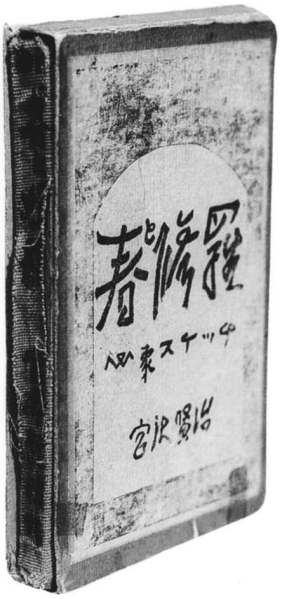
INTRODUCTION

Gary Snyder was the first to translate a body of Miyazawa Kenji's poems into English. In the 1960s, Snyder, then living in Kyoto and pursuing Buddhism, was offered a grant to translate Japanese literature. He sought Burton Watson's opinion, and Watson, a scholar of Chinese classics trained at the University of Kyoto, recommended Kenji.[1] Snyder had first heard about Kenji a decade earlier, while he was attending the Buddhist Study Center in Berkeley, when Jane Imamura, the wife of the center's founder, Kanmo, showed him a translation of a poem. This poem, which I here call "November 3rd," impressed him, since it was unlike any other Japanese poem he had read; it was full of quiet humility. Mrs. Imamura, we assume, also told him that the poet who wrote it was famous as a devout Buddhist. It is characteristic of Snyder, then, that despite his strong interest in Buddhism, he did not include the homiletic "November 3rd" in his selection of eighteen poems, focusing instead on pieces vividly describing the poet's close interactions with nature.[2]

By the time Snyder worked on Kenji's poems, four different sets of Kenji's *zenshū,* or complete works, had been compiled and published, ranging from three volumes (1934–1935) to six (1956–1958)—a remarkable development, given that Kenji died in 1933 as basically a single-volume poet. It was not that, as the popular story has it, he was "almost totally unknown as a poet during his lifetime."[3] In fact, his



The first edition of *Spring & Asura,* published in April 1924.

book, *Haru to shura (Spring & Asura),* which appeared in April 1924, electrified several of the poets who read it. The Dadaist Tsuji Jun, the first to review it in a daily newspaper (in July of that year), declared that if he could take only one volume to the Japan Alps that summer, he would favor *Spring & Asura* over *Thus Spake Zarathustra.* In the fall the anarchist Kusano Shimpei, reading it in Guangdong, where he was studying, wrote that he was "shocked" by it and ranked Kenji alongside Carl Sandburg *(Smoke and Steel)* and the Cubist painter-poet Murayama Kaita as the three poets who inspired him. Satō Sōnosuke, who wrote poems influenced by ideas of democracy deriving from the writings of Walt Whitman and of Whitman's English disciple Edward Carpenter, became the first to review it in a poetry magazine (in December) and wrote that it "astonished [him] the most" out of all the books of poems he had received, noting that Kenji "wrote poems with meteorology, mineralogy, botany, and geology." Two years later Shimpei added: "If there is a genius in Japan's poetic world today, I would say Miyazawa Kenji is that honored 'genius.' Even among the leading poets of the world, he emanates an absolutely extraordinary light."

In 1934, a year after Kenji's death, Takamura Kōtarō, a remarkable presence as a painter, sculptor, art critic, and poet, invoked Cézanne in Aix in a commemorative magazine special: "Cézanne had no thought of achieving something new and simply followed the natural road of painting itself; in fact, he tended to lament his lack of ability. Yet the

work of this old man in the countryside was so advanced as to give an important clue to the new art of the world, because he had an artistic cosmos stored deeply inside himself and constantly, fiercely dashed toward it. Someone who has a cosmos within himself escapes a locality no matter where he may be in the world, no matter at which periphery he may be. . . . Miyazawa Kenji, the poet of Hanamaki, Iwate Prefecture, was one of the rare possessors of such a cosmos."[4]

Yet it is also true that Kenji died largely unknown. A few poets praising a fellow poet, however extravagantly, does not make him well known, well read. So when the first of Kenji's *zenshū* got under way, in 1934, the Dadaist poet Nakahara Chūya, "an admirer over a decade," wondered: "Has he not been recognized until this late date because there was insufficient advertisement? Because he did not live in Tokyo? Because, other than being a poet, he had a profession, that is, a teaching profession? Because he had no communication with the so-called literary establishment? Or because of a combination of these things?"[5] The answer to the last question is yes, though we must add one more factor, the obvious one that *Spring & Asura* was the only book of poems that Kenji published.

FAMILY AFFLUENCE AND BUDDHISM

Miyazawa Kenji was born on August 27, 1896, in Hanamaki, Hinuki County, Iwate Prefecture, in the Tōhoku (northeast) region of Japan. At that time Hanamaki was a small town with a population of about 3,000. The Sino-Japanese War, Japan's first imperialistic military venture since the country terminated its isolationist policy in the middle of the century, had ended the previous year. Both Kenji's father, Masajirō, then twenty-two, and his mother, Ichi, nineteen, came from mercantile families named Miyazawa. Though unrelated, the two

families were regarded as branches of the same *maki,* or "bloodline" — a word suggesting in the Tōhoku dialect not just a familial group that was wealthy and therefore greedy but, more insidiously, one accursed with one of the diseases thought incurable, such as leprosy and tuberculosis.[6] Miyazawa Kenji, who contracted tuberculosis in his early twenties, ended up living with both stigmas.

Masajirō's father, Kisuke, ran a pawnshop and dealt in secondhand goods, especially clothes. He did a particularly booming business with the laborers who flooded into the region when the railways were extended north through Iwate to Aomori during the first phase of Japan's rapid modernization effort; the construction ended in 1891. Ichi's father, Zenji, did even better. His holdings in timberland were so great, it was said, that you could walk straight to the neighboring prefecture to the west, Akita, without once leaving the forests he owned. He helped to found a bank, to develop the area's hot springs into what might today be called a theme park, and to build a local light railway line that would play an important role in Kenji's imagination. Called the Iwate Keiben Tetsudō, it originated in Hanamaki and extended east, toward the port town of Kamaishi on the Pacific coast.

