

Tales of Ise

Section 1

In the past, a young man who had just been invested with his first set of court robes, went to the capital at Nara in his domainal village of Kasuga to hunt.

Two young and exceedingly lovely girls born of the same mother lived in this village. This man peeked at them through a crack in the hedge.

Because their beautiful presence in the old village seemed so surprising, and so forlorn, the man's heart became terribly distracted.

He ripped the sleeve off from the silk hunting cloak he wore, and writing a poem on it, sent it to them. That man's hunting robe was dyed with the pattern of the "purple patience" flower.

*Young purple in Kasuga field
Mingled in wild patterns printed on my cloak
Hide my heart's unknowable
Boundaries of disarray*

He sent this right away, perhaps hoping that things might progress favorably for him. He expressed this manner in the poem. . .

*My heart dyed with
Deep north patterns
Hidden in wild disarray
I am not one to whom this could
Have happened by any other.*

Such elegance embodies the way the people of this former time expressed themselves.

Section 4

In the past, the Great Princess's (the emperor's mother) palace stood in the eastern fifth ward. Someone lived in its west wing.

His original intention had not been to fall in love with her, but he was a man of deep intent and sincere heart, and he visited her often. Then, sometime in the beginning of the New Year, she was secluded elsewhere.

He heard where she was, but because it was a place which one could not visit, all the more his heart was filled with gloom.

A year later, during the New Year, the plum blossoms flowered in full array, and he thought of the previous year, going to where he had visited her. No

matter where he stood or sat, he could not manage to make anything appear as it had the year before. He burst out in tears and lay down on the wooden floor of the empty chamber until the moon hid itself behind the mountains.

In remembrance of that time of the year before, he uttered the poem,

*The moon
Springtime
None as they were in the past
My body alone as it was in the beginning*

And so he sang. When the night faintly began to brighten, crying and weeping he returned.

Section 9

In the past, there was a man. He came to feel that his life was pointless.

"I won't live in the capital any longer - I will go to the east to find a land where I can live."

So saying, he set off.

One or two of those who had been his friends from before went along. No one knew the way and they wandered on, completely lost. They arrived at a place called "Eight Bridges," so named because the water flowed through a "spider leg" river which was spanned by eight bridges.

They dismounted and sat under the shade of a tree which stood on the edge of this swamp. There they ate dried rice. In the midst of the swamp, irises gorgeously bloomed. Looking at the flowers, one person said, "Make a poem on the traveler's heart by using each letter of the word "Iris" (kakitsubata) at the beginning of each line. And so the following poem was recited.

*How far we have come, patterns of dazzling iris
Stretched tightly upon my breast, I am used to the distance
Closest to my body, the Chinese robe she often
Wore in the years we passed together*

With this, everyone shed tears upon their dried rice, which swelled up, ready to eat.

They traveled and traveled, reaching the land of Suruga. They journeyed to Utsuyama. Their way was extremely dark and narrow, ivy and maple grew thickly everywhere. They felt very forlorn. As they were imagining what misfortunes they might encounter, they met a wandering monk.

"How can you be traveling alone on such a road?" they asked the monk, and then realized that he was someone whom they had seen before. The man wrote a letter and asked the monk to give it to a person in the capital.

*I met no one
In dream nor in reality
Beside a mountain named
Reality in Suruga.*

When this man saw Mount Fuji, snow fell whitely upon it although it was midsummer.

*A mountain unbeknownst to time
Snow falling, Fuji's peak a
Fawn's dappled coat*

Comparing that mountain with the mountains here, it would probably be like piling up twenty Mt. Hie's. Its shape resembles a hill of salt.

Now as they traveled and journeyed, there flowed a huge river between the land of Musashi and the land of Shimotsufusa. It was called the Sumida River. They gathered together on the bank of the river, and when they thought about whence they had come, together they lamented, saying,

"How far we have traveled!"

But the ferryman said,

"Hurry and board the boat, night is about to fall!"

When they got in and were to cross the river, everyone felt extremely desolate. Not one of them was not bereft of someone in the capital whom they loved. Even at such a moment, they noticed a white bird with beak and legs red, its body as large as a snipe, which had appeared, playing about the water, eating fish. Because it was a bird that couldn't be seen in the capital, none of them recognized it. When they asked the ferryman what kind of bird it was, he replied,

"This? Why it's a capital bird!"

When they heard this, the man sang,

*Since you bear this name
Let me ask you
Capital Bird, does the person I love
In the capital, still exist,
. . . or not?*

When he sang this to the bird, everyone in the boat together cried.

Section 69

In the past there was a man. He went to the land of Ise as an Imperial huntsman. The mother of the shrine priestess in Ise said to her daughter, treat him with greater care than you would the usual huntsman." Because this wish had been conveyed to her, and because it was her mother who had asked her, she served him with the greatest care and diligence.

In the morning she sent him off to hunt. When he returned as night was falling, she called him to her. As before, she cared for him with deep regard. On the second night he said to her, "no matter what I must meet you!" She too wanted to meet him very much.

Although this was so, as they could not avoid the eyes of so many people, they couldn't very well meet.

