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by Rohan Koda  
translated by  
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**Tarōbō**

**by Rohan Koda**

*Rohan Koda (1867-1947) was born toward the very end of the shogun's reign of Japan and kept writing for six decades, until his death after the end of World War II. Unlike many other intellectuals of his generation, he did not study abroad or receive Westernized higher education. His works are based on East Asian aesthetics and Buddhist philosophy rather than the European literary trends that dominated Japanese literature in his time. In addition to novels and short stories, his works include large number of historical biographies, essays on classic literature or natural history, and annotation of Basho Matsuo's haiku corpus.*

The dazzling peaks of the cumulonimbus were blown away by the wind, leaving the evening sky clear and blue. Even the midsummer sun had some mercy as it slowly went down. Behind verdant cherry branches gleamed the thin, fifth-day moon. Bats zigzagged triumphantly under the moon.

With his kimono tucked up to the thighs, the barefooted husband vigorously watered the yard with a dipper and a bucket, as if trying to catch even the cicadas and sparrows in the shower. With his balding head and mild wrinkles on his brow, the robust man looked sincere and mature enough to weather any crisis of life.

The pleasant noises from the kitchen suggested that the wife was also busy, fanning the charcoal stove and chopping up something on the board. Since her husband was toiling with bare feet, she was not supposed to idle away. A man who runs a house

like this typically rewards good conduct and punishes bad one, so it seems safe to say that she had been trained to fulfil a wife's duty rigorously.

The servant girl was also working hard. Shaking her giant hips, she was wiping away the *engawa* porch with a damp cloth.<sup>1</sup>

This was how the respectable, lively, middle-class household spent a typical summer evening.

The husband finished watering and looked around the yard contentedly. After he had washed his feet and put on wooden sandals, he had the servant girl bring him a towel, soap, coins and went off to the public bathhouse. Dinner would be ready when he came back. This seemed to be the golden routine of the family.

Soon he came home, with his sleeves rolled up and his face as red from the hot bath as a boiled octopus. A tobacco tray awaited him on the patterned rush mat spread on the *engawa*. He sat down on the mat and relaxed with a few puffs, while a black-lacquered personal table was set before him. An oil lamp with a light-blue paper chimney was in the room behind the *engawa*. A traditional paper lantern, beautifully hanging from the eaves, added a pale, soothing glow.

Dusk gathered on the yard slowly, beginning in the corner with a Chinese parasol tree. The young pines and cypresses were dripping, as if it had just rained. It was refreshing to see the faint light of the evening moon reflected on the lustrous needles. The

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<sup>1</sup> *Engawa*: A wooden passageway outside of the room, which also functions as a bench facing the yard and entrance from the yard. There are many examples of such space which is neither strictly inside or outside the house in traditional Japanese architecture.

breeze across the yard caressed him through the openings of his kimono. The husband was content with the fruits of his hard work.

Then his wife came out with *sake* in a small, *Izumo-Yaki* earthen flask.<sup>2</sup> She sat down across the tiny table and filled her husband's cup with a smile.

“You must be tired after all that hard work.”

Her words were simple, but the tone reflected the soothing sight of the watered yard and her gratitude for that. After enjoying his first sip to the fullest, the husband put down the cup on the table.

“Oh, it was not that bad. Mild exercise is great for health. When I see the plants appreciating the water, I feel ready to do it again tomorrow.”

He picked up the cup, finished it in silence and held it out for another serving.

“I finished my job for the day, unwound myself with some yard work, and then went to the bath. At the end of such a day, *sake* tastes much better. Maybe labor is the easiest way to make people happy.” When he laughed, his face was indeed brimming with happiness.

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<sup>2</sup> *Izumo-yaki* is a general name for earthenware produced in the Izumo area (the eastern part of today's Shimane Prefecture) and includes subcategories such as *Rakuzan-yaki* or *Fujina-yaki*. Because they were originated by potters invited to Izumo by the local samurai lord, Matsudaira Harusato (1751-1818), also known as the tea master Fumai, *Izumo-Yaki* represents the subdued, zen-inspired aesthetics of tea ceremony.

On his table was a baked horse mackerel, strictly a commoner's main dish, but the modest pink spikes of smartweed on the plate added a flavor of the season and showed her tenderness.<sup>3</sup> After savoring the fish, he picked up the cup again.

“Wonderful *sake*, wonderful food, and a wonderful woman filling my cup. It's a perfect world, isn't it—although some more delicacies would make it even more perfect.”