In his business endeavors Masajirō emulated Kisuke and Zenji. He inherited Kisuke's trade, but, not content to be just a retailer, he became a wholesaler of secondhand clothes — which were in fact clothes left unsold and discounted. He traveled as far as Kansai and Shikoku to stock his inventory. (Zenji's investments in forests extended to Shikoku.) He also profited from wars, especially the First World War, in which Japan mainly played a profiteering, bystander's role and saw its economy more than triple. He had a talent for stocks. In the fall of 1918 Kenji wrote to his closest friend, Hosaka Kanai, that Masajirō's assets based on his stock holdings would grow, "on their own," to be

large enough for the family "not to have to trouble others even if [Kenji's] parents became ill for the rest of their lives."[7]

In his old age Masajirō boasted, "Had I not known Buddhism, I'd have been able to build a fortune as great as Mitsui's and Mitsubishi's." More than a touch of exaggeration no doubt, but when Kenji described himself as part of a local *zaibatsu,* in 1932, a year before his death, he was basically telling the truth. In responding to a writer who had apparently solicited comments on a children's story, Kenji said: "I've ended up writing these worthless things [suggestions] because you said I was too self-deprecating. . . . After all, I am linked to what is called a *zaibatsu,* a social defendant,[8] in my home region, and if anything happens that makes me stand out, there is always more resentment than anything else, which I truly hate. I've experienced many things that I truly hate."[9]

The family's affluence explains why Kenji was able to spend his entire salary at the Hinuki (later, Hanamaki) Agricultural School on costly "modern" things from Tokyo, such as foreign-language books, Western records (Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Bach), and Western nude paintings (reproductions, one assumes), as well as one thousand (!) *shunga,* or erotic prints. Indeed, it was while he was at school that he began collecting records, in the end making himself Hanamaki's greatest record collector. He sometimes paid poor students' travel expenses and at times treated his entire class to a meal at an expensive restaurant.

Buddhism permeated the Miyazawa household. Masajirō was an earnest follower of the school of Buddhism known as Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land). When he was twenty-four, he started a study group with his friends and invited religious scholars and leaders to lecture. His children attended many study group sessions. He bought Buddhist books and to house them built a small library in his garden, where everyone was free to read them. As one anecdote has it, his sec-

ond son, Seiroku, when three or four, visited his maternal grandmother, Saki, and was served some cookies. He would not touch them, saying: "These would create *bonnō* in me." *Bonnō,* or "hindrances," is an all-encompassing term for anything that leads you astray and deters you from becoming "awakened," including food that whets the appetite. Saki was amused: "This kid talks like an old man!"

Among the Buddhist texts Kenji grew up listening to are the *Shōshin nembutsu ge,* "Hymn to *Nembutsu* as True Faith," also known as *Shōshinge,* by Shinran (1173–1262), who founded the Jōdo Shinshū, and the *Hakkotsu no go-bunshō,* "Holy Words on White Bones," by Rennyo (1415–1499), who revived the school two centuries later. The former is a 120-line verse equating *nembutsu,* the prayer saying "Praise to Amida Buddha," with faith, and the latter is a short homily on the transience of life, hence the importance of conversion to the Amida faith at the earliest age. One famous sentence in "Holy Words" is "You have a ruddy face in the morning and find yourself turned into white bones in the evening." It is said that Masajirō's older sister, Yagi, whose first marriage had failed and who was living in her brother's house when her nephew was young, recited the "Holy Words" for Kenji in lieu of lullabies.

Of these two works, the hymn may have given Kenji the earliest familiarity with Japanese verse. Though composed in classical Chinese, each line with seven characters, it is read and recited in a Japanized pronunciation of Chinese in such a way that most lines come out in seven-five, or twelve, syllables, thereby creating the same rhythm as the verseform of *wasan*. *Wasan* are Japanese Buddhist hymns that repeat the same syllabic pattern of seven and five, which is basic, even exclusive, to Japanese versification. In view of the great differences between Chinese and Japanese, Shinran surely pulled off a neat linguistic sleight of hand in this composition.

In 1911 Kenji attended a summer Buddhist lecture series run by the scholar-priest Shimaji Taitō. One important subject covered by the series was the *Tannishō (A Record in Lament of Divergences),* a collection of Shinran's words. In November 1912, in a letter to his father, Kenji declared: "I have made the first page of the *Tannishō* my entire religion." But did he have in mind section 1 or 3? The former asserts that the moment you think of saying a *nembutsu* your salvation is assured, and the latter contains Shinran's most famous words: "Even a good person goes to the Pure Land; how couldn't an evil person?" — a postulate that reversed that of his teacher and founder of the Jōdo-shū, Hōnen (1133–1212): "Even a criminal is reborn in the Pure Land; how, how on earth, can't a good person!"[10]

CONVERSION TO THE NICHIREN-SHŪ

In September 1914, when he was eighteen, Kenji was "extraordinarily moved" to read Shimaji Taitō's just-published Chinese-Japanese edition of the Lotus Sutra. Though Shimaji was of the Jōdo Shinshū, a relatively unaggressive school of Buddhism, the reading led to Kenji's conversion to the radical Nichiren-shū (Nichirenism) and then to the ultranationalistic Kokuchūkai (the Pillar of the Nation Society). The Nichiren-shū was founded by Nichiren (1222–1282), a firebrand who equated faith in the teachings he thought he found in the Lotus Sutra with national salvation, and the Kokuchūkai by Tanaka Chigaku, in 1914, to propagate militant interpretations of Nichiren's teachings, as if Nichiren himself wasn't militant enough.

The Kokuchūkai, which today promotes such benign matters as closer relations with Korea, in the 1920s and 1930s spearheaded the kind of Nichirenism that could easily skew the course of the nation. Tanaka advocated *tengyō,* "heaven's task," which may be called Japan's

answer to America's manifest destiny, and defined his society's duty as achieving a "spiritual unity" throughout the world with "Japan as the Imperial Headquarters and the Japanese as soldiers."[11] Among his ardent admirers in the military was Ishihara Kanji, mastermind of the Manchurian Incident in 1931, which led to the establishment of the new state of Manchukuo and marked the start of what some would later call Japan's "Fifteen-Year War." For a while Inoue Akira (or Nisshō), leader of the Blood League that assassinated a former minister of finance, the head of Mitsui in 1932, thought of joining Tanaka's group. Among the more prominent Nichiren followers was Kita Ikki, who was executed as philosophical leader of the 2/26 (February 26) Incident of 1936, an attempted coup d'état in which the lord keeper of the privy seal, the minister of finance, and the inspector-general of military education were assassinated. The suppression of the rebels allowed the hard-liners in the army to consolidate their power.[12]

