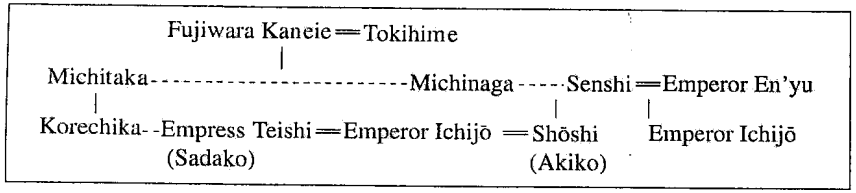
SEI SHŌNAGON

Sei Shōnagon (b. 965?) was the daughter of Kiyohara no Motosuke, a noted waka poet and one of the editors of the *Gosenshū*, the second imperial waka anthology. (The Sei in Sei Shōnagon's name comes from the Sino-Japanese reading for the Kiyo in Kiyohara.) Around 981, Sei Shōnagon married Tachibana no Norimitsu, the first son of the noted Tachibana family, but after she bore him a child the next year, they were separated.

In 990 Fujiwara no Kaneie, the husband of the author of the *Kagerō Diary*, stepped down from his position as regent (*kanpaku*) and gave it to his son Fujiwara no Michitaka, who was referred to as middle regent (*naka no kanpaku*). Michitaka married his daughter Teishi to Emperor Ichijō (r. 986–1011) in 990, and she soon became a high consort (*nyōgo*) and then empress (*chūgū*). Sei Shōnagon became a lady-in-waiting to Teishi in 993, the year that Michitaka became prime minister (*daijō daijin*). In 994 Korechika, Michitaka's eldest son and the apparent heir to the regency, became palace minister (*naidaijin*). In 995 Michitaka died in an epidemic, and in the following year Korechika was exiled in a move engineered by Michitaka's younger brother and rival Michinaga, and Teishi was forced to leave the imperial palace. Sei Shōnagon continued to serve Teishi until Teishi's death in childbirth in 1000. In the

238. This remark by one of her attendants makes it clear that it is Kaneie in the carriage.
239. Her son, Michitsuna.
240. Presumably Kaneie has ordered that this special mark of respect be made to him.



Political context for Sei Shōnagon

meantime, in 999, Shōshi, Michinaga's daughter and Murasaki Shikibu's mistress, became the chief consort to Emperor Ichijō, marking Michinaga's ascent to the pinnacle of power.

THE PILLOW BOOK (*MAKURA NO SŌSHI*, CA. 1005)

The Pillow Book, which was finished around 1005, after the demise of Teishi's salon, focuses on the years 993 and 994, when the Michitaka family and Teishi were at the height of their glory, leaving unmentioned the subsequent tragedy. Almost all the major works by women of this time were written by women in Empress Shōshi's salon: Murasaki Shikibu, Izumi Shikibu, and Akazome'emon. Only Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book* represents the rival salon of Empress Teishi. Like many other diaries by court women, *The Pillow Book* can be seen as a memorial to the author's patron, specifically, an homage to the Naka no Kanpaku family and a literary prayer to the spirit of the deceased empress Teishi. One of the few indirect references to the sad circumstances that befell Teishi's family is "The Cat Who Lived in the Palace," about the cruel punishment, sudden exile, and ignominious return of the dog Okinamaro, who, like Korechika, secretly returned to the capital and later was pardoned.

The three hundred discrete sections of *The Pillow Book* can be divided into three different types—lists, essay, and diary—that sometimes overlap. The list sections consist of noun sections (*mono wa*), which describe particular categories of things like "Flowering Trees," "Birds," and "Insects" and tend to focus on nature or poetic topics, and adjectival sections (*monozukushi*), which describe a particular state, such as "Depressing Things," and contain interesting lists and often are (particularly in the case of negative adjectives) humorous and witty. The diary sections, such as "The Sliding Screen in the Back of the Hall," describe specific events and figures in history, particularly those related to Empress Teishi and her immediate family.

The essay sections sometimes focus on a specific season or month, but unlike the diary sections, they bear no historical dates. The textual variants of *The Pillow Book* treat these three section types differently. The Maeda and Sakai variants separate them into three large groups. By contrast, the Nōin variant and the Sankan variant, which is translated here and has become the canonical version, mix the different types of sections. The end result is that *The Pillow Book* appears ahistorical; events are not presented in chronological order but instead move back and forth in time, with no particular development or climax, creating a sense of a world suspended in time, a mode perhaps suitable for a paean to Teishi's family.

Another category, which overlaps with the others and resembles anecdotal literature, is the "stories heard" (*kikigaki*)—that is, stories heard from one's master or mistress—which provided knowledge and models of cultivation. Indeed, much of *The Pillow Book* is about aristocratic women's education, especially the need for aesthetic awareness as well as erudition, allusiveness, and extreme refinement in communication. Sei Shōnagon shows a particular concern for delicacy and harmony, for the proper combination of object, sense, and circumstance, usually a fusion of human and natural worlds. Incongruity and disharmony, by contrast, become the butt of humor and of Sei Shōnagon's sharp wit. *The Pillow Book* is often read as a personal record of accomplishments, with a number of the sections about incidents that display the author's talent. Indeed, much of the interest of *The Pillow Book* has been in the strong character and personality of Sei Shōnagon.

