

## Okamoto Kidō's "Sea Turtles": An Example of the Japanese Littoral Weird Tale and the EcoGothic

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### Abstract

Okamoto Kidō (1872-1939), inspired by both domestic and foreign trends of writing uncanny and weird fiction based on various legends, wrote a series of about fifty stories during the 1920s and 1930s. Kidō's weird tales have a strong focus on the monstrous, on uncanny humans, and on nature's revenge against those who break taboos. These stories also feature realistic treatments of the urban/rural and educational divides from various periods of Japan's history. They draw deeply on both Japanese folkloric belief and ritual, and on folkloric beliefs and rituals from outside of Japan. The story translated here, "Sea Turtles" (1934), is overtly EcoGothic in its themes and folkloric in its motifs — nature takes revenge on a couple that breaks the taboo on going out to sea on the night of Obon, the summer festival of the dead. The story is told as a tale within a tale, which destabilizes the narrative and throws doubt on its veracity. Moreover, it ends in an ambiguous way that leaves the strange tragedy at its core unexplained. But instead of casting doubt on superstitions, the main characters' stubborn adherence to modern logical thought lends credibility both to the characters themselves and to the notion that some events truly have supernatural origins. Herein, a short explanation of the author's background and the story's location in Japanese literature is first offered, followed by a translation of the story with explanatory notes.

### Keywords

Weird Fiction, Gothic, Nature Writing, Japan, Folklore, Twentieth-Century Japanese Literature

### Introduction

Okamoto Kidō (1872-1939)<sup>1</sup> was a prolific author whose works span an incredible range from journalism to theater (primarily Kabuki) to weird fiction and uncanny folklore to detective fiction.<sup>2</sup> Kidō was born in Shiba Takanawa, Tokyo, the son of a low-ranking samurai who had lost his job in the wake of the Meiji Restoration (1868). His father found work as an interpreter for the British legation. From a young age, Kidō interacted both with Japanese and foreign literature: on one hand, William George Aston, the secretary for the legation, introduced Kidō to Shakespeare, among other authors; on the other hand, Kidō's family often went to Kabuki, and he became enamored with the idea of becoming a playwright.

Though he wished to become a playwright directly out of high school, he struggled to publish and produce his scripts for Kabuki. He turned to journalistic writing instead to make a living, working for the *Nichi Nichi Shimbun*. He wrote on many topics, from theater reviews to reportage, and even spent time reporting from Manchuria. In all, he spent about 24 years working as a reporter before finally finding success in writing for the Kabuki world with his play *Shūzen monogatari* (The Tale of Shūzen, 1911). At that point, he was finally able to quit his job as a reporter and focus on playwriting and short fiction full time.

Though most of his short fiction was written during or after the 1920s, including his uncanny fiction and his detective stories, some date back to the earliest days of his writing life in the 1890s. Kidō's fictions bring together elements of the strange British and French stories that he read, as well as his own deep knowledge of Japanese traditional ghostlore, folklore, and uncanny tales. It is difficult to know whether his interest in writing uncanny tales grew from his translation and retelling work or simply from his milieu and literary background. But over a span of about 10 years between the mid-1920s and 1930s, he wrote over 50 stories positioning the weird in a Japanese context in ways that parallel the types of stories he translated from French, English, and Chinese.

Kidō's uncanny tales do not have a particular focus on the EcoGothic as such, but it remains a strong motif in his writing. As his works reflect the domestic development of Japanese fiction during the turn of the twentieth century and into the early twentieth century, there is a strong juxtaposition between those characters that live in traditional ways in the countryside and those who live in more industrialized spaces. Life on the coasts, in the fields, and in the forests is shown both as nostalgic and as dangerous—it is in these natural spaces that monsters and ghosts frequently appear. His characters struggle with these strange events and attempt to explain them through logic, though they usually conclude that no rational reason can be found. This may be read as the struggle of Japan as a nation to define itself post-Meiji Restoration via scientific rational thinking, creating new interpretations of nature. As Yuriko Yamanaka notes:

Modern scientific rationalism relegates the marvelous and uncanny to the confines of “fantasy” and condemned the pursuit of such things to be “pseudoscience” and “occult.” But before the emergence of modern science, they were considered an integral part of comprehensive knowledge about the natural world. (9)

Because uncanny occurrences and inexplicable encounters in nature shifted from being a familiar part of the world to that of the realm of fantasy, people began to relegate it to the territory of fiction. But during Kidō's lifetime, that shift was yet incomplete. So the reader sees a conflict play out as the characters question the supernatural and the rational, not knowing which to believe in.

