

# The King of Farts

## *Fukutomi chōja monogatari*

The **King of Farts** (*Fukutomi chōja* monogatari-lit., “The Tale of Rich Man Windfall”) is a cautionary tale, product of an age abounding in overnight millionaires and abject poverty. It is known in Japanese art circles through its more famous antecedent, the Kamakura period *Fukutomi zōshi* illustrated scroll set, which relates the good fortune of a virtuous man in the first scroll and the comeuppance of his would-be imitator in the second. The **King of Farts** is based on this second scroll. It is unclear whether it was a deliberate adaptation or whether the copyist had only this scroll for his reference. In either case, unlike the earlier *Fukutomi zōshi*, which features sparse lines of dialogue accompanying numerous illustrations, *The King of Farts* is a genuine extended narrative.

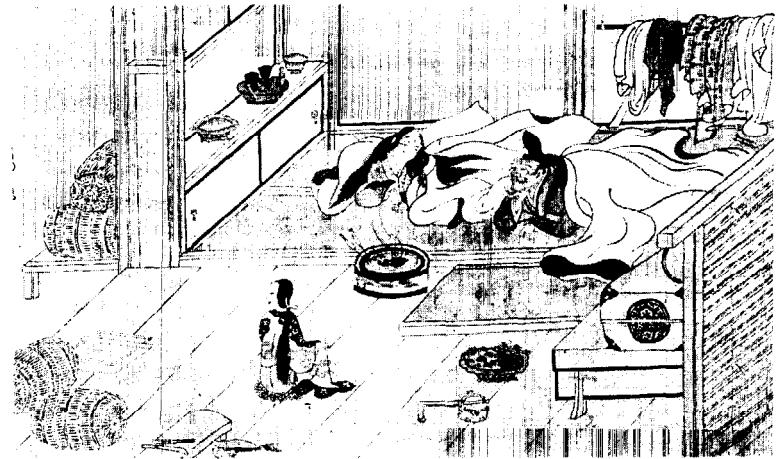
Much of the humor of this scatological farce is derived from the incongruity of an art of farting and a poor man’s misguided attempts at emulation. It is not particularly unseemly, for Windfall Oribe, the “Master Farther,” to **make** his living from flatulation: entertainment of this nature was probably one of the many grotesque curiosities of medieval street shows and carnivals. Yet certainly the text is also making an ironic comment on the medieval concept of **michi**, whereby the practice of an art was seen as a means of spiritual elevation. In the text, Windfall speaks of his farting as *michi*, and he is accorded the same degree of respect given **to** a master of the esteemed art of poetry. Of course, Windfall has done no work to develop his art; he was merely lucky. When his neighbor Tōda leaps at the chance for instant proficiency, he receives a hard lesson in self-reliance. Both characters represent a travesty of the rule of slow accretion of skill in tandem with spiritual advancement, just as the skill itself is a travesty of more refined arts.

This translation is based on the annotated text printed in *Otogi-zōshi*, ed. Ichiko Teiji (pp. 385–392). The original manuscript is an illustrated scroll in the collection of the Dai Tokyū Memorial Library, which has kindly provided the illustrations. The scribe, Naoume, is otherwise unknown.

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One should never envy the good fortune of another, for it may not accord with one's own lot in life. Long ago there lived a rich man known as Windfall Oribe,<sup>1</sup> who, thanks to some sort of favorable karma accrued in the past, possessed a particular inborn art at which he displayed uncanny ability without the need for practice. He achieved great fame effortlessly and was looked on as a god incarnate. His art was extremely vulgar, so everyone from all walks of life was familiar with it; since it was humorous, even the aristocracy came to hear of it and summoned him to perform to their vast amusement. Thereupon Windfall's wealth and happiness grew in leaps and bounds. He raised ridgepole upon ridgepole and built storehouse after storehouse. In his gardens, the five grains<sup>2</sup> sprang up lushly without the need for human cultivation.

