

I

Neither in the past nor in the time to come could one imagine a person comparable to
5 the High Lord of Horikawa. I heard that, before his birth, Dai Itoku-Myo-o, the King
of Magical Science, appeared at his mother's bedside. From birth, Horikawa was
different from the others. Of all the things he ever did, I cannot recall an act that did
not deserve our wonderment. To mention an example among many, the structure of
10 his palace – how should I define it? – Immense? Grandiose? – was so astounding as to
surpass the boundaries of our limited imagination. Some went so far as to compare
his temperament and conduct to those of the First Emperor of the Ch'in or the
Emperor Yang, although, while considering this comparison, we should keep in mind
the idea that different people have different opinions, as with the proverbial blind
15 men who touched different parts of an elephant and drew contradicting conclusions
about the animal. Contrary to those emperors, our lord's intention was never to
enjoy the luxury life can provide. He had a kind and generous heart that would
partake in the happiness and distress of all, even the humblest among his subjects.
For these reasons, when he encountered a procession of ghosts in the large palace of
20 Nijo, he was able to pass through them unscathed. And when the spirit of Secretary
Tooru prowled every night the Kawaranoin Palace in Higashi-Sanjo, famed for the
garden inspired by the marine landscape of Shiogama in the Michinoku province, the
Lord reprimanded it, after which the spectre vanished forever. Of course, as soon as
the people of Kyoto, young and old, men and women, heard Horikawa's name, they
would genuflect as if they had seen Buddha's avatar.

25 One day, on his way home from the banquet of the Plum Blossoms, one of the oxen
pulling his cart broke away and injured an old man who was passing by. It is
rumoured that the old man joined his hands to express his gratitude for having been
touched by the hoof of the Lord's ox.

His life was full of many memorable facts, most of which should be bequeathed to
30 posterity.

During a court banquet, the Emperor gave him thirty horses, all of them
white...Once, when construction work on the Nagara Bridge was damaged, he offered
his favourite boy attendants as human pillars to propitiate the gods...He had a
carbuncle removed from his thigh by a Chinese bonze who had introduced the
35 magical healing methods of a celebrated Chinese physician. If I should recount all the
anecdotes, I would never finish. But among all these episodes, none surpasses in

horror the story of the Hell scene painted on a screen that is now part of the Lord's family treasure. Even the High Lord, who was usually impassive, seemed to have been utterly shocked by the events. No need to explain that we, his attendants, were frightened out of our wits. In more than twenty years passed in the service of the Lord, I had never witnessed more horrid a spectacle.

But before telling you the story, I must introduce the painter called Yoshihide, the author of the Hell scene on the screen.

II

Yoshihide! Some people may even remember him today. In his time he was considered the first among painters, an unrivalled artist. When what I am going to relate happened, he was already over fifty. At first sight, he appeared to be a short, cantankerous old man, all skin and bone. Each time he came to the Lord's palace, he wore a clove-dyed hunting garment and a floppy eboshi on his head, but he had a vulgar appearance and his lips, too red for his age, had an unsettling bestial quality. I do not know for sure the cause of this red colour. Some said he had the habit of licking his paintbrush. Others, more slanderous, compared his appearance and gait to those of a monkey and nicknamed him Saruhide (Monkey-hide).

About this moniker, this is the story I heard. Our Monkeyhide had an only daughter, who was fifteen years old and served as a lady-in-waiting in the Lord's palace. This girl, intelligent and observant beyond her age because she had lost her mother when she was little and had taken care of herself, was charming and very beautiful. For these reasons, she had won the good graces of Her Ladyship and all the waiting ladies.

Someone from the province of Tamba, west of Kyoto, had offered a well-trained monkey to the Lord. The Prince, the Lord's young son, who was at the time in the age of mischievousness, named the monkey Yoshihide. The monkey's gestures were amusing indeed, and everyone in the palace laughed at the animal. If this mockery had been all, things would not have been that bad for the monkey, but each time it climbed up the pine tree in the garden or soiled the mats in the Prince's bedroom, everyone chased him, shouting, 'Yoshihide, Yoshihide,' to tease the poor beast.

One day, Yoshihide's daughter, Yuzuki, passed through the long corridor, carrying a letter attached to a winter-plum branch, when she saw the small monkey come from beyond the sliding door and run toward her. The monkey limped and seemed incapable of climbing up one of the palace columns as she used to do. The Prince ran after the monkey, a switch in his hand, and cried, 'Stop, tangerine thief! Stop.'

At this sight, the young woman stopped for an instant. Just then, the monkey flopped down at her feet, gripped the hem of her kimono and begged her with doleful cries.

She could not refrain from feeling compassion. Holding the plum branch with one hand, she picked the monkey up with the other, her long mauve-coloured sleeve flying.

5 'Lord,' she said in a smoothly agreeable voice, bowing. 'Let me intercede in this monkey's favour. It is only a beast. Prithee, forgive it.'

But the Prince had been chasing the monkey with determination. He made a face and stamped his foot three times. 'Why do you wish to protect it? This monkey is a tangerine thief, I tell you.'

10 'It is a beast,' she repeated. Then she took on a sad expression and dared say, 'When I hear that name, Yoshihide, I have the impression my father is being reprimanded.'

Hearing this remark, the Prince, arrogant or not, gave in. 'I see. If you ask in the name of your father, I will pardon the monkey.' Then he threw the switch down and went back through the sliding door whence he had come.

III

15 From that day on, Yoshihide's daughter and the monkey became fast friends. She tied a beautiful red ribbon around the animal's neck, and also hung a tiny bell she had received from the young Princess. The monkey would leave her presence on no account. Once, Yuzuki had to stay in bed with a light cold, and the monkey watched over her, gnawing on its fingernails in apparent concern.

