

THE GATES OF HELL

My childhood name was Iwajiro, and I was eight years old when I first entered at the gates of hell. The old monk looked like one of the *gaki*, the hungry ghosts. He was gaunt and skeletal, cheeks caved in, skin shrunk tight over the great craggy dome of the skull, fierce eyes bulging in their sockets under thick black eyebrows that met in the middle just below the third eye. (When he glowered I could see it there, blazing.)

My father had brought me to hear the monk deliver a sermon, on the Eight Burning Hells. When the monk started to speak, voice dry and cracked, rasping, I felt he was talking directly to me, as if he had singled me out. He glared at me, pierced me with his gaze, cut me to the core.

I whimpered, grabbed my father's sleeve. My father shook me off, smacked the back of my legs.

Sit, he said. Listen.

The hells, the monk explained, descended in order of severity, down and down, ever deeper into the underworld. The first of them was the Hell of Reviving, and even here, he said, the heat was unbearable, far beyond endurance. The ground was a searing expanse of white-hot iron and it was impossible to rest your feet even for a second without being scorched.

I felt my feet twitch. It was a hot day and the shoji screens

were open to the temple courtyard, shimmering in the glare. Inside at least it was shaded, cooler. The old wooden beams smelled of pine incense. I watched a little lizard, bright green, flick and dart across the wall.

In the Hell of Reviving, said the monk, you will be consumed by perpetual rage.

He looked at me, he definitely looked at me.

Think how angry you can get if you are thwarted in some small desire. You are ready to smash and destroy if you don't get your way. Well, increase this a thousandfold so you would kill anyone who obstructed you. This is what you will feel in the Reviving Hell.

I wondered, why Reviving? How could coming back to life be hell?

In this realm of the angry dead, said the monk, there will be countless millions of others like yourself, like your self, so many, so many, all consumed by their own incandescent fury. You will fight and tear and hack at each other with weapons you can only imagine, forged from your own karma. You will slash and cut and gouge, you will stab and rip till you fall down dead, a death within death, a death beyond death.

The monk paused.

And then, he said, looking at me again, answering my unspoken question, you will be revived immediately, you will wake up, you will once again be fully conscious, and the whole process will start again. You will fight, you will die in agony, you will be revived. And so it will continue for what seems like endless time. The scriptures are quite clear. You will fight and die in this realm for millions on millions of years. To be precise, for a hundred and sixty-two thousand times ten million years, you will fight and die in anger and pain. And this is the first, the least, of the Burning Hells.

A young monk bowed and placed a small tea-bowl of water

in front of the old man who nodded, took a sip, just enough to wet his thin old lips. I felt my own lips dry and parched. I looked up, saw the little green lizard scuttle across the ceiling, upside down.

The old monk coughed, loosed the phlegm in his throat. He sipped more water, continued.

The next level down, he said, the second level, is Black Line Hell. Again the ground is burning iron, hotter than the level above, and the demons of the underworld will lay you out on this white-hot surface and mark your naked body with black lines, dividing you up into ever smaller sections – four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two. And they will use these marks as guidelines for their burning saws and axes, and they will cut you into smaller and smaller pieces – sixty-four, a hundred and twenty-eight. And no sooner will you be reduced to tiny pieces of flesh and bone, than you will be reassembled, only for the whole process to start again, repeating, over and over, for twice as long as the first hell, for three hundred and twenty-four thousand times ten million years. And this is only the second of the Burning Hells.

Only the second, that meant six more to go, each one hotter and deeper and more terrible than the one above. The lizard had gone now, into the freedom of the world outside, and I wanted to follow, to run out, find my friends and play. My legs ached from kneeling on the hard wood floor, but when I shifted, tried to ease the discomfort, my father prodded me, cuffed the back of my head.

Be still, he said. Listen.

The third level, said the monk, is Crushing Hell. It is even deeper, even hotter. Here you will be rounded up with the millions of others suffering for their sins and you will be cast into a long valley between two ranges of fiery mountains. You will be packed in with these millions, piled on top of one

another till there is no space to move and no air to breathe, and all that can be heard are the screaming and weeping of the damned in their agony and terror. Then the giant demons of this world will raise their mallets of red-hot metal, each one as big as Mount Fuji, and pound you to nothing. For a brief moment, an infinitesimal part of a second, there will be oblivion, then in a blink you will be awake, and immediately the whole cycle will begin again, the rounding up, the casting down, and this time the walls of the valley will close in on you, like great beasts butting each other, and once again you will be crushed. And this will continue for twice as long again as the previous level. Six hundred and forty-eight thousand times ten million years.

The numbers meant nothing. I could count, a little. But I couldn't imagine a million. Ten million. Grains of sand on a beach. Snowflakes falling through a whole winter day. My mother would laugh when I asked about these things. How could they be numbered? But I knew the way the old monk spoke, he meant they went on for ever and ever. And every time you thought the torture was over, it would start again.

The sermon hadn't even lasted a day, maybe not even an hour.

Howling Hell, said the monk. This is the next level down. Here you will be herded with all the rest into a gigantic red-hot building. And once you are inside, crammed together, suffocating, you will realise there is no exit, no door, no way out. You are trapped there, unable to move, as the intolerable heat increases even more and all you can do is howl and scream and cry and add to the cacophony of all those millions howling and screaming and crying all around you. And this you will endure for twice as long as the previous level. Ten million years, times twelve hundred and ninety-six thousand.

He looked at me again. I felt sick in my stomach.

You may think the exact numbers don't matter. But when you are there, and every single second is agony, it matters very much indeed.

Thinking of the numbers made my head feel like stone.

Now, said the monk, we descend ever further, from the Howling Hell to the Great Howling Hell. Here you will be crammed into an even bigger, even hotter building with thick burning walls, and outside those walls are thicker, hotter walls. You will be in a box within a box, a prison within a prison, a tomb within a tomb, where the space between the inner and outer walls is filled with molten metal, sealing it completely. And all the time you are there, you are tortured by the knowledge that even if by some miracle you could break through the first wall, you could never ever broach the second. So you howl and scream and cry, endlessly, or at least for twice as long as before. Some of you can add it up for yourselves, I'm sure.

