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A TALE UNASKED

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Born in 1258 into a high-ranking aristocratic family in Japan's capital (present-day Kyoto), LADY NIJŌ was largely raised in the court of Retired Emperor Go-Fukakusa, and at fourteen became his concubine. Their increasingly difficult relationship continued until 1283, when Go-Fukakusa abruptly expelled her from the court. Nijō subsequently became a Buddhist nun, and thereafter spent much of her time wandering Japan on pilgrimage. She died sometime after 1306.

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A Tale Unasked

Translated by MEREDITH MCKINNEY

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To Royall Tyler, friend and mentor

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A TALE UNASKED

Introduction

In 1938 a scholar stumbled upon an old manuscript with the intriguing title of *Towazugatari* (*A Tale Unasked*) tucked away in the Travel section of the Imperial Household Library in Tokyo, and decided to take a closer look. He discovered it was a late seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century copy of a much earlier work that was about very much more than just travel, apparently written by a high-ranking lady at the court of Retired Emperor Go-Fukakusa (1243–1304) and containing startling and detailed revelations of the sexual politics of courtly life. He also realized very quickly that *A Tale Unasked* was an impressive work of literature that surely ranked with the great women's diaries[1] of earlier centuries. Scholars were soon at work deciphering and transcribing the lengthy handwritten manuscript, and in 1950 this precious and long-forgotten classic was finally introduced to the public.

Internal evidence dates the completion of *A Tale Unasked* to around 1306. The memoir spans more than thirty-five years, beginning with a detailed account of the events leading up to the author Lady Nijō's first sexual encounter with Go-Fukakusa at the age of fourteen,[2] and coming to an end when she was an ageing nun of forty-nine. Despite chronological gaps in the story, it forms an episodic but broadly continuous tale of Nijō's twelve years as Go-Fukakusa's concubine at court until her expulsion in 1283 (Books 1–3), followed by a description of some key events in her seventeen years spent as an often itinerant nun (Books 4–5). Together, the two parts of *A Tale Unasked* give us not only detailed pictures of two starkly different experiences of life as a woman in thirteenth-century Japan, but provide a compelling portrait of

a richly intelligent and vibrant sensibility finding its way through the sometimes daunting challenges of her difficult life.

Nijō

The author was born in 1258 into the high-ranking aristocratic Koga family, a branch of the elite Minamotos that traced its line back to a tenth-century emperor. Her mother, also of noble birth, died when Nijō was two, and from the age of four her father placed her in the court of Retired Emperor Go-Fukakusa to be brought up largely under his care, in a move designed to give Nijō every advantage in the high-stakes world of marriage politics that underpinned so much of broader court politics. 'Marriage' is a misleading word for the fluid relationships between men and women in this world in which a powerful man such as Go-Fukakusa had not only a primary consort but an assortment of lesser consorts, whose status was often dependent on the children they bore him. If Nijō's fate had taken a different turn, the son she bore him in 1273 might have secured her formal recognition as an imperial consort. Unfortunately, the child died at the age of three, and by then another blow had also severely undermined her position at court. In the previous year, her powerful father had died, and without the crucial support of his patronage to back her, Nijō's status at court was increasingly vulnerable. She was now solely dependent on retaining Go-Fukakusa's increasingly fickle favour as concubine. Remarkably, she succeeded in doing this for another ten years, until at the age of twenty-six she found herself abruptly and apparently inexplicably expelled from the court.

Her memoir takes up the story again in 1289. At some point in the intervening years, she had followed the established tradition for women who found themselves alone in the world and become a Buddhist nun, fulfilling an urge that her memoir tells us she had nursed for many years. Seizing the freedom that this new identity conferred on her, she now set off on a journey, first to the recently established centre of civil power in Kamakura, and later on a series of lengthy and sometimes arduous pilgrimages that took her to some of the more remote corners

of the nation, interspersed with periods back in the capital. The final two books of *A Tale Unasked* describe this intrepid wandering life, filled with incident and often with pleasure as well as with the serious business of devotion and prayer, but perpetually haunted by her deep and sorrowing attachment to Go-Fukakusa. Occasional chance encounters with him down the years only served to reinforce her feelings for him, which culminate in a moving depiction of her despairing experience of his death. The memoir peters out around two years later when Nijō was approaching the age of fifty (then considered old). The date and circumstances of her death are unknown.