20 Now things took a peculiar turn. No one would mistreat the monkey any longer. On the contrary, they all began petting it. Not only did the Prince throw persimmons or chestnuts to the monkey, once His Highness became furious because some samurai had shot a kick at the little beast. This news reaching his ears, the Lord gave gracious orders that girl and monkey be brought before his presence. He must also have
25 known why the girl had come to protect the beast.

'You are a good and dutiful daughter,' the Lord said. 'I am pleased with you.' With these words, she received a scarlet hakama from the Lord.

30 The monkey mimicked the girl's deference by raising the hem of the robe to its forehead, to the Lord's immense amusement and pleasure. You can see that the Lord took the young woman into his good grace because he had been impressed with her filial piety, not because he admired her charms, as it was whispered. The rumours might have been justified on some grounds, but I will talk about such things later on. Suffice it to say that the Lord was not one to fall for as lowly a girl as a painter's daughter, no matter how charming.

The girl withdrew from the Lord's presence feeling highly honoured, but being naturally wise and intelligent, she did nothing to awake her fellow maids' jealousy. On the contrary, this honour won the ladies' favour for both herself and her monkey. Her Ladyship loved Yuzuki so much she kept the lady-in-waiting in her constant presence and brought her everywhere she went in her princely carriage.

Now let me set the girl aside for a while as I tell you about her father, Yoshihide. Although Yoshihide the monkey came to be loved by everyone, Yoshihide the painter continued to be hated by everyone. And they went on calling him 'Monkeyhide' behind his back. The residents of the palace were not alone in this general dislike.

The great priest of Yokawa, for example, would turn red in the face at the mere mention of Yoshihide's name, as if he had seen a devil (as the rumour had it, Yoshihide had painted the priest in a humoristic scene depicting his conduct, but I know of no foundation proving the rumour true). At any rate, Yoshihide had a bad reputation everywhere. If one or two people did not speak ill of him, they were his fellow painters, who had seen his paintings but had never met him in person.

Not only had Yoshihide a vulgar aspect, he also had such shocking habits that everyone considered him a nuisance. For this reputation, he had no one but himself to blame.

IV

He was avaricious, mean, cowardly, lazy and insatiable, but above all he was insolent and conceited. Always 'I, the greatest painter in Japan' was plastered across his forehead. His bad temperament manifested itself beyond his work, through a profound contempt for all customs and practices in life. According to an apprentice who had lived with him for a long time, one day a spirit was spouting a terrible oracle from the mouth of the famous medium of Higaki. Yoshihide, turning a deaf ear to the oracle, took the brush and ink he always carried and painted the medium's frightening face. Our painter deemed the eventuality of being cursed by a spirit as serious as a child's play.

Yoshihide did inconceivably sacrilegious things. In picturing the goddess Kichijoten, he copied the face of an abject courtesan, and in picturing the King of the Magical Science Fudo, the god that destroys all demons, he copied a thief's figure, and so on, but if someone reprimanded him he answered impudently, 'How strange. Do you really believe the deities Yoshihide painted will hit him with lightning?' When he spoke in this way many of his own disciples took leave of him in fearful anticipation of terrible consequences. In other words, Yoshihide was arrogance incarnate – he truly thought he was the smartest man under the sun.

No need to say how highly he esteemed himself as a painter. His paintings were so different in brushwork and colouring from those of other painters that many of his colleagues, who were on bad terms with him, considered him an impostor. Several legends affirmed that the famous paintings by the ancient masters like Kawanari, Kanaoka and others were so well rendered that one could smell the fragrance of the plum blossoms painted on the doors as the delicate scent wafted about in the moonlit nights, and one could also hear the courtiers painted on a screen play their flutes. But all the paintings by Yoshihide seemed to elicit disturbing feelings. One would cite the scene of the Goshushoji, the cycle of births and deaths, hung on the portal of the Ryugai temple. Each time one passed under the gate at night, one could hear the celestial creatures sigh and sob. Some said they could smell the stench of rotting corpses. As rumour had it, the waiting ladies whose likenesses Yoshihide had painted at the Lord's command all fell ill and died within a few years. According to the slanderers, those events were proofs of Yoshihide's dabbling in black arts. His paintings, the critics said, were cursed. Being an eccentric, Yoshihide took pride in these rumours.

Once, when the Lord told him, as a joke, 'It would seem you are partial to ugliness,' he replied with arrogance, a grin on that strangely red mouth of his, 'That is true, my Lord. It is an unaccomplished artist who cannot perceive beauty in ugliness.'

Notwithstanding his superiority over any other painter in the country, how could he make such a haughty reply to the Lord? His apprentices secretly nicknamed him 'Chira-Eiju.' Maybe you already know that Chira-Eiju was the name of a Tengu, who came from China in older times.

Nevertheless, even the insufferable, shameless Yoshihide was not without feelings; one, single human emotion remained within him.

V

Yoshihide adored his only daughter, the little lady-in-waiting, and his love for her bordered on madness. As I said before, she was sweet and devoted to her father. It seemed strange that, to this avaricious man, nothing was beautiful enough for his daughter: kimono, hairpins and expensive hairdressers. Although he never contributed his tithes or mites to any Buddhist temple, he doted so much on her no expense was too extravagant for the girl's adornment, although I do not know if this rumour is true. He adored her wildly and madly, and he never gave any thought to finding her a good husband. On the contrary, if anyone had courted her, he would have hired street assassins to get rid of the suitor in the dead of night. When the Lord expressed the wish of having the painter's daughter as a lady-in-waiting, Yoshihide was so displeased he came to the palace with a sour face, even in the presence of the

Lord himself. The rumour that the Lord had called the painter's daughter to the palace because he was enamoured of her beauty might have originated in the displeasure the painter bore so openly. I am sure it was mere gossiping, while it was true that Yoshihide adored his daughter and strongly wished to have her at home with him.