Next door to Windfall lived a poor man named Hard-up Tōda.<sup>3</sup> Here, in marked contrast to the prosperity of his neighbor, smoke never rose from the chimney, and a tangle of weeds choked the path to the door. There was only a thatched fence instead of an earthen wall and rush blinds in place of curtains. In winter, his cold pallet provided scant comfort, and, since the fencing and eaves had been plundered long ago for firewood to ease the night chill, the



icy winds of winter blew in all the more. In summer, Hard-up wore shabby hempen robes and swatted away mosquitoes with a battered fan. Thus he lived day in and day out, the moonflowers growing near the eaves providing his only solace. When he was quite young, he had married a woman at least ten years his senior, whose enormous gaping mouth earned her the nickname Old Harpy.<sup>4</sup>

One day Old Harpy confronted her husband and said, "Even an idler without a profession, who belongs to none of the four classes, can be known far and wide and make his way up in the world if he has just one real art to display. Ah, it's just too cruel! You must not have been pious enough in an earlier life to have been born into this one without a single talent. It's truly a shame, such a shame!

"You may not be able to read or write, play an instrument, or dance, but there's no good reason why you can't learn that one art of our neighbor Windfall. Get yourself on over there, beg for lessons, and practice your heart out. Treat him as your master, and become his disciple. Miracles can happen in this world! Why, even if you don't become as famous as he, at least you'll be able to get by. And, if you're really clever at it, we here can have riches equal to theirs. He has a natural talent, to be sure, but you can't maintain an art without practice. As they say, polishing brings out the shine in a jewel. Anyway, learn it! If you don't, I'm sorry to say that you'll have to let your old lady go. With *this* fresh shining face of mine, I could have my choice of men." On and on she nagged.

Hard-up gave in to her arguments. He went next door and bowed obsequiously, saying one thing and another. Windfall came out to greet him. "Welcome, welcome! Yes, I'm aware of how you people over there exist from day to day, and I'm terribly sorry for you. I wanted to invite you to be my student and tell you that I was willing to be your master, but one shouldn't presume to offer advice in such matters. So time slipped by without my going on over to encourage you." He **went** on in a very sympathetic and friendly manner.

Hard-up bowed deeply and beamed. "My, my, this certainly is kind of you. Old Harpy has been after **me** constantly, but I never imagined that you would share such a glorious accomplishment as

yours with any other family, so I ignored her advice. Now I regret having wasted the past few years. When I tell her how very gracious you've been, it will please her to no end," he groveled, hands pressed together reverently.

Windfall's ire was aroused by this new assault of obsequiousness. With malice in his heart, he told Tōda, "Well, to practice my art you must first take a precious medicine before you perform—don't tell anyone about it! This is a family secret, so be sure that you never tell a soul!" Producing what seemed to be an old scroll, he explained in great detail how to prepare the ingredients.

"You've already been most generous, but would you mind giving me enough of that esteemed compound for just one performance? Old Harpy has been bossing and scolding me so much that I need to blow a few right away to show her what I can do," Hard-up pleaded fervently.

"In that case. . ." Windfall entered his house and returned with two round black pills.<sup>5</sup> "These are not to be taken on an empty stomach. Prepare your stomach with lots of food, then, exactly four hours before you expect to perform, wash them down with warm salt water. You're guaranteed to be a sensation! Don't worry if they don't take effect immediately, but, if it seems to take too long, scoop some water into a tub, dunk in your behind, and hold your breath," he instructed carefully.

Hard-up was delighted. He **took** his leave and returned home, raising the pills to his brow in gratitude. Old Harpy was waiting impatiently. "Well? Well? Did you learn anything? Did he teach you anything?"

Griming with delight, Hard-up related what had happened. His wife was overjoyed. "This very day, call on a person of consequence," she urged. "Announce yourself loudly and clearly, saying 'I am Tōda, a disciple of Windfall Oribe. I will **blast** them out in any way you desire.' I'd like to hear a trial run beforehand, but there are only two pills, and it would be a pity to waste them. Hurry up and get going!"

