The powerful west wind had tormented the forest all day, striking the trees with invisible blows until the leafless branches moaned in pain. Now the winter sun, emanating a yellow glow, was about to set. Abruptly the wind ceased, although dust-laden clouds hung uneasily above the treetops threatening another assault. As if remembering their suffering, the branches trembled from time to time, their rustling breaking the eerie silence.

Once again Oshina put down her shoulder pole and buckets. It was her custom in her spare time to go about from village to village peddling bean curd. Since she took only what she could carry in her buckets, little capital was required. Of course her earnings were also meager, but it was better than relying on farming alone. If she went her usual route through the countryside she would sell all she carried. On the return trip, after she emptied out the water and broken bits of bean curd, her pole would be lighter, and in her purse would be a little cash for everyday expenses. At all hours of the day, as long as there was light, Oshina kept busy at one task or another; soaking straw for rope-making, sweeping up leaves, her hands were never idle. She had always been strong and healthy, though, and did not mind incessant work.

On this particular day she had not wanted to leave home, but the winter solstice was coming and she had felt she must go out to get some konnyaku to sell. If she did not hurry the other peddlers who appeared at this time of year would cover her territory before her. Since there was no konnyaku in her own village she had to go some distance for it across the fields and through the forests. Thinking that she might do a little business on the way, she had carried some bean curd along. The strong wind that had arisen the night before slowed her progress. Her whole body shivered from the cold, and her hands, red from reaching into the icy water to scoop out bean curd, burned painfully. At some of her stops she had been able to warm herself briefly by a fire, but now it was late, her errand
having taken far longer than she had anticipated. She hurried back
towards her own village, through seemingly endless forest, fighting
the wind all the way. She had felt tired and strangely listless, and
several times she had stopped at the edge of the path to rest.

Now she stopped again, collapsing to her knees and leaning
wearily against her shoulder pole. She looked miserable and
dischveled. What was left of the wind blew from behind her and
caught the edge of the dirty scarf she had tied about her head. It
lifted her oily, red-tinged hair and revealed the soiled nape of her
neck. As she sat there the trees continued their restless movement.
Again and again the treetops by the side of the road bent forward
as if to peek at Oshina below. After a time they moved back in
unison. Shaking from side to side, they creaked and rustled noisily.

Sitting there, Oshina became aware of a growing numbness
inside her, and for a moment she panicked. ‘It’s been a few days,’
she thought to herself, ‘It must be all right.’ But she felt as if she
were sinking. ‘I’m just a little dizzy,’ she thought again. Then there
was a ringing in her ears, so loud that she could hear nothing else.
Suddenly she came to and briskly shouldered her pole. She moved
on through the forest until finally she could see the rice paddies.
Just beyond them was the village, and right at the edge of the
paddies, her own house. Blue smoke was rising up into the sky
from the roof. Oshina thought anxiously of her two children. It
was only about 30 or 40 feet down from the edge of the forest to the
paddy fields, but rainfall had gouged out deep depressions in the
slope. Oshina turned sideways and climbed down carefully, her
right hand steadying the front bucket on her pole and her left hand
on the rear. The weight of the konnyaku inside the buckets made it
hard for her to retain her balance, but at last she made it down, her
straw sandals covered with slush. There was an irrigation ditch
along the length of the tiny paddy fields. Where a few large black
alders stood was a narrow bridge. Oshina paused a moment at the
ditch and looked ahead to her house. The village was on a rise, and
behind her house were more trees. Some of them grew on the hill-
side and partially blocked her view, but through the empty
branches of one particularly fine oak tree she saw the dented roof.
Five or six chickens were making their way up from the paddy
fields, scratching at the ground in search of food. Oshina carefully
crossed the bridge. Although the sun had set it was still light, and
for as far as she could see everything was bathed in a yellowish
brown glow. Before climbing up from the fields Oshina put down
her pole and made her way to a silverberry bush that stood at the
base of the hillside. The chickens had been there, clawing the newly
dug soil. She pressed it firm again with her foot. By now the wind
had stopped completely. Not even the leaves of the radishes hung up to dry in the chestnut tree in her yard were moving. The chickens ran up and darted hopefully around Oshina’s ankles, but today she paid no attention to them. Putting down her pole in the doorway, she called abruptly, ‘Otsū?’

‘Mother?’ Otsugi replied immediately. Since the rain doors had been left closed that day the inside of the house was quite dark. Oshina had been unable to make out her daughter’s form at first, but now Otsugi turned, and Oshina could see the red flames in the stove by which Otsugi sat.

‘Mama! Mama!’ Yokichi, strapped to his sister’s back, waved his arms impatiently. While Otsugi untied him Oshina put down the buckets of konnyaku next to some straw bales in the corner of the dirt-floored kitchen. Then she picked up Yokichi, who began searching for her nipple, and sat down by the fire. Nearby a chicken was climbing awkwardly up to the roost, digging its claws into the makeshift rope ladder, both wings flapping. Up amid the blue smoke it quietly shut its eyes.

Since returning home Oshina had become a little warmer, but still she could not stop shivering. ‘After a while,’ she thought, ‘we’ll go out and have a bath at one of the neighbors. If I can just get warm again, I’ll be fine.’ A small pot sat on the stove, the soup inside it boiling. Outside it was completely dark. Otsugi took a burning faggot from the fire and lit the lantern. Then Oshina could see that her daughter wore only an unlined kimono and a short jacket. Normally she would have said nothing, but since she herself was so cold she felt irritated.

‘Aren’t you cold, dressed like that?’ she asked sharply.

‘Oh, no,’ Otsugi replied nonchalantly. Yokichi suckled intently at his mother’s breast, and Oshina suddenly remembered that she had forgotten to bring him a treat.

‘Isn’t there some sugar over there, Otsū?’ she asked. Without a word Otsugi kicked off her sandals and stepped up into the main room. From the cupboard she took out a small envelope made from old newspaper and sprinkled some sugar into the palm of her hand.

‘Here you are,’ she said as she put the sugar in Yokichi’s outstretched hand. What remained in her palm she herself licked off. Yokichi held his treat between his fingers and still suckling squeezed it clumsily into his mouth. Then he thrust his sticky hand up to his mother, who licked it clean.

Oshina uncovered the pot and peered inside. ‘What’s this? Potatoes?’

‘Uh-huh. I added a few to the pot.’
'And the rice? That'll be cold, won't it?'
'Well, I was going to add that, too, and make gruel.'