One day, Yoshihide painted a cherub in the likeness of one of the Lord's favourite boys. The Lord, pleased, said to the painter, 'Yoshihide, I will grant any request of yours. So tell me what you wish.'

'If it pleases Your Lordship,' Yoshihide dared say. 'Let my daughter be released from your service.'

The painter's reply would have been conceivable if he had answered another lord, but who would have imagined Yoshihide would be so presumptuous as to ask of the Lord Horikawa to let go of his favourite lady-in-waiting, even though Yoshihide loved his daughter so much?

Even though the Lord was very indulgent, he seemed offended. He stared at the painter for a moment, and then he uttered, 'No. I can't grant that,' and left on the spot.

The two of them found themselves in the same situation four or five times. Thinking back on it, I can recall that the Lord's gaze became ever colder when he looked at the painter. And the painter's daughter wept when she was alone in her room, covering her face with the sleeve of her kimono. Thereafter the rumour spread all the more that the Lord was enamoured of the girl.

Some say that the idea of having the scene from Hell painted on the screen originated in the girl's refusal to comply with the Lord's wishes. No. It was only gossip. I am sure of it.

In our opinion, the Lord did not dismiss the girl because he took pity on her and preferred to let her live in ease and comfort rather than send her back to that misanthropic father of hers. It was certain that the Lord felt affection for such a sweet-tempered girl, but to think His Lordship had amorous motives was a farfetched distortion of truth. No, I dare say it was a perfectly unfounded lie.

Because of the painter's insistence on having his daughter back, His Lordship had come to look upon Yoshihide with considerable disfavour. Despite the Lord's feelings about the painter, one day he summoned him to the palace and commanded him to paint a scene from Hell on a screen.

VI

As I evoke the screen, I have the impression of seeing that terrifying scene before my eyes. The scene painted by Yoshihide was quite different from those of other artists, first of all because of its composition. The Ten Kings of Hell and their households
5 were confined to a corner, while all the rest consisted of wild flames roiling around the Mountain of Swords and the Forest of Spears, which seemed ready to take fire as well. Save for the blue and yellow of the Chinese-styled costumes worn by the governors of Hell, which stood out here and there, everything else was ablaze, tongues of fires occupying all the space, hooked wheels dancing in fury, black smoke
10 drawn with splattered ink and sparks shooting up, done in gold smeared and mingled with soot.

These scene would have sufficed to scare the human eye, but one could also see other personages writhing in agony among the flames. None of these characters ever appeared in the representations of Hell painted by other artists. Yoshihide had
15 depicted every social class, from the noble and the dignitary to the beggar and the outcast: mandarins in formal costume, charming young ladies-in-waiting in elaborate five-pleat dresses, bonzes with rosaries hanging from their necks, vagrant clerics wearing high-wedged clogs, very young handmaids in long, clinging kimonos, fortune-tellers in the robes of Shinto priests, holding a holy stick...I would never have
20 the time to describe each of them. These people, tormented by the Gozumezu, fled in all directions among fire and smoke, like so many leaves scattered by the tempest. The woman who curled up like a spider, her hair caught in a fork, had probably been a shrine medium or a priestess. The man with the halberd sticking out of his heart, upside down like a vampire bat, must have been a young province governor, or
25 something like it. And the uncountable others, flogged with iron whips, crushed under a rock a thousand men could barely move, pecked by weird birds or slashed open by the maws of a poisonous dragon. The punishments were as numerous as the sinners.

One of these horrors, however, stood out in its own horrifying right, surpassing all
30 the rest.

A carriage pulled by oxen descended from above, grazing the tops of the sword trees, which had branches like animal fangs spitting bodies of dead souls. In the carriage, with its bamboo blinds blown upward by the blast of Hell, a court lady was visible, as splendidly dressed as an empress or an imperial concubine, long black hair streaming
35 and white neck bent backward. Among the flames, the lady writhed in agony. This rendering of a court lady writhing in a flame-wreathed carriage conveyed all the terror of Hell. The frightening intensity of the scene was concentrated on this single

personage. It was such an excellent masterpiece the spectator had the impression of hearing desperate screams.

To paint that horrible scene, something terrible must have befallen the artist. Otherwise, how could even a painter as great as Yoshihide depict the horror of Hell in such a vivid manner? He must have traded his life to be able to paint that screen. Indeed, the Hell Yoshihide painted was the very Hell to which he had condemned himself.

I am afraid that in my hurry to describe this strange screen, I have lost the thread of my story. So I will return to the moment when Yoshihide received the order to paint the picture of Hell by the Lord.

VII

For five or six months, Yoshihide absorbed himself in the painting of the screen, without making the briefest courtesy call at the palace. It was strange that, despite his love for his daughter, not once had he the thought of seeing her. According to an apprentice, each time he started painting he became like a man possessed by a fox. In fact, the rumour had it that Yoshihide had gained fame and reputation because he had sworn himself to the vulpine god of Good Fortune.

‘For proof,’ some said, ‘snatch a peek at him while he is painting and you will see the spirits of foxes thronging around him.’

Once he had picked up his brush, he forgot everything but his work. He confined himself to his study and never came out to see the sun. Now that he was painting the screen, his level of inspiration soared.

Shut up in his study with the blinds always drawn, he would mix his secret *mélanges* of colours, and had his apprentices dress up in gala costumes or in poor clothes before painting them with great care in the lamp’s light.

These oddities were usual with him. It would not have taken that special Hell scene to drive him to such extreme eccentricities. For instance, when he painted that scene from the Goshushoji, the Five Phases of the Transmigration of Souls, he once came across rotting corpses in the street; he sat down in front of them and copied faces and hands, down to the single hairs, while normal people averted their eyes.

Concerning the state of inspiration in which he painted that scene from Hell, no one was ever able to imagine it. I do not have the time to give you all the particulars and I will tell you only the notable moments.

