SÔSEKI NATSUME

Ten Nights of Dream
Hearing Things
The Heredity of Taste

translated by
Aiko Itô and Graeme Wilson

CHARLES E. TUTTLE COMPANY
Rutland, Vermont : Tokyo, Japan
Representatives

For Continental Europe:
Boxerbooks, Inc., Zurich

For the British Isles:

For Australasia:
Paul Flesch & Co., Pty. Ltd., Melbourne

For Canada:
Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton


Published by the Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc. of Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo, Japan, with editorial offices at Suido 1-chome, 2-6, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo, Japan, by special arrangement with the Asahi Shimbun Publishing Company, Tokyo, Japan.

© 1974 by Aiko Ito and Graeme Wilson
All rights reserved

Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 73-86136
International Standard Book No. 0-8048 1136-9

First printing, 1974

Printed in Japan
Table of Contents

page 7 • Introduction
page 27 • Ten Nights of Dream
page 65 • Hearing Things
page 117 • The Heredity of Taste
I dreamt.

I was sitting by the bedside, with my arms folded, when the woman lying there on her back quietly remarked that she would die now. She lay with her soft-profiled oval face framed by her long hair spread out upon the pillow. The depth of her white cheeks was moderately tinged with the warm hue of blood; and the lips, of course, were red. No sign whatever of a dying person. Yet, in so calm a voice, the woman had distinctly said that she was dying. I, too, felt that perhaps she might indeed die. So, bending over and looking directly into her face, I asked “Really? You’re dying?” The woman opened her eyes wide as she answered that of course she was dying. They were large moistened eyes and their centers, surrounded by long eyelashes, were an entire jet-black. Vividly, at the bottom of those jet-black pupils, an image of myself appeared.
Noting the utter luster of those black eyes, eyes so deep as to be almost transparent, I wondered how she could possibly be dying. So, carefully lowering my mouth beside the pillow, I said again "You aren't dying, surely, are you?" To this the woman, with her voice still quiet and her black eyes held half-sleepily wide open, told me again that she was dying; that it couldn't be helped.

I asked her then if she could see my face. "Can I see it? Surely, it's reflected there." So, saying, she smiled at me. I answered nothing but withdrew my face from the pillow. Sitting there, with my arms folded, I continued to wonder whether, really, she were about to die.

After a little while the woman spoke again. "When I am dead, please bury me. Dig a hole with a large shell, a shining shell of mother-of-pearl. Mark my grave with a fragment of star, with something broken that fell from heaven. Then, by the graveside, wait for me. I'll come to you again."

I asked her when she would come and see me. "You know, the sun rises. And it sinks. Then it rises again, and sinks again. While the red sun travels, east to west and from east to west again, will you wait for me?"

I nodded in silence. The woman raised the tone of her quiet voice and said with resolution "Wait for me a hundred years. For a hundred years, sit waiting at my graveside. For, without fail, I'll come again to see you."

I answered simply that I would be waiting.
At that moment my image, so vividly reflected in her jet-black pupils, began to dim and crumble; to crumple as reflections in still water crumple with the wet’s disturbance. The woman’s eyes began to flow and, the next instant, closed with a snap. Tears, oozed through the long shut lashes, fell onto her cheeks. She was already dead.

I went down to the garden and dug a hole with a shell, with shining mother-of-pearl. The shell was large, a glassy one with its whole edge sharp and shining. Each time I scooped the earth, the back of the shell shone brilliantly in the moonlight falling on it. I remember, too, the smell of the damp of earth. After a little while the hole was dug, and I put the woman in it. Then, over her, gently, I scooped the soft earth back. Every time I poured the earth, the moonlight glittered on the back of the shell.

Then I came back with a fragment broken from a fallen star which I had picked up somewhere. I placed it lightly on the earth. That piece of star was round. I suppose it had worn smooth and lost its edges in its long long fall from the sky. From the effort of lifting the star and of setting it up on the earth, my chest and hands had grown a little warm.

I sat down on a patch of moss. Thinking that I would be waiting thus for a hundred years, I sat there watching the round stone on the grave; sat with my arms folded. By and by the sun came up from the east as the woman
had foretold. It was a big red sun. And, eventually, just as the woman had said, that big red sun went down into the west. It fell straight down, red to its last slim slice. I counted "One."

After a while a bright scarlet sun came slowly up again. And silently it sank away. And I counted "Two."