Oshina thought that was a good idea. If she ate something hot and steamy she would surely get warm. Since she was so tired she left the preparations to Otsugi, who put a handful of cooked barley mixed with a little rice into the pot. Oshina poked at the fire while Otsugi removed the pot and hung a kettle in its place. She stirred the gruel a few times and then set out a tray on the ledge between the kitchen and the main room. Oshina sat down and began to eat, giving a little bit every now and then to Yokichi whom she held in her lap. When she put a piece of potato in his mouth, however, he immediately spat it out and began to cry. ‘Too hot?’ she asked, blowing against his cheeks. She chewed the potato a little herself and gave it back to him. In all she consumed three bowls of gruel even though she did not like it much. Then she drank a little hot water. At last she began to feel warm inside.

Otsugi went out to the well and poured a bucket of water over the empty cooking pot. ‘You don’t have to do anymore tonight,’ Oshina told her when she returned, but Otsugi went over to the buckets in the corner.

‘These need water.’

‘That’d be nice, but really, you don’t have to do so much . . .’

Before Oshina had finished speaking Otsugi was out in the yard again. When she reappeared in the doorway she was carrying the clean pot and the well-bucket. Soon the konnyaku were soaking in water.

Oshina and her children then went off for a bath at East Neighbor’s house, a large compound surrounded by a forest.

It was dark outside. The cedars in the forest thrust up boldly into the cold night air. In the past this forest, which belonged to East Neighbor, had kept the sun from shining into Oshina’s yard until fairly late in the day. Her family had truly lived in the shadows then. But one day the men from the land survey department had arrived in the area, setting up their tripods with the little flags on top. Because they could not see through the forest to complete their measurements they had cut down several trees. A big cedar had fallen to the west with a great thud right across Oshina’s yard. Its branches had broken off, and their tips had dug into the soil. When the neighbors had come to dispose of the tree they had given Oshina all the branches and debris on her property, providing her with a huge supply of firewood. And although the neighbors had lamented the loss of their fine trees Oshina and her family had secretly rejoiced. Now there was an opening through the forest, and thereafter the sun shone on them from morning on. But even with
some trees gone the forest still dominated its surroundings. At night it was especially awesome. Oshina’s tiny house, perched on its narrow ledge, looked insignificant indeed.

Oshina disappeared into the darkness and emerged again in the neighbor’s doorway. Several employees were inside making rope as night-work. Sitting cross-legged on the raised wooden floor, each man secured the piece he was working on beneath his feet and added more straw to it until his hands were high above his head. Then he reached down and pulled the completed portion behind him. So much rope had been made already that it piled up on the earthen floor of the entryway. Oshina knelt humbly on the wooden floor, waiting. Soon the men used up all the straw and began hauling in their ropes, measuring them expertly between their feet and hands and bundling them up as they went. Then they swept the leftover bits of straw off onto the dirt below. At last they were ready to bathe. Oshina watched and waited silently. She always had to wait when she came here, and sometimes she had gone elsewhere instead. But on this particular evening there were no other baths to be had. She had checked at two or three other houses first but finally had come here. The employees clustered by the roaring fire under the metal cauldron, waiting their turns. Once bathed they stood by the fire again, their naked thighs red from the hot water.

‘Come on over and get warm,’ one of the men called out, ‘It’ll be your turn soon.’ But Oshina sat still, trying to ignore the cold draft behind her. Very slightly, so as not to wake Yokichi, who was asleep in her arms, she shifted her weight to relieve her numb feet. When finally the men were finished Oshina hurriedly took off her clothes, thinking of nothing else but getting into the hot water. Otsugi held Yokichi, who was so exhausted that he did not know he had been taken from his mother’s bosom. As Oshina felt warmth returning gradually to her body she began to feel revived. She wanted to stay in the soothing water forever. But then she began to worry that Yokichi would start fussing. Reluctantly she got out of the tub. Her face was flushed, and no matter how often she wiped her forehead she kept sweating. She felt fine at last. Quickly putting on her kimono she took Yokichi in her arms again so Otsugi could bathe. But at that moment a maid came in for a bath, and Otsugi had to wait. By the time Otsugi finally got out of the tub Oshina had begun feeling cold again. She regretted that she had not waited and gone last herself.

When they returned home the moon was shining brightly, revealing the forest around them. The gap where the trees had been cut down was especially well lit. It was very cold. When Oshina lay
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down under her thin, stained quilt at home she was shivering again, and her knees felt stiff and frozen.
Oshina woke up the next morning just as the faint light of dawn began shining through the cracks in the rain doors. She tried to raise her head from the pillow, but it throbbed too severely with pain. The sound of the chickens clucking noisily and flapping their wings up in the roost overhead grated on her ears. Otugi was still sound asleep. When the cracks in the doors grew bright with light, like eyelids fully opened, the chickens began to squawk shrilly. Oshina had wanted to let Otugi sleep late that morning, but when the chickens began their rumpus Otugi suddenly awoke and looked around as if bewildered. Then she saw that her mother still lay beneath her bedding on the floor beside her.

‘There’s no rush,’ Oshina said, ‘I don’t feel so good this morning, so let’s take it easy.’ Otugi hesitated for a moment and then got up, slid open one of the doors with a clatter, and stepped out into the yard, rubbing her eyes sleepily. In the bucket by the well some potatoes she had left to soak were now locked in by a sheet of ice. Otugi broke the ice with a fragment of whetstone. Then she realized that she had left the door of the house open and that all this morning cold was creeping inside.

‘Mother, are you okay? I didn’t think,’ she said as she hurriedly slid the door shut again. Inside the darkened house one could see only the fire in the stove. ‘It is really cold out there.’ Otugi shivered as she held her hands up near the flames. ‘The potato water froze,’ she continued, turning to face her mother.

‘Hmm, looks like a lot of frost, too,’ replied Oshina faintly. With her back to the doors she lay watching the flames.

‘Everywhere it’s all white,’ said Otugi as she stirred up the dried leaves in the stove with bamboo tongs.

‘The cold at dawn woke me up,’ said Oshina, lifting her head slightly. ‘I don’t feel like eating, but you go ahead and fix yourself something.’