Did his features twist a little as he said this, into a kind of grimace that might have been a smile? That was even more unsettling, and already he was racing ahead, ever deeper.

The sixth level, he said, is known simply as the Heating Hell – as if the other levels were not hot enough. Here you will be impaled on red-hot spikes, you will be flayed and wrapped in strips of white-hot iron. And for how long? Yes, twice as long as the hell before.

I noticed at the corners of his dry lizard-lips were little flecks of spit. He closed his eyes for a moment, continued.

And what is below the Heating Hell? What is the next level down? By now you should know it will be even worse, even hotter, for this is the *Intense* Heating Hell. Here you will be boiled in vats of molten bronze, then dragged out and impaled on larger spikes that tear your insides apart, the pain so intense

you lose consciousness for an instant, only to wake to the same torment, again, again, again, for twice as long as before.

He opened his eyes again, looked out from some deep dark place. His voice was low and gravelly, incantatory, the way he would chant the *Nembutsu*.

You have heard of the first seven hells, and the tortures and agonies that await you there. But these are as nothing compared to the last, the worst, the deepest hell. This is the Hell of Ultimate Torment.

I could read the words, blazing in the air, a sign written in flame.

In this realm, he said, the intense heat is seven times hotter than all the previous hells combined, and the pain is seven times greater. Here you will be trapped for seven times as long, in an immense edifice of blazing hot metal, at the centre of a mountain of white-hot iron. An army of demons will devise ever greater tortures, pouring molten bronze into your open mouth. Your body and the bodies of all the others suffering this damnation will be indistinguishable from the flames engulfing you. You will be separated only by the sound of your anguished screams which will echo back up through all the other hells. At times they can even be heard here in this world of ours, in the darkest night when you are racked with misery and despair. For surely these hells exist deep in your own being, and you can be pitched into them at any time.

Was that a bird shrieking out there in the courtyard? And was that an owl I'd heard screeching in the night? And was that really a cat that had woken me in the small hours, yowling like a baby stolen from its parents?

Don't whimper, said my father.

Existence is suffering, said the old monk. Its cause is desire. To conquer desire you must follow the Buddha-path. There is no other way.

His sermon was finished. He bowed and folded his hands, sipped a few more drops of water from his bowl. I was anxious to get out, to get home, to see my mother. The monk stood up, his old legs stiff as he creaked and unfolded himself. He walked slowly towards the door and I bowed my head as he passed. But he didn't pass. He stopped right in front of me. I kept my head down, stared at his gnarled old feet in their worn straw sandals, the thin toes bony and splayed, the blackened toenails thick and cracked.

So, he said. Have these words put the fear in you?

I looked up at him, that great domed head, that ferocious gaze, and my whole body shook. My mouth was dry, my throat closed. I couldn't say one word.

A man of silence, he said. This is a good place to begin.

He held up his right hand, fingers spread, and for a moment I flinched, expecting him to strike me. But instead he closed his hand again, made a fist, clenched it in front of my face.

Ha! he said, shaking the fist. Then he let out a terrifying roar of a laugh, sprayed spit, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He looked at my father who tensed beside me.

Look after this one, said the monk. Teach him well.

He glared down at me again, nodded, gave a kind of rough grunt and moved on. I watched his old feet in their straw sandals, shuffling across the polished floor, then he was out the door and gone.

My father smacked the back of my head. Why didn't you speak?

I had nothing to say, I said.

Useless, said my father.

All the way home I kept my head down, looked at my own bare feet leaving their mark in the dust with every step. The sun had baked the ground all day and it burned, made me

walk quick, not linger. I looked up at Mount Fuji in the haze. I imagined it throwing up fire and smoke. Beneath me were all these worlds, deeper and deeper underground. I was walking on the roof of hell.

Back home I still had nothing to say.

My mother laughed, but she was gentle, not mocking.

That old monk's a holy terror, isn't he? He'd put the fear of death into anybody.

I still said nothing.

Sometimes it's good to be just a little afraid, she said, so we'll do the right thing.

She had made noodles with my favourite broth, ginger and scallions and the thing I loved most, *tororojiru* with the rich earthy taste of mashed-up yams. I ate it in silence apart from the slurping. I drank the last of the broth, pushed the empty bowl away from me.

My older brother came into the kitchen, made a face at me behind my mother's back, tongue out, eyes popping, a demon.

She turned and saw him, laughed and waved him away. Then she stroked my head, ran her hands over the short cropped hair.

Go out and play a while, she said.

Outside, it was the same old place, the same old world I knew, but it was different. It was still Hara, way-station on the Tokaido, at the foot of Great Fuji. I was Iwajiro of the Nagasawa family, and my father ran the inn, Omodaka-ya. This was my life, here in this place. But it had changed. It was like somewhere I had dreamed. My friends looked the same, but they were strange to me. They moved around in their own dream, playing, not knowing.

At night, before I went to bed, my mother told me my favourite story, of the Dragon King's palace at the bottom of the sea. It calmed me and soothed me a little, imagining the

coolness in the depths of the ocean. But when I lay down to sleep, I fell into dreams of fire and torment and I woke in a fever. I burned and howled till my mother came and held me and hushed me, said it was fine, it was fine, it was just a dream and everything would be all right, and she lit a stick of incense, chanted the Nembutsu to protect me from all harm.

But from that day on, everything had changed. The fear was always there.

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One day my mother took me to the bathhouse. It was something I loved, to soak in the warmth, surrounded by it, to drift away.

To purify the mind, she said, chant the Nembutsu. To purify the body, sweat out all the poisons, soak in a hot tub.

The attendant at the bathhouse was a young girl. My mother nodded to her, told her to make the water good and hot.

Turn it up, she said. The hotter, the better.

The girl bowed, gave me a smile, set to stoking the fire under the iron tub. She prodded and raked with a poker so the embers glowed, she added more firewood and topped it with chopped logs when it caught and flared. It was hot work. The girl's face was flushed and a strand of her hair came loose, fell across her face. As she pushed it back, she left a smudge of soot on her cheek. She saw me looking and laughed. The flames flickered. I started to sweat.