The Pillow Book is noted for its distinctive prose style: its rhythmic, quick-moving, compressed, and varied sentences, often set up in alternating couplets. Although the typical Japanese sentence ends with the predicate, the phrases and sentences in *The Pillow Book* often end with nouns or eliminate the exclamatory and connective particles so characteristic of Heian women's literature. The compact, forceful, bright, witty style stands in contrast to the soft, meandering style found in *The Tale of Genji* and other works by Heian women. Indeed, the adjectival sections in particular have a *haikai*-esque (comic linked verse) quality, marked by witty, unexpected juxtaposition.

The Pillow Book is now considered one of the twin pillars of Heian vernacular court literature, but unlike the *Kokinshū*, *The Tales of Ise*, and *The Tale of Genji*, which had been canonized by the thirteen century, *The Pillow Book* was not a required text for waka poets (perhaps because it contained relatively little poetry) and was relatively neglected in the Heian and medieval periods. But *The Pillow Book* became popular with the new commoner audience in the Tokugawa (Edo) period and was widely read for its style, humor, and interesting lists. By the modern period, *The Pillow Book* was treated as an exemplar of the *zuihitsu* (meanderings of the brush) or miscellany genre, centered on personal observations and musings. Since then, it has been regarded in modern literary histories as the generic predecessor of *An Account of a Ten-Foot-Square Hut* (*Hōjōki*) and *Essays in Idleness* (*Tsurezuregusa*).

In Spring It Is the Dawn (1)

In spring it is the dawn that is most beautiful. As the light creeps over the hills, their outlines are dyed a faint red, and wisps of purplish cloud trail over them.

In summer the nights. Not only when the moon shines but on dark nights, too, as the fireflies flit to and fro, and even when it rains, how beautiful it is!

In autumn the evenings, when the glittering sun sinks close to the edge of the hills and the crows fly back to their nests in threes and fours and twos; more charming still is a file of wild geese, like specks in the distant sky. When the

sun has set, one's heart is moved by the sound of the wind and the hum of the insects.

In winter the early mornings. It is beautiful indeed when snow has fallen during the night, but splendid too when the ground is white with frost; or even when there is no snow or frost, but it is simply very cold and the attendants hurry from room to room stirring up the fires and bringing charcoal, how well this fits the season's mood! But as noon approaches and the cold wears off, no one bothers to keep the braziers alight, and soon nothing remains but piles of white ashes.

To Make a Beloved Son a Priest (6)

That parents should bring up some beloved son of theirs to be a priest is really distressing. No doubt it is an auspicious[241] thing to do, but unfortunately most people are convinced that a priest is as unimportant as a piece of wood, and they treat him accordingly. A priest lives poorly on meager food and cannot even sleep without being criticized. While he is young, it is only natural that he should be curious about all sorts of things, and if there are women about, he will probably peep in their direction (though, to be sure, with a look of aversion on his face). What is wrong with that? Yet people immediately find fault with him for even so small a lapse.

The lot of an exorcist is still more painful. On his pilgrimages to Mitake, Kumano, and all the other sacred mountains, he often undergoes the greatest hardships. When people come to hear that his prayers are effective, they summon him here and there to perform services of exorcism: the more popular he becomes, the less peace he enjoys. Sometimes he will be called to see a patient who is seriously ill, and he has to exert all his powers to cast out the spirit that is causing the affliction. But if he dozes off, exhausted by his efforts, people say reproachfully, "Really, this priest does nothing but sleep." Such comments are most embarrassing for the exorcist, and I can imagine how he must feel.

That is how things used to be; nowadays priests have a somewhat easier life.

The Cat Who Lived in the Palace (8)

The cat who lived in the palace had been awarded the headdress of nobility[242] and was called Lady Myōbu. She was a very pretty cat, and His Majesty saw to it that she was treated with the greatest care.

241. Popular Buddhist beliefs at the time included the notion that "if a man becomes a priest, his father and mother will be saved until the seventh generation."

242. Originally given by the emperor to nobility of the fifth rank and above. The cap was small, round, and black with a protuberance sticking up in the back and a wide, stiff ribbon hanging down the back.

One day she wandered onto the veranda, and Lady Uma, the nurse in charge of her, called out, "Oh, you naughty thing! Please come inside at once." But the cat paid no attention and went on basking sleepily in the sun. Intending to give her a scare, the nurse called for the dog, Okinamaro.