Otugi made another pot of gruel.
‘Have a little, Mother,’ she said as she put a bowl by Oshina’s pillow. Smelling it Oshina thought she might as well try some, but when she turned over onto her stomach she again lost interest. Her movement, though, woke Yokichi, who had been sleeping beside her. Still lying down she gave him her breast, and once again she speared a few potatoes from the gruel for him.

When the doors were opened again a little later the sun had just risen above East Neighbor’s forest and was shining directly into the yard. The frost that had lain in the shadows now glistened brightly. On the brittle leaves of the chestnut trees in a corner of the yard and on the radishes hung up to dry on its branches were drops of melting frost. The waste straw strewn over the yard as a ground cover during winter was wet, and icicles dripped everywhere, in the yard itself and in the mulberry field beyond.

Oshina felt very warm under her quilt. Every once in a while she would raise her head a little and look outside. Then she would gaze idly at the two buckets of konnyaku. The twigs of East Neighbor’s trees looked strange indeed viewed lying down. When her eyes tired from staring at them she would shift to the buckets again. She had to do something about the konnyaku, she would think. But every time she thought about getting up she would become very drowsy.

‘I’ll make some kiriboshi,’ Otsugi shouted loudly from the yard, but Oshina could hear her only faintly and did not understand what she had said.

After a while Oshina heard a splash of water, then a pause, and another splash. Otsugi was washing the radishes. Sitting on a straw mat laid out over the straw she began chopping. First she sliced the radishes sideways, then she cut the slices lengthwise into thin strips, like poem cards. She moved the knife a little awkwardly up and down on the cutting board and swept the white pieces of radish off into the bowl below it. When Oshina heard the sound of the knife she realized what the splashing sound a while before had been. Just a few days earlier she had mentioned that it was time to make kiriboshi, and it pleased her that Otsugi had remembered. The sound of the chopping seemed close by. Oshina pulled herself halfway out of the covers and looked out. Otsugi was kneeling with her back to the house, slightly bent forward, with her hair tucked up in a scarf.

‘Everything okay?’ Oshina called out.

‘Uh-huh.’ Otsugi turned to the side as she answered, her knife poised in mid-air. Oshina nestled back down under the covers. And once again she heard the sound of her daughter’s inexperienced chopping. Then Yokichi, tired of being in bed so long, began to fuss.

Hearing him Otsugi called out, ‘There now, want to come out
and see what I’m doing?’ She came back into the house, warmed his clothes by the fire, and got him dressed.

‘Yoki is a good little boy, so he’ll stay close to his big sister,’ Oshina told him. Then Otsugi put him on the mat beside her. Her fingers were dirty from putting more leaves on the fire, and when she began chopping again she left fingerprints on the radishes. Quickly she wiped her hands on her jacket. Yokichi reached out toward the cutting board.

‘No, no! That’s very dangerous,’ warned Otsugi. ‘Here, you can have this.’ She gave him a slice of radish which he immediately put in his mouth.

‘Poor little Yoki, it’s too salty, isn’t it?’ Otsugi murmured indulgently. Oshina could hear all this clearly and knew just what was happening.

‘Did you drop it? Here it is, over here. Don’t drop it again, now.’

‘Don’t you do that! If you’re a bad boy, I’ll cut you up with this. You’ll be all bloody, and you’ll hurt all over.’ Oshina kept on listening. The sound of the chopping stopped. Even without looking Oshina knew that Yokichi was into some kind of mischief and so Otsugi had grabbed his finger and bitten it to warn him. Now Yokichi no doubt had his finger in his own mouth, mimicking his sister. Oshina had been fairly strict in raising Otsugi and thought her more responsible than other children of her age. But now, hearing her playing with Yokichi, she realized that Otsugi was still a child. Oshina herself had been 16 when she had met Kanji. Would Otsugi, too, grow up quickly like that, she wondered. Otsugi was now 15.

Oshina still was not interested in food at noon. She resigned herself to staying in bed all day, but she thought she might be up to a little peddling the next day. That, however, was not to be. As before, Oshina could not leave her pillow. And she began to worry. More and more she thought about Kanji, who had left home not long before. He had done that sort of work around the village, she mused, but could he keep it up day after day? She pictured him out in the cold, working in just a shirt. And then the shirt would ride up, and his belly would be exposed. At night he would ache all over. She could see it all clearly as if he were really right there in front of her, so intensely did she miss him.

Kanji had gone off to a construction project on the Tone River. Some five or six other men from the area had signed on, too, after hearing the glowing reports of the recruiters who had come through early in the fall. Kanji did not know much about the project itself, but he had heard that a day’s wages were 50 sen or more. That was unheard of for work in the off-season, and he had been delighted.
The project site was on lowland near Kasumigaura at a dike that had been built to separate the river from a lake made earlier by floods. Kanji was overcome by the great expanse of land there compared to his own village.

When Kanji had finally secured a job on the crew he had hurried to finish up his farming chores at home. With the winter solstice at hand there had been a great deal to do. The paddy fields needed tending, then there were the potatoes in the dry field, and the radishes. While Oshina was getting the fire going in the morning he had been out in the yard drying the rice. Then he had started to hull it. After that he had put the radishes up in the tree to dry. He had worked from before dawn to after dusk. Even so he had not finished all the rice, and there was still a bit of dry field to tend. But Oshina had said she would manage it all somehow, and he had set off.

It was almost 50 miles to the project site. Kanji had taken about one yen with him for expenses, but since he took his own food all he needed was money for the ferry. Arriving late at night he had gone to work the very next morning. After only a few hours of digging and hauling he had begun to regret his decision to come. The next day his hands ached so much he could not work, and he had stayed inside in the bunkhouse for a few days. About a week later a fierce wind had come up. All night long Kanji had tossed and turned sleeplessly under his thin quilt, his feet cold and his body shivering.

The next day he was back out in the mud, his stiff hands on the cold handle of his shovel. Then, all of a sudden, someone from his village appeared, delighted to have finally located him among the horde of mud-covered laborers. The man went on to tell Kanji that he had stopped overnight en route, but still Kanji had no idea why he had come. Finally he learned that Oshina had sent for him. He was alarmed to hear that she was sick. Over and over he asked about her condition, and from what the man told him he gathered it was not that serious. But he could not help worrying.