Many of these tales rely on the tradition of *kaidan*, the telling of “weird tales” that often feature *yōkai*.<sup>3</sup> It is probably no coincidence, then, that Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962), one of the pioneers of *yōkai* studies, was Kidō's contemporary. Kidō also overlapped with the philosopher who coined much of the academic language used to describe many supernatural aspects of Japanese folklore, Inoue Enryō (1858-1919). Yanagita sought to document supernatural stories, and Inoue sought to debunk *yōkai* as merely “phenomena that should have been explained rationally and scientifically but were ascribed by ignorant people to supernatural beings or powers” (Komatsu *Yōkai Culture* 24). In contrast, Kidō's uncanny stories resemble the style of *kaidan* but do not usually feature any identifiable *yōkai*, relying instead on inexplicable natural phenomena or weird people to create fear. It is for this reason that Kidō's stories are worthy of study through the lens of the EcoGothic. Kidō's interest in speculative fiction inspired him to use folkloric tropes from *kaidan* as well, such as older characters telling stories from their youth to younger acquaintances or to travelers. He elicits untrustworthiness and ambiguity in the text by utilizing first-person narration.

A prime example of Kidō's influences regarding the EcoGothic and folklore can be found in “Sea Turtles” (海亀). The story provides insight into the conflict between adherence to traditions regarding the natural world that may have lost their meaning and the need to maintain those traditions to preserve the social order. Told from the perspective of an older man, “Sea Turtles” could be categorized as a story with folkloric origins but of modern construction. It details a strange incident at sea experienced by the narrator's younger sister and her fiancé during the summer festival period that commemorates the dead. In it, a ritual practice of refraining from going out in boats on the water is violated by the couple, resulting in tragedy. The story implies the isolation of the Japanese archipelago, that its inhabitants should be careful when traveling away from its coasts, lest they meet with something monstrous. It also clearly emphasizes how even ritual practices of forgotten origin must still be practised, lest nature take its revenge.

**Translation**

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Sea Turtles (海亀) <sup>5</sup>

By: Okamoto Kido (岡本綺堂)

I.

“I reckon this happened more than 30 years ago. When I was still wearing a school uniform, still attending school in Tokyo. . . . This happened before you were born, one August sometime in the third decade of the reign of Emperor Meiji.”<sup>6</sup>

On a rainy autumn evening, Mr. Asaoka, a businessman whose sideburns had become tinged with white, started to tell this story to two or three younger company employees.

At the time, my younger sister Michiko and I temporarily resided at our relatives’ house in Hongō; I attended “M” College and she attended “A” Girls’ College.<sup>7</sup> I was 22, my sister 18—let me be straight with you, young people in those days were far more capable than they are today.

When summer vacation began in July, my sister Michiko would return to our hometown. My hometown was in San’in-dō, a small city called “H” that faced the Sea of Japan.<sup>8</sup> I didn’t find it interesting to go back every year to that same hometown, so I decided to take my good friend and spend the summer up at Chūzenji Lake in Nikkō. Michiko was one step ahead of me, having left Tokyo on the unforgettable date of July 20<sup>th</sup>, and I saw her off at Shimbashi train station.

Though it goes without saying, the 20<sup>th</sup> was the twelfth day of Obon, so it was the day of the Obon flower market.<sup>9</sup> On Ginza-dōri, the flower sellers’ stalls were also lined up on the west side. I carried Michiko’s bag, my sister carried a small basket, and as we threaded through and out of the crowded market, Michiko looked back at me and said:

“Dear brother. Don’t the Bon tōrō seem kind of lonely, even in this crowded and bustling place?”<sup>10</sup>

“Yes, they do,” I replied lightly.