Go-Fukakusa

The man who haunted Nijō's life was already sixteen years old when she was born. The son of Emperor Go-Saga, he was born in 1243 and was himself made emperor a mere three years later when his father abdicated. The role of emperor had long since become purely ceremonial, and it was common to install a young child to perform the imperial duties while the previous incumbent took the title of Retired Emperor, which allowed him to wield real power and authority behind the scenes. Go-Fukakusa remained emperor until 1259, when Go-Saga made the controversial move of requiring him to abdicate in favour of his half-brother, Kameyama (then aged ten). Although Go-Fukakusa may well have been privately relieved to be able to relinquish his arduous ceremonial life and take up the more fulfilling role of Retired Emperor, the succession should have gone to a son of his and not to his rival half-brother, who was now in a position to place his own son on the throne to follow him in due course.

The bitterness that this caused, and the simmering question of succession inheritance, underlie a number of scenes in the first three books of *A Tale Unasked*, although Nijō never directly comments on the situation. Even after Go-Fukakusa had managed to win a promise that his own son would take his turn as emperor after Kameyama's son had stepped down,[3] the relationship between the half-brothers remained tense and

rivalrous. The effect of this on Nijō was profound, for Kameyama did not hide the attraction he felt for her. Not only did she become a pawn in the complex manoeuvres between the half-brothers on several occasions, but rumours of a clandestine affair with Kameyama apparently played a large part in Go-Fukakusa's abrupt eviction of her from court. Nijō brushes off the suggestion of an affair but does not outright deny it, and there are signs earlier in the memoir that she was at least flattered by Kameyama's interest in her. After all, she was in no position to resist a powerful man's persistent attentions, and her ardent and adventurous nature also tended to make her easy prey; Go-Fukakusa's jealous suspicions were possibly well-founded.

The Court and Its World

Ever since present-day Kyoto had become Japan's capital in 794, it had been the seat of government and home to the imperial court, but by Nijō's day the importance of the court had waned and the recently established military government in distant Kamakura now comprised the real centre of power. It was to the Kamakura authorities that Go-Fukakusa appealed in his struggle to wrench the line of succession from his half-brother's descendants, and it was those authorities who gratified him by making the final decision allowing his son to follow Kameyama's on the throne.

When Nijō set off on her travels as a nun years later (see Appendix 2 map), Kamakura was her first choice of destination, and her depiction of its intriguingly different social world is full of vivid detail. Nun though she was, Nijō maintained her unofficial status as a former aristocrat and member of the imperial court, and it is telling how eagerly those in Kamakura with cultural pretensions bowed to the authority of her opinion, and how inclined she was to look down on their boorish ways. Although now effectively powerless, the imperial court still crucially remained the nation's cultural arbiter.

The imperial palace itself, where the emperor and his court lived, plays a negligible role in Nijō's memoir. The world

she describes as 'the Palace' belongs to the court of Retired Emperor Go-Fukakusa, a sprawling complex located in north-eastern Kyoto (see Appendix 1 map). Another important location for the events of her memoir was the Fushimi Palace, Go-Fukakusa's villa to the south of the city (near present-day Uji) where he retired for entertainment and relaxation from court duties. Like the other ladies of the court, Nijō's own periods of freedom from her duties at court were spent 'at home', which after the early death of her father was the home of her former nurse in the city centre. Children in upper-class families were largely raised by their wetnurses, and this bond remained close throughout their lives, but Nijō was far from fond of her nurse and did not much enjoy the time she spent there. The Palace felt to her like her real home, which added to the pain and dismay of her final expulsion from it.