"Okinamaro, where are you?" she cried. "Come here and bite Lady Myōbu!" The foolish Okinamaro, believing that the nurse was in earnest, rushed at the cat, who, startled and terrified, ran behind the blind in the imperial dining room, where the emperor happened to be sitting. Greatly surprised, His Majesty picked up the cat and held her in his arms. He summoned his gentlemen-in-waiting. When Tadataka, the chamberlain,[243] appeared, His Majesty ordered that Okinamaro be chastised and banished to Dog Island. All the attendants started to chase the dog amid great confusion. His Majesty also reproached Lady Uma. "We shall have to find a new nurse for our cat," he told her. "I no longer feel I can count on you to look after her." Lady Uma bowed; thereafter she no longer appeared in the emperor's presence.

The imperial guards quickly succeeded in catching Okinamaro and drove him out of the palace grounds. Poor dog! He used to swagger about so happily. Recently, on the third day of the Third Month,[244] when the controller first secretary paraded him through the palace grounds, Okinamaro was adorned with garlands of willow leaves, peach blossoms on his head, and cherry blossoms around his body. How could the dog have imagined that this would be his fate? We all felt sorry for him. "When Her Majesty was having her meals," recalled one of the ladies-in-waiting, "Okinamaro always used to be in attendance and sit across from us. How I miss him!"

It was about noon, a few days after Okinamaro's banishment, that we heard a dog howling fearfully. How could any dog possibly cry so long? All the other dogs rushed out in excitement to see what was happening. Meanwhile, a woman who served as a cleaner in the palace latrines ran up to us. "It's terrible," she said. "Two of the chamberlains are flogging a dog. They'll surely kill him. He's being punished for having come back after he was banished. It's Tadataka and Sanefusa who are beating him." Obviously the victim was Okinamaro. I was absolutely wretched and sent a servant to ask the men to stop, but just then the howling finally ceased. "He's dead," one of the servants informed me. "They've thrown his body outside the gate."

That evening, while we were sitting in the palace bemoaning Okinamaro's fate, a wretched-looking dog walked in; he was trembling all over, and his body was fearfully swollen.

243. One of the officials in the emperor's private office, which was in charge of matters relating to the emperor and his palace.

244. A festival day marked by banquets held beside garden streams and by ritual purification. It was also known as the Peach Festival (Momo no sekku).

"Oh dear," said one of the ladies-in-waiting. "Can this be Okinamaro? We haven't seen any other dog like him recently, have we?"

We called to him by name, but the dog did not respond. Some of us insisted that it was Okinamaro; others that it was not. "Please send for Lady Ukon," said the empress, hearing our discussion. "She will certainly be able to tell." We immediately went to Ukon's room and told her she was wanted on an urgent matter.

"Is this Okinamaro?" the empress asked her, pointing to the dog.

"Well," said Ukon, "it certainly looks like him, but I cannot believe that this loathsome creature is really our Okinamaro. When I called Okinamaro, he always used to come to me, wagging his tail. But this dog does not react at all. No, it cannot be the same one. And besides, wasn't Okinamaro beaten to death and his body thrown away? How could any dog be alive after being flogged by two strong men?" Hearing this, Her Majesty was very unhappy.

When it got dark, we gave the dog something to eat, but he refused it, and we finally decided that this could not be Okinamaro.

On the following morning I went to attend the empress while her hair was being dressed and she was performing her ablutions. I was holding up the mirror for her when the dog we had seen on the previous evening slunk into the room and crouched next to one of the pillars. "Poor Okinamaro!" I said. "He had such a dreadful beating yesterday. How sad to think he is dead! I wonder what body he has been born into this time. Oh, how he must have suffered!"

At that moment the dog lying by the pillar started to shake and tremble and shed a flood of tears. It was astounding. So this really was Okinamaro! On the previous night it was to avoid betraying himself that he had refused to answer to his name. We were immensely moved and pleased. "Well, well, Okinamaro!" I said, putting down the mirror. The dog stretched himself flat on the floor and yelped loudly, so that the empress beamed with delight. All the ladies gathered round, and Her Majesty summoned Lady Ukon. When the empress explained what had happened, everyone talked and laughed with great excitement.

The news reached His Majesty, and he too came to the empress's room. "It's amazing," he said with a smile. "To think that even a dog has such deep feelings!" When the emperor's ladies-in-waiting heard the story, they too came along in a great crowd. "Okinamaro!" we called, and this time the dog rose and limped about the room with his swollen face. "He must have a meal prepared for him," I said. "Yes," said the empress, laughing happily, "now that Okinamaro has finally told us who he is."

The chamberlain, Tadataka, was informed, and he hurried along from the Table Room.[245] "Is it really true?" he asked. "Please let me see for myself." I sent a maid to him with the following reply: "Alas, I am afraid that this is not

245. A room with a large table adjoining the imperial dining room.

the same dog after all." "Well," answered Tadataka, "whatever you say, I shall sooner or later have occasion to see the animal. You won't be able to hide him from me indefinitely."

