

## *Woman in the Tide* by Shinkichi Takahashi

Translated by Masuo Funaki

Miichi remembers seizing a swimming fish in his fingers. He was a boy of four or so. There was a flight of stepping stones which jutted out at intervals in an oblique row. The steps led down to a wide sandy beach. At high water they were immersed in the tide.

Miichi opened his eyes under the water and saw blue fish swimming. He could see them not only in front of him but above and below, too. Reaching out, he nimbly grasped a fish by the body. It was a blue-striped fish of several inches. He climbed up the landing ladder onto the road and went home, holding the fish tight.

One time beneath the sea, a fish drifting with the tide came into his mouth and almost choked him. On another occasion, his clothes wet through from the rising sea, he held his head above water, hanging on to the landing ladder. Seaweed and chips of wood tossed about on the waves. Miichi went home weeping in his dripping clothes; he had drenched the soiled clothes on purpose, expecting his surprised mother to put new ones on him. It was the first bud of evil in him.

Among his memories of his childhood there is the following. It was in the grove of the village shrine, where a big owl was sitting in a tree with big, glaring eyes. To go up the flight of stone steps as steep as a wall was no easy matter. There he met an old man dragging down a woman headlong by her dishevelled hair. Hurt and bleeding, she was yelling in tears, and held her knees apart. Both of them appeared diabolical. Perhaps the muscular old man was a local fisherman. The woman seemed to be his daughter or his wife or paramour. Miichi wondered what she had to pay so dearly for.

Miichi's house was not far from the seashore, about halfway along a long strip of street. To one of its black pillars a girl was fastened with an iron chain—a girl of sixteen or seventeen. One of her ankles was held in a ring-shaped iron lock, the other end of the chain being tied round the pillar. She was Miichi's older sister. Her pubescent manic-depressive psychosis was uncommonly serious. Indeed you should not treat a delicate girl like a Roman slave in chains, but her father subjected her to the

cruel treatment out of regard to the public eye. Miichi, who saw his sister enchained like a monkey from the garden, without drawing near to her, was overcome by a feeling of sadness.

In the fall when he was eleven years old, his mother died. She had a mole on her left eyelid. Miichi was walking along a riverside path in the evening, where the leaves of the sumacs were tinged with red, when a snake crept out of the grass and crossed the path to hide itself in the grass opposite. He nearly trampled it under foot. Some steps farther on, another snake appeared. Raising its head, it sneaked across his way. A little farther ahead, a third snake came out and went away in the same way. Undulating like a living knoll, it seemed to challenge him, as if it intended to dissuade him from walking, or to do the opposite, to force him to quicken his steps. Miichi was impressed by the queerness of it all.

During his absence, as he heard afterwards, his mother, who had been ill in bed for more than three years and was reduced to a skeleton, uttered meaningless words in a high fever. Perhaps the snakes were the souls of his mother, spirits of the earth which could not help moving then. The next night Miichi was awakened by his father and sat by his mother's bedside. She looked at him with her eyes wide open; they were like those of a snake. Her dead face was exceedingly beautiful.

One day, when Miichi was playing by the roadside, a strange girl passed by with another, apparently her older sister. They seemed to have come across the waves from the offing; they disappeared into the evening street, leaving the scent of the tide behind. The image of the girl, who resembled his mother, haunted him afterwards.

In the bustle of the village festival one fall, he caught sight of her again, slipped up behind her and lightly touched the black hair flowing down her back.

His first love brought with it heightened sexual agony as he grew older, but he had no chance to approach the girl. A common saying goes, "You take your sweetheart to be the best woman in the world, though in fact she's an ape," and the first love is mostly foredoomed to disappointment. Disappointed and approaching the depths of despair, one often turns to another love in the course of time. While far gone in love, however, everybody thinks his choice to be an irreplaceable treasure.

Miichi, now a junior high school student, was given the girl's name and address by his classmate Matsumoto. During his noon recess, knowing she was going home, he waited at the street corner and handed her a letter. About a week later he received

from her sister a long rolled letter admonishing him for his rashness. After that he sometimes saw her passing by, and it was all he could do to turn aside to keep out of sight.