Kenji knew none of these men. But decades later his faith in the Nichiren-shū and his association with the Kokuchūkai would provoke the question: Had he not died in the early 1930s, would he have joined the ranks of the chauvinistic militarists? After all, did he not call Nichiren "the world's one and only teacher" at the end of 1920, and, on joining the Kokuchūkai later that year, did he not write, "I only exist within Teacher Tanaka Chigaku's command," adding, "If so ordered, I'll go anywhere, be it the Siberian tundra or Inland China"?[13] We must also consider Miyazawa's notions of war and world order. From his religious perspective the world was in the Final-Days-of-the-Dharma phase, as Miyazawa told his father in a letter of March 1918, and from the perspective of global politics, "war constantly occurs as a result of overpopulation and [the need for] adjustment to it."[14] By then the First World War was winding down, but despite President Woodrow Wilson's talk of a "war to end all wars," some of the Allies

were readying to move against Russia's revolutionary government. Japan and Britain landed their forces in Vladivostok in April, the prelude to a large-scale Siberian invasion. The military, if not militarism, was a fact of life, explaining frequent references to the military in Kenji's stories and plays, if not in his poems.

So one might ask: What drove Kenji to such radicalism or at least to a school of religion that took such a radical stance? Except for a brief period when he tried to convert his father, engaging in a violent argument, wasn't Kenji by all accounts a benign, pleasant, "Buddha-like" person? Kenji did not leave a body of writings on religion so we can only speculate, but I think that there were basically three reasons for Kenji's conversion. One was the secularization of the Jōdo Shinshū, which, in his eyes, made it too lax, too cavalier, to deserve being called a religion. Another was a combination of circumstances that did not allow him to settle for easy compromises. And a third was his conflict with his father.

To begin with the last reason, Kenji's father was the kind of man who would harp on the fact that he had permanently damaged his intestines when he contracted dysentery from Kenji while nursing him when the boy, at age six, was quarantined with the disease. After his son's posthumous fame was secured, he ostentatiously converted to the Nichiren-shū, even though he had scornfully rejected it when his son tried to convert him. Kenji did not leave any overt complaint about him, but in an early tanka he recorded his discomfort with his father's petit bourgeois manner:

> Father father why in front of the superintendent did you wind your large silver watch?

Kenji wrote this cutting piece in April 1909, on the day he entered the Morioka Junior High School and was taken to its dormitory with

Masajirō. The playwright and biographer Aoe Shunjirō was probably right in condemning Masajirō as an "utterly intolerable small-scale philistine." Aoe was from the Tōhoku, where he witnessed firsthand many instances of stifling father-son conflict, and he wrote that it was particularly difficult for a first son to escape his merchant father's grip.[15]

Worse still was Masajirō's business of pawnbroking and selling used clothing. Serving as storekeeper, as he often did, Kenji had to keep his "feelings . . . locked up in a gray stone box," as he wrote to Hosaka in early 1920, for otherwise he'd find himself in "an environment in which [he] wouldn't be able to read a single page of a book." Kenji went on to characterize that environment with these words: "old cotton for futon, *grimy* cold children's clothing, blackish pawned goods, a frozen store curtain, blue envy, desiccated calculation, and others."[16] In the summer he wrote Hosaka again, reporting that lately he had been "bad-tempered and easily becoming furious":

> Anger flares up and my body feels as though it has entered alcohol. Sitting at a desk and remembering someone saying something, I suddenly feel like smashing the desk with my whole body. Anger looks red. When it's too strong the light of anger becomes so luxuriant it rather feels like water. In the end it looks deathly pale. To be sure, anger doesn't make you feel bad. . . . This paroxysm that almost turns me into a madman I mechanically call up by its true name and join my hands. An asura in the world of humans becoming a buddha. And filled with joy I turn the pages again.[17]

So here we have Kenji's first image of himself as an asura. As he proclaims in the title poem of *Spring & Asura:*

> how bitter, how blue is the anger!
> At the bottom of the light in April's atmospheric strata,
> spitting, gnashing, pacing back and forth,
> I am Asura incarnate[18]

Kenji evidently regarded his image of himself as an asura to be so true that he used *Spring & Asura* as the title not just of his first collection of poems, which was published during his lifetime, but also of the two subsequent collections that were not. So what is an asura?

A sculpture of an eighth-century asura at the Kōfukuji Temple, Nara.

In one Buddhist scheme, there are "six realms" in this world, and these are inhabited by unenlightened beings, all subject to rebirth, which are, in ascending order, hell dwellers, unsatiated spirits, beasts, asuras, humans, and heavenly beings. In the glossary of his Chinese-Japanese edition of the Lotus Sutra, Shimaji Taitō defines asura: "'Ashura' *(asura),* also abbreviated to *shura*. . . . They are said to be *aḳushin* [evil deities or spirits] fond of fighting and quarrels who are constantly at war with various heavenly beings and who live, in a number of phases, under the mountains or at the bottom of the ocean." In the Buddhism-permeated Japanese imagination, indeed, the word *shura* or *ashura* — *asura* is Sanskrit — readily evokes the image of bloody fights or fighters, or a state of fury. And for Kenji, his "fundamental intuition" was that the real world is the realm of asura, a realm full of killing and conflict, as the philosopher Umehara Takeshi points out.[19] Or, as the Buddhist scholar Gene Reeves put it, Kenji's was a "radical affirmation of the reality and importance of this world . . . in which suffering has to be endured."[20] The saving grace, as it were, is the Buddhist teaching that every being could be succored, "an asura in the world of humans becoming a buddha."

Ōtani Kōzui, the head of the dominant branch of the Jōdo Shinshū, the Nishi-Honganji, was an adventuresome, enterprising man. From 1902 to 1903, he led an expedition to Ceylon, India, and Tibet to collect ancient Buddhist texts and artifacts, the first such attempt by a Japanese group.[21] His father had begun the new era of Meiji (1868–1912) with radical reform and modernization in mind, with an emphasis, a few decades into the era, on efforts to counter Christianity, which, owing to waves of Westernization, had found a growing number of converts among young men and women. These efforts worked so well that by the end of Meiji the school's annual budget is said to have exceeded that of Kyoto City. In 1908 Kōzui built an extravagant villa-cum-museum-cum-school on Mt. Rokkō, in Kobe, complete with a mile-long cable car reaching from the seashore to the building, as well as telescopes and searchlights — all brand-new Western equipment seldom seen in Japan at the time. In 1914 he went bankrupt and, with other scandals breaking out, was forced to resign the post of head of the Jōdo Shinshū. We can well imagine that Kenji was so chagrined by such developments he eagerly sought another Buddhist school that advocated more pristine, vigorous goals.[22] As one result Kenji turned to vegetarianism. In May 1918, in a letter to Hosaka, he described his aversion to eating the "bodies of living things" in graphic terms:

> In spring I stopped eating the bodies of living things. Nonetheless, the other day I ate several slices of tuna sashimi as a form of *magic* to "undertake" my "communication" with "society." I also stirred a cup of *chawanmushi*[23] with a spoon. If the fish, while being eaten, had stood behind me and watched, what would he have thought? "I gave up my only life and this person is eating my body as if it were

something distasteful." "He's eating me in anger." "He's eating me out of desperation." "He's thinking of me and, while quietly savoring my fat with his tongue, praying, 'Fish, you will come with me as my companion some day, won't you?'" "Damn! He's eating my body!" Well, different fish would have had different thoughts. . . .