From a wicker trunk by the corner of the door she removed an old court hat, a persimmon-colored cloak, a pale blue overcloak,

and a pair of wide trousers and dressed him up. "Don't drag your feet! Go in with your spine straight and your chin held high!" She brushed the dust from the hat, slicked back his hair, looked at his front, then circled around to inspect the back. "With that hat on you look just like you did when you came to my parents' house to marry me. My, my, you're such a gentleman, such a gentleman!"

Hard-up took the tablets as instructed and set off. As he walked along, his stomach lurched and roared like thunder, but he tightened his buttocks and hurried on. The Honorable Middle Captain of Imadegawa was said to be a young man who might be amused by this sort of entertainment: he might reward Hard-up with all kinds of gifts. Hard-up arrived at the Middle Captain's residence and announced himself to the lord's retainers. The Middle Captain was interested: things had been rather boring of late, and he had tired of his studies. He ordered Hard-up to the garden, seated him on a straw mat by the side of the courtyard, and treated him to a lavish spread of food and wine. Then he sat expectantly with his ear cocked. Behind a reed screen inside were assembled his younger sister, who served at court, his cloistered grandmother, and his wife.

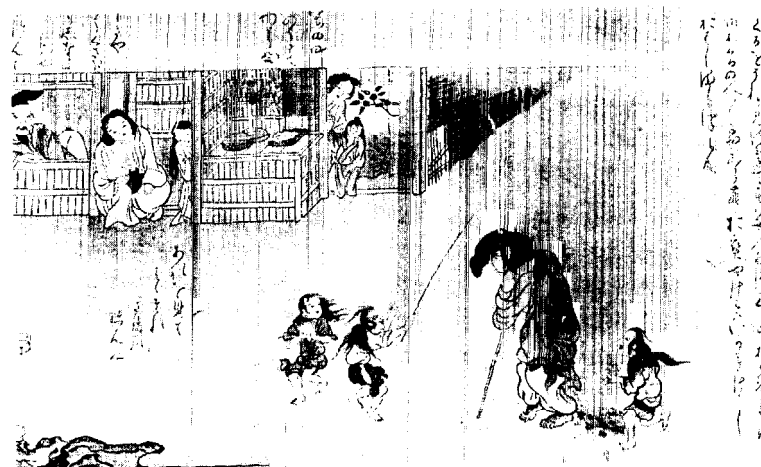
Hard-up's stomach hurt, but he tried to concentrate on the food. How odd! How dreadful! His guts were cramping, and his stomach was in such spasms that he could bear the pain no longer and tried to leave.

Just then, he abruptly let loose a spray as powerful as a water spout, leaving the white pebbled courtyard looking as if it had been covered by a scattering of primrose petals. He was musing that the mansions in Ide might look something like this<sup>6</sup> when a sudden breeze arose, wafting the stench all over the palace. It was disgusting, to say the least. Hard-up pressed together his reddened buttocks and prepared to flee, but the servants and houseboys leaped down brandishing whips and beat him until he was prone. He stuck out his bruised rear end and wailed; then they pulled him up by his hat and topknot and chased him out of the courtyard.

Blood flowed from the gashes on his forehead and trickled down to the ground in a stream as crimson as the autumn foliage along the Tatsuta River.<sup>7</sup> Smashed court hat perched on his head like a

snail's shell, blood seeping through his sleeves and hem, he slowly made his way home. How mortifying a figure he cut in broad daylight! Children playing hide-and-go-seek and blindman's bluff pointed and laughed as he passed by. Hard-up's battered haunches and skinned knees were excruciatingly painful; he wanted to sit and rest on the stoop of a shop, but he smelled so foul that no one would allow him to come near. He was quite a sight as he crept home, dragging his tail behind him.