I don't know how many red suns I have thus watched and counted. Red suns beyond all counting, big red suns that no account could ever finish counting, have passed above my head. But still the hundredth year has not yet come. In the end, watching the mosses crawling over the star's round stone, I came to think the woman must have fooled me.

Then, from under the stone a blue stem, slantwise, grew toward me. As I watched, it grew, longer and longer, till it reached my sitting chest-height. The next moment a slender bud, whose head bent lightly from the tip of that gracefully swaying stalk, opened its petals soft and full. Right in front of my nose the pure white lily poured its scent to drench my very bones. Then, as dew dropped from far high distances, the flower gentled to and fro, swayed by its own white weight. I thrust my neck forward and kissed those pallid petals from which a cold dew dripped. As I drew my face back from the lily, I happened to glance up at the far-off sky; where a single star was twinkling.

And only then, then for the first time, did I realize that the hundredth year had come.
The Second Night

I dreamt.

Leaving the Priest’s room, I came back along the corridor to my own room where I found a lamp in its paper cover already dimly lit. As on one knee I knelt down on a cushion to take out a new wick, its flower-like tip fell with a light thump on to the stool’s vermilion lacquer. In a flash the room brightened.

The painting on the sliding-doors was one by Buson. Black willow trees were there: some dark, some light, some near, some far away; and, looking extremely cold, a fisherman walking over a causeway, tilting his bamboo hat. In the alcove hung a scroll depicting Mansuri’s appearance in the sea, while incense-sticks left standing somewhere shed there smell into a gloomy corner. Because the temple is so vast, there is deep silence and no sign of life. As I looked up, the round shadow thrown on the black ceiling by the round lamp made from paper looked like a living thing.

Still kneeling on one knee, I let my left hand lift one corner of the cushion and slid my right hand underneath. It was still there, just as I had expected. Reassured, I let the cushion fall back to its original position and sat down squarely on it.

“You are a samurai,” the Priest had said, “and a samurai ought to be able to attain enlightenment. Since for so long a time you have proved unable to attain it, you cannot be
a samurai; but are instead something from the dregs of humankind. Ah, does my logic vex you?” And he laughed. Laughed. “If my words displease you, bring me proof of your attained enlightenment.” And he had brusquely turned away. Insolent lout.

I am determined to attain enlightenment by the time that the clock in the alcove of the large room next to mine strikes the hour again. Having attained enlightenment, I will return to his room tonight and exchange my enlightenment for that pert Priest’s head. Unless I attain enlightenment, I cannot kill the Priest. Whatever else may happen, I must attain enlightenment. For I am a samurai.

If I cannot attain enlightenment, I will kill myself. It is not proper that a samurai should live beyond humiliation. I will put an end to myself.

As so my thoughts proceeded, my hand, sliding of its own will under the cushion, drew forth the dagger and its scarlet-lacquered sheath. Gripping the weapon’s hilt, I flung away the scarlet sheath; and the cold blade shone in the darkness of the room. Things terrible, it seemed, one after another, whistling, ran down through my clenched right hand to meld at the blade-tip, to concentrate blood-thirstiness in that one point. When I saw the full nine and a half inches of my perfect blade so regrettably shrunk to a mere needle-point, I felt like stabbing someone: the need for stabbing someone. The blood of all my body
has flowed into my right wrist, and the hard-gripped hilt feels sticky. My lips quivered.

I slid the dagger back into its sheath and placed it close to my right side. Then I sat squarely in the full Zen posture. Chao Chou, that Chinese sage, recommended Nothingness. But what is Nothingness? Cursing that damned Priest down the corridor, I ground my teeth. I bit so hard on my own back-teeth that hot breath snorted out of my nostrils and my temples ached with cramp. Upon some strange compulsion, I opened my eyes to twice their natural size. I can see the scroll. I can see the lamp and its paper cover. I can see the matting, and a vivid image of that Priest’s bald pate. I can even hear the scornful laugh emerging from his crocodile mouth. That impudent Priest. Come what may, I swear I'll lop that saucy skull. I will attain enlightenment.

I began to pray, repeating the word Nothingness at the root of my tongue. It has to be Nothingness. Nothingness it shall be. Yet still the scent of incense-sticks persists. The insolence of incense.