Suppose I were the fish, and suppose that not only I were being eaten but my father were being eaten, my mother were being eaten, and my sister were also being eaten. And suppose I were behind the people eating us, watching. "Oh, look, that man has torn apart my sibling with chopsticks. Talking to the person next to him, he swallowed her, thinking nothing of it. Just a few minutes ago her body was lying there, cold. Now she must be disintegrating in a pitch-dark place under the influence of mysterious enzymes. Our entire family has given up our precious lives that we value, we've sacrificed them, but we haven't won a thimbleful of pity from these people."

I must have been once a fish that was eaten.[24]

That the Jōdo Shinshū's practice of eating fish, poultry, and meat turned Kenji off became clear in "The Great Vegetarian Festival," a story he wrote just a few years before his death. It takes the form of a report on an international gathering of vegetarians that was supposed to have taken place in a village near Trinity Harbor, Newfoundland. In this festival, the opponents, mainly represented by the Chicago Cattle Raisers Association, are fully allowed to air their views—a wonderful setup for reminding us that practically all the arguments for including meat in the diet and for eating vegetables only were current in the 1920s. The climax comes when the last speaker, a self-styled "follower of the Honganji Branch enlightened by the incarnation of Amida Buddha Shinran," argues: "This world is one of suffering; there is not a single thing done in this world that is not suffering; this world is all contradictions; it is all sins and crimes. . . .

What we perceive as justice is in the end no more than what feels nice to us. . . . [In the circumstances we can only] leave ourselves to the Enlightened One and Savior toward the West, Amida Buddha, so we may liberate ourselves from the contradictions of this world. Only then things like vegetarianism will be all right," and so forth.

It is when he goes on to say that Sakyamuni "allowed the eating of animal meat obtained by deeds that are not too cruel. . . . In his last years, as his thought became ever more round and ripe, he seems not to have been a total vegetarian" that the narrator forgets his reporter's role, leaping to the podium and arguing:

> Buddhism's starting point is that all living things, we who are so full of pain and sadness, together with all these living things, want to liberate ourselves from this state of pain. . . . All living things have been repeating transmigration for immeasurable *kalpa*. . . . Sometimes a soul perceives itself as a human. At other times it is born in a beast, that is, what we call an animal. . . . As a result, the living things around us are all our parents and children, brothers and sisters, as they have been for a long time. People of different religions will think this idea too serious and terrifying. [Indeed] this is a serious world to a terrifying degree.[25]

This argument wins the day for the vegetarians, though Kenji closes the story by pointing out it has all been "fantasy." But his aversion to eating the "bodies of living things" was so strong that he even felt guilty eating vegetables.

IWATE AND KENJI AS A STUDENT OF AGRICULTURE

The Iwate that inspired and distressed Kenji was prone to natural disasters. In 1896 alone, the year Kenji was born, the region was hit by a 125-foot-high tsunami, which killed 18,000 people in the prefecture,

on June 15; by a flood following a heavy rain, on June 21; by an earthquake, on August 31, which destroyed a great many houses; and by another flood, on September 6, which raised by fifteen feet the level of the Kitakami River, the main drainage system that runs through Iwate. It was in fact partly because of the August 31 earthquake that the Miyazawas were able to pinpoint the date of Kenji's birth: it struck four days after he was born, remembered Ichi, who had covered her baby with her own body to protect him. For some reason, Kenji routinely gave his date of birth as August 1.

Historically Iwate was also prone to famine. Occupying the northern part of the main island of Honshū, the Tōhoku faces the Pacific Ocean at a point where the cold current Oyashio, which flows southwest along the Chishima (Kurile) Archipelago, turns east as it meets the warm Tsushima Current, which flows from the west into the Pacific through the Tsugaru Strait. Whenever one of the two prongs of the Oyashio extends too far south and overwhelms the Tsushima Current, cold descends on the region and crop failure results. During the Edo Period (1603–1868), Iwate was hit by a major crop failure every sixteen years on average, each time killing tens of thousands of people. The region was once called the "earth of white bones" and later "Japan's Tibet."

The frequency of crop failures increased during Kenji's lifetime. Major ones occurred in 1902, 1905, 1913, 1926, 1929, and 1931. By the early twentieth century the central government was able to prevent most outright deaths from starvation, but crop failures ravaged rural areas. One consequence was rampant human trade: people selling their young daughters to brothels. It was illegal but openly, and widely, practiced. Prostitutes are a haunting presence in Kenji's poems, though not in the ones I have translated. "A Record of Food in a Mountain Village," a poem by Mori Saichi, a reporter for the *Iwate*

Daily, written in 1929, details another consequence. That year, like the previous one, had experienced drought, the one in 1928 devastating dry-land rice and vegetables. Describing a family of nine, "four above fifteen years old, five below," in Yamane Village, Kunohe County, Iwate, Mori mainly listed what the family ate from August 24 to 30. The measuring unit *shō* is about 3.8 pints, *gō* one-tenth of it. Nuts of the Japanese oak *(nara)* or acorns, along with horse chestnuts, or conkers, were important food during famines:

> 24th: 1 *gō* of millet, 5 *gō* of wheat, and 2 *gō* of *menoko* (powdered seaweed): morning, pickled cucumbers, cowpea soup; noon, same as morning; evening, wheat gruel, bean paste (licked)
>
> 25th: 1 *gō* of millet, 5 *gō* of soybean: morning, pickled cucumber, cowpea soup; noon, sweet potatoes steamed in a pan, bean paste; evening, millet gruel, pickled cucumber
>
> 26th: 7 *gō* of millet, 5 *gō* of wheat, 1 *shō* of nuts of Japanese oak trees: morning, nuts of Japanese oak trees, millet gruel, pickled cucumber; noon, same as morning; evening, wheat gruel, corn steamed in a pan, pickled *nappa*.[26]

The crop failure that struck a year after Kenji's death was the worst on record. Some historians say that it directly led to the 2/26 Incident of 1936 mentioned above. The revolting officers and the fifteen hundred soldiers who followed them were mostly from peasant families in the Tōhoku. The manifesto of the revolt spoke of "rampant greed" at the top that thrust "millions of people . . . into insufferable pain."