Meanwhile, Old Harpy had been waiting by the gate all afternoon, impatiently craning her neck to watch the road. She spied him approaching from over two blocks away and thought to herself, "Aha! There's a crowd of people around him; they must be escorting him home. I'll bet the nobles really liked him!"<sup>8</sup> As he drew closer, she waxed ecstatic, thinking that he had been outfitted in a new red robe. All the more impatient, she dashed inside, crying, "Our old clothes are so ugly! Now that we're bound to be rich, I certainly won't wear rags like these! Why should the children<sup>9</sup> have to wear them either?" She tore the robes off the clothespole, fanned the fire, and burned them to ashes. Her grandson cried out in protest, but she paid no attention. Her daughter-in-law was caught up in the excitement, but waited agog<sup>10</sup> still half in disbelief.<sup>10</sup>



Hard-up painfully arrived home. What had appeared to be the crimson of a new robe was in fact blood from his head, and his now bright yellow trousers were sagging and dripping. Since he could touch no one, he was leaning on a stick, nose crusted over, face fixed in a scowl. He was utterly miserable. Any change of clothing had been reduced to ashes, so he stripped naked, hugging his shoulders in silence, shaking and shivering, his balls hanging down darkly. All in all, he looked as down and out as his name suggested.

The nun Myōsai from the house to the north called to express her sympathy. "Words fail me! Hail Amida Buddha!" she cried, and beat a hasty retreat. The mistress of the house next door<sup>11</sup> peered with pity through the slats of her blind, staring at his nether regions.

All that night and the following day his stomach ached. Evening mist rose from his behind, and it seemed that nocturnal insects were chirping in his guts. His bowels emptied like rain from autumn skies, fitfully stopping and starting. Racked by spasms of diarrhea, he moaned and groaned in pain. Old Harpy was furious, but she was hardly in a position to utter a word of reproach. When she warmed her wrinkled hands and tried to massage his stomach, such a smell arose that it was difficult to do anything at all, so she laid him out flat on his face and, grabbing onto the clothespole for balance, walked up and down his spine. The grandson shook with delighted laughter. "Pee pee! It's dripping!" Old Harpy saw that he was wet from the small of his back down to his heels and realized that his malady was yet unabated. His daughter-in-law brought great quantities of hot water, but he would not so much as glance at it. Oh, how it hurt! How it hurt!

Hard-up grew weaker and weaker as the days and nights passed. He couldn't even negotiate the path<sup>12</sup> to the toilet now, but instead would put on high clogs, weave his way out to the garden, and, leaning on the fulling stone, spray out large quantities of liquid. His throat was parched, and he would cry pitifully for water just like a child, but soon lost whatever he could wash down. In time he grew terribly thin; his formerly round face became gaunt, and his sunken eyes were wreathed in black rings.

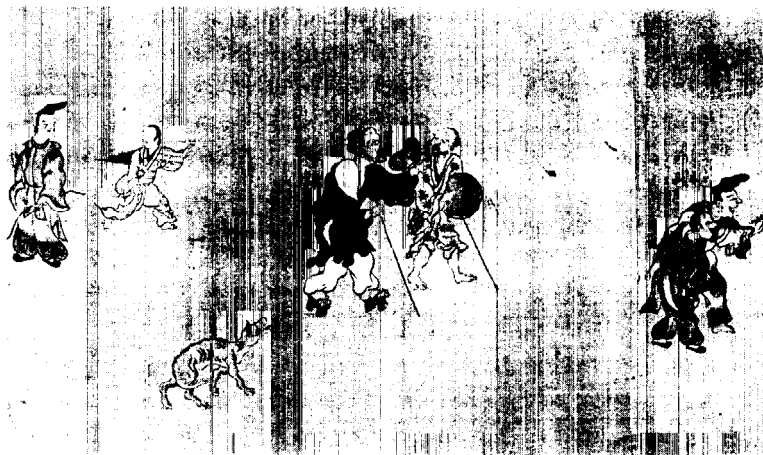
Thinking that his very life hung in the balance, his wife went to the office of Kiyomaro, the Head of the Bureau of Physicians. Plaintively she told her tale, pleading that a compassionate man distinguishes not rich from poor. The physician met with her and gave her some medicine, and at last she was able to breathe a sigh of relief.