Some years passed. Rumor had it that the woman who was his first love was going to take a husband. One evening he ran away from home; it was more than he could bear to think that the woman of his heart would marry a man other than himself. Exposed to the same sun, how could he ever possibly enjoy the smell of the sea again like a happy sandworm?

Disconsolately he roamed about, steeping himself in the vice and corruption of urban life. He stood always at the edge of a precipitous cliff. Right ahead lay the wide sea, the bottomless depths of death. He was in a position to leap into them at any time, or rather to climb up from them, for there was nothing beneath his feet. By ship he crossed the Inland Sea several times, to soak his sick and wrecked body in the native waters.

Miichi turned twenty and he had to be examined for conscription. Waiting for the examination, he went to live in a mountain temple, aiming to become a bonze as there was no hope before him.

It was May, a month of fresh verdure. One day when he came down the mountain, he heard news of the woman of his heart. She had divorced her husband and then attended on her father, who was afflicted with an eye disease, at a hospital in Tokyo. There she lost her heart to her cousin, a medical student. Becoming pregnant she came home, and she was now living in secret in a fishing village on the headland. This is what Matsumoto told him.

Miichi, though he had become unable to think of worldly affairs as they were, set out for the fishing village in a motorboat, which he boarded while it was unmoored by swinging from the quay, impelled by curiosity about the birth of a human being and a parturient woman.

The waves on the bay looked as soft as sweet bean jelly. The boat pitched heavily the whole while, puffing a wreath of smoke out of the low tinplate funnel in time with the sound of the engine. He lay on the deck, which smelled strongly of petroleum.

At sundown he reached the village. Walking across a wide sandy beach, he found a pond, the water of which appeared to be salty. By the pond there was an inn, where he inquired of the landlady, who had set before him a dinner table holding a plate of hairtails boiled hard with soy and one of pickled scallions, about the house of Mr. X

who was away in America for work. At the summit of a high stone wall he found the house; there was a persimmon tree in the garden. The washing, hung out to dry on a bamboo pole, was swaying in the breeze. Miichi turned back for fear his visit after dark should incur the woman's fright. He passed a very bad night in an upstairs room of the inn with a view of the pond.

The next morning he called at the house. A middle-aged woman appeared, and he gave his name. In a room adjoining the open corridor the woman of his heart, it seemed, kept her bed. Imagining that his unexpected call might have made her heart flutter, he waited for her to put away the bedding and dress herself. Presently he was shown into the room, and saw her in a serge *haori*, which he thought she might have put on intending to conceal her big belly from his eyes.

"I'm surprised you've found where I am. Who told you?" said the woman dubiously, her brows knitted. She had as transparent a skin color as a silkworm at the stage of spinning a cocoon; there was unmistakable evidence of her having made close contact with a man. Miichi turned his gaze upon her waist; now for the first time he could sit face to face with her on a *tatami* mat, screened by *fusuma* and *shoji* doors.

Between them there was no common topic of conversation. He had only cherished in his heart a Platonic longing for her for nearly ten years — only that. Glancing at a thin book on the desk, entitled "From Pregnancy to Childcare," he wondered if a woman, when impregnated, would become strong or weak in sexual appetite, and how the breasts would change. Not a sound was to be heard; the middle-aged woman seemed to be gone to the fields. In the corridor was lying a long-tailed black cat, its eyes narrowed to needles. She put an iron kettle on a round paper pad made of old postcards folded and interlocked, and served him tea. Miichi fixed his eyes on her nose as she drew a deep breath, her chest heaving. It was his only contact with her to breathe into his nose the air which she had breathed out. Though she was seated within reach of his hand, he could not bring himself to touch her.

Indeed he held to a philosophy peculiar to young men that any waste or destruction should be forgiven for his own existence, but he had no mind to dishonor a woman already dishonored by another man. What, then, had brought him here? Not a thirst for her soft body, but a wish to gain her heart — to be recognized by her as an individual, whether out of sympathy or out of antipathy. It was not her fault that he had remained unrecognized. It was he who was to blame for his clumsy, retiring, ill-timed expression

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of love to her. Now she was going to become a mother, attaining full maturity, while he was still a green youth who had no experience even of a kiss.

