



A Brush with Fate

My brush is dying.

It's my *mizubake* that I'm referring to - the brush that I use to apply water to the sheets of *washi* in order to make them soft and supple enough to accept the pigment mixture. Back when I was a rank beginner at woodblock printmaking, I used any old brush that was at hand, as I didn't feel that it was necessary for me to spend a lot of money on a *mizubake* of the traditional type (they can be very expensive.) But after having a chance to talk with experienced printers and watch how they worked, I realized that I was short-changing myself, so bit the bullet and bought one.

Of course, I *then* discovered just how silly I had been by holding back - because having a proper brush made the work *so much* easier and more accurate. A *mizubake* is made from carefully selected goat hair, tied in bundles and laced in place in a light wooden handle in a pattern that has been handed down for a great many years, so thus reflects the accumulated experience of generations of craftsmen. My new brush was not only less tiring to use, but - after I had grown used to it - allowed me to very finely adjust the amount of water I was applying to the paper. It holds a very large quantity of water, but only releases it in delicate amounts, on my 'command'.

It is no exaggeration to say that I could not do without it. The idea of using 'any old paintbrush' is simply inconceivable.

That first brush lasted me about ten years. Because a *mizubake* is constantly being moistened, dried, moistened again, and dried again, in a never-ending cycle, it does eventually start to give up the ghost. No matter how carefully and tightly the maker ties the fine hairs into the bundles, some do eventually start to come loose under the constant wear and tear of daily use. No tool lasts forever, and it seems that - for me, anyway - about ten years is the life of a water brush.

I was talking to Sadako one day back then about the gradual deterioration of my *mizubake*, and - I think perhaps my birthday was approaching - she offered to purchase a new one for me as a present (she didn't know exactly what type or size, etc. I needed, so couldn't do this as a complete surprise for me.) I accepted her kind offer, let her know my requirements, and she ordered one for me. And that became the brush that I used daily for the *next* ten years ...

Which is now just about at an end.

I'm a tiny bit hesitant about what I should write next, because Sadako reads all these stories while they are being prepared for publication, but I think she will understand.

You see, the very day that I began to use the new brush that she gave me, I called up the brush shop and ordered another one. Another one just like it.

Why? Well, perhaps you may guess that her brush was *so good* that I wanted to take the opportunity to get another one from the same batch.

I'm sorry to report though, that it was actually the opposite case. The quality of the new brush was a definite step *down* from the one I had previously used, even though it was made by the same maker, with the 'same'

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materials, in the 'same' way. Side by side, they look identical, but the 'feel' was different. And not in a positive way.

Do you now understand why I immediately bought another one? Because it became obvious to me that the overall brush quality is on a downward slope. I thought to myself, "If I wait another ten years before ordering again, who knows what kind of awful brush I might end up with?" So as I said, I immediately bought another one, wrapped it carefully, and set it aside, thinking that ten years later, it would be ready to step forward for duty.

That day is now here. The brush that Sadako bought for me - and which I have used to make every single one of my prints over the past ten years - is now approaching 'retirement age'. It is time to bring out that stored brush. I know what I have to do next, but I'm dreading the moment when I inspect *that* package ...

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