Looking back on it, it's possible even that was a premonition of what was to come. Before long, Michiko became someone who received offerings of Bon tōrō, and she and I said an eternal farewell to each other.

About a week after my sister departed, my friend and I went to the mountains in Nikkō together—and at first, we were greatly enthused by the prospect of studying and so on in a cooler climate, but in reality, we didn't study much. We swam in the waters of the lake and went for walks up to the Senjōgahara area, literally just loafing about. A little less than a month had passed since my sister went back to our hometown, when, on the night of August 19<sup>th</sup>, I received a sudden telegram from my relatives in Hongō. Michiko had died while visiting home, so I should come back straight away. I was shocked.

Anyhow, I felt I couldn't abandon her like that, so I left my friend there, and the next day early in the morning I made my descent from the mountain. Upon returning to Tokyo and trying to ascertain the truth of the matter, my relatives in Hongō also didn't know any details, having simply received a telegram about her death themselves. They felt it probably happened suddenly. No one would think to the contrary. It was swelteringly hot, and even if it wasn't from something like cholera, there were rumors of sudden cases of being stricken by sicknesses like gastroenteritis. Anyway, I decided to go straight home and departed from Tokyo. The brother who had seen his sister off at Shimbashi station just one month prior was now the brother who took that same train to mourn her death. The flower market, the Bon tōrō—I was reminded of them now that it was too late, and I couldn't avoid becoming sentimental.

I'll say only that on the way home it was simply too hot, and nothing else of note happened, but on the way, I thought about how much despair and shock Kiyoshi must be feeling. My family ran a wholesale seafood business, from which we made a decent living. Our neighbours, the Hamasakis, ran the same sort of business. And yes, they also ran their store well. My family and the Hamasakis were related to each other; the Hamasakis' son was Michiko's and my cousin.

Kiyoshi, the Hamasakis' only son, had graduated from a certain school in Osaka, and now ran his family's business. Kiyoshi and Michiko were cousins who were affianced to each other; everyone had given their approval that when Michiko graduated from "A" Girls' School, she would marry into the Hamasaki family. When we had said goodbye at Shimbashi and I told Michiko to give my regards to Kiyoshi, she had blushed slightly. So, Michiko must have met

Kiyoshi while she was at home. Because we were next-door neighbours, they surely must have met. I thought then about how surprised, how sorrowful, Kiyoshi must be because of Michiko's sudden death, and my thoughts became darker and darker.

Of course, I had been mentally prepared that I would miss her funeral, but I learned as soon as I crossed the threshold of my parents' house that due to the especially hot time of year, the funeral had already been performed in the evening two days before I arrived.

“Then I shall go immediately and visit her gravesite.”

“Yes, please do. Michiko is probably waiting for you,” my mother said, eyes glistening with unshed tears.

Wearing the same clothing I traveled in—which was just a simple unlined kimono in a white Kasuri pattern<sup>11</sup> with a Kokura hakama,<sup>12</sup> by the way—and a straw hat that kept the setting sun's rays at bay, I hurriedly went to Bodaiji Temple. Because it was a rural area, the temple was nearby. Though it was not excessively far from the town center, the temple was filled with very tall, old paulownia trees. Going through the temple gate, on the way to the ancestral graveyard, the evening cicadas sang mournfully among those paulownia trees.<sup>13</sup>

In front of my younger sister's grave—and in front of a wooden grave tablet enshrining a newly departed spirit, a white paper funerary lantern, Japanese star anise, and other standard offerings—I saw a lone man praying with his eyes downcast. I knew immediately when I saw his form from behind. It was undoubtedly Kiyoshi, our neighbour's son. What should I say to him when we met face to face? I thought about it while I walked quietly towards him, but he stood for some time with his palms pressed together, seemingly unaware of my presence drawing closer to him. I couldn't bear to intrude, so I stood silently.

Eventually, he stood up despondently, and when he first saw me, he grabbed both of my arms without saying anything. Then, he started to weep like a child. Kiyoshi was older than me, at 24. I'd point out how unusual it was, a grown man crying like that, but in this case, I became immoderately sorrowful myself, and for a while the two of us cried wordlessly. No, there's no way to speak of it.