While one of his disciples was mixing colours, Yoshihide said abruptly. 'I wish to rest for a while. I've had some bad dreams lately.'

'You have, master?' the apprentice said, without interrupting his work, for Yoshihide's wish for rest was nothing unusual.

- 5 But then the master asked in humble tones, 'Could you sit at my bedside while I'm resting?'

Even though the apprentice did not understand why the master was so worried about his dreams, the request was reasonable, and he said, 'Very well, sir.' To which the master, sounding troubled, added with some hesitation, 'Come into my inner room.
10 Don't let anyone come inside while I'm sleeping.'

The apprentice remarked that the room in which his master was working – for the 'inner room' meant his study – had the shutters drawn as if it were night, and the screen with the scene sketched in charcoal stood open in the dim light, taking up all the space.

- 15 The artist went to sleep with his arm under his head, as if a great fatigue had descended on him, but after half an hour a terrifying noise came to the apprentice's ear.

VIII

- 20 At first it was a voice that spoke in an incomprehensible way, but little by little the words broke up to resemble the moans of a drowning man trying to speak underwater.

'How "Come to me"? Where am I supposed to go?... What are you saying?... Where to? To Hell?... Come to the burning Hell? Whoever is this? Who could it be...? Ah!'

- 25 The apprentice forgot all about mixing colours to observe the fear on his master's face. He saw him gasping for breath, mouth open and sparse teeth visible; he noticed the dry lips, the sweating face, pale and wrinkled. Something was moving inside the mouth as if pulled by a string. It was the master's tongue. Words came out disconnected.

- 30 'I thought...It's really you...I thought you'd come... What? You come to take me away? Yes. Come. Come to Hell. There your daughter is waiting for you.'

The scared apprentice glimpsed a dark figure looming from above and brushing against the open screen. He shook Yoshihide with all his strength, but the master

continued speaking in his dream, refusing to awake. The apprentice found the courage to take the water set aside to wash the brushes, and he splashed it all onto the master's face.

5 The words Yoshihide was saying, 'I'll be waiting. Come with this carriage...with this carriage. Come to Hell...' became groans. Yoshihide sprung up as though he had been stung with a needle, although he seemed to be seeing someone, as if the evil spirits from his nightmares were still hanging upon his eyelids. For a moment he stared at nothing, eyes full of dread and mouth gaping. Then, returning to his senses, he ordered curtly, 'It's all right. Off with you now.'

10 Knowing very well he would be scolded if he tried to object, the apprentice ran out of his master's room and, when he saw the sunshine, he felt relieved as if he had awakened from his own nightmare.

15 That was not the worst of it. A month later, another apprentice was called into Yoshihide's study. The master, who was moistening a brush in his mouth, turned to him and said, 'Strip down, please.'

As the painter used to give that order from time to time, the boy immediately took off his clothes.

20 When the boy was completely naked, Yoshihide said with a strange scowl on his face and no compassion in his eyes, 'I'd like to see a man in chains. I'm sorry but you should let me do what I want to do for a while.'

This apprentice was a burly young man who could have wielded a sword better than a brush. Nevertheless, he must have been scared to death if even after years he kept repeating, 'I believed the master had gone mad and wanted to kill me.'

25 Yoshihide, seeing the apprentice hesitate, lost patience. He produced a thin iron chain out of nowhere, sprang onto the boy's back, and wrenched the chain around his body and finally he yanked at the chain with such merciless force that the apprentice fell, his body hitting the floor with a mighty noise.

IX

30 The apprentice's figure resembled a wine keg rolled over on its side because the boy's limbs were so cruelly bent and twisted he could move nothing but his neck. Because of the arrested blood circulation, his thick body, face, chest and limbs had become red and then livid in no time. Yoshihide did not heed the boy's pain and, walking around that keg-shaped body, sketched him from various angles in a realistic fashion. No need to tell what torture the apprentice suffered while his master worked.

If nothing had happened, the apprentice would have had to bear the pain for a long time. Fortunately – or unfortunately – from an upturned jar flowed an undulating thin ribbon that elongated like black oil. At first, the liquid came out slowly, like a very thick, sticky fluid, but little by little the glistening thing glided up to the nose of the frightened boy, who stopped breathing for a second and then screamed, ‘A snake! A snake!’

The boy told me that his blood had frozen, but this sensation was natural as the snake was about to touch his chained neck with the tip of its ice-cold tongue. Seeing his apprentice in such a plight, even the cruel Yoshihide became frightened. Upset, he cast away his brush and with a swift gesture, picked up the snake by the tail, letting its head dangle. The snake tried to coil around itself but could not reach Yoshihide’s hand.

‘My sketch is ruined and it’s your fault, damned beast,’ he said to the snake, and threw it back into its jar. Mumbling, he undid the chain and freed his apprentice, who got not a single word of sympathy or consolation from his master. A ruined sketch saddened Yoshihide more than having one of his apprentices bitten by a snake.

Later I was told that he kept the snake for the purpose of making sketches of it.

After what you have heard so far, you must have a fair idea of Yoshihide’s madness when inspiration possessed him. But let me recount one more episode. This time, an apprentice of thirteen or fourteen almost lost his life because of the screen. One night, Yoshihide called this boy, who had the white complexion of a girl, to his study. In the light of the oil lamp, the apprentice saw the master feeding an exotic bird something that, placed on his palm, resembled raw meat. The bird, as big as a cat, had feathers sticking out of its ears and large round amber-coloured eyes that made it look like a cat indeed.

X

Yoshihide by nature hated people prying in his business. He had told nothing to his apprentices about the snake because he never said anything about the material he kept in his study. Once the boys glimpsed a human skull on the master’s desk. Another time they saw silver bowls and lacquered platters or other unusual items, depending on what he was painting, but no one knew where he kept these things. Whence originated the rumour of a benevolent deity bestowing favours on Yoshihide.

