

THE BONFIRE (TAKIBI)

KUNIKIDA DOPPO

(Translated by THOMAS E. SWANN)

INTRODUCTION

Kunikida Doppo (real name: Tetsuo) was born on July 15, 1871 in the city of Choshi in the Chiba Prefecture, but grew up in Yamaguchi Prefecture. In 1887, he came to Tokyo and entered Tokyo Semmon Gakko (which later became Waseda University) but withdrew in 1891 after being involved in a student riot. He returned to Yamaguchi Prefecture where he started a private school, but in 1893 he came back to Tokyo and became a newspaper reporter. During the Sino-Japanese War, he was a war correspondent and afterward took a job as reporter for the magazine *Kokumin no Tomo* (The People's Friend) for some time. He died of illness on June 23, 1908 at the age of thirty-eight.

During his lifetime, Doppo was variously influenced by Christianity, Russian and English prose literature, Emerson's transcendentalism, and Wordsworth's poetry — all of which fed the romantic tendencies of his early years as a writer. Doppo started out as a lyrical poet with a deep feeling for nature and then went on to romantic prose works. This period of his literary career lasted until about 1900 and was marked by intense lyrical, poetical qualities together with high, youthful emotion.

Takibi (The Bonfire) was first published in the magazine *Kokumin no Tomo* on November 21, 1896 when the author was twenty-six. It well illustrates the author's affinity with nature. In the original, it is a beautiful piece of lyrical writing in *bungotai* (the literary language) and if not a prose-poem, comes very close to being one.

PUTTING THE NORTH WIND TO HIS BACK, A BOY SAT DOWN on the side of a white sand dune covered with withered grass and stretched out his legs. He gazed after the faint glow of the evening sun sinking beyond the Izu¹ mountains. Inexpressable sorrow and loneliness must have filled the heart of this boy from Zushi² waiting for the late return of his father's fishing boat from the open sea. The thick growth of withered reeds along the banks of the Gosaigo³ River rattled in the sea

¹ A volcanic peninsula between Sagami Bay on the east and Suruga Bay on the west.

² A small town and seaside resort southeast of Kamakura on the west side of the Miura Peninsula.

³ Located on the Miura Peninsula.

breeze. Ice, which had formed unseen at the roots of the reeds during hightide at midnight, remained though it had been broken up with the ebbside that morning. Not melted during the day, it trailed a white line along the water's edge in the evening gloom. Were a weary traveller to pause here, he would not be able to look around thoughtlessly and continue on his journey unaffected. In the past this place was the Roku-daigozen Forest and seven hundred years later it still evoked a sense of pathos with the cold wintry wind shrilling through the treetops.

Imagine a merry song ringing out from that boat moving up the gently flowing marshy river afloat with fallen leaves -- a premonition for a frosty night. But no song is heard. The man only rows by forlornly, without speaking, laughing, or singing, and it is impossible to make out whether he is a farmer or a fisherman.

The figure of a farmer with a hoe on his shoulder is reflected dimly on the river along with the shadow of the bridge where he stands. Without a sound, the boat ruffles through this reflection and is instantly swallowed up in the reeds beyond.

Two young men from the village astride an unsaddled horse splash quietly through the shallows at the mouth of the river and the last lingering light of day splays across the horse's flanks. A picturesque scene.

Now, no human shadow falls on the beach as far as you can see. A crow perched on the bow of a boat drawn up on the beach caws and flies off toward Kamakura,⁴ flapping its wings lazily.

One year there were seven or eight boys from nine to thirteen here -- carefree creatures of the open air. Though the year was almost over, they gathered toward the end of December at the foot of the dunes and discussed various things. Some stood, some sat, and some buried their elbows in the sand and rested their chins on their palms. The sun had started to set.

Having perhaps reached a conclusion, the meeting broke up and the boys began to run about the beach, each on his own. Shortly they had quickly scattered their own ways from one end of the inlet to the other. The tide was very low and decayed boards, wooden bowls with chipped rims, pieces of bamboo, logs, ladles with no handles, and other evidence of the storm two days before were strewn over the beach. The boys gathered them, one by one, selected a suitable dry, sandy spot somewhat removed from the edge of the water and made a pile out of them. The entire pile was thoroughly waterlogged.