“You are such a diplomat.” She laughed. “I'll bake some eggplant for you.”

Exhilarated by his unusually jovial mood, she honored his request right away. The husband's disposition seemed to have affected hers. She withdrew to the kitchen, and a while later she came back with eggplants baked with fragrant *miso* paste.<sup>4</sup> He took a bite of the sizzling vegetable steak and praised it. “What an extravagance!”

“Enough for serving me. Why don't you sit down and eat, too?”

Intoxicated with joy, the husband showed his gratitude.

“Oh, thanks,” she responded briefly, and she studied his face and smiled.

“You were cooked up pretty well. Now you look like Kintarō.”<sup>5</sup>

She was amused.

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<sup>3</sup> While the story so far is filled with seasonal keywords (*kigo*) for summer in haiku tradition, a spike of smartweed is a keyword for autumn. The wife has given him a gift of cool breeze through this tiny detail.

<sup>4</sup> The dish is called *shigi-yaki* (baked snipe), as a kind of playful vegetarian exaggeration, in the same way as a kind of fried bean-curd is called *gan-modoki* (fake goose).

<sup>5</sup> Kintaro: One of the best-known folk tale heroes. Born in deep mountains, he grows up, playing with wild animals, into a herculean young man. Later he becomes a retainer of Minamoto no Yorimitsu (948-1021), a real-life samurai lord. In a picture book, he is often depicted as a plump, oversize infant with unusually red skin and an axe on his shoulder.

“Oh, do I? The bath was hotter than usual, so I am very well-done.”

He responded with a laughter, for he was already quite lubricated. However, a drinker’s greed pushed him for another cup. He sipped up a few drops at the bottom and held the cup out to his wife. His hand was somewhat unsteady.

When the wife gently tried to fill the cup, a slight shake of his hand made the cup clink onto the flask’s mouth, and by some unfortunate coincidence, the cup slipped out of his hand and fell onto the wooden floor of the *engawa*. Before the surprise sobered him, the cup bounced on the edge of *engawa* and smashed into the big, flat *kutsunugi* stone, ending up in three or four large pieces and countless fragments.<sup>6</sup> It was an Eiraku drinking cup, which the husband had always called Tarōbō, as if it were a boy.<sup>7</sup> Dumbfounded, the couple looked at each other for a moment.

The euphoric evening was soured by the small but somewhat sinister incident. Forced from his joyous and intoxicating mood, the husband kept trying to put the pieces together for a while. He was unwilling to give up.

“Because I was too drunk.”

He mumbled to himself many times in regret.

With some words of consolation, the wife stood up. Then she came back with an obviously more beautiful drinking cup.

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<sup>6</sup> *Kutsunugi* (shoes-off) stone: a large, flat stone is often set in front of an *engawa* porch as a step and a platform to leave shoes on.

<sup>7</sup> Pottery by the Eiraku family in Kyoto, known for their golden-brocade technique, is called Eiraku(-*yaki*). Tarō means the first son, and many first sons were actually named Tarō before Japanese parents became more concerned about uniqueness in last few decades. -bō is a suffix expressing the speaker’s parent-like affection to the addressee.

“Now, drink some more with this new cup and call it a day.”

Despite her earnest suggestion, however, he did not even look up from the pieces of the cup.

With a laugh, she said, “This is unlike you. What’s the matter? You cannot fix it, so why don’t you toss it away and fill a new cup?”

His reaction was dull.

“Alas, I was so stupid. Isn’t there any way to put them together?”

He was still reluctant.

“Once smashed into so many pieces, it cannot be saved. It is too late, so you need to give up.”

The wife’s words made sense, but the husband’s spirit was low.

“Maybe you are right. Nothing lasts forever, I know. Such a pity...”

He was still lamenting.

The wife wondered what caused this uncharacteristic persistence.

“Tell me, what’s wrong with you? Tonight, you are not behaving like the man you are. When our servant girl, O-Nabe, dropped an entire crate of Imari *sashimi* dishes and ruined every single one out of the ten-person set, you were nearby and forgave her with a laugh, saying accidents will happen.<sup>8</sup> It was a beautiful vintage set that would sell

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<sup>8</sup> *Arita-yaki*, pottery from the Arita Town of Saga Prefecture, is also called *Imari-yaki* after the port it was shipped from. Developed in the 17th century by Chinese potters

for ten times as much as the cup, but you gave it up so easily. Why are you so persistent tonight? Just drink one more cup. You've lost all your cheerfulness."