After that, I prayed at the grave, and as if in encouragement to Kiyoshi, who was still standing reluctantly, I left the temple. That's when I finally opened my mouth.

“It was so sudden, it shocked me.”

“You were shocked too, weren’t you,” Kiyoshi said with what seemed like a bit of excitement. “It’s astonishing just to hear about it. Yes, anyone would be stunned... And even I, who witnessed it . . . I . . .”

“Witnessed it. . . . You accompanied her in her last moments?”

“You don’t yet know . . . the reason why Michiko died?”

“In truth, I just arrived, and I don’t know anything yet,” I said. “Why in the world did my sister die?”

“You don’t know anything. . . .” he said and made an inscrutable face. After a while, he talked again, as if spitting out the words. “No, maybe it’s better not to know.”

“So, Michiko didn’t pass away from an ordinary illness.”

“Of course not. If it had been an ordinary illness, I would have found a way to heal her no matter what. Your family, too, would have undoubtedly done their utmost. However, the culprits were monsters, sea monsters. Because they attacked suddenly, nothing could be done,” he clenched his fists and screamed, as if cursing.

“Hey, please calm down and tell me all about it. You mean that Michiko died in some strange manner, and you were there with her?”

“Mmm . . . I was with her. I was with Michiko-san until the end. I also wanted to die together with her, but . . . I wonder why I alone survived?” he said, animatedly. “You probably aren’t a superstitious person. I’m also someone who absolutely rejects superstitions. But I’ve become susceptible to the superstitions of others. I’m still against being superstitious, but under these circumstances, I admit it seems like I’ve surrendered to it.”

But I couldn’t even begin to imagine what on earth he was talking about.

## II.

“Well, listen to my story,” Kiyoshi said and started walking. “You know this as well, but around here, during Obon in the old lunar calendar, we don’t go out onto the ocean.<sup>14</sup> It’s said that if we did, we would meet with certain disaster. For exactly what reason people have said this since long ago, I don’t know, but some might say it means that during Obon people must stay home and

refrain from activities that kill wildlife, like fishing. I thought so, and up until now I didn't really pay it any mind. By the way, after Michiko-san came back here this summer, the two of us often went out onto the sea; night and day we rode in a little boat together. So, you see. There's nothing unusual about that."

"Mmm," I said, nodding. I had always imagined that Michiko, who had returned home for the summer vacation, would surely be sailing with Kiyoshi, so I felt nothing suspicious when I heard his story.

"In the meantime, the seventeenth day of this month arrived. The seventeenth fell exactly on the old lunar calendar date for Obon, so around here, there were quite a few families that closed their stores. At the beach, Bon Odori was popular.<sup>15</sup> The lingering summer heat was severe that day, but after the sun went down, a cool breeze gently blew the heat away. Because I'd promised to do so during the daytime, after eating dinner, I invited Michiko-san and we tried to get onto a small boat to ride out onto the sea as usual. But as we did, my family's shop clerk—the bald one, Manbei—made a strange face and said that tonight was the 15<sup>th</sup> night of Obon and it was forbidden to go out onto the ocean."

"So what if it's Obon, even during the nights of Obon, the boats belonging to Osaka Shosen Kaisha Lines come and go, don't they, I said with a deep belly laugh, and gave him a blank look on my way out.<sup>16</sup> But as I did so, Manbei stubbornly chased after me, saying that even the fishermen's boats are at rest on that night, so people using recreational boats must show even more caution. Of course, I had no intention of responding. As I was still trying to find the words to scold him, Michiko-san, being a woman, took charge and looked right at Manbei, and said soothingly, we'll be back soon, so don't worry, and with that the two of us went down to the beach."

As he said this, Kiyoshi picked a stem of bellflower blooming by the side of the road.<sup>17</sup> From somewhere nearby, I heard an evening cicada's cry.

As he gazed at the pale purple flower, he started to speak again.