Calls for radical agricultural reform were inevitable as modern scientific knowledge advanced. One might say that these began with the idea of abandoning agriculture altogether put forward by Nitobe Inazō, of *Bushidō* fame, in 1898, followed by a range of proposals,

though none of them was taken up exactly as advanced.[27] Still, when the Nippon Railway, a company set up to build a railroad through the Tōhoku, completed its ten years of work in 1891, its president, Ono Gishin, decided to commemorate the occasion by creating Japan's first corporate farm in a barren area about ten miles northwest of Morioka, then Iwate's only city. Called Koiwai Farm, it was a Western transplant, complete with silos. Kenji was enchanted by what must have struck him as an apparition in the midst of nowhere. Many of his pieces were inspired by the farm, among them his longest poem, a nine-part, 827-line description of what he saw and thought as he walked from a train station to the farm.[28]

Iwate Prefecture expressed its own concern through various measures. It established agricultural stations, one for Hinuki County in Hanamaki in 1897. It also founded the Morioka Higher School for Agriculture and Forestry, in 1903, the first of its kind in Japan. It was the latter's agriculture department that Kenji entered, in April 1915. Masajirō probably chose the school for Kenji, but agriculture, along with the range of subjects the field covered, apparently suited Kenji's interest and inclinations, for it set his course.[29] The dean of the department, Seki Toyotarō, who was awarded a doctorate for his study of volcanic ash that turned into soil, was an eccentric — he famously lectured with his face turned sideways, without looking at his students — but Kenji got on very well with him and thrived under his tutelage. Kenji's graduation paper was on the "value of inorganic elements in the humus for plants," a controversial issue at the time, as Kenji called it. It consisted of assessments of soils from four areas in Iwate with generally negative conclusions. At Seki's request, Kenji stayed on at the higher school — today's equivalent of college — as a researcher of geology, pedology, and fertilizers. His first assignment, which started in April 1918, was to map soils in Hinuki and was

financed by the county. In May Seki arranged to commission him as "assistant in experiment guidance." He wanted to guarantee Kenji's position, with a plan to recommend his eventual promotion to assistant professorship.

But at the end of June Kenji was diagnosed with pleurisy. Pleurisy — lung apex, bronchial infection, and pneumonia, to add the names he listed in a letter to a friend in October 1932 — was often equated with tuberculosis. A family with a member suffering from TB was shunned, if not ostracized, so it was necessary to camouflage the disease. Kenji's mother, Ichi, had TB; so did her sister, Koto. Kenji sensed the true nature of what he had, and as he went home to rest on July 4, he predicted to a friend that he would live for only another fifteen years. This prediction proved to be uncannily accurate. The first time around he recovered after a dozen days, but the disease kept recurring, at times severely, until his death exactly fifteen years later.

On July 20 he resumed work, but on August 24 resigned the researcher's post, though he continued soil mapping until the end of September. For his work he had to carry a good deal of equipment, along with samples, which often included rocks he had collected, his hobby since a boy. It was during this period that he became aware of his physical limitations. "I can't do anything. I plow the land but I plow two *tsubo* [four square yards] and I rest and rest without interruption. I handle something a little heavy and I have a spell of cerebral anemia," he wrote to Hosaka in October.[30]

KENJI AS TEACHER OF AGRICULTURE

That same month Kenji's beloved sister Toshiko, a student at Japan Women's College in Tokyo, fell ill; in December Kenji, told of her

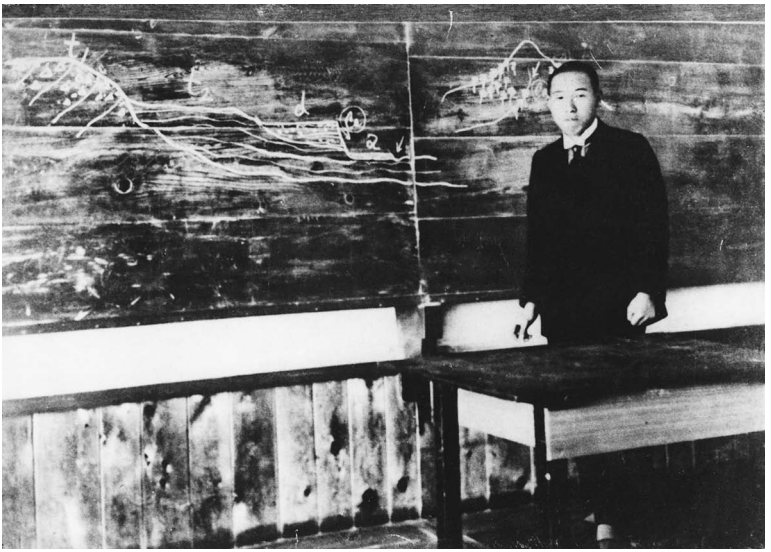
hospitalization, went to Tokyo with his mother. That year the Spanish flu raged, and the family learned that it was, in fact, the direct cause of Toshiko's illness. But it was the bronchial infection she had developed along with the flu that would lead to her death from TB four years later. Kenji tended to her in the hospital every day and filed reports on day-to-day developments with Masajirō. At the end of February Toshiko had recovered enough to be able to leave the hospital, and in early March Kenji brought her back to Hanamaki. Thereafter at times she felt well enough to be up and doing things, such as attending lectures on dressmaking and making clean copies of Kenji's tanka, and in September 1920 she took on the job of teaching English and home economics at her alma mater, Hanamaki Middle School for Girls. But her recovery proved deceptive. In August 1921 she vomited blood and had to resign. The news prompted Kenji to return from Tokyo, where he had gone to escape Masajirō and to join the Kokuchūkai and where — after Takachio Chiyō, Tanaka's top aide, persuaded him to focus on his work rather than become a proselytizing member as Kenji had wanted — he was making a paltry living mimeographing. That period, which lasted for seven months, was to be the only time when Kenji managed to live more or less apart from his father.