The apprentice who entered thought the strange bird was in the study to provide a model for the screen. He bowed and respectfully addressed the master. ‘What do you wish, sir?’

Instead of answering, the master licked his red-stained lips and thrust his chin in the bird's direction. 'Look how tame it is.'

'What's this creature, sir? I've never seen anything like it.' The apprentice, curious and diffident, ogled the strange bird that had cat-like ears of feathers.

5 Yoshihide, in his customary disparaging tones, said, 'You've never seen it before? That's the problem with you town-bred folks. This bird is a horned owl a hunter from Kurama gave me yesterday. Mind you, not many owls are as tame as this one.' He slowly raised his hand and ruffled the owl's feathers. The bird, which had just finished eating, flew up from the desk with a threatening screech and threw itself
10 into the boy's face, talons first. If the apprentice had not raised both arms to protect his face with the kimono sleeves, he would have collected a cut or two.

'Ah!' The apprentice screamed and waved his sleeves to drive the owl away but the bird swooped down on him and clicked its beak, taking advantage of the slightest unguarded movement to peck at him. The boy forgot all about being in his master's
15 presence. He ran to and fro in the study, jumping up and throwing himself to the floor to escape the talons. The bird followed him and darted at his eyes. Each time the owl spread its wings, the boy smelt odours of rotting leaves, waterfalls, soured fruit or monkey-wine. Remembering the event, the apprentice said the oil lamp shone like moonlight and the master's study had become a narrow valley lost in the mystery of a
20 ghastly mountain.

Although he was terrified by the owl, the master's conduct frightened him even more. Yoshihide, impassive, watched the smooth-faced boy being disfigured by the bird, and calmly sketched the scene on a leaf of paper he had unrolled for the occasion. When the apprentice saw Yoshihide in the process of painting, horror
25 thickened his blood. The master had called him to see him die.

XI

The apprentice might have been right in thinking the master had wanted to kill him. In truth, Yoshihide had planned to infuriate the owl and then set it on the boy to paint him running about in terror.

30 When the boy realised what his master had in mind, he collapsed by the door, hiding his face behind his kimono sleeves and screaming incoherent words. He heard his master rising. Right then, something fell with a loud noise and broke. The bird's wings flapped faster. The apprentice raised his head and saw that the room had turned pitch black. The master's irritated voice called the disciples. One of them
35 replied from a distance and came running with some fire.

In the pale, sooty light of the torch, they saw the light-stand had been knocked down and the oil of the broken lamp formed a pool on the mats. The horned owl tossed about on the floor, flapping only one of its wings. Yoshihide, frightened despite what we know about him, mumbled from behind his desk.

- 5 A black snake had coiled itself around the owl, from the neck to the wing. It turned out the apprentice had upturned the jar, freeing the snake. The owl had pounced on it. For a while, the two apprentices watched the battle with gaping mouths, exchanging bemused glances, but soon they bowed to their master and left without a word. Nobody knows what became of the owl and the snake.
- 10 I could recount several episodes of this kind. The High Lord had ordered the screen decorated with a picture from Hell at the beginning of autumn. During all winter, the disciples worried about their master. Toward the end of winter, Yoshihide seemed unable to continue his work and became gloomier than ever, while his language turned more aggressive. The sketch, complete at eighty percent, displayed no further
- 15 progress. The master appeared so dissatisfied everyone thought he was about to erase what he had already sketched.

No one knew what prevented Yoshihide from working, and no one tried to find out. The apprentices, wary after so many incidents, gave Yoshihide a wide berth, as anyone would do if forced to live in the same cage with a tiger or a wolf.

20 **XII**

As a consequence, I do not have much to say about that period. If I had to add anything, I would say that the stubborn old man had become so maudlin he would sometimes be found weeping alone in his room.

- 25 Once, an apprentice went out into the garden and stumbled across his master. All teary, Yoshihide gazed at the sky, which brought the promise of spring. Embarrassed, the disciple slipped away. It was such a strange spectacle, this man so merciless he could paint corpses in the street for the Goshuyoji scene, but now weeping like a child because he was unable to work on the screen.

- 30 While Yoshihide was absorbed in his work with the intensity of a madman, his daughter became more cheerless by the day and it was clear to us she was trying to hold back her tears. Her face, white and melancholic by nature, now displaying black circles under eyes shadowed by heavy eyelashes, gave her a tragic composure. Sad and lonesome, she appeared to have retreated into her inner self. Various guesses were made, such as 'She misses her father and her home,' or 'She's in love.' As soon
- 35 as a rumour spread that the Lord wanted to submit her to his desire, the good people stopped talking about the painter's daughter, as if they had forgotten all about her.

Just about this time, as I happened to pass by the corridor in the dead of night, the monkey Yoshihide bounded toward me and persistently pulled at the hem of my hakama. It was a mild night bathed in moonlight and charged with the sweet scent of plum blossoms. In the dim light of the moon, I could see the monkey baring its teeth
5 under a wrinkled nose. The beast screamed wildly. Feeling three parts of fear and seven of anger, as I was afraid the monkey would ruin my new hakama, I was tempted to kick the beast and go my way when I remembered the samurai who had mistreated the monkey and had received a reprimand from the Prince. Moreover, the monkey's behaviour indicated that something unusual might have happened. I let
10 myself be pulled by the monkey for five ken or so.

I took a turn in the corridor, in the direction of a placid pond that glistened pale in the darkness behind a pine with finely shaped branches.

From a room nearby came the noise of an altercation that sounded both passionate and strangely muffled. All was stillness in a dim light that came half from the moon,
15 half from the moonlight reflected by the haze. A great silence reigned, save for the splashing of fish in the pond. And those stifled sounds intruded on this calm, thus the quarrel stopped me. Intrigued, I tiptoed up to the sliding door, ready to deal blows if the arguing people turned out to be rascals.