Right, said my mother. Let's get you scrubbed.

I stepped out of my sandals, took off my robe and hung it up. I sat on the low three-legged stool and my mother washed me thoroughly, filled a little wooden bucket and poured it over my head, twice, three times, rinsed me down till I stood there dripping, clean and ready for the bath.

I turned and stepped forward, aware of my own nakedness, this little body of mine so tiny and fragile, so vulnerable, soft flesh. The heat in the room had grown intense. Steam rose, swirled in the air. The water gurgled and churned. Two merchants had come in and their voices boomed. I stood still and could not move. Through the steam I saw the girl's face as she smiled at me again, nodded encouragement. My mother pushed me forward. The fire was roaring under the tub. A huge flame suddenly leaped and the wood crackled, sent up sparks and cinders. There was a panic in my chest, a trapped bird desperate to escape. The waters would boil and scald me to death, my flesh would melt off the bone. I would plunge into the deepest hell and burn there forever.

No!

I heard my own voice, screaming, filling the place, till the girl covered her ears and the two men stopped their talking and stared, and my mother picked me up and wrapped me in my robe and carried me outside.

That night my father heard what had happened. He raged at me.

Why do you behave like this? Are you a baby?

I said nothing.

If you're going to scream and cry like a little girl, at least tell us why.

I'll tell my mother, I said, and no one else.

He looked for a moment as if he might slap me. Instead he let out a huge, long-suffering sigh and rubbed his face with his hands. Then he called my mother to come and talk to me.

So, little one, she said. That was quite a performance.

I stood with my head bowed, looked down at my feet in the straw sandals I wore indoors. This was me, standing here.

Well? she said.

It was the flames, I said. And the noise. And the heat.

Ah, she said.

I was afraid.

Of hell?

I nodded.

We have to put an end to this, she said. This fear is consuming you.

But how? If hell is waiting for us, how can we not be afraid? And if there is no escape, what is the point of anything we do?

There is a way, she said. But now it's late and you need to sleep. I'll tell you in the morning, I promise.

In the morning! That was no time, no time at all. She would tell me. I would know. I ran to her and she hugged me, stroked my back. The cotton of her robes smelled of incense from the shrine.

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Some time in the night I heard a voice from behind the shoji screen, thin and wavery, a demon-voice wailing.

You're going to burn in hell . . .

I sat up, alarmed, but immediately the demon let out a chuckle and I recognised the voice of my older brother Yozaemon. I laughed and lay down again. Everything was going to be all right. I slept well, released from the fear. In fact my sleep was so deep I woke late, well after eight, and the morning sun was streaming in through the shoji screen. I jumped up and threw my clothes on, rushed into the kitchen to find my mother. But she was bustling about the stove, cooking miso soup in a heavy iron pot.

Not now, she said, shooing me away. I don't want you getting under my feet.

But you said!

Not now.

Well, when?

Later. As soon as I can. Now go and play.

She was hot and harassed, but she managed a smile.

Go!

I barely flinched at the little flames licking the bottom of the pot.

Outside I heard a gang of the neighbourhood children shrieking and yelling. I ran over, saw them kicking up dust, leaping and dancing like demons. One or two of them had sticks and were beating the ground with them, their screams getting more excited, high-pitched, as they stamped and screeched. I pushed through and saw what they were doing. They had tipped out a nest of baby crows and the boys ran and jumped and struck, chasing them, trying to stamp on them or hit them with the sticks.

I was excited and horrified all at once. There was a huge exhilaration in the game, in the hitting and beating and striking out, trying to crush and kill, and the crows were carrion, they were vermin, to be rid of them was good. But I could feel the panic and terror of the tiny birds as they fluttered and scurried, tried to escape. I felt it in my stomach, an agitation, discomfort, and maybe torturing the birds was a sin. I was suddenly hot, felt the prickle of tears. I pushed through the crowd of boys and ran back to the house.

My mother had said she would tell me, as soon as she could. But now she was sitting on the porch, talking to a neighbour whose husband was ill.

These things are sent to try us, said my mother.

What's for us will not go by us, said the woman.

They were sipping tea. They could talk like this for hours.

He was fine in the morning, said the woman. Then in the afternoon he took a turn for the worse.

It's often the way of it.

My mother looked over to me.

I haven't forgotten, she said. I'll talk to you soon. Now go and play a little longer.

Soon. A little longer. The whole morning could pass by and they would still be talking. I heard my mother tell the woman to burn the moxa herbs on her husband's spine, and to continue chanting the sutras.

Back outside I saw the gang of boys running off into the distance, whooping and brandishing their sticks in the air. There was no trace of the baby crows, then I saw a scraggy stray cat had dragged one of the tiny carcasses into the shade of a tree and was holding it down with its paws, tearing it apart with its teeth, crunching the little bones.

My mother was still talking to the woman. At least they had stood up now, but that might mean nothing. They could still take another hour to get to the door and for the woman to actually leave. It was unbearable.

My head hurts, I shouted. I have a fever.

My mother smiled, nodded at the woman.

This young man has things on his mind!

When more time had passed, and the woman had finally gone, my mother turned to me.

So, she said. Your head aches. You have a fever. Let us deal with those things first.

No! You said you would tell me!

But headache and fever are no joke, she said, and she placed her cool hand on my forehead.

The thought had been niggling at me, and now it began to grow, that she didn't have an answer after all, and she had been lying and stalling just to keep me quiet.

Tell me!

A remedy is called for, she said.

You told that woman to burn moxa and chant the sutras,
I said. Is that what you're going to tell me?

You were listening, she said. You have big ears!

Tell me!

Moxa would help your headache.

But moxa meant burning, and the fear would be there
again.

Not moxa!

She laughed.

You're the wisest child in the world, she said. You've found
the answer all by yourself. No moxa, you only have to chant
a sutra. But not just any sutra. You have to chant the Tenjin
Sutra.

Tenjin. I said the name. Tenjin.

Tenjin is the deity of Kitano shrine, she said. In life he was
Michizane, a scholar and poet, a great calligrapher. As a god
he is Tenjin, with the power of fire and thunder. He can drive
out angry ghosts and conquer the fear of hell.