It was a cold evening for the project. The setting sun, sinking in the west, dyed the clouds enveloping the mountains above Ashigara over

⁴ Residential city and seaside resort situated at the west base of the Miura Peninsula on the shore of Sagami Bay.

toward Hakone⁵ a golden color. The wind had fallen and a fishing boat returning to Kotsubo Inlet⁶ lowered its sail, being close to land, and rowed onward.

A round-faced boy, dark complexioned but good-looking, remarked that he had found what appeared to be a mirror frame with its glass broken and lost, but that he didn't think it should be burnt. The oldest boy of the group, however, piling on some logs which were too much for him to handle, replied that it would burn easily. The round-faced boy said the logs probably wouldn't burn, at which the older boy angrily stood up and retorted that they certainly would burn. Another boy nearby gleefully shouted that their haul for the day was greater than ever before.

The boys planned to burn their haul. The red flames would be wild ecstasy. They boasted among themselves about running and leaping over the flames, then went about fetching dead grass from the dunes and brought it to the pile. The oldest boy stood in front of the pile with the rest standing in a circle around it wondering, "Now? Will it burn now?". They listened for the crackling sound of burning bamboo, indicating the fire had spread into the pile. But only the dry grass burned. It burned for a while and then flickered out. Smoke billowed up mischievously, but neither the wood nor the bamboo readily caught fire. The mirror frame was slightly burnt and steam hissed from the ends of the logs with a ghostly sound. Each boy put his face down near the sand in turn, puckered his lips, and blew. Unfortunately, the smoke got in their eyes and they all looked like they were crying.

Out to sea it quickly became dark, so that it was hard to make out the silhouette of the island of Enoshima.⁷ The only sounds were the cries of plovers flying over the upper part of the beach. It was lonely. When you looked for them, the birds were only white specks against the evening darkness. A snipe started up from the reeds and flew away swiftly.

Suddenly one of the boys shouted, "Oh, look! Look! I just saw a fire on the Izu mountains. Why won't our fire burn?" All the boys stood up and stared fixedly out to sea. Sure enough, there were some points of light over on the other side of Sagami Bay.⁸ The fires flickered and moved will-o-the-wisps. Probably the villagers of the Izu mountains were burning off undergrowth. On a winter evening like this after sunset,

Watching the fires on the Izu mountains, the boys sang songs merrily, facing the sea and clapping their hands and dancing around wildly. Their

⁵ An area in Kanagawa Prefecture between Mt. Fuji and the Izu Peninsula noted for its scenic beauty and hot-spring resorts.

⁶ A small inlet on the northwest coast of the Miura Peninsula.

⁷ A very small island slightly west of Kamakura connected by bridge to the beach at Katase.

⁸ West of the Miura Peninsula.

travellers would be thinking of the long road ahead. They would see fires like the Izu mountain fires in the distance and feel lonely.

innocent voices echoed over the lonely beach enveloped in twilight. The waves murmured. Forming white caps at the southern edge of the inlet, the waves dashed ashore in perfect cadence. The tide was rising.

A voice called out to them from beyond the sand dunes, "How long are you going to play on the beach this chilly evening?" None of the boys heard, for they were thinking of the fires at Izu.

The voice called again two or three times, "Aren't you coming home? Aren't you coming home?" and one of the youngest boys heard it. Giving in to his mother's summons, he announced he was giving up and going home. As soon as he had gone over the dunes, the rest of the boys shouted, "Let's go! Let's go!" and ran scrambling up the dunes.

Only the oldest boy looked back as they ran off, thinking with regret of the fire's refusal to ignite. Standing on top of a dune and just on the point of running down the other side, he gave one last look back. A dart of flames caught his eye. When he shouted to the others that their fire was somehow finally burning, they were startled and skeptical. Returning to the top of the dune immediately, they stood in line and peered downward.