"As you already know, a small boat belonging to my family is beached on the sandy area of the shore. I launched it and boarded it with Michiko. That's nothing new, so I don't need to explain it in detail. The night sky was clear as I took the oars and started rowing out to sea. The stars came out, and the moon rose. The waves were calm, and the wind was cool. Up until then, I had gone out onto the ocean several times with Michiko, but never before had we had such a fine



night. We became exceedingly merry and started banging on the side of the boat as we sang together in unison. Looking back at the shore, the lights of the coastal town sank low, the sound of voices singing the Bon Odori songs echoing over the water became faint, and I realized that our boat had gone too far out to sea, but still I paddled without care. Because, you know, I grew up here and am used to the ocean. After a while, Michiko said the following: ‘I really and truly wonder who first said that it’s wrong to take out a boat on the night of Obon.’ I replied to her, as I said previously, ‘Perhaps it meant that on the night of Obon, everyone stayed home and refrained from killing any fish.’ So saying, Michiko-san sighed as if she had become depressed all of a sudden, and then she said this: ‘If that’s true, then it’s fine, but as the clerk said, isn’t it wrong that we’re out here on the ocean tonight? It’s said to be a legend or a superstition, but it’s probably because of many years of experience that people have said it’s bad for such a long time.’

“So, you see. Michiko-san was neither a superstitious nor a weak-willed person, but a woman of normal intelligence and vivaciousness. I felt a bit eccentric because I had said something rather odd while imitating the bald clerk. It was strange—for a person who had been singing gaily just moments before to now sigh suddenly and feel depressed.”

As he said this, he sighed deeply and tossed away the stem of the bellflower he had been holding in his hand.

“What happened after that?” I asked, urging him to finish.

“After that . . . I said this. ‘Although he said, “many years of experience,” in those many years, if one went out onto to the ocean on the night of Obon, it can’t be the case that no one ever accidentally suffered some kind of disaster, not even once or twice. It would be a mistake to use that coincidental event as evidence, thinking that it will always happen.’ – However, Michiko-san did not agree, so I continued with something like this. ‘Even if it’s by chance, it doesn’t mean that we won’t have an accident tonight.’ – Speaking of which, that’s what occurred, after all, but what Michiko-san said wasn’t something she would normally say. Nevertheless, I decided to return the boat without further resistance because even if we argued further, it would be pointless.

“It was then. Michiko firmly grasped my hand, which was holding an oar, and said, ‘That over there, that . . . a mermaid . . . a mermaid.’ I wondered what it was and turned to look but was unable to see anything. The moon shone brightly, and the surface of the sea glittered. But even so, my eyes could see nothing. Because Michiko-san had been saying such strange things before, I

thought this was also a hallucination or an illusion. As I tried anyhow to row back to shore without letting it bother me deeply, Michiko-san grabbed my hand tightly and without letting go the entire time, as if she were possessed by something, as if she had paroxysms of madness. ‘There it is again. . . . That, the mermaid. . . .’ she said repeatedly. I couldn’t pull the oars while she was grasping my hand. The boat continued to just float in place. Well, it was then. . . . I saw it, too. . . . I saw it, too.”

Kiyoshi grabbed my arm and poked it hard. Just like Michiko had grabbed his hand. . . . I questioned him hurriedly as I was being poked.

“You saw it too. . . . What did you see!”

“On the sea, where the moonlight glistened. . . .” Kiyoshi said breathlessly, as if remembering his feelings from that moment. “On the sea. . . . A person’s face. . . . I could see a person’s face. Between the billows, a head peaked out. . . .”

“Are you sure you saw a person’s face?”

“Mmm. A person’s face. . . . It was as Michiko-san had said.”

“It was a sea turtle, wasn’t it?” I said.

A sea turtle—also called a *shōgakubō* (large sea turtle)—comes in two types, green and red.<sup>18</sup> Green sea turtles are mainly captured near the Ogasawara Islands, but loggerhead (red) sea turtles are the type that inhabit the ocean in the direction of the Sea of Japan. Though they’re called “red” turtles, they’re really reddish brown, and sometimes gigantic ones are found. As I listened to Kiyoshi’s story, I immediately recalled loggerhead sea turtles. I imagined that both he and Michiko had suffered from the same illusion or delusion, one in which they had mistakenly thought a large sea turtle sticking its neck out from between the waves was a human face, or a mermaid, and became unhinged. He nodded in assent.

