

OKAMOTO Kei  
“A Moment” (Tsuka no ma)  
Tr. Kendall Heitzman

moaning thunderbolt eyes  
a gun homicide  
the five holes punched in a life  
dry out and soon turn black  
and white: I saw it in print  
a corner of the paper near the comics  
a few lines of news

his name will soon  
splinter into a thousand pieces and fly over vast distances  
but the afternoon that washed over him in that moment  
can't be changed  
the way the name of a boulevard can

I know it well that cold roadway  
where alone he hangs the natural world he wore  
on the edge of the trembling atmosphere  
and breathes his last  
it is all too easy for me to be here  
but love had cloaked itself in a physical body

I scrawled missives here and there  
in the passageways that ran underground  
because I couldn't bear the dark secret

I didn't know  
this inordinate span of time known as today  
that started on the shores of death  
would shimmer so sadly

OKAMOTO Kei  
“Chairs” (Isu)  
Tr. Kendall Heitzman

The vacuum is thrumming  
in the oratory.  
Right at the bottom of the polished wooden backrest  
on every chair  
the lacquer is peeling right at the same spot.  
The cleaner comes on Mondays, it seems.  
The fat on his back shimmies  
straight through his t-shirt, as  
(never minding me)  
he drags the nozzle back and forth, in jerks  
more violent than a lamentation.  
So brusque, but of course  
so very human.  
My toes crowd up against the very front of my shoes.  
I am enchanted by these deep substrata pushing into view,  
polished to a fault,  
but  
other than the rumble of the motor  
was there anything else to be heard?

*Hey, Kei,*  
*do you know what it means to pray?*  
*Like when you get a paper cup from Starbucks*  
*filled right to the brim,*  
*and have to walk with it.*  
*You hold yourself rigid, so that you don't spill a drop.*  
Memories of the departed.  
Communion with the unknown.  
A single wire,  
like a hair caught on my tongue—  
I went to spit out that strand  
which had lodged inside my cheek,  
and smelled the newly fallen leaves.

My strength will fail, like a branch that is snapped.  
My lungs, too, will fall to waste,  
that I know.  
That's why I want to speak  
in a tongue with the contours clearly defined.  
In the lazy morning,  
when no one is looking —  
the old chairs, which he is cleaning by himself,  
are perfectly arranged on the floor.  
Someone sits down here, and when they go  
takes with them the warmth of the wood.

Mud knocked off shoes, splotted across the space;  
a week's worth of dust;  
a strew of dry leaves;  
the clinging bugs, fallen hairs —  
each individual breath  
is in its turn suddenly sucked up  
into the darkness,  
shaking me as they go.  
Racked by vibrations like a passenger plane  
on takeoff,  
the old drum-shaped vacuum and  
a stray walnut rattle on the floor.  
Could I hear the sound of another,  
the thrumming without end,  
and never once feel any awe?

OKAMOTO Kei

“Sender Unknown” (Sashidashinin wa fumei)

Tr. Kendall Heitzman

*Giant Iceberg Breaks Away from Antarctica*

*Crack more than 120 miles long had developed over years*

Did you read about it,  
this Larsen C ice shelf?

How many ice cubes do you want?  
you ask, rattling the tray.  
Newborn babies cannot distinguish between night and day.  
When we are born, at last, the drifting begins.  
Before that, we are  
as useless as splinters.

We are as useless as splinters, sure, as useless  
as a mere trillion ton iceberg.  
The wind does not blow on our cheeks,  
the light does not get through our eyelids—  
it is as though we have fallen into the post.

The sender is unknown.  
Inside an envelope,  
tracked and delivered,  
a colossal page has been folded over and over  
but nothing has been written on it.

Okamoto Kei

“Tokyo, 2020” Tr. Kendall Heitzman

something is there oh, yes, something  
so uncertain like the  
stain a bagel leaves on a paper bag or  
the witness a scrape on the back of a hand pays to the heaving protest and  
the light that streams through the spaces between the police billy clubs

the leaden lines of your writing crumpled and stuffed into  
the damp suede of your sneakers suck up the moisture  
maybe you can hear how it quietly seeps in

you give up on figuring out  
which record is inside which cover and sunk down deep in your sofa  
fish out the softened paper spread it out carefully and for long hard minutes  
stare at the traces of what has been blotted out beyond comprehension

is it gone at last  
the drub of the driving rain that grew fierce the moment  
you pedaled off bike lock draped around your neck

when you finally raise your head you can see the clouds all that is left of the rain  
and Tokyo, bewildered not a trace of anger only a hushed  
place of great death hey everyone  
hey let's sound our umbrellas fire up  
our confusions hold in our mouths  
a single sip of cold coffee this body,  
before we know it stops moving cells die  
the universe seeps out  
but it doesn't disappear or so you believe

and then what are you supposed to do  
with this confusion the meaning gone blurry  
put it away, put it away that kind of obscurity only for esoterics  
you don't understand it but it is right here before you  
as the paper starts to dry, it wrinkles undulates  
nothing particularly beautiful a single sheet of scrubwork

what to do with this aging body this thing they call a “soul”  
this unintelligible, monstrous universe