Suddenly, clenching my fists, I struck my head a terrible blow and I ground my teeth as hard as my jaws could grip. Perspiration ran from my armpits. My back became like a stick. The knee-joints grew abruptly painful, and I thought to myself that I wouldn’t care if both damned knees cracked open. Ah, it was painful. And I suffered. But, even then, that Nothingness eluded me. Just when it seemed
to be coming closer, that was the moment I felt pain. Rage consumed me. Resentment swarmed. I was beyond endurance mortified. Tears came rolling down. I yearned to be smashed in smithereens, to pulverize every bone in my body, to pulp each shred of flesh, by flinging myself against a gigantic rock.

Yet still I persevered and sat and sat and sat. Holding within my chest something unbearably heart-rending, still I endured. This thing that rends the heart, tautening every muscle of the body from below, strained to break loose, to erupt from the pores of my skin; but my entire self was sealed, all exits blocked. So hideous was my case.

Now at last my head’s gone queer. Everything, the paper lamp and Buson’s painting, the matting on the floor, the very alcove, seem not to exist although they do exist; seem to exist when they don’t. But still there was no Nothingness, no Nothingness at all. So it was that I was just sitting there disheartened and dispirited when, all of a sudden, the clock in the next room began to chime the hour.

I came to myself with a jerk. My right hand leapt to the dagger. And the clock struck twice.
The Seventh Night

It seems that I'm aboard some massive ship.
The ship plows forward, shearing the waves away, day after day, night after night, continuously emitting, without one second's break, a stream of inky smoke. The noise is tremendous; but the destination utterly unknown. All I know is that the sun, burning red like red-hot tongs, bulges up from the bottom of the sea. It rises, seems to hover briefly dead above the tall ship's mast, and then, before we realize what's happening, overtakes the shuddering ship and, plunging dead ahead, sinks back with a sizzling sound, the sound of red-hot tongs, down to the bottom of the sea. Each time it sinks, the blue waves far ahead seethe to a blackish red. The ship, making its tremendous noise, pursues the sinking sun. But it never catches up.

One day I buttonholed a sailor, and I asked him "Is this ship steering west?"

The sailor, a curiously uncertain expression on his face, studied me briefly and then answered "Why?"

"Because it seems concerned to chase the setting sun."

The sailor burst into a roar of laughter; and then left me.

I heard the sound of jolly voices chanting:
"Does the sun that travels west End up in the east? Is that really true? Has the sun that leaves the east Its real home in the west? Is that also true?"
We that on the ocean live,
Rudders for a pillow,
Sail and sail, on and on."

I went up into the bows where I found a watch of sailors hauling at the halyards.

I began to feel most terribly forlorn. There was no way of knowing when one might get ashore. And, worse, no way of knowing whither we were bound. The only certainties were the streaming of black smoke and the shearing of the sea. The waves stretched wide as wide, blue in their boundlessness. Sometimes they grew purple though, close to the sliding ship, they slavered and were white. I felt most terribly forlorn. I even thought it would be better to throw myself into the sea than to stick with such a ship.

There were many fellow-passengers, most, or so it seemed, foreigners though each had a different cast of feature. One day when the sky was clouded and the ship rolling, I saw a woman leaning on the rail, and crying bitterly. The handkerchief with which she wiped her eyes looked white, and her dress, a sort of calico, carried a printed pattern. Seeing her weep, I realized that I was not the only person sad.

One evening when I was alone on deck, watching the stars, a foreigner came up and asked if I knew anything about astronomy. Since I was already contemplating suicide as a means of escape from boredom, it scarcely seemed necessary for me to be acquainted with matters such as astronomy. So I made no answer. The
foreigner then told me the story of the seven stars in the neck of the constellation of the Bull; and went on to inform me that the stars and the sea were all of God's creation. He finally asked me if I believed in God. I looked at the sky and said nothing.

Once as I was entering the saloon, I saw a gaily dressed young woman playing the piano, with her back toward me. At her side a tall most splendid-looking man stood singing. His mouth appeared inordinately large. They seemed completely indifferent to all things other than themselves. They seemed even to have forgotten their being on this ship.

I grew more bored than ever. Finally, I determined to put an end to myself and, one convenient evening when no one was about, I jumped with resolution over the side. However, in that moment when my feet left the deck and my link with the ship was severed, suddenly then life became peculiarly precious. From the bottom of my heart I regretted my rash action. But by then it was too late. Will-nilly I was committed to the deep. But, possibly because of the ship's high freeboard, my feet for some long time failed to touch water although my body had abandoned ship. Nonetheless, since nothing could check my fall, I dropped closer and closer to the sea. However much I drew in my legs, nearer and still nearer came the sea. The color of the sea was black.