“Yes, a sea turtle. . . . Until we realized that’s what it was, not only Michiko-san, but I, too, thought I had seen a person’s face. If you had been there, you also would surely have thought a person’s face . . . or a mermaid must have appeared. Michiko-san said, it’s a mermaid, it’s a mermaid. I also believed that temporarily, for when I was staring into its marvelous eyes, I thought it was the face of a person that had sunk into the waves. As I had that thought, it reappeared. Well, we were in trouble. . . . My wonder suddenly turned to horror. Even if you’ve been going out on the ocean for many years, you probably haven’t had such a frightening experience.”

He shook himself, as if he could not endure the terror.

III.

Up to this point, Kiyoshi and I had been walking calmly while we were talking, but as the conversation came to this point, it seemed he had become unable to walk. He stopped by the side of the road and continued to speak.

“You say ‘it was probably a sea turtle’ with such ease, but those sea turtles were horrifying. I awoke from that temporary hallucination, discovering that the ‘mermaids’ were really sea turtles, but Michiko-san continued to insist they were mermaids. Well, be that as it may, what caused me an abnormal amount of fear were the sea turtles coming from between the billows . . . at first one, then two, three . . . five . . . ten . . . gradually appearing and completely surrounding our boat. The sea was tranquil; the waves barely swelled. On the surface of that boundless sea, Michiko-san and I were surrounded by a bale of sea turtles and had no idea what to do.

“As I was wondering exactly what they intended to do by surrounding our boat, small sea turtles appeared one after another and were crawling into our boat. Ordinarily, creatures like small sea turtles don’t cause problems, but Michiko-san was unreasonably frightened of them, and my anxiety became unbearable, so any turtle that came close enough to my hand, I grabbed and threw it into the sea. But I didn’t just throw them randomly; I used the small ones like stones to pelt the big ones, thinking thereby to cut a path through enemy lines. That seemed to be quite successful, but in any case, we were outnumbered. Sea turtles both large and small came crawling from the starboard and port of the small boat, from the stern and the bow. Did they intend to consume us? These sea turtles ate shrimp and crabs, and I’d not heard of them eating a human. However, when attacked by this many sea turtles, we could not help but feel we were in danger. In the end, I became tired of fighting. Michiko-san seemed as if she had already died. They seemed to increase to incalculable numbers, and it appeared that the moonlight gleamed across their shells, which were lined up in a single surface around the boat. . . .<sup>19</sup> What would you do if you encountered something so bizarre? I was so tired and scared; I could not move.”

Indeed, they were undoubtedly in trouble, I sympathized. Overcoming my sympathy, I also started to feel my blood run cold somehow. Perhaps my complexion changed somewhat.

“In that situation, I guess even you would only have enough wisdom to use an oar to defend yourself,” Kiyoshi said derisively. “Do you think that this monstrosity . . . a creature more monstrous than a mermaid . . . would be repelled by such an ordinary means of protection? It’s useless, it’s useless. Innumerable enemies boarded my boat from all sides, while I merely lay stunned like a defeated soldier, having been completely deprived of my combat abilities, both physically and mentally. How they clambered up, I have no idea, but one after another they got in the boat. Given the situation, anyone would think only of the weight of the sea turtles. You know, too, don’t you, how much a large sea turtle weighs? Countless numbers of them climbed aboard, and furthermore, one would ride on the back of another’s shell, and on top of that one, another would ride, and so on and so forth; it was unbearable how the bale of them rode atop each other. As a small boat loaded with large stones would, our boat had no alternative but to gradually sink. I knew it was useless, that the shore was too far away, but I continued calling for help at the top of my lungs and with all my might.<sup>20</sup> My desperate screams were all in vain—they echoed on the water and disappeared. If this were an ordinary night, there would be quite a few fishing boats off the coast. Regrettably, on that night, due to the superstition about you-know-what, not a single boat could be seen on the vast sea. The people on the beach seemed completely absorbed in the Bon Odori. Only the moon and stars that night silently gazed down upon our desperate, agonizing struggle. The enemy had finally come in, mocking our lack of resistance. The boat became heavier. The tidal waters gradually flowed in from the sides of the boat. We knew we were doomed at last, so I banished my thoughts and held Michiko-san tightly in my arms. I grew up along this coast since childhood. If it was just me by myself, in that situation, I might risk my fate and swim, even if the shore was very far away, but I couldn’t abandon Michiko-san. As we held each other, I decided to sink with the boat. . . . I felt this was a type of lovers’ suicide. . . . And everything after that was as if I was dreaming. . . .”