"I hear you are expecting a baby. Is it true? What month are you in?" His words were foolish and cold enough, and she muttered, holding the braid of her *haori* between her fingers, "That's more than I can answer." If so minded, he could have thrust her down to determine the truth. He felt inclined to seize and tear her hair, without thinking of the effect his behavior might have upon the unborn baby. Suddenly it occurred to him that he should wait with resignation for her to have a girl, and for the girl, in twenty years, to grow as tall as her mother. In fact the woman's dry expression was lacking in sexual attractiveness. He felt like barking at something. At whom should he bark, however, but himself? He got up, and putting on the *geta* clogs he had taken off on the dirt floor just outside the room, went out with a dejected step. The sky was gloomy and threatening. He went down to the shore and boarded the motorboat for home. A white bird was pursuing the wake of the boat. To him, the sea and the mountains were the same color.

Some days later he boarded the motorboat again. The headland projecting far out into the sea looked like the trunk of an elephant. The boat plied every day to the point where the lighthouse stood. That day he got off short of his destination and walked along the beach; red lilies were in bloom. Presently he came to a mountain pass through a clump of cryptomeria trees, and there the sea went out of sight. There was a dilapidated shrine with crumbling walls. Before an oven there was squatting a woman with a towel over her head. Then a man came back from nowhere, mopping his brow and saying, "It's awfully hot outside." Perhaps they were a couple. In that secluded place, the woman was burning brushwood to boil water for tea. A bamboo blower was lying on a dirty mat, and no other household goods were to be seen. Evidently they were living like birds in poverty. Miichi wanted to lead a quiet life alone in this way, never vexed with worldly cares. As a matter of fact, the place was swarming with striped mosquitoes and lacked facilities for water, and it would have been out of the question for him to board there.

It was not a long way to his woman's dwelling. Walking on, he soon caught sight of the shallow pond, in which clouds were reflected. After it got dark he hung around the house, whose shutters were closed; no light shone through. He sneaked into the garden, where he looked up at the starry night sky through the branches and leaves of

the persimmon tree.

He thought he could crawl on his belly from the open corridor into the space beneath the floor of her room. If with a sharp pole he pierced the floor board, the *tatami* mat and the *futon* mattress on which she lay, what pose would she take? He pictured to himself that some day she would hear a dog barking, peep down through the chinks of the floor and find a spider's thread on a shred of clothing on his skeleton. Couldn't the house, the headland and the woman together with himself be burnt to nothing this very instant by furious, leaping flames? He wished he could be a fish swimming in the sea.

Coming back to the inn, he put out the lamp and went to bed, but he could not get to sleep. Was the woman sleeping calmly, insensible that he had come? He fancied he heard the breathing of the sleeper close by in the sound of the waves, and saw her white nude figure floating in the dark. He tried to imagine how frightened she would be if he stood like a ghost at her bedside at midnight and slipped in to lie with her.

A disagreeably warm breeze came up from the sea, and the day soon dawned. Miichi walked heavily to the door of her refuge. The middle-aged woman came out and showed him in.

His woman, in the same serge *haori*, was seated by the bedding which she'd pushed aside, passing her hand over her hair. On a tray near by, a thermometer lay uncased.

"The other day, after you left me, I went down to the beach; no boat was to be seen," she said in a fidget, blinking her melancholy eyes. He wondered if it was true that she had walked along the sea-washed beach, and, if so, in what mood she had walked there.

The washbowl in the open corridor was filled with water, reflecting the sunlight of early summer. It was for the doctor to wash his hands after examining her. What sort of man could he be? Miichi envied the doctor, who could touch her skin and feel the warmth of her blood.

The woman had turned her downcast eyes upon her lap. No longer had he passion enough to give his life for her happiness. If he had loved her more genuinely, he might have put an end to their two lives.

"I'm going to take the tonsure and light a holy fire for invocation. I wish you to be a mother in good health." The mole on her eyelid became wet with tears and glistened black. She was weeping.

He left the room hurriedly, as if he were a pursued offender. At the sandy beach he

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waited for the motorboat to come plowing the white waves.