Tenjin, I said again. Tenjin.

All you have to do, said my mother, is chant the sutra, every
morning when you wake and every night before you sleep. It
is only a few lines long, a hundred Chinese characters, but it
is very powerful.

I felt a kind of fire kindle in me, in the centre of my chest,
and below that, in my belly. I was excited, impatient.

Teach it to me now!

She laughed.

Come, she said, holding out her hand, and she led me out
by the back door.

Where are we going?

Sanen-ji, she said.

Sanen-ji was the Pure Land temple, across the road from
our house. It had a shrine room and a little sacred grove

dedicated to Tenjin. The place was tended by a young monk who was sweeping the steps as we came in at the gate. He bowed to my mother, then to me, and asked if he could be of help to us. My mother explained about the sutra and he smiled at me, said yes. He could not have been more different from the old monk I had heard at the other temple, Shogen-ji, who had filled my head with hellfire and damnation. This young man had a mildness and a gentleness about him, a kind of lightness. He beckoned us to follow him into the shrine room, leaving our sandals outside. We kneeled beside him on the tatami floor and he lit a stick of incense at the altar. A few flowers had been placed in an old vase in front of a painting of Tenjin, one hand raised in blessing. The expression on the face was benign, kindly, but behind him a thunderbolt emerged from a cloud, and beside him was an ox, looking up at him.

The ox is his messenger, said the monk. So the best time to pray to him is the hour of the ox, between two and three in the morning.

My mother shifted uneasily.

But, of course, said the monk, a young man like you should just meditate as early as you can, whenever you wake up.

I will wake up at two, I said. The hour of the ox.

The monk nodded approval, gave a little chuckle. Then he became serious again, reached forward and opened a drawer at the side of the shrine, drew out a scroll of paper which he unrolled and handed to me. I could only read a few of the characters, like *wind* and *fire*. But the page had an effect on me – again I felt that sensation in my chest, in my belly, and something in my forehead, a kind of tingling.

We'll chant, said the monk. Take it a line at a time. I'll chant it first, then you repeat it with me.

He folded his hands and began, his voice surprisingly deep and resonant. I folded my own hands, copied him as best I

could, my own small voice cracked and high but eager, and my mother joined in, a clear sweet singsong. By the time we'd gone through the whole thing two or three times I was singing out with all my heart and soul.

The monk bowed to me again and said I could keep the copy of the sutra, and from the same drawer he took out a smaller copy of the painting of Tenjin.

You should take this too, he said, for your shrine.

I carried my treasures home, overcome with excitement, and went straight to the little altar room in our house. I swept the floor and dusted the shrine. I took down the painting that hung in the alcove and replaced it with the image of Tenjin. I laid out my copy of the sutra in front of it. I emptied the ash from the incense holder and cleaned it out, lit a new stick. I pestered my mother for a few fresh flowers from the display in the front room and I put them in a vase. Then I bowed to Tenjin, and I chanted the sutra over and over till I knew the words by heart.

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It was the middle of the night. I didn't know the exact time, but I knew it must be close to the hour of the ox. The whole house was dark and quiet as I felt my way, step by step, to the altar room where I managed to light the oil lamp, put another stick of incense in the burner. Then I kneeled on the tatami in front of the shrine, folded my hands and started to chant the sutra.

Namu Tenman Daijizai Tenjin . . .

I thought I was awake, but from time to time my eyes started to close and my head nodded forward, jerking me awake again. Then I would start the sutra all over again, from the beginning.

Namu Tenman . . .

In the flicker of the lamplight, the image of Tenjin changed, came in and out of focus. Now it was kindly, the way I had seen it before, now the expression was fierce. I invoked him to ward off demons, to keep me from the perils of hell.

Namu Tenman . . .

My legs began to ache. Outside a wind rose, shook the pine trees. There was a howl, a shriek. Something darted past, brushed against the shoji screen, scared me. But I told myself it was only a bat, and if it was anything else, anything worse, out there in the dark, Tenjin would protect me.

Namu . . .

The house itself seemed to creak and groan. Shadows shifted, wavered. Something scurried, was gone when I looked. I shivered, chanted louder.

Namu Tenman . . . Tenjin . . .

There was a sudden noise behind me, a rustling, a thud. I sensed a huge dark shape, looming, and a great deep voice boomed out.

What the hell are you doing?

It was my father, his robe pulled about him, his hair dishevelled, eyes staring.

I am chanting the Tenjin Sutra.

Do you know what time it is?

The hour of the ox.

He growled.

The bloody hour of the bloody ox!

It's the best time, I said.

It's the middle of the bloody night!

I bowed low, kept my head down on the tatami. I heard another rustling and smelled a faint perfume I recognised as my mother.

The boy is doing what the monk told him, she said. He's doing the right thing.

He's wasting lamp-oil, said my father. At his age this is ridiculous. You'll turn him into a useless layabout, a lazy good-for-nothing with his head full of nonsense about burning in hell.

At this rate, you'll burn in hell yourself, she said. You neglect your own devotions and now you're trying to stop the boy from following the way. You should be ashamed.

I thought my father was going to choke. The veins stood out on his thick neck. The lamplight changed his face, made him look demonic. He let out a kind of grunt and turned away, went crashing through the house, shaking the whole wooden frame of the building as he slammed shut the shoji-screen door.

My mother held me a moment, spoke calmly.

Don't be troubled, little one. You are doing what you must. This is your path. For this I bore you. Now, chant the sutra one more time, then go and get some sleep.

TENJIN

Encouraged by my mother, I persisted with my devotions. For weeks, months, I got up faithfully, every morning at the hour of the ox, while it was still dark. I bowed to Tenjin, I chanted the sutra. My father said nothing, but from time to time I caught him glaring at me then turning away. I continued, regardless. Then something happened that shook my faith.

Among the boys in the village there was a sudden fashion for a game of archery, shooting at a target with a special small-scale bow and half-size arrows. My father gave me a set, perhaps to deflect my attention from what he still saw as a waste of time, and briefly I became obsessed with the game, determined to improve.

