Takako ARAI
Poems

Give Us Morning

Morning is the time we count the dead
In the newspapers, in the hospitals, on the roads, on the seashores
In the rubble that was once our homes
Possess us all the more, Amenouzume-san
The morning is still not enough
We still cannot count them all
We still cannot carry them all
Dance more for us, Amenouzume-san
Put a green twig in your hair
And call out to them
Give the dead
To morning
Possess them, call out to them

It's me, the girl floating here this whole time
It's me, Mama's boy crouched down
It's me, the boy with the right arm wrenched off
I want to see you again, I want to see you again
A bullet to the temple
I scratch my throat, it hurts
Now I'm sinking as far as I can go
Why? Why was I the boy
Blown aside by the bomb blast?
The fingers of flame came in no time
I struggle but there's only sand, I struggle but there's only sand
One lung was crushed by the ceiling
Left alone like this, where will I float?
I wait for an extended hand
Here I am, here I am
I want to escape this blood-bathed school
With my girlish eyes still open wide

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I know this is my last breath
I am fed up with the roar of the bombs
The sea has raised its clenched fist

Morning is the time we count the dead
On the TV news, in the embassies, in the community centers
In the rubble that was once our buildings and our mosques
Possess us all the more, Amenouzume-san
The morning is still not enough
The morning is still not enough
The morning is still not enough
Dance for us all the more, Amenouzume-san
Claw the milk from your breast, shake your hair wildly
Pound your feet on the ground
And dance
Spin your arms round, shake off your sweat
Bend back your neck
And dance, dance
More
More
More
Sway your spine, lift your legs
Shake your hips
More
More
More
Set your womanly shadow on fire
Open your womanly shadow
And call for them
And dance for them
And possess them
And gather
The dead
To the shadow

Give them to morning
Give us morning
The time we count the corpses
Translator's note:
This poem was written at the time of the Iraq War and the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean. In an interview for the journal *Full Tilt*, Arai commented “Every morning, I would wake up, turn on the TV or open the newspaper only to find reports of the numbers of the dead... It seems so ironic to see such terrible tragedies and cruelty transposed into numbers. At the same time, I wanted to try to depict the mornings that surrounded those huge and weighty numbers.” Amenouzume is a mythical Japanese goddess associated with dance and performance. Through her dance, she is said to have lured the Sun Goddess Amaterasu out of a rock cave where she had secluded herself, thus plunging the world into darkness. The words “womanly shade” that appear toward the end of the poem is a euphemism for the vagina.

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When the Moon Rises

It is the night shift in an abandoned spinning factory
There is only a single light bulb here
The spools of thread turn by themselves
Click goes the bobbins
Changed by the machines
It has already been a decade
Since this place shut down
But when the moon rises, it begins to work
Its strange automation
They say soon after the war
A factory worker’s hair got tangled
In the machines, killing her
There are things that float here
But this is not the work of ghosts
No
In the factory
There are peculiar habits
That is what I mean
Peculiar habits remain here
An old lady who spun thread
For forty-four years here
Still licks her index finger and twists
Even on her deathbed
She cannot escape that gesture
That must be true in the netherworld too
Since threads are so infinitely thin
The gestures sink into the bodies
Of those who manipulate the machines
They possess them

Look
How the raw silk thread
Is pulled smoothly
From the factory woman’s fingers
Then dances endlessly
The factory is that way too
The axle of the spinning wheel
Remembers
The molecules of steel
Hang their heads in the
Direction in which they spin
Then get caught up
Clanging emptily
When the moonlight pours in
It is not just the tide that is full

Emptily
Emptily
The spinning wheels spin
The threads swim
Through the abandoned factory

—Translated by Jeffrey Angles

Wheels

A fire is coming! A fire’ll be here soon!
There was a female snake that kept warning us
It lived for ages in the storage space above the closet
We grew up hearing its voice
Each time we laid out the bedding
Eventually my sister and I could hardly stand it
We would lie in wait anxiously, temples pounding
It’s coming tonight! It’ll be here tonight!
Did you extinguish it? Did you put it out?
Did you smother it? Are there any cracks for it to get in?
We started lowering our eyes to check

The snake was one of the factory girls three generations ago
She was so beautiful she turned the heads of men passing by
But the man she loved cheated on her
She started taking methamphetamines so often
She could not leave the workers’ dormitory
She started having visions
She started hallucinating about fire
A fire is coming! A fire’ll be here soon!
Perhaps she wanted to feel a fire burning down there
There were only women in the factory
They poured water into her mouth from a teapot
And she came to for a moment
One side of her face would be smiling
But her expression would look so forlorn
Her hairline raised in a peak
A fire’s coming! Hot! Hot!
She steamed, went into convulsions, and died among nightmares
They say they gave her a funeral right there
Her brother did not come for her ashes
Even the locks of hair her co-workers saved
Were stashed away in a storage compartment
It was that hair that cried out to us
Every night

The fire in the kitchen range, the fire in the stove
The charcoal in the brazier, the cigarettes in the ashtray
The heater beneath the bath
The metal latch in the sliding door, the window key
When my sister and I grew too intent
Looking at one would cause us to forget what came before
The snake would cry out, Look, it's a trap! And we would start all over
A fire is coming! A fire'll be here soon!
We were compelled to crawl around the floor
Who knows how many times our eyes licked
The charcoal stoves at the feet of the women
In the spinning factory?