The various ladies of the Palace, including Nijō, are described as being 'in service' to Go-Fukakusa. As well as tending to his needs and keeping him company as required, 'service' included sexual availability. Powerful men were sexually promiscuous. 'He never spent a night without a woman,' Nijō says of her beloved and now ailing father, with no hint of disapproval; the description is intended simply to indicate his former robust energy. Go-Fukakusa could choose whom he spent each night with, although his greatest allegiance was to his primary consort Higashi Nijō'in ('Her Highness' in the memoir). Besides the ladies of the court, he clearly had a predatory eye for other potential sexual partners, and it was the duty of whichever lady was serving him at the time to procure these women for him. Nijō several times describes such encounters with a coolly appraising and sometimes satirical eye. She understood his sexual tastes all too well, and would have had good reason to feel sorry for the women who failed to please him.

One of these unfortunate women, the timid and vulnerable Imperial Priestess whom Nijō had recently befriended, was not only a half-aunt of Nijō's but Go-Fukakusa's own half-sister, although this close blood tie does not seem to have troubled anyone involved. In fact, thanks largely to the combination of male polygamy and the alliances of marriage politics, all

the prominent aristocratic and imperial families were related to each other, sometimes several times over. Go-Fukakusa's primary consort Higashi Nijō'in (eleven years his senior), for instance, was also his half-aunt. Her mother Lady Kitayama (Go-Fukakusa and Kameyama's grandmother) was also Nijō's great-aunt on her mother's side, as well as the grandmother of her lover Sanekane (referred to as 'Akebono' in her secret relationship with him). These complicated relationships sometimes mattered in the social politics of the court, but they usually played little part in private life.

Nijō herself had four children:[4] a short-lived son fathered by Go-Fukakusa, a daughter by Sanekane, and two sons by her subsequent lover 'Ariake', her private name for the abbot of Ninnaji Temple (who is generally identified as a half-brother of Go-Fukakusa). Her secret daughter was hastily removed at birth and brought up in the household of the father as an officially recognized daughter of Sanekane.[5] The fate of the other two children is not recorded, although Go-Fukakusa claimed he would accept Ariake's first child as his own. Nijō writes movingly of the strong maternal love she felt at their birth, but babies were automatically removed into the hands of a wet-nurse, and the extended period that Nijō spent alone nursing Ariake's second son after his birth was exceptional in every way. Late in life she says of herself, 'I essentially had no child to pass anything on to'. Clearly she had no ties to any surviving children. She truly was alone in the world.

Nijō and Go-Fukakusa

Nijō's only lasting bond was with Go-Fukakusa, and it continued until his death. Although there were many other women who claimed his attention, she depicts herself as his favourite, and certainly she seems to have been of considerable emotional importance to him. This is also attested by the jealousy and animosity that his primary consort Higashi Nijō'in felt towards her, which finally helped prompt Nijō's expulsion from court. Nijō's portrayal of events and of the relationship is surely skewed by her urgent need to emphasize her central importance

for Go-Fukakusa and the depth of their bond, but we need not doubt that much of what she writes was substantially true.

Nijō was far from faithful to Go-Fukakusa. The opening pages reveal a stealthy courtship already underway with an unnamed man (Sanekane), which complicated her feelings during the subsequent encounter with Go-Fukakusa. Despite her protestations of innocence, both parties would surely have been well aware that she was destined to be Go-Fukakusa's concubine. Their flirtation later developed into a heady secret affair that culminated in the hidden birth of Sanekane's child, described in the memoir in moving detail, but the difficulties of maintaining secrecy and the compromises of Nijō's life at court finally caused her and Sanekane to become estranged, though he continued to be kind to her.

Sanekane strikes the reader as a genial and warm-hearted man; on the other hand, the desperate infatuation of Nijō's other clandestine lover, the Ninnaji abbot whom she calls Ariake, sometimes repelled and terrified, then finally enthralled her. The relationship with Sanekane appears to have remained largely undetected by Go-Fukakusa, although there are hints that he suspected it; but Go-Fukakusa's discovery and manipulation of the affair with Ariake, together with the rest of his increasingly capricious and abusive treatment of Nijō, makes confronting reading today. It is hard to judge how much her own often wilful and secretive behaviour may have contributed to the deepening rift between Nijō and Go-Fukakusa, but a modern reader can only feel repelled by his progressively arbitrary and degrading cruelty in the latter stages of their relationship.