Because he was on an imperial commission, he was not quartered far away from her. Because the woman's nightchamber was close by, she sent everyone to bed, and with only one child serving her, visited the man.

Since the man had not yet gone to bed, he was lying down looking outside at the partially obscured moon.

She sent the little child in first, and then the woman came in. The man felt extremely glad, and led her to his bedside.

From midnight until three in the morning they stayed together there, but in the end she returned to her quarters without exchanging vows of love. The man felt extremely sad, and could not sleep. The next morning, while wondering if he might not send one of his own attendants over to her, sat, feeling extremely empty and forlorn, waiting for her message. A little while after dawn, her poem came, but without a message.

*Was it you who came?
Or I who went?
I don't know if it was a dream or reality,
If I was sleeping or awake.*

The man, sobbing in profound grief, sent this poem.

*I am lost in the gloom of my darkened heart
Whether it was dream or reality
Let us find out tonight.*

He then set out for the hunt. Although he was in the field, his heart was in the sky. He thought that he must send everyone off to bed and at least meet with her tonight. But the governor of the province, who was also the administrator responsible for the shrine, had heard that the imperial huntsman was there.

Because they spent the night drinking together, he wasn't able to meet with her at all. Because in the morning he had to depart for the land of Owari, the man secretly wept tears of blood, yet he still was not able to meet her. As the night at last began to give way to dawn, a woman delivered a poem on a tray. When he picked it up and read it, it said,

Since it is a bay across which the traveler's robe does not get wet . . .

The poem lacked a final line. So the man took the ember from a torch, and wrote the final line of the poem on the tray.

He must cross the pass on the hill of meeting again.

So writing, when dawn broke he crossed over into the land of Owari.

This shrine virgin served during the reign of the Seiwa Emperor.¹ She was the daughter of Emperor Montoku and the younger sister of Prince Koretaka.

Section 71

In the past, a man went as an imperial messenger to the shrine of the Ise Virgin. When he arrived at the imperial quarters, a woman who served the Ise Virgin and lived within its sacred precinct spoke to him of love, and expressing her own desire, said

*I must cross the fence
of the awesome gods
I so want to see that palace man. . .*

The man replied,

*If you long for one
then you may come
and see, for this path
is not the one the gods
forbid.*

Section 82

In the past, there lived Prince Koretaka, one of the emperor's sons. His palace stood in a place called Minase, near Cape Yama. He would reside in this palace every year when the cherries came into bloom. He usually brought the Head of the Right Horses with him on these visits. But because this occurred in

¹Morimoto, op. cit. , p. 314.

times from a world far in the past, this man's name is now forgotten. They seldom went out hunting, rather they just drank and composed Japanese poems.

It was the cherry trees blooming at a temple near the Nagisa mansion on Katano field, now used for hunting, which they delighted in. They dismounted beneath the trees, and broke off the flowering branches, placing them in their hair, and all those present, high, middle and low ranking composed poems. The poem composed by the Captain of the Right Horses went, . . .

*If there were never any cherry blossoms in this world,
How easy would my mind be in Spring.*

Another person's poem went,

*It is because they scatter that cherry blossoms are so wonderful
What lasts in this melancholy world ?*

By the time they had departed from beneath those trees, it was already dusk. Some others in their company came from the field, their attendants carrying their wine. These men said, let's drink this wine! And so saying they all went off to find a good spot, and arrived at a place called Heavenly River (the Milky Way). The Head of the Right Horses offered wine to the Prince. The Prince said, "compose a poem on hunting in Katano and then coming to the banks of the Heavenly River, and then empty your cup!"

The Head of the Right Horses offered this poem.

*Having hunted all day let's
stay the night with the Heavenly Weaver maid
Since we have come to the fields of the Heavenly River (the Milky Way, where the
Weaver maid constellation can be found - an allusion to tanabata)*

The prince tried and tried to compose a suitable reply, but in the end was not able to. Ki no Arisune wrote this poem for him in reply, . . .

*Waiting for you who come but once a year
(referring to the yearly meeting of the weaver maid and cowherd stars)
I cannot believe there is anyone to share my lodging tonight.*

They returned to the palace. They drank until late at night, telling each other stories, and the Prince became exceedingly drunk, and so was going to

retire. Because it was the 11th day of the new moon, the moon was about to sink behind the mountains, so the Head of the Right Horses said,

*Although we've only just seen it, how quickly the moon disappears,
If only the mountains would vanish refusing to cover it*

Ki no Arisune composed the Prince's reply,

*If all the mountains were leveled
If there were no peaks, then the moon would not retire.*

Section 117

Once, the emperor paid a visit to Sumiyoshi. This poem was recited on the occasion.

*It has been a long time - even for me
But you, my friend, the pine, on the shore of
Sumiyoshi, how many years can
have passed?*

*Even I have seen the long years pass
But you, old pine, how many generations
can you have expired?*

The form of the spirit of the pine appeared, and spoke to the emperor.

*Lovingly, and for countless
generations, my care for you
has not ceased, though you have
never known, like the white
breakers crashing on the shore.*