Kenji, who had graduated from the agricultural school with today's equivalent of a master's degree in May 1920 — his final report for Hinuki County was "Geography and Geology" — became a teacher at the Hinuki County Agricultural School in December 1921. Created in 1907 to teach sericulture, the school had broadened its scope that year. When Kenji, who had given a series of lectures on mineralogy, soils, chemistry, and fertilizers there in 1919, arrived to take up the teaching post, the school was as it had been originally: a

humble establishment with thatched roofs. In fact, Kenji's businessman uncle was working to build new buildings for the school at the time. Introduced by the principal to the students, Kenji simply said, "I am Miyazawa Kenji, just introduced," and stepped down from the podium. He had a buzz cut and wore a Western suit with high collar, a point worth noting if only because he had worn formal Japanese attire when he had earlier given lectures at the school.

The year 1922 opened with Kenji writing a string of poems that would form *Spring & Asura,* beginning with "Refractive Index." It is said that one inspiration behind Kenji's sudden ease in turning out free verse was a music teacher at Toshiko's school — though by the time Kenji visited him there and the two quickly had become friends, Toshiko had left. "Love and Fever" is the first poem expressing Kenji's concern for Toshiko. In April, when the ceremony to welcome newly enrolled students was held, Kenji was assigned to teach algebra, English, fertilizers, agricultural production, produce, meteorology, chemistry, and soils, in addition to giving practical training in growing rice in paddies. On April 8, the day after the ceremony, he wrote "Spring & Asura." Some commentators find it significant that April 8 is the Buddha's birthday. With six teachers in all, including the principal, taking care of just two classes, four were idle when two were in class. The abundance of time and the liberty he enjoyed must have added to the surge in Kenji's creative energy.

While at the school Kenji also wrote a dozen songs and plays for his students. He composed the music for the songs as well, and he made sure that his students sang them when he took them to other schools, with himself serving as conductor. The earliest play he wrote at the school was probably the one staged in March 1922. It described the crown prince of England, who was scheduled to visit Japan the



Miyazawa Kenji in front of a blackboard at the Hinuki County Agricultural School, ca. 1922. Photograph © Rinpoo.

following month. As the student who played the prince's role recalled, it depicted the prince meeting Japanese people of all classes, calling those who were deferentially speaking to him in English (perhaps) "fools" to their faces, while returning polite greetings to those rude fellows who, assuming that he did not understand Japanese, said insulting things to his face. The play was an uproarious success. When the school in the new buildings opened as Hanamaki Agricultural School, in April 1923, two of Kenji's plays, *Shokubutsu ishi* (The plant doctor) and *Kiga jin'ei* (The starvation camp) were staged to mark the occasion. The first pokes fun at someone who makes money by pretending to know everything about plants, and the second mocks the

military, which is unable to procure enough food for the rank and file. Both plays are slapstick.

In July 1922 Toshiko was moved to the family's "other house" in Shimoneko, since her mother had become worn out looking after her.[31] Toshiko was provided with a nurse and two maids, and her sister Shige made meals for them. Kenji visited her every day. In early November, her condition worsening, she was brought back to the Miyazawa house, and on November 27 she died. Kenji shouted *daimoku* — the Nichiren-shū prayer *Namu Myōhō Renge-kyō,* "Praise to the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma" — into her ear before she died. It was sleeting that day. "The Morning of Last Farewell," "Pine Needles," and "Voiceless Grief" all describe the occasion. The following summer Kenji went to visit Karafuto, the southern half of Sakhalin, which became Japanese territory in 1875, on the pretext of asking one of his classmates, now with the company Ōji Paper, to consider two of his students for employment. Unable to shake off his grief, he wrote a series of elegies for his sister. Except for the poems Takamura Kōtarō wrote about his wife, Chieko, who suffered from schizophrenia and died in a mental hospital, there is nothing comparable in Japanese poetry to these and other poems about Toshiko.[32]

In December 1924 Kenji published his book of children's stories, *Chūmon no Ōi Ryōriten (A Restaurant with Many Orders)*. As he had with *Spring & Asura,* he printed a thousand copies at his own expense.

KENJI THE "REAL PEASANT"

As he told a visiting teacher in the summer of 1923, Kenji liked teaching. He said the secret lay in arousing interest in one's students and not paying much attention to textbooks, heresy in the days when

strict adherence to textbooks was de rigueur. His casual dress and his unorthodox behavior — he liked to exit the classroom through the window — delighted his students as much as his kindness attracted them. For a while Kenji even grew his hair long and used pomade. Still, he left the school in the spring of 1926. He wanted to become a "real peasant." As early as April 1925 he wrote one of the students he had successfully placed with Ōji Paper, "I can't continue indefinitely doing lukewarm things like teaching that's going nowhere, so probably next spring I'll quit to become a real peasant. And I think I'd create a farmer's theatrical troupe regardless of profit or loss."[33] In June he put it more poetically, if you will, in his letter to Hosaka (in which he used no punctuation):

> Next spring I will quit teaching and become a real peasant and work Out of various bitter hardships I foresee things like burrs of blue vegetables and flashes of poplars I have changed quite a bit from what I was in the Morioka days In those days I was only thinking of a flow of water like transparent cold water nymphs but now I pray for rice seedlings beds and faintly muddy warm water by a grass-growing dam in which many microorganisms pleasantly flow my feet dunked in it my arms dunked in it myself repairing the water outlet.[34]

Kenji's decision to become a "real peasant" and to do something useful for the peasantry came partly from what he observed daily. He wrote in the proem to his second, unpublished, *Spring & Asura:*

> I received such relaxing, solid status [at school].
> Nevertheless, in time,
> I gradually became used to it
> and calculated somewhat excessively the number of kimonos every child had
> and the amount of protein every child took at every meal.

One incident that graphically revealed the inadequate protein intake among ordinary villagers occurred during the 1926 ceremony of the National Foundation Day, on February 11. A student fainted, and Kenji rushed to him. He had vomited *daikon kate,* finely sliced daikon often added to meals to increase their volume.

At that time there was also a growing sense that a proper person could not ignore the plight of workers and peasants. The establishment of the Soviet Union gave momentum to the proletarian movement, which conversely fanned the government's fear of anything smacking of communism, socialism, or liberalism. In March 1920 Japan's stock market crash, comparable to Wall Street's nine years later, occurred and the economy dipped and bobbed, hardly moving thereafter. Social unrest grew. One of the worst manifestations of that unrest was the murder of many Koreans and Chinese following the great September 1923 earthquake. This violence was partly caused by the rumor that they were responsible for the natural disaster that had killed 100,000 people and rendered 1,000,000 homeless.