Decadent though court culture clearly was by then, Nijō's depiction of Go-Fukakusa's behaviour is dismaying; but Nijō herself may also puzzle us. We can understand that her situation forced her to submit to Go-Fukakusa's whims, but why, given the treatment that she details, does she never express outright resentment of him? An answer is suggested in the scene of her expulsion from the Palace, when Go-Fukakusa casually dismisses her with a cruel sneer and walks out. 'How could I not bitterly resent him at this moment?' she says, at last expressing

what we have long believed she must feel. But reading on we discover that her resentment is not of his treatment of her, but rather the betrayal in his abandonment of her.[6] For Nijō their continuing bond was paramount,[7] regardless of the suffering involved. This conviction remained unshaken through the long years of her exile from the court as a wandering nun when she never ceased to love him, and in the end it is what sent her running barefoot and grief-stricken through the dark streets of the capital after his funeral procession, towards the end of her life.

Nijō and Religion

'Though we may be reborn in different forms, our bond will never cease,' Go-Fukakusa promised her during their first nights together, and on his deathbed Nijō's father admonished her to 'remember that the bond of man and woman lasts indissolubly through future rebirths'. This Buddhist doctrinal teaching is based on the concept of karma, which establishes unbreakable connections between people through the cycles of rebirth. The idea of karma, which permeates *A Tale Unasked*, was central to Nijō's understanding of the world and her experience of it, as it was for everyone. Relationships are not arbitrary but are dictated by karmic bonds, and one's experiences in life are likewise the result of karma from a previous lifetime. Although she often wept with unhappiness and lamented her fate, Nijō never expressed the resentful bitterness of the victim, no matter how cruelly and unfairly Go-Fukakusa treated her. The belief that what happened to her was dictated by her karma prevented Nijō from feeling blame and resentment. Nor was she made merely passive by this Buddhist understanding of life, for the evil karma from a previous lifetime could be transcended through dedication to the Buddhist Way. Again and again during her years at court we see Nijō yearning to retreat from the world and take Buddhist vows, and for all the unhappiness of her expulsion, when she finally steps out into the world as a nun at the beginning of Book 4 she has achieved her long-cherished goal.

Nijō does in fact spend considerable periods in retreat from her life at the Palace with female Buddhist communities, and

A Tale Unasked provides a valuable picture of the nature of such communities at this time. There seem to have been numerous small nunneries in the vicinity of the capital, centred around a female teacher and following a daily routine of instruction and devotion,[8] which were willing to shelter women in need who arrived on their doorstep. Sectarian affiliations were often fluid at this time, and some of these communities may not have been formally associated with any larger temple community or sect. It is likely that these were the kind of places in which Nijō also frequently stayed during her later travels.

Nijō had few options when she left the Palace at the age of twenty-six. Her father puts it starkly in his deathbed admonition to her: in such a situation, her choice can only be to become a nun or else to 'make yourself a name among the brothels'. In fact, entering the religious life released her into a new freedom of which she took full advantage. Women in her situation would normally have retired to live in the kind of pious community described above, but though she mentions feeling tempted to do so once, 'I realized that I didn't have it in me to quietly devote myself to religious study.' Instead, Nijō joined the free-floating world of itinerant pilgrims who flocked along the roads at this time, pausing for sometimes lengthy periods to pray at religious sites in often far-flung places before moving on. These sites included both Buddhist temples and shrines devoted to native deities, although there was little distinction between the two.[9] Despite its hardships, Nijō clearly enjoyed travel and the encounters it produced, but her aim was serious. She had vowed to make a complete copy of the major Buddhist sutras[10] and offer them as a prayer for salvation both for herself and for her father, an undertaking that took her many years and which she finally triumphantly completed in 1305.