It was summer and my brother was home from school, hanging about the house, and he watched my efforts with a mixture of irritation and amusement. Some day he would inherit the family business, run the inn, take over the waystation from my father, and already he was puffed up with the sense of himself and his place in the world.

One particular afternoon he was lolling back on the balcony, cool in the shade, as I tried again and again to hit the little pine tree that grew in the yard. The more I tried, the louder he laughed and the wilder my shots became.

Great samurai, he said, maybe you should try hitting a barn door!

I tried again, missed again, and he laughed even more.

Maybe you should pray to your Tenjin, he said. Ask him to help you out.

I picked up my arrows and strode into the house, trying to calm myself and fight down the rage. Inside it was cooler, and without my brother taunting me I thought I might have more success. I looked around the room. One set of shoji screens was decorated with a chrysanthemum flower. The circular shape of it, the petals radiating out from the centre, to my eye made a perfect target. I set myself to hitting it right in the middle, the heart of the flower. I got it in my sights, let fly and missed, the arrow skittering through the open half of the screen and into the room beyond. It was frustrating, twanging the string, seeing the arrow float harmlessly wide of its target.

I had to concentrate. One of the older boys I'd seen practising spoke mysteriously of *kyudo*, the way of the bow, as if it was a kind of meditation in itself. You have to act as if you are not acting, he said. Pull the bowstring as if you are not pulling it. Aim at the target as if there is no target.

None of this made any sense to me. It all just sounded like so much nonsense, and the boy, like my brother, was full of himself, cocksure. Nevertheless, he hit the target more often than not, so perhaps if I tried not trying, I would improve. And after all, I knew a little about discipline, I got up every morning at the hour of the ox to chant the sutra. Perhaps my brother was right, and Tenjin would help me.

I stood a moment and folded my hands, chanted the opening verse. Then I picked up the bow and breathed deep. I concentrated my gaze on the painted chrysanthemum, at the point right in the centre, the target. I remembered the older boy,

tried to copy the way he stood, the way he held his arm out straight, grasping the bow, the way he placed the arrow, pulled back the string. I tried to empty my mind, I asked Tenjin for help.

Now.

I released the arrow, saw it fly, higher than I'd shot it before, wide of the target and through the gap into the next room. In the room was the *tokonoma* alcove where a special scroll hung, a painting of the poet Saigyō standing under a willow tree, composing verses. My mother had very few possessions she treasured – a hair clasp, a silk kimono with a lotus pattern, a little wooden statue of Kannon, Bodhisattva of mercy, and this scroll with the painting of Saigyō.

The arrow had flown straight and true, as if guided by some malevolent spirit. It had hit the scroll, pierced the poet's left eye.

I dropped the bow and ran into the room. I pulled out the arrow and that only made things worse as the arrow tore a bigger hole, as if Saigyō's eye had been gouged out. I let out a cry then pressed my head to the ground. I asked Tenjin to protect me, to let my crime somehow go undiscovered. But my brother had heard the noise and came rushing in.

You're dead, he said.

And my father was standing in the doorway.

What is it now? he asked. And he looked where my brother was pointing. He saw the damage to the picture and he grabbed the arrow from me, picked up the bow.

Useless! he said, and he strode off.

Then I saw that my mother had come into the room, stood staring at the scroll. She said nothing, and the look in her eyes was not anger, but sadness, and that was much much worse.

*

That night I couldn't sleep, turned this way and that, tortured. If I hadn't picked up the bow. If I hadn't fired at the target. If I hadn't tried not to try. And the final, terrible thought, if I hadn't asked Tenjin for help. He had failed me. But I mustn't think that. Ultimately Tenjin would protect me, he would save me from hell.

I was wide awake at the hour of the ox – I hadn't slept. So I sat as usual in front of the shrine and lit a stick of incense.

There was something I had heard, a way of reading the smoke from the incense. I would ask the deity a question, and the smoke would give the answer. I folded my hands.

Great Tenjin, I sit at your feet and ask you this question. If you can save me from the burning fires of hell, make this smoke rise straight up. But if you cannot help me, make the smoke blow this way and that.

I concentrated intensely, my eyes clenched shut, my folded hands pressed tight together. Then carefully I opened my eyes and peered at the smoke. It rose in a long white line towards the ceiling, straight and unbroken. I felt sheer relief, elation. Tenjin had given me a sign. I laughed and let my hands fall to my lap, and immediately the smoke started writhing and breaking up, dispersing and drifting across the room.

The answer was clear. Tenjin could not protect me. I was damned.

*

Next morning I was miserable. There was no point in getting out of bed, no point in eating, or playing. No point in chanting the sutra. No point in anything.

My mother came to me in my room.

It was just an old painting, she said, a dusty old scroll. It

can probably be patched up. And if it can't, it doesn't matter. It's not worth the misery.

It's not just the painting, I said. And I told her about asking Tenjin, and the smoke from the incense giving me my answer.

And, of course, she said, you're such a terrible, terrible sinner.

I could see she was trying not to smile, but I turned away. This was serious.

In the first place, she said, sometimes it's better if we face up to things. It's better for our karma if we take our medicine. And second, you're being very hard on Tenjin! Are you going to give up on him just like that, and believe some hocus focus about incense smoke? Are you going to be like that smoke, at the mercy of a puff of wind, blowing you this way and that?

I felt something in my chest, a bubble bursting, and I let out a great sob.

There, she said, hugging me. There.

*

A puppet show was advertised in nearby Suwa, and my mother said she would take me.

They're performing a wonderful story, she said, about the great teacher Nisshin Shonin. I wanted to know what happened in the story, but she wouldn't tell me. She said she didn't want to spoil it for me, she would let me see it for myself.

The performance was outdoors, in a temple courtyard. It was early evening, the light beginning to fade, and lamps had been lit all around. A little stage had been set up with a simple black curtain as backdrop. I had never been to a puppet show, or any kind of theatre, so I didn't know what to expect, but I knew from my mother's quiet excitement it must be something special. The place was crowded but we had arrived early and sat near the front.

A group of musicians sat at the side of the stage and suddenly, with the whack of wooden clappers, they began to play, the ripple and twang of a koto, wail of a samisen, breathiness of a shakuhachi flute. Immediately the atmosphere changed. The sense of anticipation intensified and it felt as if we were in a special place. I hadn't seen the puppeteers come on stage, but suddenly they were there, dressed in black, the little puppet figures slumped in front of them.