An old woman with bleary red eyes and a blank, insane look stood at the shoaling beach, looking at clouds that were aglow with the setting sun. Miichi reached out and touched her shoulder, and she staggered towards him. At first he felt no inclination to deal with this ugly thing, though at bottom he was aware it was a woman just as the woman of his heart was. Perhaps he came close to sensing that the old woman, now withered like a trepang, had had a blooming girlhood. At any rate, under the influence of alcohol he lacked enough sense to reflect on the consequences, even if he had no irresistible desire.

Miichi pulled her by her turbo-like hand into the shade of a rock. He did so half for fun, but unexpectedly she followed him unresisting, with light steps like a sleep-walker. Thrusting her to the edge of the water, he tripped her and tumbled her down on the sand. The old woman lay on her back and would not get up, as if she were an oyster clinging to a rock. A soft wave glided in upon her like a *futon* being laid out and moistened her calves, which looked like long, white dried radishes. Allured by her weird, subtly smiling look, Miichi drew his face near hers and sat astride her belly. The lower parts of his clothing and her filthy waistcloth were both wringing wet with salt water. Nevertheless, she started a kind of movement under him, as if she had remembered her experience of former days. All that happened in a moment. Shuddering like a man shocked by electricity, Miichi sprang to his feet. Sea spray dashed up, and he heard the sound of the waves.

On the rock were creeping innumerable barbated sea lice. He had done no rhythmic work in tune with the old woman, for from the beginning he had felt no sexual impulse. How terribly intense, how amazingly stubborn the sexual desire of a woman must be! Miichi was quite startled. He had not expected to come upon such a serious manifestation of human nature. But he had wanted to see if the hag had any of the passion of an ordinary creature, and had now attained his purpose, having ascertained that it existed hidden in her far beyond his expectations.

Miichi thought of the woman of his heart; as she was much younger she must have oceans of sexual appetite left. He regretted he had not made a headlong pounce upon her instead of flinching while he was sitting face to face with her those several hours. The truth was, however, that he had found no way but to accept the situation, deterred by her big belly, in which the crystallization of her union with another man had un-

mistakably settled like salt.

No sunken rock could ever be an obstacle to a woman's sexual desire, Miichi now realized: two horizontal lines could easily be made to cross each other by the force of that instinct.

He was weary from walking along the dusty road, across the delta of the headland. The place was not within his memory, nor could it be identified on a map. He was confused into thinking that he might be on the far side of the Straits of Kitan, or on some broad, far-stretching land mass. There were a few houses, most of which looked like villas of the bungalow type, at a summer resort. A steamboat came up from nowhere, and he realized the harbor was this side right round the point of the headland. It was near enough to walk and catch the boat.

He stopped at an inn, where he was served a bowl of eels and boiled rice. The three slim eels that lay on the rice, head and tail intact, were of conger-like color. He ate two of them with his fingers — two pieces of something like conger sushi. Some other dishes had been placed on the table; leaving them unfinished, he left the room. Whether he was going to hurry back or had some urgent business that would keep him away would not have been clear to an onlooker. The bowl, however, weighed so heavily on his mind that he turned back to the inn and lifted the lid to find a long eel left.

He ate a bit. The very eel he was staring at was, curiously, creeping on the *tatami* mat, its head moving back and forth. Surely it was a snake! He had eaten a snake! That's no matter, he thought. It might do some good, though it had not tasted very good. The snake is the spirit of the earth. But wasn't it rotten of them to serve a living one? What spite did they hold against him? In a fit of anger, Miichi struck the snake on the head with something that stood at hand. And out of the head came countless round, fine, pink beads which rolled over and over like bubbles — small and pearly.

It was probably at that time that he became deranged in mind. A warm current of blood that carried his fate was running in his veins.

His older sister, now married and the mother of three children, was driven to the wall, distracted, it was conjectured, by a tangled love affair or by economic troubles. One day, receiving a wire from her husband, Miichi's father set out for their home in the depths of the mountains. Miichi, who started the following day, put up at an inn



after dark; the mountain village was more than 10 *ri* off. In the night he awoke once at a strange rustling sound, as of a piece of paper being crumpled.

His sister lay in a room from which the sound of the river could be heard. Her body was spotted purple all over and terribly swollen. They said she had taken rat poison and had been in an agony of thirst throughout the night. Miichi rubbed her cold legs. He had a vision of the iron chains which he had seen tied round one of them in his childhood, and he heard the chains clatter.