Before long, Okinamaro was granted an imperial pardon and returned to his former happy state. Yet even now, when I remember how he whimpered and trembled in response to our sympathy, it strikes me as a strange and moving scene; when people talk to me about it, I start crying myself.

The Sliding Screen in the Back of the Hall (11)

The sliding screen in the back of the hall in the northeast corner of Seiryō Palace is decorated with paintings of the stormy sea and of the terrifying creatures with long arms and long legs that live there.[246] When the doors of the empress's room were open, we could always see this screen. One day we were sitting in the room, laughing at the paintings and remarking how unpleasant they were. By the balustrade of the veranda stood a large celadon vase, full of magnificent cherry branches; some of them were as much as five feet long, and their blossoms overflowed to the very foot of the railing. Toward noon the major counselor, Fujiwara no Korechika,[247] arrived. He was dressed in a cherry-color court cloak, sufficiently worn to have lost its stiffness, a white underrobe, and loose trousers of dark purple; from beneath the cloak shone the pattern of another robe of dark red damask. Since His Majesty was present, Korechika knelt on the narrow wooden platform in front of the door and reported to him on official matters.

A group of ladies-in-waiting was seated behind the bamboo blinds. Their cherry-color Chinese jackets hung loosely over their shoulders with the collars pulled back; they wore robes of wisteria, golden yellow, and other colors, many of which showed beneath the blind covering the half shutter. Presently the noise of the attendants' feet told us that dinner was about to be served in the Daytime Chamber, and we heard cries of "Make way. Make way."

The bright, serene day delighted me. When the chamberlains had brought all the dishes into the chamber, they came to announce that dinner was ready, and His Majesty left by the middle door. After accompanying the emperor, Korechika returned to his previous place on the veranda beside the cherry blossoms. The empress pushed aside her curtain of state and came forward as far as the threshold. We were overwhelmed by the whole delightful scene. It was then that Korechika slowly intoned the words of the old poem,

246. According to traditional Chinese beliefs, the northeast was the unlucky direction. The sliding screen "protected" this room from the northern veranda of the palace by scaring away any evil spirits that might be lurking in the vicinity.

247. Korechika, the elder brother of the empress, who was appointed to major counselor in 992.

The days and the months flow by,
but Mount Mimoro lasts forever.[248]

Deeply impressed, I wished that all this might indeed continue for a thousand years.

As soon as the ladies serving in the Daytime Chamber had called for the gentlemen-in-waiting to remove the trays, His Majesty returned to the empress's room. Then he told me to rub some ink on the inkstone. Dazzled, I felt that I should never be able to take my eyes off his radiant countenance. Next he folded a piece of white paper. "I should like each of you," he said, "to copy down on this paper the first ancient poem that comes into your head."

"How am I going to manage this?" I asked Korechika, who was still out on the veranda.

"Write your poem quickly," he said, "and show it to His Majesty. We men must not interfere in this." Ordering an attendant to take the emperor's inkstone to each of the women in the room, he told us to make haste. "Write down any poem you happen to remember," he said. "The Naniwazu[249] or whatever else you can think of."

For some reason I was overcome with timidity; I blushed and had no idea what to do. Some of the other women managed to put down poems about the spring, the blossoms, and such suitable subjects; then they handed me the paper and said, "Now it's your turn." Picking up the brush, I wrote the poem that goes,

The years have passed
and age has come my way.
Yet I need only look at this fair flower
for all my cares to melt away.

I altered the third line, however, to read, "Yet I need only look upon my lord."[250]

When he had finished reading, the emperor said, "I asked you to write these poems because I wanted to find out how quick you really were.

"A few years ago," he continued, "Emperor En'yū ordered all his courtiers to write poems in a notebook. Some excused themselves on the grounds that their handwriting was poor; but the emperor insisted, saying that he did not

248. From the *Man'yōshū*.

249. A famous poem attributed to the Korean scholar Wani and later to Emperor Nintoku. Children in the Heian period were taught the poem for writing practice.

250. Fujiwara no Yoshifusa, *Kokinshū*, no. 52.

care in the slightest about their handwriting or even whether their poems were suitable for the season. So they all had to swallow their embarrassment and produce something for the occasion. Among them was His Excellency, our present chancellor, who was then middle captain of the third rank. He wrote down the old poem,

Like the sea that beats
upon the shores of Izumo
as the tide sweeps in,
deeper it grows and deeper—
the love I bear for you.

"But he changed the last line to read, 'The love I bear my lord!,' and the emperor was full of praise."

When I heard His Majesty tell this story, I was so overcome that I felt myself perspiring. It occurred to me that no younger woman would have been able to use my poem, and I felt very lucky. This sort of test can be a terrible ordeal: it often happens that people who usually write fluently are so overawed that they actually make mistakes in their characters.

