THE TEMPLE OF THE WILD GEESE and BAMBOO DOLLS OF ECHIZEN

two novellas by Tsutomu Mizukami translated with a postscript by Dennis Washburn

THE TEMPLE OF THE WILD GEESE

and

BAMBOO DOLLS OF ECHIZEN

江苏工业学院图书馆 藏 书 章

Originally published in Japanese as *Gan no tera* by Bungei Shunju, Tokyo,1961 and *Echizen take ningyo* by Chuo Koron-sha, Tokyo, 1963

Copyright © 1961, 1963 by Fukiko Minakami

English Translation © 2008 by Dennis Washburn

First English translation, 2008

All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Minakami, Tsutomu, 1919-2004.
[Gan no tera, English]

The Temple of the wild geese; and Bamboo dolls of Echizen / Tsutomu Mizukami; translation by Dennis Washburn.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-56478-490-2 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-56478-490-8 (alk. paper)

I. Washburn, Dennis C. (Dennis Charles), 1954- II. Minakami, Tsutomu, 1919-2004. Echizen take ningyo. English III. Title. IV. Title: Bamboo dolls of Echizen. V. Title: Bamboo dolls of Echizen.

> PL856.I5G313 2008 895.6'35--dc22

2007040574

This book has been selected by the Japanese Literature Publishing Project (JLPP), which is run by the Japanese Literature Publishing and Promotion Center (J-Lit Center) on behalf of the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan.

Partially funded by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and by the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign



www.dalkeyarchive.com

Printed on permanent/durable acid-free, recycled paper and bound in the United States of America

THE TEMPLE OF THE WILD GEESE

and

BAMBOO DOLLS OF ECHIZEN

TWO NOVELLAS

by

TSUTOMU MIZUKAMI

TRANSLATED WITH A POSTSCRIPT BY DENNIS WASHBURN



The Temple of the Wild Geese \cdot 9 \cdot

BAMBOO DOLLS OF ECHIZEN · 89 ·

THE TEMPLE OF THE WILD GEESE

I

Kishimoto Nangaku, whose paintings of birds and wildlife had won him acclaim among Kyoto art circles, passed away in the autumn of 1933. He died in a back room of his sprawling residence, which sat enclosed by a black wooden fence on a corner of Higashi no Tōin in the district of Maruta-machi.

Nangaku's death was caused by a combination of severe chronic asthma and old age. In his declining years, when he was wasted and thin as a praying mantis, it seemed that all that remained was his strength of will. Those disciples with him at the end all agreed that when he died, it was as if a withered, worm-infested tree had fallen. Because they had known Nangaku when he was still a man of vigor and vitality, when he had sported with more than his share of women, they may have been particularly inclined to describe his passing in this way. Throughout the day and evening, he had been snoring loudly as he slept, but in his final moments, he groaned hoarsely and writhed in pain. Nangaku was sixty-eight.

The day before Kishimoto Nangaku died—that is, on October 19—Kitami Jikai came by to see him, arriving just after Nangaku's wife, Hideko, had stepped out on some errands. Jikai was the head priest at the Kohōan, which was located at the foot of Mt. Kinugasa. He said he had been passing by, and wanted to drop in to express his concern. He was wearing a short black robe over his kimono and had a white silk band draped around his neck. Pleats of

purple cloth were peeking out from beneath the hems of his robes. It appeared as though he was on his way home from a memorial service somewhere.

A maid Jikai recognized by sight met him at the entryway. He peppered her with questions as he proceeded to make his way straight into the house. "How're things? How's he doing?" he asked. Behind him was a short acolyte, who couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen years old. The boy shuffled hurriedly after the priest.

The Kishimoto household was among the benefactors of the Kohōan. Since Nangaku was an honorary representative of the temple's patrons, it was not at all unusual for Jikai to barge into the inner recesses of his home in such a familiar, unceremonious way. Nevertheless, it discomfited Sasai Nansō, the most senior of the disciples, who was moistening his master's lips with a strip of dampened cotton when he arrived. The doctor had already given up and left, and now here was the priest of the family temple. Nansō considered it a bad omen, and the dour expression he wore made his feelings evident to everyone. Still, when the maid withdrew to fetch tea and sweets, Jikai breezed past the artist's disciples, seemingly oblivious to their consternation, and headed straight for the patient's bedside. Peering into Nangaku's sleeping face, he repeated his questions: "How're things? How're you doing?"

Nangaku had been lying like a toppled, decayed tree, a silk quilt pulled up to his chin, but Jikai's voice was so loud that he could feel it reverberate off the low ceiling and beat against his ears. With a slight flutter of his lids, he half-opened his eyes and, in a voice wracked with pain, said, "Is that you, Reverend?"