Miichi thought his sister's life had been like a sparrow's. After the burial he left ahead of his father, roamed about aimlessly and spent about ten days no one knew where.

Then he left home again. He wandered from city to city like a burglar or a wild man. One time he was struck on the head with a stone and got smeared with blood down to his navel; another time his skull was battered in with an oak club and his feet got soaked in a pool of his own blood. All this hastened the death of his father, who confined him in a boarded-up, barrel-like cell and killed himself a year later.

At the moment his father breathed his last, a luminous, suspended white ball irradiated Miichi's body. When he thought of his father's death, he had nothing to say to others: he realized he had been disqualified from living.

A little more than a year and a half later, he was released from his home prison. His head, though still cracked, was good for use all the same. Presently he went up to Tokyo. Surprisingly, the crack in his head closed up and healed of itself.

The woman of his heart had been treading another thorny path. One spring or fall Miichi happened to meet Matsumoto in a library. He said her husband worked for a hospital in Shinjuku and that they lived with his family in Kashiwagi. Matsumoto knew him as well as his wife.

One day Miichi and Matsumoto called at the house, in a quiet residential quarter. The woman's husband and children were away, and she was spreading a newspaper in a dimly-lit room when they arrived. Shown into the parlor, Matsumoto told her in a light-hearted way that he had brought one of his friends with him. Through the glass door the tops of tall trees could be seen.

The woman made conversation with Matsumoto without turning her eyes towards Miichi. More than ten years had passed since he had seen her at the fishing village on the headland. He suspected that she might have removed the mole with some liniment, for she sat diagonally opposite him with her cheek resting on her arm, as if fearing that he should see her eyelid. She was somewhat bent in the back, as he per-

ceived when she got up and walked. She had grown old, Miichi thought.

Though she assumed an air of calm, she was agitated at heart because she had had no time to adjust her feelings to his visit. So suddenly had he come, without notice — the man who had left her in the midst of a nightmare in the days of her youth! She was conversing with Matsumoto in a rambling, commonplace and absent sort of way. Miichi refused to follow and kept obstinately silent, but he stared her up and down narrowly and shamelessly. She was wearing striped clothing of some sort, with a soiled *obi* sash. She looked a bit off color, evidently on account of emaciation. She seemed settled but not very happy in the monotonous life of a housewife.

Miichi suspected it was because she had forgotten his face, or rather because she had built a protective wall around her, that she would not speak to him. She was not going to jump over the wall of matrimony, and he, too, was careful not to go beyond bounds.

“Good morning, Mamma!” A girl of about ten arrived at the house, opened the front lattice-door, and went across to the kitchen to drink some water, carrying her school knapsack on her back all the time. Matsumoto and Miichi took the occasion to leave.

That visit left Miichi without a coherent impression. It was true that he had exchanged not a word with the woman, but also true that the image of her locked in his breast so long had been shattered beyond repair.

Some years passed. Miichi went to Peking as a correspondent for a magazine. Just at that time Matsumoto was running a service club for soldiers at Paoting in North China — a house of prostitution where more than ten Korean and Japanese girls he had gathered up were engaged. Miichi called on Matsumoto, who took him to a Chinese-operated brothel. There he found a girl of twelve or thirteen in a Chinese dress with many stitched buttons. Undoing the buttons one by one, the girl silently cast a piercing and reproachful glance up at him. The result was that he had his shoes stolen by her shortly afterwards at a department store in Shanghai. He went home to Nagasaki by ship.

About that time, according to a rumor, the woman of his heart left her husband and children and took up living with a man with whom she had had sexual intimacy; her husband, giving up his post at the hospital, went into practice in his native town. What had brought about the ruin of her home life? Miichi wondered if he should take the blame for her having become very immoral.

He visited old shrines throughout the country, because he harbored doubts about Shintoism. He took the place name ‘Usa’ to be the origin of ‘uso’ (‘falsehood’). On

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Makigamine Peak of the Usa Hachiman Shrine, he saw three huge rocks towering. There were footprints of beasts in the snow. Clearing the palisade that guarded the restricted area and forcing his way through the shrubbery, he reached the rocks and urinated. He was prepared to meet his death, however painful or tragic it might be, as divine punishment for this act. He also climbed Mt. Hiba, which stands on the boundary between Izumo and Bingo Provinces. Mt. Hirusen resembled the Yin-shan Mountains of Mongolia, he thought.