They left for home that night. Kanji himself wanted to hurry, and besides, he could not expect the weary messenger to return by foot, so they took a boat from Kasumigaura to Tsuchiura. The boat broke down during the night and arrived in Tsuchiura long overdue. It was after sunrise. Kanji hurriedly bought a package of sardines in one of the shops and set off on foot, walking as fast as he could. Even so it was dark by the time he arrived at the door of his house. A lantern was burning inside. He could see Oshina lying under her quilt. Then he saw Otsugi sitting at her feet. Kanji slid the door open and stepped inside. ‘What’s happened?’ he asked from the dirt-floored kitchen.
The Soil

‘Kanji-san? Is that you?’ Oshina turned towards the sound of his voice. ‘I thought maybe South Neighbor hadn’t found you.’

‘He found me all right. But what’s wrong here?’

‘I didn’t think it was much at first. But I’ve been stuck here in bed for four days now. I’m feeling a little better today. I’m sure I’ll be all right.’

‘That’s a relief.’ Kanji sat down on the ledge and removed his sandals. ‘It’d have been better if I’d come all the way on foot. But I couldn’t ask South to walk back, so we took a boat. Then it broke down. I left South in Tsuchiura and came on by myself. He’s really tired, so he won’t make it back for some time yet.’ As he spoke he placed the package of sardines close to Oshina’s bedding and threw his knapsack on the floor. He went out into the yard to wash and returned to Oshina’s bedside.

‘I’m glad it’s nothing serious. I didn’t know what to think. You had anything to eat?’

‘Otsu made me some gruel a while back, and I managed to put some of it away.’

‘Well, here, try a little piece of this. I bought it on the way.’ Kanji drew the lantern closer and unwrapped the fish. In the light the sardines looked bright blue.

‘Oh, my . . . ,’ Oshina murmured as she rolled over onto her stomach.

‘Bring us a fire,’ Kanji said to Otsugi.

‘You didn’t have to do this, Kanji-san. I don’t need that kind of thing.’

‘Well, they’ll keep a long time at this time of year. Besides, you need to get strong again.’

‘But it must’ve cost a lot to come by boat.’

‘Uh-huh, it was sixty sen for the two of us. I couldn’t ask South to pay, so I paid for both.’

‘Then, all the money you’ve earned so far is gone . . .’

‘Oh, I got some left. Only worked a week, but I have about two yen left over. I’m going back there, after all, so I asked for an advance. Fellows from around here vouched for me,’ Kanji announced proudly.

‘It’s so good to see you. I missed you.’ Oshina put her head down on the pillow.

‘Well, I was planning to come back once anyway. I have some work to finish up here, so it’s all the same,’ said Kanji, peering down at her.

‘I see you got the rice bagged up,’ he continued, looking over at the stack in the corner. Oshina just lay still. ‘Over at the project you don’t need any money, you know. I don’t smoke, and they
provide everything else you need on credit. Rice, firewood, whatever. Pay day’s the fifteenth, and that’s when we settle up.’ Kanji went on, telling Oshina more about his job. ‘They give you pure rice to eat, too. Every day, almost two quarts. The work’s so hard you need almost that much. But I’m saving some of it and when I come back next time I’ll be able to sell it and buy some really fine fish. Maybe even some salmon.’

‘I’m glad it’s working out,’ Oshina said, turning her head. ‘They say those construction bosses are no good, so I didn’t know what to think.’

‘Oh, they’re a rough bunch, all right, but I keep out of their way.’ While Kanji spoke Otsugi broke up some faggots and started a fire in the hibachi. Kanji put three of the sardines on the grill. Oil dripped from them as they cooked, turning the flames blue. The smell of fish and smoke filled the room and made Oshina hungry. Still lying on her stomach she picked up one of the sardines and began to eat it.

‘Not too salty?’ Kanji asked.

‘Oh no, delicious.’

‘The tradesmen around here don’t have anything like ’em,’ Kanji said, watching her intently. She ate two of the fish and looked down at Yokichi.

‘He’ll really fuss if he wakes up,’ she said.

‘Go on and have the other one,’ Kanji urged her.

‘I’ve had plenty, really. Maybe Otsugi will eat it.’

‘I’ll have a little rice myself,’ Kanji said, taking out his lunchbox and starting on the cold leftovers.

‘Otsū,’ Oshina called out. ‘Bring some hot tea.’

‘Don’t need any. On the job we make do without it.’ Kanji ate a few umeboshi. Then he gave Otsugi a piece of the remaining sardine and took a bite himself.

‘You say these are good, but they’re too sweet for me,’ he said, and drank a few cupfuls of cool water. Finally he reached into his knapsack and took out a package.

‘This is the rice I saved up so far. If I’d come back without it someone might’ve stole it.’ He handed the package to Otsugi.

‘I wondered what you had in that huge knapsack,’ Oshina said teasingly.

‘Well, the firewood was too much so I left it behind,’ Kanji replied, looking a bit insulted. ‘How about a little massage to make you feel better?’

Oshina smiled. ‘That’s all right. I’ve been feeling better all day. Otsugi rubbed my feet just a while ago. You ought to be able to go back to work in a few days.'
The Soil

‘I feel really good tonight,’ she continued, ‘Really, Kanji-san. And you must be tired.’

It was late, and very still, as if everything in the darkness outside had frozen. Even in the buckets of konnyaku by the wall thin sheets of ice had formed.
Frost lay white on the straw in the yard the following morning. Three mats of radish strips were spread out on top of the straw, each strip frosted with tiny specks of ice that glistened in the morning sun. The white strips had been set out to dry without any preliminary steaming. Day and night they would remain there and unless it rained they would become covered with dust and grit.

Kanji headed off along a path lined with icicles for South Neighbor’s house on the other side of the mulberry field. When he returned some time later, carrying a loom, the frost had melted a little in the sunshine and lay stickily on the ground. Oshina had been very lonely during the short time he was away. She felt a little better that morning, much to his relief. He spread out another mat on the straw and began weaving bales, his body warmed by the distant winter sun. The loom he used was a simple tool with legs at both ends, like the frame of a pack saddle. He wove by putting a handful of straw on the pole between the legs and moving the shuttle back and forth while feeding in rope. Kanji needed five of these bales, smaller and stronger than the ones inside the house, to hold his rent rice, but all he had been able to do before leaving for the construction project had been to gather the straw and rope. He had worried about this unfinished task ever since.

Oshina opened one of the rain doors. She could see the bright blue sky and the light reached almost to her bed. Until today she had felt too depressed to look out-of-doors. Now she saw that the radishes hanging on the oak tree had dried to a brown color. Otugi was sitting near Kanji, cutting some of them up. Faintly Oshina could hear the sound of her knife alternating with the clatter of the loom. It reassured her to see both of them there. The day was very still, and not even the hanging radishes moved. She was certain that she would soon be well.