His disciples were startled. Since morning, Nansō had repeatedly called out his master's name but to no reply. Now, Nangaku opened his parched lips ever so slightly and told the priest in a raspy voice, "I knew I could count on you to come."

"I hate performing this duty," Jikai replied. Lowering his stout shoulders and leaning closer into Nangaku's face, he added haughtily, "You're the one person I never wanted to call on for this purpose."

Only then did the priest seem to register the presence of Nansō and the three other disciples. Glancing about at them arranged in the large, ten-tatamimat room, he chuckled. Then he abruptly called out to the young acolyte. "Hey, Jinen! Hey!"

Moments earlier, the boy had stepped out onto the veranda overlooking the garden and was just then gazing intently at a stone lantern entwined with ivy in its autumn colors. Hearing his name, his shoulders stiffened. He turned toward the priest and peered into the room. He was a disturbingly odd-looking boy, his shaven head emphasizing the enormity of his crown, and his protruding forehead and deep-set eyes making his face appear small and narrow.

"Come over here!" Jikai called again, motioning with his hand.

The young acolyte stepped forward quietly, taking care to avoid the cloth trim of the tatami. He shuffled his feet, sliding them over the mats.

"His name's Jinen," Jikai told Nangaku. "He just went through his ordination rites yesterday. He's good at keeping the garden tidy, too. When you get better, you must come to the temple to relax."

Could this be the reason Jikai had dropped by? Whenever a novice is ordained, it is customary for Zen temples to announce the event to the representatives of their patrons. The priest appeared to be introducing the boy he had chosen as his assistant. Watching the boy in profile, the disciple Nansō thought he had certainly picked a rather glum-looking lad.

After a few moments, Jikai got up and began retracing his steps away from the sickbed. Before the priest had reached the veranda, Nangaku abruptly stirred again. "Look after Sato, Reverend," he said in a hoarse whisper. "She belongs at the temple."

No sooner had he uttered these words than Nangaku closed his eyes and was overtaken by a violent fit of coughing. Nansō quickly returned to his side and resumed moistening his master's lips with the dampened cloth.

The priest glanced back to survey the scene. Bowing deeply, he saw that Nangaku's complexion was already a pale greenish shade. "Take care of yourself," he called. Patting his acolyte once on the head, he quickly withdrew from the Kishimoto house. His visit had lasted no more than four or five minutes.

Nangaku did not say another word until the following day. At times he snored loudly or gasped painfully, and at other times he was quiet, as though his breathing had abruptly stopped. When he was on the verge of taking his final breath, he parted his lips ever so slightly. Because it appeared he wanted to say something, his disciples leaned in and listened closely. What they heard was "Sato."

Nangaku's disciples all glanced over nervously toward Hideko. Sitting at the head of her husband's bed, she was sobbing, her face pressed into the sleeve of her kimono. It appeared she had not heard.

This "Sato" who consumed Nangaku's last thoughts was Kirihara Satoko,

whom he had taken from her job at a small restaurant in Kiya-machi and set up on the second floor of a flower shop in Demachi, Kamigyō Ward. In his final years, the artist had visited her so often that even his disciples and the priest Jikai knew all about their relationship. And while she was now thirty-two and no longer a young woman, Satoko was the type favored by men—petite and buxom, with an hourglass figure and delicate features. Why, then, would Nangaku think it necessary to ask the priest to look after her?

When Kishimoto Nangaku was in good health, he had traveled as far as China and Europe for his work. Yet when it came to creating those master-pieces on which he lavished his greatest care, it was his custom to borrow the guest quarters at the Kohōan and work there. The artist was drawn to the area around the temple because of the groves of deciduous trees that skirted the base of Mt. Kinugasa. He used the Kohōan's guestroom as his atelier in his later years. In fact, ten years before his death, he had even spent an entire summer in residence at the temple doing nothing at all. He had brought Satoko to live with him during that time.

Nangaku had painted wild geese on the four-panel *fusuma* doors in the corridor running from the cedar entryway of the head priest's residence to the main hall, and on the doors of the inner sanctum and the two chambers adjoining it to the left and right. Strolling the premises with Satoko, he would gesture to them and say, "These are the geese I painted."