This time her consolation included some exhortation, but he was still reluctant to move ahead. However, unwilling to waste her good intentions, he slowly picked up the new cup and began to drink. But the cheerful mood did not come back.

"Somehow the *sake* doesn't taste as good in a new cup. I guess I should move on to the meal."

He was still in gloom. The wife switched to a more chastising tone.

"You must move ahead now."

"I know, I know. But...a tea master cherishes his tea bowl, and a drinker loves his cup...isn't it quite natural?"

"But the new cup is also Eiraku. The violets on the old one were very sketchy, and the finish was not great. This one, on the other hand, is golden brocade inside and painted with cobalt blue outside. The artisan put in lots of time and effort, making it one of the best examples of Eiraku pottery—you told me all this, didn't you?"

"I did, but it's something I *purchased*. I found it at a curio shop on the Center Street.<sup>9</sup> That cup, the one I just broke, I didn't buy."

"Then how did you get it?"

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invited by samurai lords, Imari-*yaki* was the first porcelain produced in Japan and is often associated with the highest quality and the upper classes.

<sup>9</sup> Supposedly the Center Street (*naka-dōri*) of Kyōbashi, Tōkyō, known for curio stores since the Edo period.

“Ah, I shouldn’t have mentioned it.”

He tried to laugh it off, but then he noticed that she was looking at him in silence. He stopped laughing and thought quietly for a while. Soon the cheerful mood returned, and he began to laugh. The cloud of sullenness left his face, and his eyes were clear and bright. He seemed to have changed the direction of his mood rather quickly.

“I’ll tell you all, I’ll tell you all. Why should I contemplate on this all alone? I’d rather share it with you and laugh together.”

With this conclusion, even his words were livelier.

“Well, it’s something awkward to tell you. I got the cup—when I was young—indeed, it’s such a long time ago—twenty years already. I had a woman in my heart—umm...it’s embarrassing to tell you in a straight face.”

He took a sip.

“Oh, whatever. I’ll tell you anyway. This is just a random story for the evening by a drunk man, so it may be only half-truth. Back then I was just an immature young man. Looking back now, everything feels like a blurry dream. At that time, I was not bald nor red-skinned as this. You know, everyone looks better, more or less, when young. I hope it’s not all because I looked better, but there was a girl who liked me. Sometimes love echoes between two people. There was some natural attraction between us; she was nice to me, and I was nice to her. We never talked about anything indecent, but our hearts talked so well without words, letting us share some ideas on our future. One day her father invited me and offered me a drink with that cup. I knew nothing about pottery in those days, but somehow, I liked it and appreciated it a lot. Then he said, “Although you

are young—no offense—but you have a good eye. This cup is nothing fancy, but it was made by Ryōzen, and I’ve always thought it’s nothing an ordinary potter could make, even if it looks improvised.”<sup>10</sup> He was apparently flattered. Then the girl, who was nearby, said to me, “You like it so much. The cup must feel happy and proud. Why don’t you take it home? I don’t want to be forward, but I just want you to have it. Is it okay, Father, to offer it to him?” It was nothing too fancy and giving it to me was a kind act of friendship. Probably he didn’t want to disappoint his dear daughter in front of me. He agreed with her immediately and gave me the cup, along with a smaller one on his personal table. The old man said, “Violets are also called ‘Tarōbō and Jirōbō,’ and so I have called these two cups, with violets painted on them. The big one is Tarōbō and small one is Jirōbō. Since it is odd to give away just one of the pair, I’ll give you both.” And so did he. Tarōbō is the one I just broke. So, when I drank at home, I used Tarōbō and the smaller Jirōbō, as if drinking together with the girl. And when I had a chance to see her, I joked to her, like, “Tarōbō misses you.” Or “Jirōbō annoys me, saying, ‘I want to see my old master’s daughter. When can I serve her again day and night?,’ until she blushed. Such innocent, happy days!”

Recalling his old love story, he touched his own forehead in a mixture of nostalgia and embarrassment, but soon he took another sip with the same hand.

“One day, however, I broke Jirōbō by accident. Alas, I ruined the pair, if by mistake! What a shame! I was seriously disturbed, suspecting that it was a sign that we

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<sup>10</sup> Eiraku Ryozen (1770-1841), the tenth head of the Eiraku pottery family of Kyōto.

would be torn apart someday. But my youth and vitality consoled me, ‘No, that can never happen, never if we believe in each other!’”

He slowed down toward the end. His wife was listening with vivid interest. In the yard, the evening breeze rustled the leaves of the parasol tree, like an interlude.

