why I didn't kill you last time." Saemon's words echoed in his brain. Certainly they could not have used bamboo swords, because a duel was a duel, but it was strange that they had thought only of victory and not of death whenever they confronted each other.

They had foolishly thought that their friendship would last forever. Yes, friendship! They had never cheated each other and had fought in fair competition. Jurota stared at Saemon's quivering lips. It was this man who had taken away the only woman Jurota ever loved, and through him he learned how to live; Jurota had finally accomplished what all fencers coveted, the state of nothingness through fencing. But what was left for him now? He was losing a true friend by what he had attained. Jurota knew that he was asking too much from life, but he ground his teeth in agony.

"Jurota?"

"Yes?"

"It hasn't been easy for me to live with Misao...She has grown old." Saemon closed his eyes in pain.

Jurota twitched with shock, but at last said calmly, "You had the best years of her life." Saemon smiled weakly as if to say, "You think so?" Suddenly Jurota felt like crying. There was no satisfaction in this world. No, nothing! He had done everything to forget Misao. He had slept with many women, mostly geisha girls, but with no pleasure. He had no remorse in leaving them, since they were professional women, except the last one, who had asked him to stay with her even if he did not love her.

"I become disgusted with myself when I am near you because I can't love. I don't want to hate you as I have others," said Jurota to console her.

"You idiot! You don't know anything about love. I am happy in loving you," she cried in rage.

After this he gave up women completely, because he suddenly felt that there was no difference between prostitutes, Misao, and himself. He did not want to try escape any more. But how futile and foolish all his struggle and resignation had been, always dreaming of a young, beautiful Misao who never grew old! For twenty-two years, what aim had he had in life? Only to defeat Saemon. What could he do now. He was too old to start a new life. The mastery of fencing was no satisfaction for him now that his friend would be no more.

"Saemon, don't die!"

The wounded man opened his eyes and said, gasping, "You don't have to urge me. I would do anything, were there any possibility. I'm frightened...Jurota?"

"What is it? What do you want me to do?"

"My son isn't any good. Will you train him and make him as fine a fencer as you?" Saemon's voice trailed away.

"I'll be most happy to do so if I can be of any help to him."

"Thank you...My coat..."

Jurota looked around and saw it under the oak. Carefully lowering Saemon to the grass, he went to bring it. As he picked it up, one of the sleeves swung heavily. There was a wallet inside.

"Is this what you want?" Jurota asked, showing the wallet.

Saemon blinked and said, "Take it."

"I don't need money. I feel better without it, because I don't have to worry about thieves and pickpockets. Why don't you leave it to Misao?"

"It's--tuition."

"Then I can't keep it by any means. It's my duty to make your son famous some day."

"Will...you...accept...it?"

"Saemon!"

"Water..."

Jurota ran to a puddle nearby and dipped his dirty towel. Holding Saemon's head, he squeezed the water in his dry mouth.

"Delicious," Saemon whispered with his eyes wide open as if to catch the last glimpse of Jurota, but it was obvious that he could not see any more. He gulped once, his eyes rolled, and life was gone.

"Saemon!" Jurota seized the limp body and shook it violently. Then putting his head on Saemon's chest that was slowly growing cold, he wailed like a child, muttering in a broken voice, "Please don't die. I didn't mean to kill you. What shall I do? What can I do without you?"