Kanji finished weaving a bale and spread apart the little bundle of straw attached to one corner to make a round opening. Then he
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opened up one of the coarse rice bales that Oshina had filled and poured in the correct measure of rice. There were a few red grains among the white, but what stood out were the crushed grains and bits of chaff mixed in with the rest.

'There's a bit too much waste stuff here,' he called out suddenly.

'I know,' Oshina replied apologetically from inside the house, 'but I really winnowed it a lot before wrapping it up. There's a lot of red, too, so I guess something's wrong with the grinder.'

'Well, there's no need to worry. This little the Master will overlook,' Kanji replied hastily, concerned that he had upset her. He piled the bales up one by one against the wall, and Oshina stared at them intently. It was one of the things that always made her feel cheerful. Kanji lifted the cover of one of the buckets by the pile and said, 'Ah, we have some konnyaku.'

'I went and got it just before I got sick,' Oshina replied. Kanji put the cover back on.

The sun that had been moving slowly across the calm sky suddenly began to sink, as if it had stumbled. Winter days were now at their shortest. Since there was still light Kanji took a hoe and went off to the barley field. Before he could do much work, however, the sun set, and it quickly became cold and gloomy. Oshina waited uneasily for him to return, her eyes closed in the darkness.

There were only two days left until the solstice. In the morning Kanji once again uncovered the konnyaku. 'Maybe I ought to go out and sell 'em. It's no good just having 'em sitting here.' He looked inquisitively at Oshina.

'That's so, but you know what I'd really like is for you to pickle some radishes. I've been looking at the tree, and I'm afraid they've gotten too dry,' she replied. 'If only I wasn't sick I could do 'em myself.' She wanted him to stay at home, but she could not bring herself to say so directly.

'Check on the salt, won't you?' she continued. 'I think there's enough. Then there's bran in this bucket here. Use that. The bran in the other bucket has some sand in it.'

'What's the difference?' Kanji asked. 'You don't eat the bran. Why not mix 'em together?'

'No, don't do that! They say that sand will poison pickles. That's why I kept it separate.'

'Well, okay,' he replied. Then he checked on the salt. 'Looks like there's just barely enough.' Oshina watched contentedly as he got up on the ladder to take the radishes down and spread out the bran and salt on a mat.

But the day before the solstice Kanji went off with the konnyaku. Oshina did not try to stop him this time. Since it was late and others
had been out before him he would not sell much, she was sure. When he came back that evening, though, he said, ‘Here, you’re in charge of the konnyaku business, so you get all the money.’ He dropped some copper-coins on the floor near her pillow. She picked them up and counted them one by one. Even deducting what she had had to pay for the konnyaku there was still quite a bit left over.

‘I don’t believe it!’ she said. ‘Do you have any of it left at all?’

‘Just a bit. Not enough for another trip out,’ he replied happily. Oshina put the coins away under her bedding. She had been lonely while he was out, but now that he had done so well, much better than she had imagined possible, she did not feel unhappy anymore.

‘The rape’s still out in the field, you know,’ he told her.

Oshina was alarmed. ‘What? Oh, I just forgot all about it. Is it all right?’

‘I’m going out now to get in as much as I can.’ Then Kanji left, taking Otsugi with him. No one else in the village had left their rape in this late. Kanji borrowed a cart, and before dusk they managed to bring in two loads. The lower leaves were all withered and yellow, but the plants were not ruined. Even though she was left alone in the house again Oshina did not feel sad. Instead she thought happily about the harvest Kanji and Otsugi were bringing in. In the busy summer season, before there were any fresh vegetables available, pickled rape greens were all they had to eat with their rice. It was vital that they have as large a supply as possible.

The day of the solstice was calm. As usually happened about this time of year the wind suddenly stopped blowing. For a time the sun shone brightly, warming the cold air. Oshina had felt cheerful since morning. Later in the day she even got out of bed. She felt weak and strangely weightless, but she made her way over to the doorway, enticed by the sunlight, and sat down. Yokichi was with her. She dangled him over the ledge and tickled him playfully.

Kanji and Otsugi were over by the well, preparing the greens. First they cut off their roots and washed them. Then they tied a layer to a ladder and set the ladder up in the sun. The greens with many dead leaves they boiled in a kettle and hung up on a rope to dry. Finally they boiled some greens for lunch. Oshina watched them at work. She was aware of the glaring sunlight, as if her eyes had weakened a bit in the days she had spent in bed. The plate of greens she ate made her thirsty, but they tasted delicious.

When the greens on the ladder were dry Kanji put them in a large basin, added some salt, and stomped them down with his feet. Then he added more salt and stomped on them again. All the while Oshina gave him advice on how much salt to use, and he followed her instructions carefully.
Since she did not feel especially tired, even though she had been up for some time, Oshina put on her sandals and slipped out the side door. After checking on the greens hanging on the rope, she walked down through the trees to the edge of the rice paddy. Once again she stood by the silverberry bush, quietly tamping down the earth with her foot. Suddenly she heard Kanji calling her, and she made her way back up the slope, grabbing onto tree trunks and bamboo stalks to ease the climb. Just as she came around the side of the house Kanji called out again. Standing beside him was a peddler, his carrying pole still slung over his shoulder.

‘He wants eggs,’ Kanji told her, returning to his bucket of greens. Oshina looked in the drawer of the cabinet and found twenty eggs.

She called out to Otsugi. ‘Take a look up in the roost, will you? I haven’t checked for almost a week, so there’ll be some more.’ Otsugi climbed up on top of the rice bales. When she opened the coop one hen came lurching out and headed for the forest. The others cackled noisily. Otsugi reached in and collected the eggs, putting them one by one into the sleeve of her jacket. Then with the sleeve dangling she descended unsteadily to the floor. She had found only six. The peddler took a scale and a brass plate from his basket.

‘What’s the price?’ Oshina asked him.

‘Eleven and a half sen a hundred momme. It’s gone down a lot,’ he replied as he put the eggs into a shallow basket. Holding the scale aloft, he adjusted the beam, pulled the weight, and read off the total.