XIII

20 The monkey Yoshihide found my approach too slow. Shrieking as if someone had been strangling its neck, the monkey ran around me three times and finally leapt onto my shoulder. I turned my head quickly to the side to avoid the tiny claws, and the monkey gripped my sleeve to hold on. Losing balance, I staggered back and bumped against the sliding door. Now I was forced to act. I threw the door open and
25 was about to rush into the room, beyond the reach of the moonlight, when a young woman bolted out the doorway as if propelled by a spring. She almost bumped into me, stumbled and fell. Kneeling there, she gazed up at me, dishevelled, out of breath and trembling all over as though still under the impression of a dreadful sight.

I need not tell you I was in the presence of Yoshihide's daughter. But that night she
30 looked so different, so lively. Her eyes sparkled, large and bright; her cheeks glowed with a rosy blaze. In her untied nightgown, she was alluring, quite unlike her customary childish innocence. How could this attractive creature be the painter's daughter, who was so fragile and modest?

Steadying myself against the door, I observed the beautiful girl in the moonlight.

35 Hurrying footfalls came from a masculine figure receding into the dark.

I pointed in the man's direction and asked in a calm voice, 'Who is this?'

The girl bit her lip and shook her head. She appeared to be much chagrined.

I stooped down and whispered into her ear, 'Who was that man?'

She shook her head and pressed her lips together. Tears filled her long-lashed eyes.

5 On account of my inborn stupidity, I only understand what shines as clear as daylight under my nose. Not knowing what to say, I remained rooted to the spot as if I were trying to hear her thumping heart. For one thing, I did not wish to be harsh and prod her with more questions.

10 I do not know how long I remained stock still, saying nothing. Finally, I shut the door and turned to the girl, who seemed to have recovered a little. As gently as possible, I told her, 'Now go back to your room.'

Tormented by the sensation of having witnessed something I was not supposed to see, and ashamed – of what, I do not know – I strode back to the place I had left to follow the monkey. Hardly had I taken ten steps than someone tugged timidly at the
15 hem of my hakama from behind. In surprise, I glanced over my shoulder. Can you guess who it was?

The monkey Yoshihide gave little bows with its head, hands placed on the ground to express gratitude like a man. The gold bell at its neck tinkled.

XIV

20 Two weeks had passed when Yoshihide the painter showed himself at the palace without being requested and begged the Lord's personal audience. He believed his wish would be granted, given the consideration in which the Lord held him in spite of his humble origins.

25 The Lord, who did not admit people in his presence easily, made an exception. The painter, sporting his customary orange hunting garment and floppy cap, and looking more sullen than usual, prostrated himself, bowing his head repeatedly. Raising his chin he said in a hoarse voice, 'Concerning the screen Your Lordship was pleased to command, I would like to tell Your Lordship I have applied myself to the task night and day and have very nearly finished the work.'

30 'Excellent. I am pleased to hear it.' Nevertheless, the Lord's voice lacked conviction.

‘No, my Lord.’ Yoshihide lowered his eyes, as though plagued with dissatisfaction. ‘It is almost finished but there is one detail I am unable to paint.’

‘What? Is there something in the world you cannot paint?’

5 ‘Yes, my Lord. I cannot paint anything if I don’t see it with my own eyes. If I paint something I haven’t seen I cannot convince myself my rendering is exact. Isn’t it like being unable to paint?’

A scornful smile crept across the Lord’s face. ‘So, if you have to paint Hell, you mean you need to see it?’

10 ‘Precisely. A few years ago, when there was a big fire, I saw a burning Hell. That’s why I was able to paint the scene of “Buddha unmoving among the flames.” Your Lordship must know that painting.’

‘What about the damned? Did you see them as well?’ The Lord put question upon question, as if he did not wish to hear Yoshihide’s answers.

15 ‘I’ve seen a man bound in iron chains. I have made detailed sketches of one beleaguered by an ominous bird. So it can’t be said that I know nothing about the suffering of the damned subjected to various torments. As for the infernal torturers –’ Here Yoshihide paused, an enigmatic grin on his face. ‘Infernal torturers appeared to me in my dreams. Almost every day and night bull-headed, horse-headed, or three-faced, six-armed demons arrow and torment me, beckoning me to follow them and
20 moving their silent lips. Those aren’t the things I cannot paint.’

Astonished by Yoshihide’s words, the Lord glared at Yoshihide for a moment and then, frowning, he cried, ‘Then what is it that you can’t paint?’

XV

25 ‘In the central leaf of the screen, I would like to paint a nobleman’s carriage with a roof of palm leaves, falling from the sky,’ said Yoshihide, looking the Lord intensely in the eyes.

I had heard that when he spoke about his work, the painter would speak insanely. And in that moment, his gaze displayed madness. ‘In the vehicle, a splendid court lady writhes in the agony of death, her long black hair tossed by the wind. Her face,
30 smothered by the smoke, should look upward to the carriage ceiling, her eyebrows furrowed. Trying to escape the sparks raining over her, she grips the mats with both hands. Around the carriage, a flock of ominous birds fly about, clicking their beaks...Oh, how can I ever paint a court lady in a burning carriage?’

‘Mmm...and...?’ The Lord urged Yoshihide to continue as if he found the painter’s words amusing for some reason.

5 ‘I cannot paint it,’ Yoshihide repeated, entranced, his red-stained lips trembling as if he had a fever. Then he became animated and said in biting tones, ‘Please, my Lord, burn a nobleman’s carriage before my eyes. And, if possible...’

The Lord’s face darkened for an instant, but a second later he burst into laughter. ‘All your wishes shall be granted.’ Half choking in his merriment, he added, ‘Don’t worry.’

10 The Lord’s words struck me and a terrible premonition gripped my chest. The Lord seemed infected with Yoshihide’s madness. White froth gathered at the corners of his mouth and his eyebrows twitched. As he paused, his throat still vibrated with laughter.

