

scene of the Otori's worst defeat, where my father was killed. That is Yaegahara. The Otori were betrayed by the Noguchi who changed sides and joined Iida. More than ten thousand died.' He looked at me and said, 'I know what it is like to see those closest to you slaughtered. I was not much older than you are now.'

I stared out at the empty plain. I could not imagine what a battle was like. I thought of the blood of ten thousand men soaking into the earth of Yaegahara. In the moist haze the sun was turning red, as if it had drawn up the blood from the land. Kites wheeled below us, calling mournfully.

'I did not want to go to Yamagata,' Lord Otori said as we began to descend the path. 'Partly because I am too well known there, and for other reasons. One day I will tell them to you. But it means we will have to sleep outside tonight, grass for our pillow, for there is no town near enough to stay in. We will cross the fief border by a secret route I know, and then we will be in Otori territory, safely out of reach of Sadamu.'

I did not want to spend the night on the lonely plain. I was afraid of ten thousand ghosts, and of the ogres and goblins that dwelled in the forest around it. The murmur of a stream sounded to me like the voice of the water spirit, and every time a fox barked or an owl hooted I came awake, my pulse racing. At one stage the earth itself shook, in a slight tremor, making the trees rustle and dislodging stones somewhere in the distance. I thought I could hear the voices of the dead, calling for revenge, and I tried to pray, but all I could feel was a vast emptiness. The secret god, whom the Hidden worship, had been dispersed with my family. Away from them, I had no contact with him.

Next to me Lord Otori slept as peacefully as if he had been in the guest room of the inn. Yet I knew that, even more than I was, he would have been aware of the demands of the dead. I thought with trepidation about the world I was entering – a world that I knew nothing about, the world of the clans, with their strict rules and harsh codes. I was entering it on the whim of this lord, whose sword had beheaded a man in front of my eyes, who as good as owned me. I shivered in the damp, night air.

We rose before dawn and, as the sky was turning grey, crossed the river that marked the boundary to the Otori domain.

After Yaegahara the Otori, who had formerly ruled the whole of the Middle Country, were pushed back by the Tohan into a narrow strip of land between the last range of mountains and the northern sea. On the main post road the barrier was guarded by Iida's men, but in this wild isolated country there were many places where it was possible to slip across the border, and most of the peasants and farmers still considered themselves Otori and had no love for the Tohan. Lord Otori told me all this as we walked that day, the sea now always on our right-hand side. He also told me about the countryside, pointed out the farming methods used, the dykes built for irrigation, the nets the fishermen wove, the way they extracted salt from the sea. He was interested in everything and knew about everything. Gradually the path became a road and grew busier. Now there were farmers going to market at the next village, carrying yams and greens, eggs and dried mushrooms, lotus root and bamboo. We stopped at the market and bought new straw sandals, for ours were falling to pieces.

That night, when we came to the inn, everyone there