‘Altogether, 423 momme, 2 bu,’ he said, showing the reading to Oshina. Then he picked up a tiny abacus and began calculating. ‘First we deduct the weight of my basket. Then it’s about 408 momme, 2 bu. Now let’s see, we’ve got twenty-six eggs, here, so each one . . .’

Oshina interrupted, ‘What are you figuring for this little basket?’

‘Why, fifteen momme.’

‘It looks more like ten to me.’

‘Well, here, take a look at it.’ He held the basket out towards Oshina. ‘It’s fifteen momme all right. I use a bigger one than most people.’ Then he resumed his calculations.

‘So they weigh 15 momme 7 bu each. They’re a little small, aren’t they?’ He moved the beads of the abacus slowly. ‘They’ll bring you 46 sen 8 rin 6 mo 3 shu. Why don’t we just round that off to 46 sen 8 rin?’ He took out his purse and counted the coins.

‘Oh come on now, Oshina,’ Kanji called out. ‘Keep a few and eat ’em yourself.’
‘But we can use the money to buy other food,’ she replied. ‘Besides, he’s figured it up and all. I’m really much better, so don’t worry.’

Kanji stopped working and came over. His hands were covered with salt, and both his hands and feet were bright red from the cold water. ‘No such thing! You keep a few for yourself. You still got to be careful.’

‘Oh well, maybe so.’ Oshina picked out two of the smallest eggs. ‘Not those, these,’ said Kanji, picking out three larger ones. Some of the salt on his fingers stuck to the shells.

‘Well, then. I’ll just weigh the ones you’ve taken back.’ This time the peddler put the three eggs into the brass plate. ‘You can always collect more for yourselves, you know,’ he said as he lifted the scales. The beam moved wildly up and down.

‘Don’t you cheat us, now,’ Oshina remarked, smiling faintly. ‘What a silly thing to say,’ the peddler replied indignantly. ‘Why, these scales have just been inspected. The beam’s supposed to work like that. There now, they weigh 50 momme 1 bu. That’s ’cause they’re pretty big.’

‘They got salt on ’em,’ Kanji laughed. ‘That’s what makes ’em weigh so much.’

The peddler did not smile. ‘So they’re worth 5 sen 5 rin 6 mo plus a little. Now what was the price I figured before, I wonder?’

‘You said 46 sen 8 rin, plus a little,’ Oshina answered quickly.

The peddler took up the abacus again. ‘So the difference is 41 sen 3 rin plus. You do a little trading yourself, don’t you, so you have a head for figures. Say, you have a cold or something? You look a little under the weather.’

‘Uh-huh, just a bit,’ Oshina replied. ‘Isn’t it a little more than 41 sen 3 rin?’

‘No point figuring out the rest. Can’t get any of those little old coins anymore.’ He reached into his basket and took out some matches.

‘Oh no, not matches again!’ Oshina was smiling.

‘They do just fine for little amounts,’ he said, giving her a few along with the money he owed her. ‘All the peddlers use ’em these days.’

‘Seems to me the price is awful low,’ Kanji remarked. ‘The eggs will keep a long time in this cold weather, so you’d think they’d be worth more instead of less.’

‘They’re imported from Shanghai nowadays. That brings the price way down. Eggs are dirt cheap over there, you know.’ The peddler put the eggs into his carrying basket and lifted his pole. ‘We can’t make any money off ’em either. You farmers have the
best of it, growing rice. Price is always good. But collecting eggs! We lose a lot when the market drops. People get dysentery, they want to eat eggs, but still, peddlers lose their shirts.'

He started to leave. 'I'll stop by again. Please put some aside for me,' he said as he walked off, this time speaking more formally.

Oshina put the money in the purse she kept under her bedding. Then she took a marume box from the cabinet and put the eggs in it. Cotton had once been raised in this region, and as night-work all the women had made thread, winding it up on the spindles until it was as thick and round as a candle. Each spool was called a marume. Now, however, cotton was no longer grown, and only a few marume boxes were left, gathering soot in dark corners and used only to hold bits and scraps of cloth. Oshina noticed that her thick money purse was showing under the bedding. She smoothed out the lump and lay down. For some time now she had felt exhausted, but as soon as she was in bed again she relaxed and felt better.

That night, the night of the solstice, the whole family ate a little konnyaku to clean out the grit that had accumulated in their intestines during the previous year. Oshina was sure she would be up and around the next day. And since he had finished up his chores at home Kanji decided to go back to the Tone River.
That night Oshina’s condition worsened. She woke Kanji not long after he had fallen asleep with her pitiful whisper:

‘I can’t open my mouth at all!’

Her jaws were locked shut, and no matter how much saliva she swallowed, her throat remained constricted. She was terrified, and so was Kanji.

‘What? It’s worse? Just try to hang on till morning, okay?’ He tried to reassure her, but he himself had no idea what to do. He lay in bed uneasily until dawn. Then, even more concerned about her, he sent a neighbor for the doctor while he remained at her bedside. They did not usually summon a doctor, but this time Kanji was too alarmed to think of the money it would cost. The doctor lived to the east, across the Kinu River.

Thinking it might help relax her Kanji rubbed Oshina’s feet, but her listlessness only frightened him more. All morning he flitted about nervously. Then one of the neighboring wives came by to sit with her, and he was able to dash off and see what was keeping the doctor. As he crossed the river by ferry he spied the messenger he had sent out earlier coming back across on the other boat. In midstream they shouted out to one another. Kanji, having promised Oshina that he would return with help, went on to the doctor’s house, hoping that he could hurry him along. Finally the doctor, an old hat perched on his head, was ready to leave. Kanji carried his bag. The doctor moved along slowly in his clogs; unless it was a special emergency he never went by rickshaw. That was one reason poor farmers, who could not afford the fare, called on him for aid.

Kanji described Oshina’s condition and invited the doctor’s opinion as they went, but the doctor replied irritably that he was not about to venture a diagnosis sight unseen. When finally he did see Oshina, however, he nodded grimly. She had the symptoms of tetanus, just as he had thought. Apologizing that he was an old man and did not own one of those hypodermic syringes, he
excused himself. Kanji in haste made for the other doctor in the
area. This one wrote out a few words on a slip of paper and told
him to hurry to the apothecary shop. He would come to their house
later to administer the medicine. With that Kanji dashed off across
the river again and asked for the two little vials of medicine the
doctor had prescribed. When he learned that each one cost 75 sen
he felt faint. But he bought them and made for home. Then,
toward evening, after completing his other calls, the doctor arrived
to administer the shot. He wiped Oshina’s thigh with a damp piece
of gauze, pinched up the flesh between his fingers, and drove in the
needle. After a while he extracted it, pressed the puncture with his
finger, and applied an adhesive plaster. All this took place by the
dim light of the lantern which Kanji held close by as directed by the
doctor.