OKAMOTO Kei

“The Oort Cloud” (Ōruto no kumo) Tr. Kendall Heitzman

I know full well  
it can't be wiped away and replaced  
we quick are spattered with mud  
a bric-a-brac corpus  
in the summer breeze  
a ski area in summer where the very shadows are blown away, the stopped chairlifts  
stretch across the exposed green of my heart  
and I am tumbling on, forgotten  
like an empty insect box  
wayward still  
outside of time, I cast about, I pluck a single stalk  
and before my very eyes, the pampas grass turns transparent  
My father's quiet figure, too, fluffs up bit by bit  
from the snow I hereby add to this writing,  
becomes a girthy yeti, a Sasquatch, and in the end  
disappears from sight again  
I hold the paper up to the light, a little  
sinewy. Ah, no need for letters anymore  
No matter where I am, no matter where I arrive  
this is the ends of the earth. But, truly,  
was I here for my split second?  
With words as my pillow, somehow I am sleeping at the station building.  
When I set free the last image  
taken from the empty insect box  
in my corpus I have to ask, OK,  
What am I looking at?  
Time without cease, I see it disappear  
over the horizon behind my eyes, one  
Brilliant horse fluttering beast time without end  
bearing my friend gone in peace down his course  
so fast they spatter mud on my pants  
and cake my pupils, too  
the wind carries an unknown body  
of work  
wispig away as smoke  
[blinking, pain] the wind has blown  
through my chest, the door will not shut  
the mud is a native tongue we cannot wipe away  
so strange in my pulse silent though it may be

someone is speaking I can say  
these meaningless things  
to no one in particular,  
my breath seemingly surprised that it was ever born

OKAMOTO Kei

“The Shape of Things” (Sugata) Trans. Kendall Heitzman

they appear  
and just as soon disappear  
like words  
like breath

the leaves sway wildly  
and trembling among them  
are the ears of a fox

which twitch  
ever so slightly—  
like subtitles, the ears only gesture  
at everything below, still a fox

I am not yet enough  
not for the tomato weighing down its vine  
not for the glistening stream of light  
not for the bird pecking away  
or even for the soft, sticky spider’s thread

but it’s true  
everything and anything is something  
not yet enough

The parched tomato plants  
that have sunk their roots into the rock  
and their red fruit  
are the world itself  
of which we are so tired

one of them, not yet enough  
but still so plump  
wipe it gently,  
slowly sink your teeth in,  
and wow

so tart



OKAMOTO Kei

"Music" (Ongaku) Tr. ENDO Tomoyuki

The sound never comes straight,  
but somehow, I can hear it so clearly.  
The comet timidly passing by.  
The mouth trying to inform of its passing  
moves silently.  
The twelve numbers, the short hand and long hand  
that have regulated our living  
have flown away,  
and the balls with various colors are turning upside down  
moving slowly above my head, beyond my toes. . .  
Well, there always IS a place out of reach of our imaginations, but  
I just want to know where you are.  
Thinking about the people taken away by Death,  
I can't share how it feels with them.  
At the edge of the woods where everything begins,  
there comes flying a needle of life  
and it turns to a bright beak of a toucan  
and I walk toward the direction the beak points.  
Stirring / stirred,  
toward this great chance occurrence on this earth.  
From such a place,  
the sound never comes straight,  
but the sound I have vaguely heard in this world  
can be, somehow, clearly heard.

OKAMOTO Kei

"a body" (Aru Karada) Tr. ENDO Tomoyuki

With the posture  
yielding everything to myself,  
the brightness receding from the face,  
the eyes sunken, the ankles, the upper arms, the wrists  
torn apart, collapsing right in front of my eyes.  
(this is one of my works "inertia," which happened,  
and will stay with my body, forever)  
bending the body forward,  
and looking for the toes never coming out of the bottoms of the trousers,  
slipping the arms to the forgotten sleeves,  
hooking the buttons on the chest onto the time nobody knows,  
wiping the breath,  
a tumbler, though it was handed, slipped from the hand,  
making the clear sound,  
onto the cold ground,  
regardless of the ears,  
regardless of the long time of silence  
till this planet is covered  
with the air.  
Putting my cheek on the soil,  
with a blink  
never again redeemed.

## our whereabouts

Translated by Polly Barton and Motoyuki Shibata

don't speak to me one whisper will change everything  
 why does everyone carry monsters around with them so patiently  
 before my eyes *the garden of vertigo* is *starting out at a blank sheet*  
 the moment the words float up I brush against a soft breeze  
 catch alight leaping flames grasp at *the curtain of meadow*  
 grasp at *the flowerless bough*  
 words grasp other words one after another  
 but what is *the garden of vertigo*?  
 at each stand-still the flint of the words and the flint of the landscape collide  
 snap crackle tut-tut of tongues here, you see? I'm hearing things  
 I am whispered to  
 leap up, little wisp of flame! stretch up, sweet chimney! the whole line blazes up from the hem  
*starting out at a blank sheet* blazes *the flowerless bough* blazes  
*the deranged forest road* blazes *the dance of the imps* blazes

and though I am there as though I was always meant to be utterly lost  
 I can't find the words ummmm ummm  
 ummmm ummmm  
*the garden of vertigo* taken out (burnt) from the oven is

flint                      whisp                      ear  
    er  
 ear  
    ear  
    er  
 hear                                      wisp  
 fire                                      tongue  
    ear  
    er