Nijō was particularly alert to the women she came across on her travels, and there are interesting cameo scenes of her sympathetic encounters with courtesans and prostitutes as well as women of higher classes. She sometimes needed to be wary of men – the somewhat confused description in Book 5 of her attempted abduction by a man in whose house she was staying exemplifies the kind of problem a lone travelling woman

might face. In one of their rare re-encounters later in life, Go-Fukakusa expresses a common opinion when he says, 'It's quite acceptable for a man to travel hither and yon . . . but it's said that all sorts of things stand in a woman's way to hinder her in this kind of wandering practice', and he accuses her of sleeping with men she has met along the way. She indignantly defends herself in a lengthy reply that is surely partly designed to put to rest the reader's suspicions as well as those of Go-Fukakusa. She may well have been speaking the truth when she asserts 'I have foresworn relations with men and that is that', although some of the men she met in her travels were clearly attracted to her, and by the time she left Kamakura rumours of an affair were certainly circulating. For all the sometimes startling honesty of description in *A Tale Unasked*, there was surely much that Nijō chose not to reveal.

A Tale Unasked

Although Nijō completed *A Tale Unasked* when she was around forty-nine, it is unclear when she began it. In the final section of the version we have, she says that 'since His Highness's death I have ceased to feel the need to unburden myself to others', which suggests that much of the work was written before his death and with the motivation of telling her story, as the title implies. The lonely lack of anyone to 'tell my troubles to' is certainly a recurring theme throughout the work.[11] Despite her final protestation to the contrary, she surely hoped that posterity at least would hear her with a sympathetic ear.

There are indications that many of the earlier sections of the memoir may have been written close to the time at which the events occurred. The detail is impressive, although Nijō's gift for bringing scenes vividly alive on the page would no doubt have extended to skilful imaginative reconstruction from memory. More importantly, the style and tone of these earlier scenes sometimes seem to belong to a much younger person, while here and there the comments of a later self are slipped in, suggesting that Nijō may have been copying out descriptions preserved from an earlier time, editing and shaping as she wrote. We can

speculate that with her natural narrative flair she had long found pleasure and comfort in keeping a kind of sporadic diary, that this gradually evolved into a version of *A Tale Unasked* as Nijō's urge to record her story grew, and that earlier parts were perhaps copied out again towards the end of her life and edited to become part of the final work.

There are a number of problems with the version of the text that has come down to us in the single surviving copy. We share the copyist's puzzled frustration expressed in the occasional inserted comment: 'The page has been cut with a blade at this point. If only we knew what had been written below', and we sense perhaps an earlier reader's violent disapproval of the excised passages. In other places the text occasionally suddenly breaks off, either because a tired copyist has laid down her pen and inadvertently taken it up again at a different place, or perhaps because she (or possibly even Nijō herself) decided that the content should be omitted. It is also likely that in places the text has become somewhat garbled through careless or successive copying, and larger sections or even perhaps whole books may also have become lost. Comparison with a second copy, if one existed, would no doubt reveal various other anomalies and omissions, but we are lucky to have the single copy that did survive in an obscure corner of the library stacks in the Imperial Household in Tokyo, since it seems that *A Tale Unasked* was seldom read or remembered, and perhaps actively suppressed, in the centuries after Nijō's death.

Nijō herself is unrecorded in history. This is not so surprising, given that she never attained official status as an imperial concubine, but it has encouraged some to suggest that *A Tale Unasked* might be fictional. There are some historical anomalies in its record of known events, and here and there the narrative timing does not convincingly hang together. If it is indeed a fictional work, it is a most extraordinary one, which not only invents a compellingly real three-dimensional protagonist along with all the gripping details of her long story, but persuasively embeds her deep within both the complex social and familial fabric of the court and the broader historical moment. Such absolute historical authenticity in a work of

fiction had never been attempted in Japan, let alone so successfully achieved. If it is a fictional work, it could only be called a product of genius.