The doctor came again the next morning and administered
another shot. Then, saying that everything should be all right now,
he left. But Oshina still showed no signs of recovery. Not only that,
she began to grow noticeably weaker. That evening she suddenly
went into convulsions. Her arms and legs stiffened, and her entire
body trembled violently. These convulsions recurred from time to
time, causing Oshina such suffering that it was painful even to
watch. Her face would become weirdly contorted, her mouth
drawn grotesquely to one side. Afraid to leave Otsugi there alone to
look after things Kanji had to wait until dawn to go off again for
the doctor. Once more he was sent off running to buy medicine.
But the Number 2 blood serum the doctor had specified this time
was not available anywhere. It doesn’t keep long, he was told at the
apothecary, so they didn’t order much at a time. Besides, it was
very expensive. ‘What’s it cost?’ Kanji asked. ‘Three yen a bottle.’
He looked into his purse. Even if they had had some in stock he
could not have paid for it.

Kanji returned home but was quickly sent back to the apothe-
cary. He was out of breath, but he welcomed the opportunity to go
on another errand, for only by doing as he was ordered by the
doctor did he feel he had a chance to help. The doctor injected the
Number 1 blood serum that Kanji had obtained. It was wasted
effort, however. Oshina’s convulsions came more rapidly now. It
was hard for her to breathe. A few neighbors knelt sadly around
her bed.

‘Won’t someone go to Noda?’ Oshina suddenly asked. Both
Kanji and the neighbors had been so distracted that they had for-
gotten to notify Uhei.

‘I’ll see to it he comes tomorrow,’ Kanji whispered. Despite the
hour one of the neighbors agreed to go fetch him.
A little after noon the next day Uhei arrived with the neighbor in tow. As he moved his large frame across the threshold Oshina was screaming out in pain.

'Where's it hurt?' Kanji asked. 'How about a massage?'

'It's my back, my back!' was all she could reply.

One of the wives spoke up. 'Your father's here, Oshina-san! Get hold of yourself, now.' Oshina did manage to calm down a little.

'Shina, what is it? Bad?' Uhei was a man of few words.

'I've been waiting for you,' Oshina moaned. 'It's awful.'

Uhei frowned. 'Looks serious,' he muttered. After that he said nothing. Oshina grew steadily worse. The doctor gave her a shot of morphine to relieve the pain and let her sleep a little. But she woke up after a time and began convulsing violently again, her body bent back as if she were dangling from a rope.

'What's going to happen to me, Doctor?' she asked all of a sudden. The doctor just stroked his mustache and said nothing.

'How about it, Doctor?' Kanji asked.

'Best thing is to tell the patient everything's all right,' he whispered.

Kanji bent down close to Oshina. 'He says you'll be okay. Just be brave for a bit longer,' he repeated over and over.

'But I can't take much more,' Oshina moaned. 'I won't last till morning. I'm scared . . . .' Her words, barely escaping between her clenched teeth, made everyone uncomfortable, but they knew she was right. The doctor gave her a large dose of morphine and left.

That night the convulsions came one right after another, and Oshina's temperature rose sharply. Even though she hadn't been able to drink anything her tangled hair was wet with beads of sweat. The damp bedding smelled foul.

'Come here, Kanji-san,' she moaned.

'I'm here, I'm not going anywhere.'

'Kanji-san!' she cried out again.

'What is it? I'm here,' he repeated. Hadn't she heard him?

'Papa, I'm sorry,' she murmured. Then she grabbed Kanji's hand.

'Otsū . . . ,' she stammered, and was seized by another convulsion.

'When I die, Kanji-san . . . in the casket . . . '

Kanji leaned closer to her, and after a pause she continued. 'On the path in the back paddy . . . there by the silverberry . . . ' She spoke haltingly, fighting for breath, but Kanji understood.

She lapsed into convulsions and said no more. Then she suddenly cried out deliriously, 'Furoshiki, furoshiki!' Kanji had no idea what she meant.
She began kicking furiously at the quilt, her whole body thrashing. The people seated around her grabbed her legs and held them down, restraining her in her death throes. When the convulsions stopped her breathing stopped too.

It was very quiet. One could hear the rain doors creaking faintly and the leaves rustling in the darkness outside. Oshina’s body began to turn cold, her feet first and then her legs. When they realized that she was dead Kanji, Otsugi and the others who had gathered at her bedside could restrain themselves no longer. They began to cry uncontrollably. Everyone except for Yokichi, who was sleeping peacefully beside his mother’s corpse. Uhei reached out and crossed Oshina’s arms over her bosom. Then he put a weaving shuttle on top of the quilt. That would keep away the cats, who were said to walk on the dead and assume their forms.

The night grew colder and colder, but there was no fire inside the house. The neighbors could not leave until Kanji and Otsugi stopped crying, so they just sat there quietly, their cold hands pulled back inside their sleeves. Finally Otsugi lit some leaves in the stove and brewed some tea. Everyone sipped it in silence.

‘You might’ve told me sooner, Kanji,’ Uhei grumbled quietly, but everyone overheard. He had not known anything about Oshina’s illness until the messenger had arrived early that morning. Hurriedly he had come to see what was the matter, and then it had all been over. He too had cried. But now he just sat there gripping his pipe between his lips and clicking his tongue. Kanji could do nothing but cry. From the time he had first learned Oshina was sick he had worried and thought of nothing else but caring for her. In his grief he did not even take notice of Uhei’s complaint.

Oshina’s death had affected the old man deeply. Now 71 years old, he had been working as a night watchman at a soy sauce brewery in Noda for the past year. He had married Oshina’s mother and been adopted into her family when Oshina was already 3. After a short time he and Oshina had grown very fond of one another. All had gone smoothly as long as Oshina’s mother had lived, but after her death Uhei had become more taciturn than ever. He and Kanji had never got on well. Gradually the gulf between them had deepened, despite all of Oshina’s efforts to bring them together. Finally Uhei had obtained an introduction from one of the men in the village and gone off to Noda to work.

