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Ten Nights of Dreams

by Natsume Soseki

English translation by Sam Bett

I had this dream.

I was sitting with my arms crossed at the bedside of a woman. Laying face up, she told me in a quiet voice that she was going to die.

Her long hair was fanned across the pillows, framing her slender face, so gentle in its shape.

The warm color of blood shone plainly through the fair skin of her cheeks, and her lips were persistently red.

Not the mien of a woman on the verge of death.

But when she said that she was going to die, her quiet voice was certain.

I realized this was it, that she was dying.

Glancing down at her, I asked if she was sure that she was dying now.

Wide-eyed, she answered yes, that she was dying.

Her eyes were large and moist, orbs of blackness fringed by long eyelashes.

Deep within the total blackness of her eyes, I saw my own reflection, all too clearly.

A minute later, she spoke up.

“When I die, I want for you to bury me.”

Dig my grave with a big pearl oyster shell.

And mark my plot with a piece of shooting star.

Then wait there for me, by the grave. I promise I'll return."

But when will you return, I asked.

"The sun will rise as surely as the sun will fall. Rising only to fall again.

Can you wait for me while the sun crosses the sky—from east to west?"

I nodded silently.

Her quiet tone grew more emphatic.

"Good," she said. "Then wait for me a hundred years.

If you can sit beside my grave and wait for the next hundred years, I promise I'll return."

I said I would be waiting.

But now I saw that the reflection I had seen inside her eyes had turned to chaos.

As when a quiet pool is shaken by disturbance. Her eyes snapped shut.

Tears slipped from her lashes and down her cheeks.

She was dead.

Out in the garden, I dug a grave using a big oyster shell, the lip of which was keen enough to slice the earth.

With every scoop, the moonlight glimmered from the inside of the shell.

I could smell the moisture of the ground.

In due time, the hole was deep enough to lay the woman down inside.

I sprinkled shellfuls of loose dirt over her body.

With every toss of earth, the inside of the oyster caught the moonlight.

Next I found a piece of shooting star and set it carefully atop the mound of earth.

The piece of star was round; it must have lost its edges during the long tumble through the heavens.

When I placed it on the grave, I felt a warmth suffuse my chest and hands.

I sat down on a patch of moss.

Knowing I would be here waiting for a hundred years, I crossed my arms and gazed upon the rounded hunk of star.

Before long, the sun rose in the east, like she had said it would.

A big, red sun traveling west, like she had said, and sinking red as ever.

One day down, I told myself.

At length, a crimson vast sun snuck over the horizon, working its way overhead and down again.

That makes two.

I lost track of the number of red suns that I had watched go up and down, one after another.

No amount of tallying could stop the endless train of red suns tracking overhead.

And yet a hundred years had far from passed.

Once moss had crept over the piece of star, I finally decided that the woman had deceived me.

That instant, a green sprout poked from underneath the star rock, leaning towards me as it grew.

Growing before my very eyes, it only stopped when it had reached my chest.

A moment later, the trim bud dangling from the tip of the long stalk, slightly askew, burst into flower.

A brilliant white lily tipped before my nose, so fragrant that I felt it reach my bones.

A speck of dew dropped from the sky. It knocked the flower, set it bobbing.

I brought my lips to its white petals just before the chilly dewdrop fell.

When I withdrew from the lily, my eyes turned to the atmosphere, and I saw the morning star aflicker.

“So,” I told myself, “a hundred years have passed.”

KANTAN 邯鄲

English translation by Sam Bett

*"I have lost my way in this cruel world.
When will I awaken from this dream?"*

In the land of Shoku, there lived a man named Rosei, who led an idle life.

One day, hearing that a great monk could be found on Flying Sheep Mountain in the land of So, he decided to pay him a visit, in the hopes of discovering a path to enlightenment.

Along the way, he came to the village of Kantan.

Though the sun was high, he opted to stop for the night at an inn.

The woman who ran the inn offered him the Pillow of Kantan, explaining that those who dreamt upon it would experience enlightenment.

Rosei accepted the pillow and took a nap while the innkeeper prepared a meal of millet.

Soon a royal emissary arrived to inform Rosei that the king of So had ceded him the throne.

Rosei boarded a sedan chair and was carried to paradise on earth, a magnificent, expansive palace where he was received as king.

Fifty years passed in the blink of an eye, and Rosei was given a mystical elixir, that he may live a thousand years.

Banquets in his glory continued night and day, and Rosei even danced before his subjects.

Suddenly he found the crowds had gone.

Rosei had awakened from his dream.

The innkeeper announced that the millet was ready.

Rosei staggered to his feet.

Fifty years of glory had passed in the time it took to cook the millet—a dream that came and went while he was waiting for his supper.

Rosei had discovered the pathway to enlightenment, thanks to the Pillow of Kantan and the dreams that it had shown him.

He now saw that the world we know is but a dream. And thus he made his journey home.

The Butterfly Dream

English translation by Neo Sora

Once, in a dream, Zhuang Zhou was a butterfly.

The butterfly was simply itself, fluttering about.

It was happy following its whims as it pleased.

It did not know of a Zhou.

Suddenly, waking up, there was Zhou, unmistakably so.

Was Zhou a butterfly in his dream?

Or was the butterfly Zhou in its dream?

Where there is a Zhou and a butterfly, there must be a distinction.

This is called materialization.