The panels of the *fusuma* had been painted in ink and gold dust. The setting was an ancient pine with enormous roots stretching its great branches out over a pond. Each of the needle-like leaves had been drawn in exquisite detail. A flock of wild geese, some perching, some flapping their wings, was pictured settling in the lower branches. As one bird was about to fly off, its white-feathered belly flashing in the evening sky, another nestled motionlessly on a branch, appearing as if it were part of a knot on the trunk of the pine. There were goslings. And there were chicks with their mouths open to receive food from their mothers. Although every one of these countless birds had been painted in monochrome ink, no two of them were alike. One could almost hear the sound of the brush through which the artist had focused his passion, rendering each with the greatest care. The geese seemed to be alive.

Nangaku had poured his heart and soul into these panels, completing them in the spring two years before that summer he spent with Satoko at the Kohōan. Indeed, they were so brilliantly executed that the artist himself could not hold back his pride. Intoxicated with drink, he gently stroked the nape of Satoko's neck and smiled. "After I'm dead and gone," he told her, "this place will come to be known as 'The Temple of the Wild Geese,' and the number of famous places in western Kyoto will increase by one."

"Yes, you can almost hear their cries!" Satoko, who was enraptured, whispered ecstatically. Standing in the dusky light of the main hall, Nangaku beamed and caressed her neck.

Was it because Nangaku had been unable to forget the events of that summer that he had entrusted Satoko to the care of the priest?

In fact, the three of them had often passed the time together drinking in the temple's guest quarters. Although Jikai was ten years younger than Nangaku, his face and body suggested he was of equal virility. Their similar personalities meant he also got along well with Satoko.

"Can't you please remove the hair from your ears, Reverend?" a drunken Satoko had once asked, squinting at him through heavy eyelids. Jikai had laughed and studied his two companions, but a flash of sexual desire had settled in his eyes. Knowing full well that the priest was attracted to her, Satoko often remarked to Nangaku, "Jikai's eyes are frightening."

Indeed, Jikai and Nangaku shared identical tastes. When it came to women and drink, they were in total agreement. Perhaps for this reason, Nangaku always seemed dissatisfied that Jikai had never married. The Kohōan held special status as a branch temple within the Tōzenji sect; and because it was physically separate from the grounds of the main temple, keeping a wife would not have attracted undue attention. In any case, it was an open secret that all the branch temples—even those located on the main temple's grounds—kept a woman in the head priest's residence. Nangaku had told Jikai to his face that a priest with sexual urges had no reason to maintain his bachelorhood. But Jikai had just laughed and ignored him. When Nangaku pressed him on the matter, he replied, "To cut off one's hair is to sever the roots of attachment. That is the meaning of a Zen priest's tonsure."

When it came time to observe the Buddhist rites on the seventh day after Nangaku's death, Kirihara Satoko once again walked through the gate of the Kohōan. She was wearing mourning robes and a brownish agate rosary on one of her slender white arms. The sky was overcast, and there was a slight breeze. The peak of Mt. Kinugasa, overgrown with small pines, was covered in a thick mist. The leaves were sparse on the deciduous trees in the groves

around the gentle base of the mountain. Japanese maples, brilliant in their autumn foliage, were clustered between open spaces where bare patches of the mountain's reddish soil peeked through.

An iron chain was attached to the wicket located at the side of the temple gate. The slapping of Satoko's sandals against her feet and the metallic creaking of the chain as she entered the precincts broke the peaceful silence of the surroundings. The young acolyte Jinen came out to greet her. It was the first time Satoko had encountered the boy, with his large head and deep-set eyes. He was dressed in a lined robe of solid blue that was a little long for him. As he knelt on the wooden floor against the backdrop of the polished, sootblackened pillars of the temple's living quarters, his appearance and manner seemed disagreeably adult-like. Satoko felt a little unsure of herself.

"Could you please tell the Reverend that a caller has arrived from Demachi?" she said from the steppingstone at the entryway.

"Yes," he replied, and immediately returned to the living quarters.

Presently, Satoko heard the sound of hurried footsteps coming from the hallway. Then Jikai appeared, dressed in a lined white robe tied with a stiff obi. "Please, come in. Come in," the priest said, and a look of nostalgia rose in Satoko's face.

Satoko's buxom figure moved as briskly as ever, and—was it Jikai's imagination?—her pale face seemed luminescent. Seeing her this way, Jikai clucked with delight. He led her into the guestroom, where Nangaku's funeral had been conducted. It was a quiet space that looked out onto the small landscaped hill and pond in the garden. For Satoko, it was a place filled with memories. She placed her palms on the tatami floor, her eyes moist with tears. "It's been so long," she cried.