“And now I’m a balding old man. The other day, a saucy geisha apprentice compared my head to kimono lined with cherry-red silk. I asked why, and she burst into laughter, saying, ‘Because I can see the reddish skin beneath your hair!’ I’m too old now to be upset with her ridicule, or even to tell a love story. It is just like recalling a trip full of difficulties. We can have a good laugh over it simply because it’s old enough. So, the girl was determined to come and live with me, and I was expecting a life with her. But as you know, the dice and destiny are always beyond our control. One day I realized that I had no other choice than to give her up, and it wouldn’t have been good for her if I insisted. I even thought of some reckless actions, things that give me cold sweat even today. Fortunately, I was able to rein myself in and through lots of deliberation managed to come out of it alive, but I had to part with her after all. I remembered my premonition from when I broke Jirōbō. Alas, it all came true! Every time I saw Tarōbō, I shed secret tears. ‘I’m a man! I’m a man! How long am I going to cry over just a girl?’ I blamed my effeminate self and forced myself to give her up like a man. However, no matter how many months and years went by, somehow, I wasn’t able to forget her. I gradually forgot the immediate pain of parting, but the tender feeling kept coming back, as vividly as when we joked about Tarōbō and Jirōbō’s messages to her. Over the years I forgot everything I didn’t like about her, but whatever I liked about her at all haunted me. Even if I knew they were all useless pieces of the past, I was never able to leave the memories

behind. However, I had no knowledge or interest in whom she married or where and how she lived. I never thought of getting in touch with her. I was happy with my peaceful daily life, without being distracted by the dream that never came true. Only once in a while random shadows of my old feelings surfaced on the *sake* in Tarōbō. So, I was no longer yearning for the girl, but from time to time her memory came back, even though it's years since our parting, reminding me how much she once meant to me. Sometimes I was proud of myself for not doing anything crazy with all such feeling. Other times I realized our inability to know our destiny and ended up wishing for a deity I could throw myself on. We have been married for fifteen or sixteen years already, but I did not tell you why I always used that cup when I drank, because I thought it was not necessary or worthwhile. Who else would know, since even *you* didn't, such an old story of mine? Only Tarōbō knew my young days, when I joked about its message to her. And this evening even Tarōbō disappeared from this world. I haven't known if the girl is dead or alive for the last twenty years, and Tarōbō, the last keepsake of her, has now returned to dust. When I think of my balding head, laughing stock of that young geisha, the only remnant of all the flowers and fiery passion of my youth, I realize the power of passing time. How inscrutable a man's life is! Even my love—the memory of which outlasted my hair—slowly disappears, just like a wheel losing its pins and rim, one by one, by the formidable power of time. Once I thought she was dearer than my own life, another time I almost renounced this world, and yet another time I realized how futile it was to resist destiny. Since my old friend, Tarōbō, with whom I was obsessed, passed away in pieces

this evening, my love also went back to the nothingness before itself.<sup>11</sup> Now the way I clung to Tarōbō all the time looks funny. It is even funnier that I was trapped in my old memories for quite a while after dropping the cup. If you toy with a piece of ice, all you get at the end is some water. They say the flowers' fragrance never stays in the air, and now I know that is so true. Well, shall we go on to the meal? I have spoken too much.”

He finished the story with a hearty laugh. Now he was the husband she knew again, with his lively expression. The wife joined the laughter, but then she leaned her head, moved by the story.

“You two loved each other so much, and what in the world pulled you apart? Were there any complicated issues?”

The question came out of her genuine sympathy for him. The husband, however, did not really answer it.

“It is useless to explain it now. This world is boundless, and months and years flow on forever. Even so, there is not a single person who can tell whether my story is true or false; there is nobody who can decide whether my painful decision back then was good or bad. The only surviving witness, Tarōbō, who knew all the secrets between she and I, has just passed away. It is useless to point at water and discuss the shape of the ice it once was, and so is looking up at the sky and arguing where the fragrance of flowers has gone, hahahaha. All we can do is laugh them away. The scab on my old love, so to

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<sup>11</sup> This reminds me of a well-known zen *koan*, “Show me your original face before your mother and father were born,” from *Wumenguan*.

speaking, has just fallen off because it was time, hahahaha. Now I am so pleasantly drunk.

Thank you, but I have had enough. No more *sake*.”

The husband cast his eyes over the garden. A gentle breath of wind shook the lamplight. Evening cool filled the room.

(July 1900)