In 1924 the education ministry banned the staging of plays in schools. In March 1925 the Public Safety Preservation Law passed the Diet, and it went into effect the next month. Declaring that any attempt to change the *kokutai,* national polity, as well as any attempt to deny the sanctity of private property was equally punishable by law, it would become the government's most powerful weapon for suppressing freedom and dissent. Between 1922 and 1926, the home ministry expanded the Special Higher Police, the thought police, and set up its branches in nine prefectures.

Conscious of his "idle rich" status, Kenji was sympathetic to the proletarian movement. Though in the end he would decide that the kind of revolution advocated by the communists was not for Japan, at

one point he helped the Hinuki-area branch of the Labor and Farmer Party, which was under close police surveillance. His idea of promoting *nōmin geijutsu,* agrarian art, came out of that sympathy. To do so on his own terms, he had to become independent of the education system that was being quickly hemmed in. But that idea would prove too dangerous.

Kenji in work clothes at his Shimoneko house, 1926.

Not that the idea of "agrarian art" itself was radical or dangerous. Iwate's board of education and its league of agricultural societies established a "citizens' higher school" — a lecture series for adults — and ran it at Hanamaki Agricultural School during the first three months of 1926, after Kenji firmed up his decision to quit and before he actually had. Among its stated purposes was to improve the conditions of "the villages that are in the extremely worrisome state of utter fatigue" and to "advance rural art *(nōson geijutsu)*." Kenji was one of the two dozen lecturers lined up for the program, and he gave a total of eleven lectures focusing on agrarian art.

On April 1, 1926, Kenji left his family home to live alone in the "other house," the one in which Toshiko had spent her last months. He did not do it on the spur of the moment. He had employed two carpenters to renovate the house in mid-January, and he did the interiors himself, in Constructivist mode. His move hardly went unnoticed. Kenji was, after all, the first son of an important man of Hanamaki. The morning edition of the *Iwate Daily* summarized

Kenji's remarks on the previous day — the day he resigned from the Hanamaki Agricultural School:

> It seems to me that villages are certainly at a dead end economically and in various other ways. I'd like to do a bit of research on the "village economy," which I am short of [don't know much about], at some university in Tokyo or Sendai. And for about half a year I'd like to engage in tilling here in Hanamaki and lead my life, that is, a life of art. So I will hold things like a magic-lantern gathering every week and hope to give a record concert once a month. Fortunately there are about twenty comrades, and my plan is to exchange the produce I have made with effort, with sweat on my brow, and go on to live a quiet life.[35]

What he actually did was to set up a society to educate the farmers — "We are all farmers," he declared — and for that purpose he prepared an "outline for agrarian art." Named Rasu Chijin Kyōkai, the Society of Rasu Earthmen,[36] the society seems to have come into being in late August 1926, as Kenji worked out the "outline" and managed to give a few lectures. But with a well-meaning write-up in the *Iwate Daily* on February 1, 1927 — Kenji was again identified as the first son of Miyazawa Masajirō, of Hanamaki, even though he was a thirty-year-old man with a pedagogic career behind him — the thought police made an overt move to look into Kenji's activities as potentially socialist. Kenji wilted, and the society practically stopped functioning. It ceased to exist in August 1928 when a high fever felled Kenji.

Kenji meticulously went about the preparation of the outline, which was based on his lectures of early 1926. First he itemized the topics he would address:

> Introduction
> . . . What we together are to discuss from now on . . .
> Rise of Agrarian Art
> . . . Why our Art must rise now . . .

Essence of Agrarian Art
. . . What makes up the heart of our Art . . .
Fields of Agrarian Art
. . . How they can be categorized . . .
Isms of Agrarian Art
. . . What kinds of argument are possible in them . . .
Production of Agrarian Art
. . . How we can begin work, how we should proceed . . .
Producer of Agrarian Art
. . . What the artist means in us . . .
Criticism of Agrarian Art
. . . How a correct evaluation and appreciation is first made . . .
Synthesis of Agrarian Art
. . . Oh friends, let us combine our righteous strengths together so we may turn all our countryside and all of our lives into a large single four-dimensional art . . .
Conclusion
⊙ What we need is the transparent will and the large power and heat that wrap the Galaxy

Kenji then lined up his thoughts on each topic. Among the ones he included in the introduction, "What we together are to discuss from now on," for example, are:

We are all farmers. We are extremely busy and our work is hard.

We'd like to find a way to lead a brighter, livelier life.

Among our ancient masters there were often people who did.

We'd like to discuss this matter in the unity of the proofs of modern sciences, the experiments of the seekers of the way, and our intuitions.

Unless the entire world becomes happy, there can be no happiness for individuals.

The consciousness of the self gradually evolves from individuals to groups to societies to the Universe.[37]

He then set out to write detailed lecture notes for each such thought, but he apparently managed to do so for just one topic, "Rise of Agrarian Art," either because he ran out of time or because he lost courage somewhere along the way. Still, a look at the writers and thinkers he cites reveals a good deal about the tenor of Kenji's reading and sentiments at the time. They were Büchner (most likely the German materialist philosopher Ludwig Büchner, 1824–1899, rather than his writer brother, Georg, 1813–37) on the changing economy and the advancement of "ownership impulse"; Daniel Defoe on his idea of the circulatory relationship between food and labor; Oscar Wilde for his observation on living and being merely alive;[38] William Morris for his statement "Art is man's expression of his joy in labour"; Leo Tolstoy for his thought that only 10 percent of the population "buy and enjoy" games, while 90 percent work themselves to death; Oswald Spengler on the decline of art, "music since Wagner, painting since Manet and Cézanne," and so on; Ralph Waldo Emerson on the decline of creativity and the withering of the roots of beauty; Romain Rolland on "unproductive pleasures"; Ōtani Kōzui — the only Japanese person who appears — for his observation cited with apparent incredulity, "Some call themselves thinkers; but is there anyone who has no thought?"; Edward Carpenter; and Leon Trotsky. The last name serves as a reminder that Kenji had *Das Kapital* among his books and once asked a friend to lecture on Lenin's treatise *The State and Revolution*. In any event, he guarded these notes and showed them to no one except perhaps to some of his close comrades.