15 ‘Yes, I shall burn a carriage with a roof of palm leaves. A splendid girl dressed like a court lady of the highest station shall ride in the carriage. She shall perish in the carriage, tormented by the black smoke and consumed by the fire. Bravo. It is an excellent idea, worthy of the greatest painter in the whole country. I praise you. I praise you highly.’

20 Upon hearing these words, Yoshihide turned pale and tried to move his lips as if he were suffocating. But then he set his hands on the mat and bowed, saying, ‘I am grateful, my Lord,’ in a voice so low as to be hardly audible.

Perhaps the Lord’s words had illustrated the horror of the scheme Yoshihide himself had suggested, and the images must have flashed vividly in his mind. Only this once in my life did I take pity of the man.

XVI

25 A few days later, as promised, the High Lord summoned Yoshihide to witness the burning of a nobleman’s carriage right before his eyes, although this event did not take place on the grounds of the Lord’s mansion of Horikawa. The carriage was burnt in the mountain mansion of Yukige, the ‘Limit of the Snow,’ where the Lord’s sister had once lived.

30 No one had inhabited the house for years and the vast garden was said to be in state of total neglect. In those days, many rumours concerned the fate of the High Lord’s late sister. Some said that on moonless nights, her crimson hakama could be seen moving along the corridors without touching the floor.

These rumours of gloomy apparitions stemmed from the lonely and desolate nature of the neighbourhood even in the daylight. After dark, the murmur of a torrent added a note of melancholy while night herons fluttered about in the starlight, like winged monsters.

5 In the pitch-black, moonless night, torches shed light on the Lord who, dressed in a yellow-green kimono and a brocaded purple hakama, sat cross-legged near the veranda, on a round white cushion hemmed with bicoloured silk. Five or six samurai encircled him in respectful poses. One stood out among them, a man solidly built who had eaten human flesh out of starvation after the battle of Michinogu and was now so
10 strong he could break apart the horns of a living deer. Wearing armour under his kimono and clad in full dignity, he kept by the veranda, the tip of his sheathed katana pointed upward. The scene turned bright or dark according to the movements of the torches that flickered in the night breeze, blurring the boundaries of dream and reality, with a ghastly effect.

15 A carriage roofed with palm leaves was stationed in the garden, within a patch of darkness, with no oxen, its shafts resting on their supports, its gilded fittings glittering like stars. When we saw it, a chill came over us even though it was spring. Blue-green tasselled blinds trimmed with embroideries hid the interior. A few servants, serious-faced and stiff, stood near the carriage, carrying blazing torches,
20 and worried about the smoke that drifted toward the veranda.

Yoshihide, the hero of this night, knelt opposite the veranda, in his usual hunting attire and worn floppy cap. He looked even smaller and more miserable, as if the sky were weighing down on him. The man who squatted behind him, dressed in a similar fashion, was probably one of his disciples. As both of them knelt in the dark, the
25 colours of their garments were not clearly discernible from my position inside the veranda.

XVII

The time was near midnight. In a silence so deep we could hear our breathing, darkness seemed to spy on us while the nocturnal breeze carried the sooty smell of
30 burning torches in our direction. For a moment, the Lord gazed at the scene in silence. Then he leant forward on his cushion and called harshly, 'Yoshihide!'

I am not sure Yoshihide answered because my ears caught only a moan.

'Yoshihide, tonight I will set fire to the carriage as you wished.' The Lord glanced sideways at his samurai. I had the impression he was exchanging a knowing smile
35 with them, but perhaps it was only my imagination.

Yoshihide, very stiff, looked at the veranda in a reverent manner and said nothing.

‘Look at the carriage. It’s mine. You surely recognise it. I will set fire to the carriage and create a blazing Hell before your eyes but...’ The Lord exchanged another glance with his samurai and then resumed speaking in bitter tones. ‘In the carriage lies a
5 sinful woman, bound in chains. As soon as the carriage will take fire, she will die in terrible agony. It is the perfect model to finish your painting. Watch closely as her snow-white skin burns and sparks braid her black hair.’

The Lord paused again, shaking his shoulders in silent laughter, and then he said, ‘A
10 spectacle worthy of entering the chronicles. I will appreciate it as well. There, raise the blind and let Yoshihide see the woman inside the carriage.’

At his command, one of the attendants, holding his torch high, yanked the blind up. The red blazing light from his torch illuminated a woman cruelly bound in chains, reclining on the seat. Golden ornaments glittered in her black hair, which hung loose about her shoulders over a gorgeous Chinese gown of a cherry-blossom colour.

15 I very nearly cried out. Who could have mistaken her? The trim maidenly figure and the lovely melancholy profile belonged to Yoshihide’s daughter.

The samurai sitting opposite me rose and gave Yoshihide a sharp glance, his hand on the hilt of his katana. Mouth gaping, I pivoted to see Yoshihide, who had sprung to his feet like a madman and attempted to rush toward the carriage, arms extended in
20 front of him.

As I already said, he was in the darkness, and I could not see the expression on his face. But soon he was running into the light as though pulled by an invisible string. At the same time, the Lord cried, ‘Set fire!’ The attendants threw their torches at the carriage with the girl inside. The carriage was engulfed in a pillar of raging flames.

25 **XVIII**

The flames enveloped the carriage in no time. As soon as the purple tassels hanging from the roof waved in the sudden wind, a vortex of smoke spiralled up against the black sky, and sparks exploded like sprays of water. Bamboo blinds, hangings and metal fittings burst into so many balls of fire, soaring into the night like celestial orbs
30 spurting out of a fallen sun. A moment before I had nearly cried out. Now I was so dumbfounded I could do nothing but gape at this terrifying spectacle. But as for the father, Yoshihide...