Next the empress placed a notebook of *Kokinshū* poems in front of her and started reading out the first three lines of each one, asking us to supply the remainder. Among them were several famous poems that we had in our minds day and night; yet for some strange reason we were often unable to fill in the missing lines. Lady Saishō, for example, could manage only ten, which hardly qualified her as knowing her *Kokinshū*. Some of the other women, even less successful, could remember only about half a dozen poems. They would have done better to tell the empress quite simply that they had forgotten the lines; instead they came out with great lamentations like "Oh dear, how could we have done so badly in answering the questions that Your Majesty was pleased to put to us?"—all of which I found rather absurd.

When no one could complete a particular poem, the empress continued reading to the end. This produced further wails from the women: "Oh, we all knew that one! How could we be so stupid?"

"Those of you," said the empress, "who had taken the trouble to copy out the *Kokinshū* several times would have been able to complete every single poem I have read. In the reign of Emperor Murakami there was a woman at court known as the Imperial Lady of Sen'yō Palace. She was the daughter of the minister of the left who lived in the Smaller Palace of the First Ward, and of course you all have heard of her. When she was still a young girl, her father gave her this advice: 'First you must study penmanship. Next you must learn to play the seven-string zither better than anyone else. And also you must memorize all the poems in the twenty volumes of the *Kokinshū*.'

"Emperor Murakami," continued Her Majesty, "had heard this story and remembered it years later when the girl had grown up and become an imperial consort. Once, on a day of abstinence,[251] he came into her room, hiding a notebook of *Kokinshū* poems in the folds of his robe. He surprised her by seating himself behind a curtain of state; then, opening the book, he asked, 'Tell me the verse written by such-and-such a poet, in such-and-such a year and on such-and-such an occasion.' The lady understood what was afoot and that it was all in fun, yet the possibility of making a mistake or forgetting one of the poems must have worried her greatly. Before beginning the test, the emperor had summoned a couple of ladies-in-waiting who were particularly adept in poetry and told them to mark each incorrect reply by a *go* stone. What a splendid scene it must have been! You know, I really envy anyone who attended that emperor even as a lady-in-waiting.

"Well," Her Majesty went on, "he then began questioning her. She answered without any hesitation, just giving a few words or phrases to show that she knew each poem. And never once did she make a mistake. After a time the emperor began to resent the lady's flawless memory and decided to stop as soon as he detected any error or vagueness in her replies. Yet, after he had gone through ten books of the *Kokinshū*, he had still not caught her out. At this stage he declared that it would be useless to continue. Marking where he had left off, he went to bed. What a triumph for the lady!

"He slept for some time. On waking, he decided that he must have a final verdict and that if he waited until the following day to examine her on the other ten volumes, she might use the time to refresh her memory. So he would have to settle the matter that very night. Ordering his attendants to bring up the bedroom lamp, he resumed his questions. By the time he had finished all twenty volumes, the night was well advanced; and still the lady had not made a mistake.

"During all this time His Excellency, the lady's father, was in a state of great agitation. As soon as he was informed that the emperor was testing his daughter, he sent his attendants to various temples to arrange for special recitations of the scriptures. Then he turned in the direction of the imperial palace and spent a long time in prayer. Such enthusiasm for poetry is really rather moving."

The emperor, who had been listening to the whole story, was much impressed. "How can he possibly have read so many poems?" he remarked when Her Majesty had finished. "I doubt whether I could get through three or four volumes. But of course things have changed. In the old days even people of humble station had a taste for the arts and were interested in elegant pastimes. Such a story would hardly be possible nowadays, would it?"

251. One of the frequent inauspicious days determined by the masters of divination, when, according to current superstition, it was essential to stay indoors and, as much as possible, to abstain from all activities, including eating, sexual intercourse, and even such seemingly innocuous acts as reading a letter.

The ladies in attendance on Her Majesty and the emperor's own ladies-in-waiting who had been admitted into Her Majesty's presence began chatting eagerly, and as I listened I felt that my cares had really "melted away."

Depressing Things (13)

A dog howling in the daytime. A wickerwork fishnet in spring.[252] A red plum-blossom dress[253] in the Third or Fourth Month. A lying-in room when the baby has died. A cold, empty brazier. An ox driver who hates his oxen. A scholar whose wife has one girl child after another.[254]

One has gone to a friend's house to avoid an unlucky direction,[255] but nothing is done to entertain one; if this should happen at the time of a seasonal change, it is still more depressing.

A letter arrives from the provinces, but no gift accompanies it. It would be bad enough if such a letter reached one in the provinces from someone in the capital; but then at least it would have interesting news about goings-on in society, and that would be a consolation.

One has written a letter, taking pains to make it as attractive as possible, and now one impatiently awaits the reply. "Surely the messenger should be back by now," one thinks. Just then he returns; but in his hand he carries not a reply but one's own letter, still twisted or knotted[256] as it was sent, but now so dirty and crumpled that even the ink mark on the outside has disappeared. "Not at home," announces the messenger, or else, "They said they were observing a day of abstinence and would not accept it." Oh, how depressing!