Kenji tilled the land as he said he would. He had to clear a plot of sandy land atop a cliff rising from the Kitakami River. Though an inveterate walker and a good mountain climber when a little younger, he wasn't really cut out for that kind of labor. He tired easily. To live like a regular peasant, he insisted on subsistence food, rejecting, for

example, the lunch boxes his mother made and brought. He ate mainly the vegetables he grew. Among them was the tomato, an imported species then still regarded as an herb because of its strong smell. Some of the people who visited Kenji or worked with him during that time came away with the indelible memory of eating tomatoes, sometimes only that. Kenji owned only two rice bowls and a set of chopsticks for kitchenware. One of his aunts remembered telling him once to eat more nutritious things. His response was, "I like eggplants, and I need nothing else as long as I have them. I eat five or six of them. But one day I said to a neighborhood child, 'I've just eaten two eggplants.' He was shocked and said, *You ate as many as two!*"

Not that Kenji could not afford adequate food, or anything else he might have needed. He could obtain from Masajirō any amount of money he wanted, as he did, for example, when he went to Tokyo in December that year to study a variety of things in the shortest possible time: Esperanto, typing, the organ, and cello. He attended lectures such as the one given by the Finnish minister, who spoke in Japanese about the need to abandon materialistic culture to build a new agrarian culture. He unthinkingly went there poorly dressed, to find himself the only sartorially deficient one in the well-dressed crowd. But he was also the only one to have a lively conversation with the diplomat on the subject he had discussed, asking him about things like the position of dialects in the culture to be newly promoted. Tōhoku dialects are only too famous for their unintelligibility to outsiders; Kenji once wrote a tanka in Iwate dialect and translated it into standard Japanese for Hosaka. During this trip he also went to see Takamura Kōtarō, the only established poet he would meet and talk to in his lifetime.

Kenji's life as a peasant at the Shimoneko house was full of incongruities. For example, not just the Ponderosa tomato but also the flowers in his garden were grown from the seeds he ordered from the

Yokohama branch of the English purveyor, Sutton & Co., an extravagant thing to do. He held record concerts as well as live concerts with his comrades, with himself playing the organ or the cello, both expensive instruments. While refusing to eat proper food, he used a *rear cart* (the English name was used then, as it is today) to carry things — a two-wheeled vehicle originally designed to be pulled by a bicycle but more often pulled by hand in Japan. The erudite popular writer Inoue Hisashi, who says he was inspired to become a writer when he read Miyazawa's writings, with their singular use of onomatopoeia, has depicted the poignancy of the incongruities Kenji created for himself:

> Kenji loved rubber boots, but no peasant in those days wore such high-quality things. Everyone knitted his own heel-less straw sandals and went to the paddies and walked in the fields in them. Kenji, incidentally, was undexterous, I gather. While studying at the Morioka Higher School he had to knit straw sandals in practical training, but he didn't know where to stop so would end up making sandals longer than the abacus. No matter how often he tried, the result was the same.
>
> According to the testimony of his students, Kenji always used socks. The heels became holes, so this aspiring farmer wore them with the torn parts up. Even so, there was not a single peasant in the Tōhoku region in those days who wore socks. Even in the dead of winter they usually went about barefoot, wearing *tabi* only for the first three days of the New Year or for the ceremonies of marriage and funerals.
>
> He sometimes went to town to sell the vegetables grown in his field, loading them on a rear cart. Now, of course you can't possibly expect the scion of a distinguished family of Hanamaki to walk about, loudly calling out his wares. He simply pulled his rear cart along, smiling, so most of his stuff would end up unsold. Then, as he went home, this brand-new peasant would give away his vegetables to any passerby who cared to take them. That's strange, too. No peasant gives away his produce, free. If you can't sell your stuff, you exchange it for something else to get value out of it. I'd say that is the Peasant's Way.

> Above all, to go about pulling a rear cart was beyond belief. In Hanamaki in those days there were only a few mercantile houses owning one, and having one meant a big house. It would be comparable to today's Mercedes-Benz, and you couldn't use such a thing selling vegetables.
>
> Kenji liked uniforms. He once designed what he called "farm-work clothes," which resemble today's work clothes, and had the design printed in the bulletin of the Iwate Prefectural Farm Association. He wasn't satisfied just designing them; he apparently had one set made for himself and proudly wore it, looking triumphant as he pulled his rear cart hither and thither. The Hanamaki people seem to have been astonished by this, too.[39]

"Astonished" is putting it kindly. Kenji provoked ridicule, envy, and resentment among the *real* peasants, as he chronicled in many of the poems in the third, unpublished, *Spring & Asura*. It did not help that the Shimoneko district included Dōshin-chō. During the Tokugawa Period *dōshin* were a low stratum of policemen (but still samurai) and, following the custom of the period that based residential zoning on profession, they lived in the section named after them. With the arrival of the Meiji Era and the abolition of the samurai class, many low-ranking samurai like these willy-nilly became peasants, an outcome that intensified their ancestral discontent and disgruntlement. The Teikichi in the poem "In Dōshin-chō toward daybreak" was one of that lineage.

From the spring of 1927 Kenji increasingly turned his attention to devising "fertilizer plans" for the farmers. These plans required detailed knowledge of the place: the type of paddy, distance from the river, the kinds of grass or weed that normally grow, soil permeability, and so forth. Here is the beginning of a poem in which Kenji describes how he determined a fertilizer plan through an imagined (perhaps actual) series of questions:

Well then, let's calculate.
The place is in Kamineko, Yuguchi, correct?
What you got there,
what's the total size of it?
5 tan 8 se, you say.
Is that on the book,
or by the unit of 100 harvested bundles?
Is it a paddy always dry or moist?
Then, how many steps up from the river?
You mean, it's on the same level
as the Kannon-dō where there's that chestnut tree, isn't it?
Oh, I see, it's just below it.
And it's still a step up
from the river, isn't it?
Does trefoil clover grow
on and around the ridges?

And here is an example: the plan he prepared for a Takahashi Hisanojō on February 5, 1932 (1 *kan* = 8.27 pounds):

Dear Sir,
I have consulted your thoughts and made calculations as follows:

manure	200 *kan*
ammonia sulfate	2 *kan*
fish lees	3.5 *kan*
soybean waste	10 *kan*
strong perphosphoric acid	4.5 *kan*
bone meal (steamed)	2 *kan*
carbonated lime (2 millimeter)	7.5 *kan*

In Akashibu use 2 *kan* of ammohos instead of ammonia sulfate and [decrease] the perphosphoric acid to 3 *kan*.

Next, last year's aluminum phosphate was evidently effective. This is because you should not overlook that the fact that you had 3 *koku* and 70 percent of fourth-class rice means that phosphoric acid, which has gradual effect, worked extremely well.