She was still angry at Windfall, however. Going out to the riverbank, she purified herself, cut out paper for a prayer wand, faced south, and prayed. "Hear me! I follow the Law and pay homage to the Buddha. Oh, ye three deities of Kumano! Take that Windfall Oribe, who has so shamed my husband, into your power and make him suffer!" She rubbed her prayer beads furiously and prayed for evil to befall her enemy. She must have been heard, for a large-billed bird came flying from the direction of Kumano, dipped its wings over the stick, and sang. She returned home confident that her request would be granted.<sup>13</sup>

When she realized that Windfall must have deliberately deceived her husband, her hatred flared tenfold. "Somehow I'll take my revenge," she thought, waiting feverishly day and night.

It is the way of the world that one must bear the weight of another's grievances.<sup>14</sup> Windfall was afflicted with continual nightmares. He consulted a soothsayer, who advised him to declare a taboo for seven days, fasten shut his gate, and see no one. This was so dreary a prospect that Windfall decided to ask the gods to reverse his ill fortune. He set off on a pilgrimage the very next morning. Old Harpy caught wind of his journey and waited at the roadside for his return. As soon as he appeared, she seized him fiercely with the wild look of a mountain demon. How terribly frightful! Since Windfall was a man, he was able to wrench away from her grip and flee, but she chased after him, clamped her teeth down on his chest, and shook her head back and forth more savagely than a rabid dog. Her eyeballs rolled upside down, and her mouth split open to the ears, just like a furious serpent. Passersby cried out, "It's a people-eating demon! How awful!" Some ran away, and others stayed to gawk in fascination.

Two itinerant minstrels named Tameichi and Utaichi, shuffling



sleepily down the road on their return from an overnight vigil, were startled awake by all the commotion. Imagining that it came from wild beasts, they took to their heels as fast as they could. The Lord Chamberlain thought that the mad barking of the dogs meant that a thief was about. He picked up a small bow and went out to shoot the culprit, but, on hearing the cries “Demon, demon!” returned home quietly.

And that’s what happened long ago.

Autumn 17 50

Transcribed by Naoume

#### NOTES

1. Fukutomi no Oribe. I have freely translated *fukutomi* (wealth and prosperity) as “windfall,” intentionally punning on the nature of his profession. *Fuku* also means “to blow”; perhaps his name incorporates this pun.

2. Wheat, rice, beans, and two kinds of millet.

3. Bokushō no Tōda. *Bokushō* is composed of two characters, denoting “poor” and “sparse.”

4. *Oniuba*, lit., “old lady demon.” Demons were imagined to have large mouths.

5. In the *Fukutomi zōshi* scrolls, the “medicine” is described as ground-up morning glory seeds.

6. A location famed for the beauty of its primroses (*yamabuki*).

7. The picture caption reads: “A poor farter makes this kind of uproar. / Beat him! Beat him! / Could he have been drunk? / It has the stink of a rotten persimmon. / It reeks! It reeks!”

8. The picture caption reads: “People peeked out from roadside stalls and snickered. / Look at that! Don’t do poo-poo, little boy! / What a stink—you’d think the great wind god himself let it out!”

9. The text specifically states “daughter-in-law and grandson.” Nothing is mentioned about a son.

10. The picture caption reads: “Oh, how it smoked! / She must have loved that smoke—that billowing smoke. / Stand back! Stand back!”

11. Perhaps Windfall’s wife?

11. The text reads *michi*, another satirical reference to the exalted “way.”

13. I have corrected an inversion of this and the preceding paragraph in the Japanese text. Ichiko Teiji, the annotator of the text, believes that the copyist must have blundered.

14. The original—“Hito no nageki wa ou naru yo no naka”—is unclear.