Again, one has sent one's carriage to fetch someone who had said he would definitely pay one a visit on that day. Finally it returns with a great clatter, and the servants hurry out with cries of "Here they come!" But next one hears the carriage being pulled into the coach house, and the unfastened shafts clatter to the ground. "What does this mean?" one asks. "The person was not at home,"

252. These nets were designed for catching whitebait during the winter; in springtime they were useless.

253. Dresses of this color could be worn only during the Eleventh and Twelfth Months.

254. Scholarly activities, like most other specialized occupations, tended to run in families, and they were not considered suitable for girls.

255. When a master of divination informed someone that a certain direction was "blocked" by one of the invisible, moving deities central to Heian superstition, he or she might circumvent the danger by first proceeding in a different direction. Then after stopping on the way at an intermediate place and staying there at least until midnight, that person would continue to the intended destination.

256. The two main types of formal letters were "knotted" and "twisted." Both were folded lengthwise into a narrow strip; but whereas the knotted kind was knotted in the middle or at one end, the twisted kind was twisted at both ends and tended to be narrower.

Embarrassing Things (63)

While entertaining a visitor, one hears some servants chatting without any restraint in one of the back rooms. It is embarrassing to know that one's visitor can overhear. But how to stop them?

A man whom one loves gets drunk and keeps repeating himself.

To have spoken about someone not knowing that he could overhear. This is embarrassing even if it is a servant or some other completely insignificant person.

To hear one's servants making merry. This is equally annoying if one is on a journey and staying in cramped quarters or at home and hears the servants in a neighboring room.

Parents, convinced that their ugly child is adorable, pet him and repeat the things he has said, imitating his voice.

An ignoramus who in the presence of some learned person puts on a knowing air and converses about men of old.

A man recites his own poems (not especially good ones) and tells one about the praise they have received—most embarrassing.

Lying awake at night, one says something to one's companion, who simply goes on sleeping.

In the presence of a skilled musician, someone plays a zither just for his own pleasure and without tuning it.

A son-in-law who has long since stopped visiting his wife runs into his father-in-law in a public place.

Things That Give a Hot Feeling (78)

The hunting costume of the head of a guards escort.

A patchwork surplice.

The captain in attendance at the imperial games.

An extremely fat person with a lot of hair.

A zither bag.

A holy teacher performing a rite of incantation at noon in the Sixth or Seventh Month. Or at the same time of the year a coppersmith working in his foundry.

Things That Have Lost Their Power (80)

A large boat that is high and dry in a creek at ebb tide.

A woman who has taken off her false locks to comb the short hair that remains.

A large tree that has been blown down in a gale and lies on its side with its roots in the air.

The retreating figure of a sumo wrestler who has been defeated in a match.[279]

A man of no importance reprimanding an attendant.

An old man who removes his hat, uncovering his scanty topknot.

A woman, who is angry with her husband about some trifling matter, leaves home and goes somewhere to hide. She is certain that he will rush about looking for her; but he does nothing of the kind and shows the most infuriating indifference. Since she cannot stay away forever, she swallows her pride and returns.

Awkward Things (81)

One has gone to a house and asked to see someone; but the wrong person appears, thinking that it is he who is wanted; this is especially awkward if one has brought a present.

One has allowed oneself to speak badly about someone without really intending to do so; a young child who has overheard it all goes and repeats what one has said in front of the person in question.

Someone sobs out a pathetic story. One is deeply moved; but it so happens that not a single tear comes to one's eyes—most awkward. Although one makes one's face look as if one is going to cry, it is no use: not a single tear will come. Yet there are times when, having heard something happy, one feels the tears streaming out.

279. Sumo-wrestling tournaments usually took place in the imperial palace every year at the end of the Seventh Month, with skilled fighters being specially recruited from the provinces.

Adorable Things (99)

The face of a child drawn on a melon.[280]

A baby sparrow that comes hopping up when one imitates the squeak of a mouse; or again, when one has tied it with a thread round its leg and its parents bring insects or worms and pop them in its mouth—delightful!

A baby of two or so is crawling rapidly along the ground. With his sharp eyes he catches sight of a tiny object and, picking it up with his pretty little fingers, takes it to show to a grown-up person.

A child, whose hair has been cut like a nun's,[281] is examining something; the hair falls over his eyes, but instead of brushing it away he holds his head to the side. The pretty white cords of his trouser skirt are tied round his shoulders, and this too is most adorable.

A young palace page, who is still quite small, walks by in ceremonial costume.

One picks up a pretty baby and holds him for a while in one's arms; while one is fondling him, he clings to one's neck and then falls asleep.

The objects used during the Display of Dolls.

One picks up a tiny lotus leaf that is floating on a pond and examines it. Not only lotus leaves, but little hollyhock flowers, and indeed all small things, are most adorable.