At first I felt a slight disappointment. The puppeteers were in full view, it would be obvious they were manipulating the figures, it would be distracting, it would spoil the illusion.

Then the music changed, a rapid drumbeat, a man's voice chanting, intoning the story, and slowly, slowly, one of the puppet figures began to move. The little body straightened up, the little head raised, the little hands came together. He bowed and the little eyes blinked once, stared straight out, right at me, and I caught my breath, completely and utterly transfixed.

The everyday world fell away. None of it mattered, the courtyard, the crowd, the stage, the puppeteers, none of it was real. We had been drawn into another world where this little being was fully alive. He was Nisshin Shonin, come to life.

He told us of the true path to enlightenment, the chanting of the Lotus Sutra, and how his devotion to that path might cost him his life. He had fallen foul of the Shogun, Yoshinori, and been denounced as a heretic. Now he was to be tortured and forced to give up his faith.

Another figure loomed beside him. This was Lord Tokimune, the Shogun's henchman.

Tell me, he demanded. If you follow the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, can you bear the heat of a blazing fire?

A true devotee, said Nisshin, can enter into a raging fire without being harmed.

Indeed? said Tokimune. Let us put this to the test.

I felt the fear again, for Nisshin, for myself. My throat was dry, a sick emptiness in my stomach. The voices and the music said the torturers were piling up firewood and setting it alight. I could smell it, I could feel the heat. Nisshin was ordered to walk through the flames. He moved forward, hands folded in front of him. He wavered a moment, as if from the intense heat, then he gathered himself again. The music grew louder and through it came the chant from the sutra.

Namu Myoho Renge Kyo.

He stood, unscathed.

This is the protection of Kannon Bodhisattva, he said, and I felt a thrill, a tingling in my spine. The audience shouted their approval, applauded. I thought the show was over. But the music changed again as Tokimune stepped forward.

So you can bear a little heat, he said. But do you think this can be compared to the fires of hell?

I would not be so arrogant, said Nisshin.

We must give you a sterner test, said Tokimune. Now, kneel.

The music changed again, thud of a deeper drum, screech and wail of the flute and strings. Two more figures appeared, summoned by Tokimune. They moved awkwardly, carried between them two poles, and suspended from the poles was an iron pot, a cauldron. Tokimune explained that the cauldron was red-hot and the two men could hardly bear the heat. Nisshin was kneeling in front of them, and with difficulty they raised the pot over his head as he chanted once more.

Namu Myoho Renge Kyo.

The sky had darkened and a breeze made the lanterns flare. Steam and smoke rose from the cauldron as the two men shook from the effort of holding it up. The music grew louder still, the howling of demons, as the cauldron was placed on Nisshin's head, and he flinched and the audience gasped and I thought my heart would stop. I clung to my mother's sleeve.

Courage, she said.

Then we heard it, getting stronger, rising above the cacophony.

Namu Myoho Renge Kyo.

The two bearers staggered back and let the cauldron fall to the ground. Nisshin stood up, folded his hands and continued his chant.

Namu Myoho Renge Kyo.

There was a cheer and a few people at the back started chanting along with Nisshin.

Namu Myoho Renge Kyo.

More and more people joined in, and my mother was chanting, and I was too, and so was everyone else in the audience.

Namu Myoho Renge Kyo.

Namu Myoho Renge Kyo.

The voices rose together, like one great voice, into the night, and I felt lifted up, outside myself. I had tears in my eyes, and my mother wiped them with her sleeve. On the way home I told her I knew what I wanted to be. I would be like Nisshin. I would leave home and be a monk.

Yes, she said. Yes. When it's time.

WISE CRANE

I was fourteen and felt as if I had been practising these devotions all my young life. I got up every night, shocked myself awake with cold water, lit incense and sat chanting the sutras. It meant I began each day with a kind of strength and clarity, even if it faded as the day wore on. But lately it had been fading more and more quickly. Some little thing would jangle my nerves, make me angry, and it felt as if all the austerity was for nothing. Then that old fear of hell began to stir in me, and I was once again that frightened child, terrified of burning in the fires.

Something else was stirring too. My body was changing, and the young girls at the bathhouse looked at me differently. They would whisper to each other and giggle, glance in my direction and turn away. It filled me with confusion and a huge dumb longing. The pale little lizard between my legs would harden and redden, rear up like a dragon, and I had to hide it behind my towel as I eased into the tub, praying for it to subside.

It would leap up again in the night, this tough stubborn little dragon, when I woke from muddled dreams involving those girls from the bathhouse. I imagined when I doused myself with cold water it would hiss and steam. I could picture it, the way I could sometimes see the figures on a painted scroll, on the storyteller's *kamishibai* screen, move around with

a life of their own, animated. It was another world, or another way of looking at this world. It was this world exaggerated, made fluid, and it made me laugh.

I took to making little drawings myself, using a brush and inkstone I'd found in an old box at the back of the shrine room. I'd beg scraps of rice paper from my mother – discarded wrapping paper, out-of-date bills and receipts. I'd turn them over, sketch on the blank side, practise my calligraphy. Sometimes an unintended drip or smear of ink would make an interesting shape and I'd turn it into a bird or an animal, a mountain or a twisted branch. One time an accidental swish of the brush became my mother's kimono and I quickly sketched in her round face above it with the tip of the brush. Another time a smudge looked like my father's thick eyebrows and I added the glowering eyes, the grim line of the mouth. I showed both the portraits to my mother and she laughed, said I'd got them just right. But I didn't show them to my father.

Once I doodled a shape that looked like my own body, naked, the way I saw it when I stepped out of the bath. The brush made a quick approximation of my face, then before I knew it I had drawn that little dragon between the legs, just the way I had imagined it with steam rising as if cold water had doused its fire. Again it made me laugh but then the laugh cut short, stopped. I saw the expression on the face I had drawn, a leer, demonic. I took the brush and tried to wipe out the drawing, but I only succeeded in blurring, smudging the shapes. The face was distorted now, ugly, and the dragon shape was still there, darker, more solid.