A sudden gust of wind had started the fire in the pile, which hadn't ignited before. A spiral of thick smoke rose above the pile and tongues of crimson flame appeared and disappeared. They could hear the sound of crackling bamboo joints and sparks danced up from the fire. It was definitely burning, but the boys couldn't return now and only clapped their hands for joy. With a happy shout they ran together toward the road for home along the base of the dunes.

The sea and the beach were now engulfed in darkness. A lonely winter night began. The forsaken fire burned forlornly on the deserted Zushi beach.

Suddenly a black shadow could be seen tracing its way along the water's edge and approaching the fire. An aged traveller came into view. He had just crossed the Gosaigo River and started along the beach, deciding to take the Kotsubo road along the beach. His feet pounded on the sand as he hurried along taking short strides, with his eyes fixed on the fire.

"What a nice fire," he exclaimed weakly in a hoarse voice. Throwing down his walking stick, he hurriedly took off the small pack on his back. He quickly held his hands over the flames. His hands shook and his knees knocked together. "It's really a cold night" he remarked as his teeth chattered. His face, lined with deep wrinkles, shone red in the light of the fire. The reflection in his deeply sunken eyes was dull and cloudy.

His hair and beard were grey and dust-covered. The tip of his nose was red but his cheeks were the color of clay. Who knows where he came from or where he was going. He was probably a homeless drifter.

It was truly a cold night. Muttering to himself, he shook his entire body hard. Warming his hands over the fire, he rubbed the pleasant warmth from his hands into his face. His robe was very old and worn padding showed through here and there. Steam rose from the bottom of the robe, which was close to the fire. It had gotten wet in the morning rain and had not yet dried.

"What a wonderful fire," he said and picked up the walking stick he had thrown aside. Using it to steady himself, he raised one foot and held it over the fire. His leggings and socks were a faded dark blue. His little toe, which looked drained of blood, poked through his sock. A chorus of loud popping sounds came from the bamboo and the fire flamed up with vigor. Even though the flames seemed about to singe his foot, the old man did not pull back.

"A really pleasant fire. I wonder who made it. I'm certainly grateful." He broke off and pulled his foot back. "Since I left the happy hearth of my own home ten years ago, I haven't met with such a pleasant fire until this one." His expression, as he peered into the fire, was as if he were gazing into the distance. The fire of his home hearth as it had been in the distant past seemed to be etched in this fire. His children and grandchildren vividly came to mind. "The fire of the past was a happy one and this fire is a sorrowful one. But, no. The past is the past. Today is today. This fire is pleasant," he muttered in a trembling voice. He roughly threw his walking stick down and turned his back to the fire. Standing with the sea in front of him he bent backwards and pounded on the small of his back with both fists. The sky he looked up into had become black and clear. The Milky Way, its stars crystals of cold frost, touched the horizon in the distance at the end of the Izu Peninsula.

His entire body was thoroughly warmed and the hem and sleeves of his damp robe had dried. "Ahh, who kindled this fire? For whose sake did they kindle it?" The old man's heart was filled with gratitude and his eyes filled with tears. There was neither wind nor waves. His eyes closed, the old man clearly heard the sound of the inflowing tide flooding the sands. Perhaps the wandering traveller forgot his unhappiness at this moment. The old man's mind returned once again to his past youth.

Alas, the fire was just about to die out at last. Both the bamboo and the wooden planks had been consumed. Only the fat logs still

burned well. The old man had thought he wouldn't care if the fire went out, but, on the verge of leaving the fire he seemed reluctant to depart. Making a circle of his arms and leaning forward, he held his arms over the fire as if embracing it. His eyes blinked and he pounded on the small of his back as if he were about to leave. But, as he was about to take the first few steps away, he turned back to the fire, scraped the bits of unburned wood together, and added them to the fire. He watched the fire flame up spiritedly and smiled with pleasure.

After the old man had left the fire emitted a crimson glow. It burned on weakly in the darkness of the lonely night. It was late at night and the tide was high. Soon, both the fire kindled by the boys and the footprints made by the old wanderer were erased by the eternal waves.