He stood behind a rock on a high mountain; it was sunny there. In the old days, tradition says, the sword Hahakiri, with which Susanoono-mikoto slashed a huge serpent, was enshrined there. A great quiet reigned all around. Miichi had a Japanese army sword with him, and on the way to the mountain he had felt an impulse to strike a grazing cow a blow between the horns. Through a crevice in the rock a fine, thin snake peeped out, its red tongue flickering like a silk thread. Miichi laid the point of his sword on the head of the snake, and it drew back deep into the chink.

For a year and a half he held a reporter's job on a trade paper. Scorpoid enemy planes came flying through the night sky, dressed as if they were voluptuous beauties. Incendiary bombs rained down and the apartment house he lived in was burnt to the ground. The smoke irritated his eyes in the cave where he had taken shelter; he remained there on the damp ground for over two weeks. With the end of the war he was dismissed from the paper. Returning to Shikoku, he roamed through fields and mountains. He begged for sweet potatoes intended for seed, which he roasted at blacksmiths' shops to eat while walking. Somewhere, he was given a ride in an empty cart for about two *ri*. When he got off the cart, he found it necessary to walk two *ri* farther to the town that was his destination. When he had walked a half *ri* in the dark night, a girl came up with him.

The girl carried nothing with her, walked barefoot, without *tabi* socks or *zori* sandals, and wore soiled clothing with a high hem. Seen in the dark, her features resembled those of the woman of his heart.

Miichi, observing her, said nothing to her at first. She was a girl of spare frame. He wondered on what business she was walking along the empty road at night, and thought she might possibly be a female fox in human shape — this one who was tripping along abreast of him. By way of trial he spoke to her. Showing his cloth wrapper full of left-over roast sweet potatoes, he said, "Do you want some?" and she answered,

"Yes." He gave her about ten of them, which she received in cupped hands, and then she followed him, eating. She kept close, and Miichi felt a vague apprehension stealing over him. If the girl was in fact a fox, she would fly away or fall flat with a shriek, in case he should strike her shins with his stick, he thought; but on the other hand, even if she was a fox he should not strike one who showed reliance on him in following. After a while they came to the entrance to the town, which emitted an odor of fish. There the road sloped down, giving a view of the lights of houses; it was a plain town near the sea. Three or four *cho* forward, and they arrived in front of a house. When Miichi stopped to enter, the girl went off somewhere.

The next morning it was raining. In a field a peasant was plowing with a cow. The back of the cow was covered with a waterproof coat or something, which it dropped just as it turned its buttocks round. Miichi picked it up at once and threw it over his shoulder. But the peasant, wielding a whip and crying in a fury, wrested it away from him. The rain was pouring, the wind blew harder, and flashes of lightning and thunderclaps alternated furiously.

There was a shrine in the town. Drenched to the skin, he went up the stone steps in the thunderstorm. When the rain let up a little, he went down to the bus stop. In the shelter there he heard a traveler say to a youth, who appeared to be a resident of the town, "I don't know where my daughter has gone." Miichi interposed, "I walked with that girl last night. She told me she would get home by walking through the night." The traveler said, "I've come all the way here to meet her." He gave Miichi some of the bean-jam buns he had carried with him to give his daughter, and went away. Miichi thought the father fox might have come, in the disguise of a traveler, to thank him for having done his daughter no harm.

Miichi was swimming; he was now a mackerel. Something tickled his belly with a fin. It was a tunny — the woman of his heart — swimming by. The two frequently made contact as the Black Current carried them on. Presently the woman shot spawn. The girl, a saurel, grew up to swim in the waters nearby. Miichi made contact with her, too. The woman did not think of the dried codfish with whom she had had illicit intercourse. Nor did she think of the dead yellowtail, her husband. Her children, a sardine and a whale, were swimming about in the ocean as they pleased. The woman tried to keep contact with Miichi even after she had become a medusoid hag. The mole on her eyelid, having become a shell, had been buried in the sands. She was floating with her black hair immersed in the tide of the Black Current.