The expression painted on Yoshihide’s face is still alive in my memory. The man, who on impulse had attempted to rush at the carriage, stopped before the roaring fire

and, with his arms outstretched, fastened his gaze on the flames and the heavy smoke that enveloped the burning shape. Sparks fell around him, bathing his features in a lurid light so that his ugly wrinkled face was visible down to the tip of his beard.

His wide-open eyes, twisted lips and twitching cheeks, showed the terror, despair and astonishment that alternated in his heart. Neither the robbers about to be beheaded nor the most odious of sinners of 'Ten Crimes and Five Faults' dragged before the Ten Judge-Kings could have worn a more mournful expression. Even the herculean samurai paled and shot a furtive glance at his Lord.

The Lord, however, lips pressed together and wearing an enigmatic grin, kept his gaze fixed on the carriage. And inside the carriage...I lack the courage to convey a detailed description of the girl I saw in it: the paleness of her face tilted back and choked by the smoke, the length of her black hair intertwined with flames as she tried to shake off the spreading fire, the beauty of the cherry-blossom-coloured Chinese dress, which the flames were devouring by the minute – what a terrible and cruel scene. At one moment, the breeze blew the smoke to the other side, and among the red flames sprinkled with golden dust appeared the girl, biting on her gag and writhing to the point of breaking the chain that bounded her.

This atrocious torture resembled a genuine scene from Hell brought before our very eyes. Facing the spectacle, we all – even that samurai with supernatural strength – shuddered.

Then once again we thought that a gust of wind had blasted through the trees. Following the noise, something dark, hardly visible, shot across the black sky like a ball, without either touching the ground or flying through the air. From the roof of the mansion, the thing dived straight into the burning carriage. And through the crimson-lacquered chassis that was crumbling in pieces, among whirls of fire we saw something clasp the shoulders of the girl, who arched her body backwards. The thing gave a long and piercing screech out of the soaring smoke, a shriek like the tearing of silk. One more screech. And another. We could not help letting out a scream of surprise in unison. Against a red curtain of flames, the creature that was holding fast to the dying girl was the monkey nicknamed Yoshihide at the palace of Horikawa.

XIX

But, a second later, the monkey disappeared. When sparks shot into the night, glittering like a pear peel sprinkled with gold, girl and beast sank under a whirl of black smoke. In the middle of the garden, only the burning carriage was visible as it blazed away with terrifying crackles. 'A pillar of fire' might have been more appropriate than 'burning carriage' to describe the blaze that soared into the starry sky.

Before the pillar of fire, Yoshihide stood still, rooted to the ground. What a strange transformation. The old wrinkled face, which only a minute before had expressed agony at the infernal spectacle, now radiated a blissful ecstasy. Arms tightly crossed on his chest, he seemed to have forgotten he was in the presence of the High Lord. His
5 eyes did not mirror the girl's atrocious agony any longer. Did the form of the thrashing body silhouetted by the wonderful red colour satisfy him?

The strangeness went beyond the sight of this father ecstatically watching his daughter's agony. At that moment, Yoshihide incarnated a solemn exaltation elevated beyond the human condition, some supernatural dignity similar to the King
10 Lion's wrath in his nocturnal appearances. Even the uncountable, soulless night birds scattered by the flames seemed aware of the mysterious virtue that shone like a halo over Yoshihide's worn cap.

If the birds were scared, so much more were we, the humans, down to the menials. We held our breath and, shivering, watched Yoshihide with the same wonderment
15 we would have felt at the unveiling ceremony of a newly made Buddhist image. Those sputtering flames soaring, immense, into the sky, and Yoshihide who stood, petrified and absorbed in the tragic spectacle. Such greatness and joy.

But the Lord, who sat in the veranda, fairly removed from the great fire, was as pale as a spectre. White froth at the corners of his mouth, he gasped like a thirsty animal,
20 grasping tightly his knee draped in the purple hakama – with both hands.

XX

I don't know who spread the story of a carriage burnt with a woman inside, but I know it reached every corner of the country. Many wondered why the Lord had burned Yoshihide's daughter alive. Most people thought it was vengeance for the
25 Lord's thwarted love, although in my opinion the Lord had wanted to chastise the perversity of a painter who had not hesitated in asking that a carriage be burnt before his eyes, even though it involved the sacrifice of a human being, to paint a scene to perfection. This last explanation came from the Lord's very mouth.

Since Yoshihide had such a heart of stone he could witness the death of his own
30 daughter, some accused him of being a devil who had sacrificed his paternal love for the sake of his art. The great priest of Yokawa supported this view: 'Whatever talent they may have in any branch of learning or art, those who did not live according to the five virtues of Confucius, benevolence, justice, courtesy, wisdom and fidelity, are to be condemned to Hell.'

35 One month later, when the screen decorated with the scene from Hell was complete, Yoshihide took it to the palace and presented it to the Lord, with all his respect. The

great priest, who happened to be there, as soon as he glanced at the screen, was surely struck by the realism of the infernal horrors, a firestorm raging from the sky to the abyss of Hell. Although he had glared angrily at Yoshihide at first, he cried, 'Bravo!' tapping his knee in an involuntary gesture. I still remember the Lord
5 drawing a forced smile at the priest's ejaculation.

From that day on, no one, at least in the palace, spoke ill of the painter. Those who looked at the screen, even though they hated the personage, were impressed with that mysterious solemnity and with the ghastly realism of Hell's torments, as if they could feel the bite of the infernal fire.

10 By then, Yoshihide had already departed this life.

The night after he completed his painting, he threw a rope over a beam in his room and hanged himself. Perhaps Yoshihide, who had survived his beloved daughter's untimely death, could not bear the idea of surviving her absence for long. His body is buried under the ruins of his house. After scores of years, wind and rain have worn
15 down the small tombstone, and moss has covered the barrow, erasing all trace of his grave.