“And just like that, in the end, the boat sank. . . . Only you were saved, and my sister perished.”

“Unfortunately, that’s the truth,” Kiyoshi said, letting out a painful sigh. “When I awoke from that horrifying nightmare, the two of us had been pulled up onto the beach. When I asked about it afterwards, the clerk, Manbei, had become worried that we were late returning and started making a fuss. It was because he sent out a boat to search for us that we were saved as we drifted

on the sea, floating and sinking by turns. I guess you could say it was because I was good at swimming, I didn't swallow too much water and easily recovered, but Michiko-san could not be revived. We tried everything, but she wouldn't breathe. If this were going to happen, it would have been better if I had not recovered at all. It's a shame they saved me; there was no need to. Our small boat was found far off the coast the next morning, but as for the whereabouts of the sea turtles, not even one could be seen."

"Her death could not be helped, I guess. How has your health been since then? Is it okay for you to be walking around?" I asked, trying to comfort him.

"I just slept through the next day and did not worry anymore. I thought about how I truly wanted to go to Michiko-san's funeral, but because everyone stopped me and it was unavoidable to postpone my visit to her grave, I dared to come today. No matter how many times I tell it, it's the same—I don't know whether it's fortunate or unfortunate that I survived. It's as if I've sacrificed Michiko-san to endorse an old superstition."

Tears streamed down his pale cheeks.

"I don't want to become a superstitious person, either. It was as Michiko said, you had an unfortunate and sudden accident," I told him to comfort him again.

This story ends here. Of course, it's undoubtedly a superstition whether or not to go out in a boat on the night of Obon; so why the bale of turtles appeared and sank the boat, I do not know. Because they have a habit of leaving the water and basking, it seems as though they may have crawled up to the boat with that intention. However, the local elders said that they'd never heard of a boat being sunk by a large sea turtle before. Considering it further, it's extraordinary for an ordinary turtle—that a sea turtle would try to climb into a boat doesn't make sense to me. As you know, since I didn't bear witness to the event, at any rate, I have no choice but to trust Kiyoshi's account of what happened.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The penname of Okamoto Keiji.

<sup>2</sup> Romanization of Japanese names and other words from Japanese follow the Revised Hepburn method. I have included the original Japanese instead in some instances. Because Okamoto Kidō is his penname, he is referred to as Kidō throughout this work (as opposed to Okamoto), following standard naming conventions in Japanese literary studies.

<sup>3</sup> Telling *kaidan* became famous during the Edo-period alongside works such as Ueda Akinari's *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (1776), but grew even more in popular during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Stories often concerned *yōkai*, supernatural creatures, monsters, and ghosts that inhabited the Japanese archipelago.

<sup>4</sup> Special thanks to Simon Angseop Lee for his kind assistance with translating some of the more difficult turns of phrase and for helping me with some of the historical details mentioned in the endnotes, such as the characters' clothing. Thank you to Kat Hacheny for her encouragement and for proof-reading the draft of the translation. And thank you to Nobuko Tabata for talking with me at length about Japanese littoral fiction and introducing me to this short story several years ago.

<sup>5</sup> This translation was written using the text provided by volunteers at *Aozora Bunko*, an internet-based free library of works whose Japanese copyrights have lapsed. This story was originally published in the collection 「日の出」 [Dawn], 1934; this version is based on the one published in 「異妖の怪談集 岡本綺堂伝奇小説集 其ノ二」 [*Collected Weird Stories of Strange Occurrences, Collected Romances of Okamoto Kidō*, Part 2], 1999. See Works Cited for further details.

<sup>6</sup> The thirtieth-year of the reign of Emperor Meiji is 1897 in the Gregorian calendar. Mr. Asaoka here says “in the 30s” so we may guess this story takes place sometime between 1897 and 1907.