Most scholars are happy to accept that *A Tale Unasked* is indeed a memoir; but this does not deny it the status of literature. Nijō was writing from within the centuries-old literary genre of 'women's diaries', though she extended this far in the direction of confessional realism. The literary models that can be felt behind both what she wrote and how she wrote it include above all Murasaki Shikibu's great early eleventh-century novel *The Tale of Genji*, which had long since attained the status of literary masterpiece. As was not uncommon in writing of the day, faint or overt echoes from *The Tale of Genji* permeate *A Tale Unasked*, adding an aura of literary sanction to Nijō's tale. The writing itself can also be self-consciously literary. The work she claims as her primary inspiration is a version of what is now called *The Tale of Saigyō*, a highly romanticized poetic biography of the great twelfth-century poet-monk Saigyō, whose elevated style she often emulates, and in the early travel section of Book 5 Nijō's description of her journey along the Tōkaidō Road largely conforms to the genre of poetic travel journal. Throughout her memoir, particularly in evoking a moving scene, Nijō reaches for time-honoured literary tropes of poetic depiction to elevate the effect. Straightforward realism was often not her aim, although the style continually varies, and sections such as the extended description of the grand birthday celebrations at the end of Book 3, or her later experiences in Kamakura, suggest that Nijō was sometimes conscious of her role as a recorder of important facts and events.

Nijō's real talent lies in narrative writing. Certain key scenes, such as her first traumatic sexual encounter, the death of her father, or the secret birth of Sanekane's daughter, are masterfully paced and vividly written, and she has a keen eye for telling detail. Such a judgement would have disappointed her, however. Her aim was to produce a literary work, and literature at this time meant above all poetry. For her, the poems scattered throughout the memoir[12] constituted a vitally important record of Nijō the poet, proud inheritor of the long

poetic tradition of her forebears. Unfortunately, changing poetic taste makes it difficult for us to appreciate what worth there might once have been in the poems. With the poetic quality of her prose Nijō is on surer ground; her sentences are sinuously beautiful in the classical manner. Above all, the sustained focus on feeling establishes *A Tale Unasked* as a work of literature. Being easily moved to tears was a marker of the refined and delicate sensibility of a literary persona. Nijō had good reason to weep, of course, but her tendency to 'soak her sleeves with tears' has a strong literary as well as autobiographical resonance.

Although lost and forgotten for centuries, Nijō's tale still speaks to us compellingly today. With its richly varied and at times deeply moving content, its impressive scale, its stylistic elegance and its startlingly modern honesty and relishing of incident and narrative realism, *A Tale Unasked* fully deserves the place it has belatedly achieved among Japan's literary classics.

A Note on the Translation

Nijō's prose style generally follows the classical pattern of lengthy and often allusive sentences that sweep the reader along through shifting time and events in a way impossible to replicate in natural English. While attempting to maintain the overall effect where possible, I have often imposed a shorter sentence structure and added paragraph breaks for ease of reading.

Names are seldom used in classical Japanese texts, people being referred to if necessary by their titles. I have simplified this while trying to preserve the important decorum of title use. Since Go-Fukakusa and his half-brother Kameyama both hold the position of Retired Emperor for much of the story, I distinguish between them by generally referring to Kameyama by name. Titles such as Abbot, Counsellor and so on, are approximate equivalents, since no exact equivalents exist in English. Nijō's naming scrupulously distinguishes between her two secret lovers in their private roles (Akebono and Ariake) and their public roles (respectively, Sanekane and His Holy Eminence),

and I have preserved this distinction where possible. (See page xxvii for a list of the main characters cross-referenced with their titles.)

Japan at this time used the Chinese lunar calendar, in which the full moon is on the fifteenth day of each month. The new year (the first day of the first month) began on the first day of spring, which usually fell somewhere between our early February and early March. At birth a child was one year old, and one's age increased at each new year. Since the exact date of birth is often not known, precise ages are impossible to calculate, so I have retained the ages as given in the text.

I have based my translation on Iwanami's Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei edition of *Towazugatari*, annotated by Misumi Yōichi, while also consulting Shinchōsha's Nihon Koten Bungaku Shūsei edition, annotated by Fukuda Hideichi.

There are two previous translations of *Towazugatari*: *Lady Nijō's Own Story: The Candid Diary of a Thirteenth-Century Japanese Imperial Concubine*, translated by Wilfrid Whitehouse and Eizo Yanagisawa (Charles E. Tuttle, 1974); and *The Confessions of Lady Nijō*, translated by Karen Brazell (Stanford University Press, 1976).