An extremely plump baby, who is about a year old and has lovely white skin, comes crawling toward one, dressed in a long gauze robe of violet with the sleeves tucked up.

A little boy of about eight who reads aloud from a book in his childish voice.

Pretty, white chicks who are still not fully fledged and look as if their clothes are too short for them; cheeping loudly, they follow one on their long legs or walk close to the mother hen.

Duck eggs.

An urn containing the relics of some holy person.

Wild pinks.

When I First Went into Waiting (116)

When I first went into waiting at Her Majesty's court, so many different things embarrassed me that I could not even add them up and I was always on the verge of tears. As a result I tried to avoid appearing before the empress except at night, and even then I stayed hidden behind a three-foot curtain of state.

280. Drawing faces on melons was a popular pastime, especially for women and children.

281. That is, cut at shoulder length.

On one occasion Her Majesty brought out some pictures and showed them to me, but I was so ill at ease that I could hardly stretch out my hand to take them. She pointed to one picture after another, explaining what each represented. Since the lamp had been put on a low tray-stand, one could view the pictures even better than in the daytime, and every hair of my head was clearly visible. I managed to control my embarrassment and had a proper look. It was a very cold time of the year, and when Her Majesty gave me the paintings I could hardly see her hands;[282] but from what I made out, they were of a light pink hue that I found extraordinarily attractive. I gazed at the empress with amazement. Simple as I was and unaccustomed to such wonderful sights, I did not understand how a being like this could possibly exist in our world.

At dawn I was about to hurry back to my room when Her Majesty said, "Even the god of Kazuraki would stay a little longer." So I sat down again, but I leaned forward sideways in such a way that Her Majesty could not see me directly and kept the lattice shut. One of the ladies who came into the room noticed this and said that it should be opened. A servant heard her and started toward it, but Her Majesty said, "Wait. Leave the lattice as it is." The two women went out, laughing to each other.

Her Majesty then asked me various questions and finally said, "I am sure you want to return to your room. So off you go! But be sure to come again this evening—and early too."

As soon as I had crept out of Her Majesty's presence and was back in my room, I threw open all the lattices and looked out at the magnificent snow.

During the day I received several notes from Her Majesty telling me to come while it was still light. "The sky is clouded with snow," she wrote, "and no one will be able to see you clearly."

Noticing my hesitation, the lady in charge of my room[283] urged me, saying, "I don't know how you can stay shut up like this all day long. Her Majesty has granted you the extraordinary good fortune of being admitted into her presence, and she must certainly have her reasons. To be unresponsive to another person's kindness is a most hateful way to behave." This was enough to make me hurry back to the empress; but I was overcome with embarrassment, and it was not easy for me.

On my way I was delighted to see the snow beautifully piled on top of the fire huts. When I entered Her Majesty's room, I noticed that the usual square brazier was full to the brim with burning charcoal and that no one was sitting next to it. The empress herself was seated in front of a round brazier made of

282. Because they were covered by her sleeves. In the winter the long sleeves of Heian robes served as a sort of muff.

283. The lady-in-waiting in charge of a number of younger maids of honor who lived in the same room or set of rooms.

shen[284] wood and decorated with pear-skin lacquer. She was surrounded by a group of high-ranking ladies who were in constant attendance on her. In the next part of the room a tightly packed row of ladies-in-waiting sat in front of a long, rectangular brazier, with their Chinese jackets worn in such a way that they trailed on the floor. Observing how experienced they were in their duties and how easily they carried them out, I could not help feeling envious. There was not a trace of awkwardness in any of their movements as they got up to deliver notes to Her Majesty from the outside and sat down again by the brazier, talking and laughing to one another. When would I ever be able to manage like that, I wondered nervously. Still farther in the back of the room sat a small group of ladies who were looking at pictures together.

After a while I heard the voices of outrunners loudly ordering people to make way. "His Excellency the chancellor is coming," said one of the ladies, and they all cleared away their scattered belongings. I retired to the back of the room; but despite my modesty, I was curious to see the great man in person and I peeped through a crack at the bottom of the curtain of state where I was sitting. It turned out that it was not Michitaka but his son, Korechika, the major counselor. The purple of his court cloak and trousers looked magnificent against the white snow. "I should not have come," he said, standing next to one of the pillars, "because both yesterday and today are days of abstinence. But it has been snowing so hard that I felt bound to call and find out whether you were all right."

"How did you manage?" said Her Majesty. "I thought that all the paths were buried."

"Well," replied Korechika, "it occurred to me that I might move your heart."[285]

Could anything surpass this conversation between the empress and her brother? This was the sort of exchange that is so eloquently described in romances; and the empress herself, arrayed in a white dress, a robe of white Chinese damask, and two more layers of scarlet damask, over which her hair hung down loosely at the back, had a beauty that I had seen in paintings but never in real life: it was all like a dream.