<sup>7</sup> Though it says “school” here, and in contemporary Japanese that would refer to primary or secondary school, both the era of the story and the age of the characters indicate that the author means tertiary education.

<sup>8</sup> San'in-dō (山陰道) roughly corresponds to the modern San'in region, an area in the southwest of the main Japanese island (Honshū), between the modern-day areas of Hyōgo and Yamaguchi Prefectures, facing the Sea of Japan. San'in-dō does not just refer to the geographical region, but also to the main route that ran through it.

<sup>9</sup> Obon is the yearly festival for the dead that takes place in the summer. The festival is based on the belief that the spirits of deceased ancestors/family return each year to visit their living relatives; it is also based on the Buddhist belief that if the spirits are on the path to becoming hungry ghosts (*gaki* (餓鬼) in Japanese, or *preta* in Sanskrit) after their death, they should be relieved of their suffering. Though in modern times the national government calendar has standardized days off for the holiday, each local area actually has its own schedule for celebrating and each has its own history for how it should be celebrated. Songs and dancing (in the formal form of *Bon Odori*) are

usually central to the celebration, as is bringing offerings (food, flowers, sake, and paper lanterns) to the gravesite of family members.

<sup>10</sup> Bon tōrō is a kind of colorful lantern (usually some combination of white, gold, red, blue, and yellow) constructed of paper and bamboo that is brought as an offering to gravesites during Obon. It is called Bon tōrō because it is used for the Bon (Obon) season and resembles a tōrō lantern.

<sup>11</sup> White fabric with navy blue, black, or brown dyed with one of the Kasuri-type repeating patterns.

<sup>12</sup> A hakama made from fabric from venerable fabric-makers in a style originating in the northern Kyushu city of Kokura. Kokura hakama fabric was made of cotton, striped, and came in a variety of colours. It was favoured since the early days of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1868 C.E.), often for activities that required movement like hawking, but the fabric became famous among samurai as well because of its durability. Its popularity lasted well into the Taishō Period (1912-1926 C.E.).

<sup>13</sup> *Tanna japonensis*, a type of cicada that lives throughout East Asia, but is most commonly found in Japan. Its shrill call is most often heard in the morning and the evening, thus its common name, the evening cicada. The call of this cicada also indicates the season in Japan, as they're noisiest in the heat of mid-to-late August and through mid-September.

<sup>14</sup> I have referred throughout the translation to the holiday as “Obon” to help the modern reader, but in the original text several different words for Obon are used: Bon (盆), Obon (お盆), and Urabon (盂蘭盆). One should note the storyteller, Asaoka, who has been living in the city, calls the holiday Obon or Bon, and Kiyoshi, from the countryside, calls it Urabon. There is some nuance of space and place to the use of dialect, but it does not really affect the overall meaning.

<sup>15</sup> As mentioned in note 9, Bon Odori (盆踊り) is a type of dance associated with the Obon celebrations. The practice grew out of Nembutsu folk dances to welcome the spirits of the dead. Typically, an organized line dance through the town streets, it is both a spectacle and welcomes active participation from spectators.

<sup>16</sup> Osaka Shosen Kaisha Lines, or O.S.K. Lines, is an historic international shipping company based in Osaka, Japan; it was founded in 1884. It has since merged and then merged again and is currently part of the Mitsui Group of companies.

<sup>17</sup> *Platycodon grandiflorus* is a purple-blue bell-shaped flower that grows on a long stem with multiple blooms on one stem. It blooms near the end of summer and into early autumn. It is considered one of the seven famous flowers of autumn in Japan and is thus strongly associated with arts such as haiku poetry and brushwork, and figures in family crests and patterns of kimonos. Meanings of unchanging love and honesty are often attributed to it.

<sup>18</sup> A shōgakubō (正覚坊) is a large sea turtle. This is an older word that ambiguously refers here both to the Pacific green turtle, *Chelonia mydas* (アオウミガメ), and to the reddish loggerhead sea turtle, *Caretta caretta* (アカウミガメ).

<sup>19</sup> The description here of the shells implies that they have replaced the surface of the ocean, glistening in the moonlight the same way that the sea's surface had been described earlier in the story.

<sup>20</sup> Literally, “as if my voice was bloody.”

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