NOTES

1. *women's diaries*: The usual translation of the term *joryū nikki*, although these works are often closer to a loose journal or memoir than to day-to-day diary entries.
2. *the age of fourteen*: A girl was considered an adult and legitimately able to have a sexual partner the year she turned fourteen. Here, as in the translation, I retain the age as given in the text (see A Note on the Translation above).
3. *his own son would take his turn . . . had stepped down*: This was the origin of a system of alternating succession between these rival branches of the imperial family that continued for approximately sixty years.
4. *four children*: She describes a fifth pregnancy, to Go-Fukakusa, but makes no further mention of it. Presumably the child was either miscarried or stillborn.

5. *hastily removed at birth . . . officially recognized daughter of Sanekane*: It is likely that she was one of Sanekane's three daughters who became high-ranking consorts to later emperors.
6. *the betrayal in his abandonment of her*: See page 132.
7. *their continuing bond was paramount*: It was not exclusive, however. She and Ariake also speak of the deep karmic bond that will continue to unite them through future rebirths.
8. *instruction and devotion*: Devotion generally took the form of prayers, sutra chanting and copying rather than meditation. Zen had only recently arrived in Japan, though one of Nijō's relatives was Dōgen, the renowned founder of Zen's Sōtō Sect.
9. *there was little distinction between the two*: Native gods were considered to be local avatars of Buddhist deities.
10. *make a complete copy of the major Buddhist sutras*: Painstaking copying of holy texts was a common form of Buddhist devotion.
11. *a recurring theme throughout the work*: 'If only someone somewhere cared enough to ask', as one of her poems puts it.
12. *the poems scattered throughout the memoir*: It has been suggested that the pages that originally followed the final page of the work as we have it contained an anthology of her poetry.

List of Principal Characters

AKEBONO: Abbreviation of 'Yuki no Akebono' (Snowy Dawn), Nijō's private poetic name for her lover **Sanekane**.

ARIAKE: Abbreviation of 'Ariake no Tsuki' (Dawn Moon), Nijō's private poetic name for her lover who is believed to have been **Go-Fukakusa**'s half-brother Prince Shōjō, abbot of the imperial temple Ninnaji. Referred to in public situations by his title 'His Holy Eminence'.

CROWN PRINCE (1265–1317): Son of **Go-Fukakusa** and **Lady Genkimon'in**, he later reigned as the 92nd Emperor Fushimi.

GENKIMON'IN (?–1329): Second Consort of **Go-Fukakusa**. Mother of Emperor Fushimi.

GO-FUKAKUSA (1243–1304): Reigned as 89th emperor, 1246–60. Nijō's primary lover, referred to by her as 'His Highness'. Father of Emperor Fushimi and **Yūgimon'in**.

GO-SAGA (1220–1272): Reigned as 88th emperor, 1242–46. Father of Emperors **Go-Fukakusa** and **Kameyama**. Referred to by his title 'His Cloistered Excellency'.

HIGASHI NIJŌ'IN (1232–1304): Primary consort of **Go-Fukakusa**. Daughter of **Lady Kitayama**. Sister of **Lady Ōmiya'in**. Mother of **Yūgimon'in**. Referred to by Nijō as 'Her Highness'.

HIS HIGHNESS: See **Go-Fukakusa**.

HIS HOLY EMINENCE: See **Ariake**.

IINUMA (?–1293): Son of Taira no Yoritsuna, effective ruler in Kamakura.

IMPERIAL PRIESTESS: Kaishi Naishinnō, a half-sister of **Go-Fukakusa**, and Nijō's half-aunt. For some years she was imperial priestess at the Ise Shrine.

KAMEYAMA (1249–1305): Reigned as 90th emperor, 1260–74. Son of **Go-Saga**, half-brother of **Go-Fukakusa**. When his son Go-Uda was named as the next emperor, a succession dispute broke out between Kameyama and his rival **Go-Fukakusa**.