I crumpled up the paper, crushed it to a ball in my fist, looked for somewhere to throw it away. But I didn't want my mother, or even worse, my father, to find it. If I dropped it outside, I imagined the wind catching, unfurling it, blowing

it into the village where one of my friends would find it. It would be passed around, pinned onto a noticeboard. The girls at the bathhouse would look at it and snigger. It might even blow all the way to Mishima where my brother was at school. He would find it and recognise it as mine.

I could tear it into tiny pieces and scatter it, but the pieces would never be small enough. Somebody might gather them up, put them together again.

This was madness, but it took hold of me. Then I realised the only thing to do with the drawing was burn it. There was a lamp burning in the shrine room and I bowed before it. I unfolded the drawing and held it carefully to the flame, catching one corner and setting it alight. But I hadn't allowed for it flaring up so quick. I had to get it outside or I'd burn down the house. I stumbled towards the door and out into the yard, shook the burning paper from my hand just as the flame reached my fingers, scorched me. My eyes smarted. My fingers stung, red. They would blister.

I tucked the hand under my armpit to numb the stinging. I stamped barefoot on the ash, on the charred remains of the page.

My father stuck his head out the window.

What is it this time?

Nothing, I said. I was just burning something. Out here. Outside.

He took in a breath, about to say something, but then stopped as if he truly, genuinely, had no idea where to begin.

*

My burned fingers nipped for days. I eased them in cold water, dabbed them dry. My mother asked what had happened. I told her I'd burned my hand on the lamp.

Testing yourself again? she asked.

I'd gone through a spell, a year or two back, of holding my hand over a candle flame, seeing how long I could bear it.

Not this time, I said. It was an accident.

But this pain, now, reminded me how little I could take, and how this was nothing, less than nothing, compared to that other, endless fire. And I knew it was the fire of desire that had brought me here, that fierce little dragon. I had read about it, and I'd seen beasts in their season, cattle in the fields, dogs in a dusty backyard, grimly coupling. My brother had taken a leering delight in telling me our mother and father had done this, that it was how we were made, how we came into the world.

I made up my mind. The only way to conquer this desire, to go beyond it, was to throw myself into the spiritual life. It was time for me to go away, to become a monk.

*

Fuji was this constant presence, this vastness, towering above the village, filling the horizon. It changed from moment to moment, day to day, season to season. It was hidden by spring mists, shimmered in summer haze, burned almost red in autumn, shone pure white in winter. But the shape of it, the form, was always there, taking the breath away, quickening the heart.

I was wandering at the edge of the village, gazing up absently at the mountain, when I heard shouts in the distance. I had forgotten the procession would be passing through – the Daimyo and his entourage, his retinue, returning from Edo. Every year he had to make this journey – to Edo and back – on pain of death and at huge expense, to declare his loyalty to the Shogun.

We heard crazy stories about the Shogun. He was known as Inu-Kubo, the Dog Shogun. He'd been born in the Year of the Dog and some rogue of a Buddhist monk had told him he'd been a dog in his last animal incarnation, before becoming human. So he'd issued an edict, *On Compassion for Living Things*, making a law that dogs should not be harmed and should be treated with respect. Anyone disobeying was liable to summary execution.

I'd heard people talk about it at the inn. If they had too much to drink they might start by criticising the Daimyo, then they'd move on to the Shogun. (Somebody would bark.) Or they'd even criticise the emperor himself. Then a friend would make a cut-throat gesture or my father would clear his throat loudly and change the subject.

I'd always loved watching the procession pass through Hara, the endless ranks of pikemen and flag-bearers, riflemen, armed samurai on horseback, ranks of foot-soldiers, priests and servants, palanquins wobbling on the shoulders of the bearers, the Daimyo himself in his elaborate *norimon*, curtained to shield him from view. There must have been a thousand men in the procession, and it took hours to pass through the village. Some of the Daimyo's retainers would stop at the inn to water their horses, and my father would take charge and be suitably deferential as they ate and drank and shouted out their orders. The critics and gossips would stay well back, emerging later to share the news they'd picked up from the footsoldiers, rumours from the capital, tales from the floating world.

I found a vantage point, back from the road, and settled to watch. The pikemen appeared first, the vanguard, all dressed in black silk, walking with their strange exaggerated slow march that was almost a kind of dance, raising the foot high then gliding forward. They did this in concentrated

silence, the only sounds the swish of silk, the crunch of gravel underfoot.

The lead man stepped for a moment to the side of the road, hitched up his loincloth and let out a great stream of piss, spattering in the dust. A few of the young girls from the bathhouse had been standing nearby and they jumped back, laughing.

Did you see his thing?

What a pike!

The size of it!

They laughed even louder, but the pikeman had returned to his position sombre and dignified, and resumed his slow march.

A little way behind came the Daimyo himself, carried on high, hidden inside the *norimon* with its silk curtains, its elaborate carvings, and some way further back came another *norimon*, smaller, less ornate, but still beautifully decorated. This too had its curtains closed, but just as it passed me, they opened with a swish of silk and a woman was looking out at me. Her face was the most beautiful I had ever seen, like an *ukiyo-e* painting, like the goddess Kannon herself, embodied.

I must have been staring, and I'm sure my mouth fell open so I gulped like some stupid carp surfacing. The woman smiled and the curtain fell shut. I was shaken, but I bowed and turned away, continued walking up the hill, Fuji ahead of me.

There was a haiku I had read.

*Beloved Fuji –
The mist clears and reveals
Your snowy whiteness.*

When I'd climbed far enough, I looked back, saw the procession still trailing into the distance, but so small, so insignificant. I imagined each and every one of that huge entourage plodding along with head down, eyes fixed on the ground, not once looking up at this. This.

I knew when I went back to the inn I would have to help clear up the mess. My father would ask where I had been and raise his eyes to heaven.

I bowed once more to the mountain, and dragging my steps I headed back down.

*

Now I made drawings of Fuji, with swift simple strokes, and I tried to draw Bodhisattva Kannon. Sometimes her face looked like my mother, sometimes like the woman who had looked out at me through the curtains of the norimon.