Meanwhile the ship, still as usual streaming its black smoke, steamed steadily away. I would
have been far better off aboard, even though that ship had no known destination. When I came to that realization, it was no longer possible to make use of my belated wisdom. And so I went down quietly, infinitely regretful, infinitely afraid, down to the black of waves.
The Ninth Night

The times seem, somehow, troubled. A war, it seems, may start up any minute. The feel of the times is as though unsaddled horses, flying from burnt-out stables, were running, day and night, wildly round one's house with a rowdy jumble of low-ranked ostlers chasing after them. And yet deep silence reigns within the house.

The house contains a young mother and a child three years old. The father has gone away. It was at moonless midnight that the father left. He donned straw-sandals: then, wearing a hood of black, left by the backdoor. As he left, the light of a hand-lamp held by the mother cast a narrow beam along the darkness and glimmered on the ancient cypress standing in the hedge.

The father, since that night, has not returned. Every day the mother has asked her three-year-old "Where is your father?"; but the child says nothing. After some time the child began to answer "Over there." And when the mother asks "And when will he be back?," the child still answers "Over there"; and laughs. So the mother laughs as well. She taught him, over and over again, to say "He'll soon be back." But the child learnt only to say "Soon." Sometimes when asked "Where is your father?," the child answers "Soon."

When night falls and everything is quiet, the
mother reties her obi and slips her short-sword through it. Then she binds the child on her back and goes out through the side-gate. Always she wears sandals. Sometimes the child falls asleep on his mother's back while listening to the sound of sandals.

Going westwards down a gentle slope from the residential quarter where the long long walls of plaster stretch one beyond another, one finds oneself at the bottom of the slope in front of a lofty ginkgo tree. If, facing the ginkgo, you turn off sharp to the right, you come within one hundred and twenty yards to the stone gate of a Shinto shrine. The path to the shrine's stone gate is bordered on the one side by paddy-fields and on the other by a low-grown wilderness of striped bamboo. For forty yards beyond the gate you walk on paving-stones through a stand of cedars to the steps of an old shrine. Its wooden offertory-box has weather-worn to grey. Above the box a large bell-rope is hung. In daylight one can read the tablet set beside the bell on which three characters are written: hachi-man-gū. The writing style is such that the first character, hachi, looks like two doves facing each other. Which is interesting. In addition to this tablet, all sorts of other tablets can be seen there. Most of them are arrow-targets bull's-eyed by the Clan's retainers. Each such tablet bears the name of the retainer who scored the bull's-eye. Some of these retainers have left their dedicated swords; but only a few.

Whenever the mother passes the gate to the
TEN NIGHTS OF DREAM

... shrine, an owl hoots among the cedar trees; and her thin sandals make spattering noises. The spattering ends in front of the shrine. The mother pulls the bell-ropes, crouches down on her knees and claps her hands together. Usually then the owl immediately stops hooting. The mother prays in singlehearted fervor for the safety of her husband. She cherishes an unshakeable belief that, since her husband is a samurai, prayers to Hachiman, the God of Arms, prayers as a last resource, cannot possibly fail to be granted.

The child is often woken by the banging of the bell and, seeing only the pitch of darkness round him, at once breaks into crying on his mother's back. Then the mother, busy with her mumbling of prayers, tries to soothe the child with a shaking of her back. Sometimes she succeeds and the child stops crying. Sometimes the child cries more pitifully than ever. In either case she stays there crouching for a long long time.

When all the prayers essential to her husband's safety have at last been said, she loosens the bands that hold the child and slides him round from the back to the front. Next, she climbs the steps to the shrine holding the child in both her hands. Then, always rubbing her cheek against the child's, she says to him "There's a good child; wait here just a while." She ties the child at one end of a string and secures its other end to the parapet of the shrine. Then she descends the steps and, back and forth one
hundred times across the forty yards of paving-stone between the steps and the gate, she walks and worships as the ritual requires.

The child tied to the shrine crawls about on the broad veranda as far as the string permits. And if he does no more, it proves an easy night for the mother. But when the tied child cries and cries unceasingly, his mother becomes anxious. She greatly quickens her pacing of the ritual. She becomes breathless. Sometimes, feeling she has no other choice, she abandons the ritual halfway through and climbs the steps to coax the child to quietness. Thereafter she restarts the ritual right from its beginning.

The father, for whose sake the mother thus, night after night, was tortured by anxiety, and for whose safety, night after night, she prayed and took no sleep, had long ago been slaughtered by some lordless samurai.

This sad tale was told me by my mother in my dream.