KANEHIRA (1228–1294): Takatsukasa Kanehira. Regent and Chancellor, who forced his attentions on Nijō with the connivance of **Go-Fukakusa**.

KITAYAMA (1195–1302): Mother of **Lady Ōmiya'in** and **Higashi Nijō'in**, grandmother of **Go-Fukakusa** and **Kameyama**. Wife of Saionji Saneuji and grandmother of **Sanekane**. Sister of Shijō **Takachika** and Nijō's great-aunt, giving Nijō tenuous imperial status.

KOGA MASATADA (1225?–1272): Nijō's father. A high-ranking noble who served in **Go-Saga**'s court. Head of the Koga clan.

NIJŌ (1258–1308?): The author. Daughter of **Koga Masatada**, concubine of Retired Emperor **Go-Fukakusa**. Personal name Akako.

ŌMIYA'IN (1225–1292): The Empress Dowager, **Go-Saga**'s primary consort, mother of **Go-Fukakusa** and **Kameyama**. Referred to by her title 'Her Cloistered Highness'.

SANEKANE (1249–1322): Saionji Sanekane. Nijō's lover 'Akebono'. A high-ranking noble who played a key role in the succession dispute negotiations between **Go-Fukakusa** and the government in Kamakura.

TAKAAKI (1243–?): Shijō Takaaki. Also called the Zenshōji Counsellor. Nijō's maternal uncle, son of **Takachika**.

TAKACHIKA (1203–1283): Shijō Takachika. Nijō's maternal grandfather, father of **Takaaki**, brother of **Lady Kitayama**.

YŪGIMON'IN (1270–1307): Daughter of **Go-Fukakusa** and **Higashi Nijō'in**. She later became primary consort of Emperor Go-Uda.

ZENSHŌJI COUNSELLOR: See **Takaaki**.

Timeline of Principal Events

Ages use the traditional Japanese counting system, in which a person is one year old in the year of their birth. A person's age is given in brackets after the name.

Dates for events not recorded in A Tale Unasked *are given in square brackets.*

[1258] Nijō, private name Akako, born
[1259] Nijō's mother dies
[1261] Nijō (4) goes to live in Retired Emperor Go-Fukakusa's palace

BOOK 1

1271.1 Go-Fukakusa first sleeps with Nijō (14)
8 Higashi Nijō'in, primary consort of Go-Fukakusa, gives birth to a daughter
9? Retired Emperor Go-Saga falls ill
1272.2 Go-Saga (53) dies
5 Nijō's father falls ill
6 Nijō (15) discovers she is pregnant
8 Nijō's father (50) dies
10 Akebono sleeps with Nijō
1273.2 Nijō (16) gives birth to a son
1274.1 Emperor Kameyama (26) retires, Go-Uda (8) becomes emperor
9 Nijō (17) gives birth to Akebono's daughter
10 Nijō's son dies

11 Go-Fukakusa sleeps with his half-sister the Imperial Priestess

Book 2

1275.3 Ariake confesses his love. Kameyama shows interest in Nijō (18)
9 Ariake sleeps with Nijō
1276.9 Nijō (19) attempts to sever relations with Ariake
1277.3 Upset by her grandfather's behaviour, Nijō (20) goes into hiding
She is pregnant
4 She re-encounters the daughter she bore Akebono
8 With the connivance of Go-Fukakusa, Kanehira sleeps with Nijō
1278–80 *No recorded events*

Book 3

1281.2 Go-Fukakusa discovers Nijō's (24) relationship with Ariake
10 Pregnant with Ariake's child, she goes into retreat at Saga
11 She gives birth to Ariake's son. Ariake visits. Ariake dies of the plague
1282.3 Nijō (25) realizes she is pregnant with Ariake's child
4 Go-Fukakusa suspects her of an affair with Kameyama
8 She secretly gives birth to Ariake's son and suckles him
1283.3/4 Nijō (26) is ordered to leave the Palace
11 She begins a thousand-day retreat at Gion
1284.2 Nijō (27) makes an offering of a cherry branch at Gion
1285.1 Nijō (28) is invited to the birthday celebrations of Lady Kitayama
2–3 She attends the three-day party