It had been out of the question for Satoko to attend Nangaku's funeral. She told the priest how she had been at home on the second floor of the florist's in Demachi when she learned of Nangaku's death. How she had known the date of the funeral, but had mourned his passing alone. "I'd like to offer a prayer right away," she said. "And Reverend," she added fawningly, "could you show me his paintings of the wild geese?"

Satoko was shown into the main hall, where the memorial tablet for Nangaku instantly caught her eyes:

Shūgakuin nantō ikken koji

It was specially decorated and set atop an altar cloth that had been spread out on the ordination platform. Satoko found it hard to breath. In recognition of his devoted service to the temple, Jikai had included the honorific title "koji" in Nangaku's kaimyō, his posthumous Buddhist name. Seeing it there, Satoko pondered how Nangaku's entire being was now reduced to a thin, rectangular wooden tablet less than a foot high.

She placed some incense in the censer, and the ten-mat inner sanctum soon filled with white smoke. As the smoke began to flicker above the tatami, the geese Nangaku had painted on the sliding doors appeared to move within the haze. They were so beautiful. Seeing them again, it occurred to Satoko that Nangaku had surely achieved Buddhahood.

The two geese at the center of the sliding doors that opened onto the chamber left of the inner sanctum were puffing out the white down of their bellies. One of them was pressed into a hollow of the pine and nuzzling the side of the other with its beak. Satoko kept staring at their image. Jikai, who had been standing behind her the whole time, finally broke the silence: "Let's go in over there and have a drink."

He was in a state of excitement. For the first time ever, Satoko was about to step into the dusky six-mat room that served as his private quarters. The acolyte Jinen was already inside, kneeling and setting out cushions for them to sit on. The priest motioned toward the boy with his jaw and said, "He's my substitute wife. His name's Jinen. He recently completed his ordination rites."

Bowing, Jinen dropped his head slightly and glanced toward Satoko. His deep-set eyes were gleaming, but he looked down immediately as though embarrassed. He quickly left the room.

"I was surprised when I first saw him at the entrance," Satoko remarked. "He strikes me as a rather strange boy. How old is he?"

"Thirteen."

"Really? Does he go to school?"

"He goes to the middle school at Daitokuji."

"Is he your successor?"

Jikai regarded Satoko's face but did not respond. He stood up and went to open a small sliding panel beneath one of the altars. Inside were several magnum-size bottles of sake. Jikai took out the *Sawanotsuru* and said, "Let's open this one today." A child-like smile spread across his cheeks and he clapped his hands. "Heat this up for us, all right?" he asked when Jinen reappeared.

The boy withdrew into the hallway clutching the large bottle. After a short while, he returned carrying a tray loaded with cups and flasks filled with the prepared drink. The acolyte's odd appearance belied the fact that he was actually a diligent child, Satoko thought. The first time she saw him, she felt his face was somehow disagreeable. Now that she was becoming more accustomed to seeing him, however, she began to find the boy curiously touching.

"He works very hard. You've found a good acolyte," she told Jikai, her tongue quickly loosened by the sake.

Because Satoko had not had occasion to drink for some time, the alcohol quickly went to her head. But even after night fell, she still felt relaxed and at ease. When she stayed with Nangaku at the Kohōan, they had often stayed up all night drinking with the priest.

"I had a last request from Nangaku," Jikai finally told her, a glittering light settling in the large pupils of his dark eyes. "He asked me to look after you. He knew very well how much I liked you. Won't you come here and live with me?"

Jikai moved closer, exposing his knees beneath his white robe. He seemed to be waiting intently for her answer, but Satoko remained silent. This silence gave Jikai his opening. He kicked his cushion aside and seized her from behind, passing his hands under her arms and pinning her to the floor. As the priest began to press his lips to her, an earlier premonition that this day would come flashed in Satoko's mind. She closed her eyes but did not resist. The priest quickly pulled open her robes and pressed his powerful body up against her. Satoko's eyes fluttered open.

A shadow suddenly darted across the shoji directly in her line of vision. Startled, Satoko instinctively pushed the priest away. It must be Jinen, she thought. But the shadow's significance quickly faded from her consciousness. As her body was once again overwhelmed by the priest's strength, Satoko's mind drifted away.

Short of breath from exertion, Jikai began to repeat his request for Satoko to join him at the temple. "You'll come here, won't you? Won't you?" he panted again and again. Her hair disheveled and her face pressed to the tatami, Satoko shook her head each time, but soon even that much resistance seemed too much trouble.

The following day, Satoko agreed to live in the residence of the Kohōan. More accurately speaking, she could not return home because of what had happened with Jikai. The rites of the seventh day following Kishimoto Nangaku's death had become the day of Kirihara Satoko's initiation.