Korechika joked with the ladies-in-waiting, and they replied without the slightest embarrassment, freely arguing with him and contradicting his remarks when they disagreed. I was absolutely dazzled by it all and found myself blushing without any particular reason. Korechika ate a few pieces of fruit and told one of the servants to offer some to the empress. He must have asked who was

284. A region in China that produced a type of aromatic wood imported into Japan and used for making braziers, and so forth.

285. From a poem by Taira no Kanemori: "Here in my mountain home the snow is deep and the paths are buried. Truly would he move my heart—the man who came today."

behind the curtain of state and one of the ladies must have told him that it was I, for he stood up and walked to the back of the room. At first I thought he was leaving, but instead he came and sat very close to me; he began to talk about various things he had heard about me before I came into waiting and asked whether they were true. I had been embarrassed enough when I had been looking at him from a distance with the curtain of state between us; now that we were actually facing each other I felt extremely stupid and could hardly believe that this was really happening to me.

In the past, when I had gone to watch imperial processions and the like, Korechika had sometimes glanced in the direction of my carriage; but I had always pulled the inner blinds close together and hidden my face behind a fan for fear that he might see my silhouette through the blinds. I wondered how I could ever have chosen to embark on a career for which I was so ill suited by nature. What on earth should I say to him? I was bathed in sweat and altogether in a terrible state. To make matters worse, Korechika now seized the fan behind which I had prudently hidden myself, and I realized that my hair must be scattered all over my forehead in a terrible mess; no doubt everything about my appearance revealed the embarrassment I felt at that moment.

I had hoped Korechika would leave quickly, but he showed no sign of doing so; instead he sat there, toying with my fan and asking who had done the paintings on it. I kept my head lowered and pressed the sleeve of my Chinese jacket to my face—so tightly indeed, that bits of powder must have stuck to it, making my complexion all mottled.

The empress, who no doubt realized how desperately I wanted Korechika to leave, turned to him and said, "Look at this notebook. Whose writing do you suppose it is?" I was relieved to think that now he would finally go; but instead he asked her to have the book brought to him so that he could examine it. "Really," she said. "You can perfectly well come here yourself and have a look." "No I can't," he replied. "'Shōnagon has got hold of me and won't let go." It was a very fashionable sort of joke but hardly suited to my rank or age, and I felt terribly ill at ease. Her Majesty held up the book, in which something had been written in a cursive script, and looked at it. "Well indeed," said Korechika, "whose can it be? Let's show it to Shōnagon. I am sure she can recognize the handwriting of anyone in the world." The aim of all these absurd remarks, of course, was to draw me out.

As if a single gentleman were not enough to embarrass me, another one now arrived, preceded by outrunners who cleared the way for him. This gentleman too was wearing a court cloak, and he looked even more splendid than Korechika. He sat down and started telling some amusing stories, which delighted the ladies-in-waiting. "Oh yes," they said, laughing, "we saw Lord So-and-so when he was—." As I heard them mention the names of one senior courtier after another, I felt they must be talking about spirits or heavenly beings who had descended to earth. Yet, after some time had passed and I had grown

accustomed to court service, I realized that there had been nothing very impressive about their conversation. No doubt these same ladies, who talked so casually to Lord Korechika, had been just as embarrassed as I was when they first came into waiting but had little by little become used to court society until their shyness had naturally disappeared.

The empress spoke to me for a while and then asked, "Are you really fond of me?" "But Your Majesty," I replied, "how could I possibly not be fond of you?" Just then someone sneezed loudly in the Table Room. "Oh dear!" said the empress. "So you're telling a lie.[286] Well, so be it." And she retired into the back of the room.

To think that Her Majesty believed I was lying! If I had said that I was *fairly* fond of her, that would have been untrue. The real liar, I thought, was the sneezer's nose. Who could have done such a terrible thing? I dislike sneezes at the best of times, and whenever I feel like sneezing myself I deliberately smother it. All the more hateful was it that someone should have sneezed at this moment. But I was still far too inexperienced to say anything that might have repaired the damage, and since the day was dawning, I retired to my room. As soon as I arrived, a servant brought me an elegant-looking letter, written on fine, smooth paper of light green. "This is what Her Majesty feels," I read.

> How, if there were no God Tadasu in the sky,
> and none to judge what is the truth and what a lie,
> how should I know which words were falsely said?

My emotions were a jumble of delight and dismay, and once again I wished I could find out who had sneezed on the previous night. "Please give Her Majesty the following reply," I said, "and help me make up for the harm that has been done.

> 'A simple sneeze might give the lie
> To one whose love is small,
> But sad indeed that she who truly loves,
> Should suffer from so slight a thing!

The curse of God Shiki[287] is of course very terrible.'"

Even after I had sent my reply I still felt most unhappy and wondered why someone should have had to sneeze at such an inopportune moment.

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286. Sneezing, in Heian Japan, suggested that the last person who had spoken was not telling the truth.

287. Shiki was the name of a demon invoked by magicians and other practitioners of the occult when they wished to put a curse on someone.