After they had drunk their tea one of the neighbors went off to notify Oshina’s relatives in the village while the others made plans for the funeral. It was decided that everything would be taken care of the following day. As soon as it was light people went off to make arrangements at the temple, to buy death supplies, and to
notify relatives in other villages. A few women came to the house to pay their respects, and then Kanji and Otsugi started to prepare the body. They rolled up one of the floor mats, filled a washbasin with water, and cleansed Oshina’s emaciated face and limbs. Uhei sat by silently and watched. The body was then laid out on the soiled bedding on top of the slotted floor boards, and the dirty water poured off onto the soil below. The washing completed, the mat was put back in place. The rain doors had been thrust open that morning, and now all the mats inside the house were swept off. Four or five finely woven mats borrowed from East Neighbor were spread out over the old ones. Then, in accordance with the local custom, Kanji turned Oshina’s purified body over to the neighbors.

The women cut a length of bleached cotton cloth in half and fashioned a simple shroud and a hood to cover the shadow of death on Oshina’s face. Next they made some cloth socks for her feet and hung a cloth purse containing a few coins — just enough for the fare across the River of Death — around her neck. They tied up her hair with a flaxen ribbon and stuck in a white comb. Then Oshina’s stiff body was bent into the fetal position and she was put into the casket. Since her head would have stuck up above its top, they had to push down on her neck until the bone broke. This awful task was always left to others, to spare the family. They tied a rope from her feet up around her neck to keep her in the proper position. The crude pine casket creaked under her weight. The pine boards for the casket stand were nailed together, and the casket was placed on top of it.

Early in the morning Kanji had slipped out of the house and walked down through the oak trees to the edge of the rice paddy. Soon he located the silverberry bush and detected the traces of digging. He scooped up the surface dirt with his sickle and then pushed aside the soft earth with his hands until he uncovered something wrapped up in a rag. Inside was a tiny corpse. Kanji picked it up carefully and looked around to make sure he was unobserved. Then he wrapped it up in a piece of old oil cloth and returned to the house. As Oshina was being put into the casket he slipped the little bundle into her arms. Her bony fingers held it tightly, and her sunken cheek touched against it. The funeral was being held on a day of the red-tongued god.

Although the burial itself and the simple feast that preceded it would be confined to neighbors and relatives, all the villagers stopped by to pay their respects, each contributing 2 sen towards expenses. Later the priest and acolyte from the temple arrived, accompanied by a servant carrying a lacquered box. The acolyte lifted the lid of the casket, removed Oshina’s hood, and stroked her
cheeks with a razor. Now that this perfunctory shave was finished the lid was nailed in place. The leftover piece of bleached cotton cloth was wrapped around the casket and a funeral canopy, crudely made of crossed pine branches, was set on top. Finally an old mandala was laid over all. Only a few people were going to the burial, but even so there were two paper lanterns, and two large bamboo baskets decorated with paper flowers were held aloft during the procession. In the bottom of each basket a sheet of paper lay over the lattice-work, and on top of it were coins, one for each year the deceased had lived. During the procession the men carrying the baskets would shake them from time to time, and the village children would dash about to pick up the coins as they fell. The lanterns and baskets led the way. Next came the village prayer society, its members beating slowly on their drums and chanting the nenbutsu. The procession followed the main road through the village, and everyone came out to watch as it passed by. All the while the shoddily made casket pitched from side to side. Kanji followed behind it, in formal dress and carrying a mortuary tablet. He had rented the clothes he wore, and they fit him poorly.

Around the grave dry red soil was piled up on all sides. The men had tried to find a spot where no one had been buried before, but the graveyard had long been in use. As usual they had unearthed a few bones — a hand here, a foot there — as they had dug. The priest’s servant removed the piece of cloth from the casket and placed it in his lacquered box. Then the casket was lowered on ropes into the grave until it rested on the red soil below. The casket stand was placed over the grave, and the lanterns and baskets were set beside it. Hardly a day passed in Oshina’s life when she had not felt the soil beneath her feet. Barefooted except in icy winter, she had been its creature. And now, in death, she was its creature still. Separated only by a thin layer of pine, her feet would rest on the soil forever.

After the funeral party left, a wind had come up, sweeping away the dust in Kanji’s yard. The wives from the neighborhood who had come to help with the food and cleaning up had little to do, since there had been few guests at the feast. Now they were eating leftovers. Instead of barley mixed with rice, the farmers’ usual fare, pure rice had been served. It was a rare treat, and the women ate all they could manage to stuff into their mouths. They were gathered by the back door gossiping.

‘Did you hear how the casket rattled!’ one of them remarked.

‘It’s supposed to,’ another answered. ‘The spirit inside is worried about those it’s left behind.’

‘She hated to leave Kanji, I’ll tell you that.’
Nagatsuka Takashi

'That's right. But if she misses him too much her spirit will come back and fetch him.'
'I'd hate that, if someone came for me!'
'Well, even if you begged and begged, no one would come back for you.'

On and on they went, talking without reserve. Then there was a brief lull.
'It's sad about Oshina,' one woman said.
'Uh-huh,' another answered, 'Lots of people do it, after all.'
'They say she caught a cold, but I don't believe that story. You don't die from colds!'
'It's always the poorest who die from it.'
'You know, I heard she did it for others, too.'
'That's so. I wouldn't go around talking about it, but I heard sometimes she got 50 sen, 80 sen for it.'
'80 sen! That's a lot for woman's work. But this time it cost her her own life.'
'Uh-huh, it was a punishment for doing wrong.'
'You better watch out, saying things like that about the dead! Don't you know a spirit can come back and possess you if it gets angry?'

After a brief silence, one of the women picked up a piece of radish and stuck it in her mouth.
'Now how'd you like it if someone caught you doing that?' she was asked.

The woman peered out at the yard. 'Pretty private here.' Then she chuckled. 'An old bag like me, nobody's trying to marry me off so I don't have to worry about how I act any more. What a relief!'

All of them burst out laughing.

Until the people who had gone to the burial returned they would keep on talking. Constrained by the occasion they had remained quiet during the feast itself, but as soon as they were alone in the kitchen, their sleeves tied up to wash dishes, they had relaxed. It may have been a sad day for others, but for them it was a happy occasion, their only chance to visit, to eat decent food, to rest from work. While others grieved, they satisfied their hunger. The sorrows of others were of no concern to them. They went on laughing.

Oshina had once been a part of this group. But today she had put her laughter behind her and returned to the soil.