My restlessness increased and I went out walking every day, climbed the slopes of Mount Yanagizawa in search of a quiet place to sit, away from the everyday world. I found the perfect spot, a flat rock above a mountain stream, a sheer cliff face rising up behind. I sat for hours, totally absorbed, reciting what I knew of the sutras, looking down at the rushing stream, or up at Fuji.

One day I noticed that a configuration of the rock, viewed from a certain angle, resembled Kannon herself. The next morning I brought a chisel and a small mallet, borrowed from my father's workshop, and I set to carving the likeness into the stone, accentuating what was already there, bringing it to life. When I'd finished I stood looking at it in amazement, the Bodhisattva smiling at me. I bowed my head and chanted to her in reverence.

Enmei Jikku Kannon Gyo.

That afternoon there were heavy rains and I took shelter under an overhang of rock. When the rain had subsided I climbed down to head for home. The stream was swollen, the waters rushing fast, and I had to wade across, carrying the chisel and mallet, wrapped in cloth, above my head. Twice I stumbled, lost my footing and almost went under, the water reaching up to my chin. I made it to the other side, and I got home, drenched and shivering, my clothes sticking to me. But I was elated, and my mother could see it in me.

Perhaps it's time, she said.

*

My mother was Nichiren Buddhist. That was why she had loved the story of Nisshin Shonin walking through fire, saving himself by chanting the Lotus Sutra. So it was no surprise when she suggested I go to Shoin-ji, a Nichiren temple. But then she said something else that did surprise me.

And after all, she smiled, it is where your father studied as a young man.

At first I thought I had misheard, or misunderstood.

My father? I said. He studied at the temple?

For a few short years, she said, he trained for the priesthood. He was taught by his uncle, Daizui-Rojin.

My head felt cold. There was a taste like iron in my mouth.

I didn't know, I said. I had no idea.

There is much you do not know about your father, she said.

I bowed.

Where do you think that brush and inkstone came from? she said. The ones you've been using.

They were his?

His calligraphy was good, she said, though he lacked your talent for making these drawings and bringing them to life!

I thought of the drawing I had burned. I felt myself blush. So you see, she said, when he gets angry at you, or loses patience, it is not a simple matter.

The drawing I had done of him, glowering.

He knows how difficult that life can be, said my mother. Perhaps he is afraid for you, and thinks you are too young.

He thinks I will fail.

She left a silence, then continued.

Perhaps in his heart he feels that he failed, and it pains him to think of such things, so he pushes them away.

My father, the businessman. My father with his brusqueness, his ferocious samurai manner, inherited from his father. My father's impatience with me, his anger at my devotions, calling it all a waste of time.

The way is not easy, said my mother. And perhaps his real work, like mine, was to bring you into the world, to provide for you. Until now.

*

Tanrei, the head priest at Shoin-ji, was old and frail. He said I might be better to follow my vocation at another temple, Daisho-ji, in the neighbouring town of Numazu. Perhaps he also thought it would be best for me to move away from home, to put some distance – even just a few miles – between myself and my parents. But he said he would accept me into the order. I would receive the tonsure and he would give me a new name.

On the appointed day I bathed and dressed in monks' robes of rough grey cloth. My head was shorn then lathered and shaved, scraped close to the scalp. The monk who used the razor had a steady hand and only once, when I twitched, he nicked the skin with the blade, just at the crown of my head. He dabbed the little bead of blood.

This one's keen, he said. He wants to open his crown chakra already.

I rubbed my head, felt the rough stubble. I was led into the meditation hall and told to kneel in front of Tanrei who sat upright on a hard wooden bench. The sharp tang of incense filled the air.

From today on, he said, Iwajiro is no more. You will leave the name behind as you leave behind your childhood. Your new name is Ekaku. Repeat it after me. Ekaku.

Ekaku.

It means Wise Crane.

Ekaku.

Go to the shrine room, he said, and chant the name one hundred and eight times. Let the sound of it fill you. Become the name. Ekaku.

Ekaku.

The monk who had shaved my head handed me a string of *juzu*, counting beads. From the length of it I knew there must be 108 beads, the sacred number. I would count them between thumb and forefinger as I chanted. I thanked him and sat in front of the shrine. Here too the smell of incense was strong. The very walls, the old wooden beams and pillars, were infused with its ancient musky scent.

I straightened my back and began to chant, my own voice as strange to me as this new name, my mantra.

Ekaku. Ekaku.

Wise Crane.

As I chanted I felt the sound resonate in my belly, my chest, my throat. Then the word lost all meaning, became pure sound.

Ekaku.

It became the cry of a bird, a white crane in flight across the evening sky.

Ekaku.

Then I was the crane, neck thrust forward, spreading my wings. I alighted on a rock, folded in on myself, and I was an old Chinese sage, looking out over a range of mountains.

Ekaku.

My finger and thumb closed on the final bead, larger than the rest. I chanted one last time.

Ekaku.

I stepped outside and into this new life.

My shaved head. The spring breeze.

*

A few weeks later my parents came to see me off on my journey. The arrangements had been made. The head priest at Daisho-ji would be expecting me. My father had given me a few coins tied in an old purse, enough to pay for my keep when I arrived. I thanked him and bowed low, pressed my forehead to the ground, stood up again and dusted myself down. My mother held me a moment, stood back and bowed to me with folded hands.

I shouldered my pack and set out walking along the Tokaido. The spring morning was bright and cold. Looking up, I saw Fuji, immense above the clouds, then they swirled and closed in again, obscuring it. I turned and looked back, saw my mother and father still standing there. I waved and my mother bowed, my father gave a nod of the head and turned away, went back inside.

Further on I stopped and put my straw *kasa* on my head. Again I looked back and could still see my mother, small and distant. Again I waved, and this time she also waved. I walked on. At a bend in the road, I turned and looked back one last time, and she was still there, a tiny figure, just distinguishable.

I thought she was waving again, and I did the same. I kept walking, and the next time I looked I could no longer see her, or the house, or the village. The world I knew had shrunk and disappeared, and now Fuji shook off its mist and cloud and loomed there, huge and serene, a great being, dreaming itself.