I was terrified of the voice, it would get under my skin
It was my older sister pulling my leg
She was imitating the factory girl
She turned off the light in the bathroom so it was pitch black
And would imitate it, A fire is coming! A fire'll be here soon!
She made me cry
I cried and clung to my sister as she teased me
She was just trying to scare me
But even so
In the slowly cooling steam
She would eye me with a strange gleam
As if she were speaking the truth
A fire's coming! A fire's coming! It's coming! It's coming!
The factory's going to burn!
Her voice, the voice evoked the snake
And came after me
It turned upon me and came after me
It got under our skin, swallowing
The two of us together in the nude

We would try to endure it as we rolled up the bedding
But we would always crawl out
And it would lift itself up
And the factory girl
Would look at the source of the fire with us
We would slither, slither, slither
The ceiling would spit out dust
The handles on the chest would rattle
I don’t get it! The more I look
The more fiery apparitions in the sparks
We would check too often to see if the fire was out
   If the gas opening on the kitchen range was out
   If the cigarette butts in the ashtrays were out
   If the burning embers in the hibachi were out
We would light them
   We would set our eyes upon
   The ghostly flame
I who was chasing my sister who was chasing the factory girl who was chasing my sister who was chasing me who was chasing
Me who was chasing me who was chasing the factory girl who was chasing my sister who was chasing...
We were mice, gasping, forming a big whirl
We were house mice, shaking our breasts in fear
We can’t catch you!
We called out to the sparks

The spinning wheels smile

We would often light fireworks by the ditch by the factory
We would bring the brass candlestick from the family’s Buddhist altar
And bring the colored paper near the flame for our ancestors
And the powder would suck it in
It would choke a bit
Then the flame
Would spring up
Would turn, would kick the gravel
Would try to steal the children’s ankles
Would reflect in the water
Would explode and
Would scorch the straps of our sandals and at the same time
Would get under our skin
The flame had no feet
Nor did the dead
So it would try to swallow us
We were the ones being chased
We were the ones
  It was after

The spinning wheels smile

There was a bright red quilt
Sewn from the old underclothes
The factory girl wore beneath her kimono
When I snuggled into it
My face would grow red
And wind would pass through my throat
Snuggle further down and
The setting sun would shine, flashing
The thick snake would start slithering
From the storage closet
Coming for the two little mice
Its eyes clear, the color of flame

   Flaring
       The flame
           Would crawl closer

It was on fire
  The factory girl, her hair had come lose
           And had become the shimmering of the heat

It was on fire
  My sister, she stuck out her tongue
           From behind her buck teeth

I stood
  On the edge of the ditch
The flame
  Burning at my ankles

The spinning wheels turn.  They turn in the hot wind.  They turn with the hot hands of the flames.
They turn intently.  They turn like a coiled snake.  They turn staring at fate.  The spinning factory
is a wheel of flame. It turns, swallowing a whirlpool of fire. It spins on and on to the end of the world. It spins on and on to the end of time.

It is spinning

It is spinning its bright red thread

—Translated by Jeffrey Angles

**Nylon Scarf**

The weaving girls lived there
Played with me, tied cake ribbons into my hair
So much younger than mother
They stiffened when I threw my arms around them
They didn't stick to me
Though their breasts were soft
Clamoring like light falling through trees, there was an opening
Yeah, that—
Embarrassing, when I think of it now
When a child touches them
Pale nipples tighten
It tickled... Tickled me too
	So that's why I, still a little girl
Would make a point to take them in my arms

On the wall of their lodgings
A girl with big, made-up eyes and flipped-out curls, a man in profile wearing a scarf
Magazine cutouts plastered the whole place
In the sharp scent of hairspray
The weaving girls made themselves up to look nice
Put the make-up on thick, like girls who trade their affections for cash
The girls competed
Stared into the mirror
Even when brushing their cheeks against a child
They felt it
Embarrassment, that is
They're closed in, turn on the factory lights
And they shake with the roar
That is
They look just like those who lean
Against the wall of a noisy disco
I get it now
Why they stayed so long in the factory

I got in together
One evening with Mat-chan
We borrowed the bathtub from the factory head’s wife
She scrubbed me, my back and my head
Called me her little kewpie doll
Made me stand up, covered in bubbles, and smiled
Then we submerged ourselves
To our necks, counted to fifty
Something changed
Her eye color
So quickly—And go!
She started to scoop out goldfish
No
None were there, of course
Mat-chan
Spread a thin towel outside the tub
And meekly
Began to scoop out
The body hair swimming in the tub
Kids don’t need to help, she said
Over and over
She scooped them out
Even when I told her there weren’t any more
Splash, splash—Sopping, soaking wet
Dripped
Splash, splash—Sopping, soaking wet
How did we
Climb out of the bath?
How much did our warm bodies cool?
I don’t remember
Was Mat-chan’s name
Really Machiko? Or Matsuko perhaps?
I don’t remember

When the girls left the lodgings
The factory owner’s wife gave them a silk kimono belt
To take for their bridal trousseau
Day after day, Mat-chan had been weaving
Gold-threaded peonies, peacocks, and other treasures
But when told to take any she liked
The plainest turtle-shell pattern is what she chose
I can wear it the longest, she said
Mat-chan boded better than all the others
With her attractive, richly colored nylon scarf
When she lowered her head
And left with the belt
She dove into waters from a shore far more difficult
Than her coming-of-age would ever be
Where are you going?
No one ever dared to ask

They peeled off
Cutouts on the wall
Souvenir pennants from group excursions
Leaving just scotch tape, wistfully waiting
Brush your bangs against it
One hair gets caught
Snuggles up and dangles close

I didn’t tell anyone
About her scooping up goldfish
About Machiko or Matsuko or whatever her name was
I didn’t tell anyone
About the hot, flushed bodies and furrowed brows
Of the factory girls who had removed their make-up
I didn’t tell anyone
About the water of our borrowed bath
About how her fist broke the water's surface
Sending waves, rolling across,
Splish, splish—Sopping, soaking wet
I didn't tell anyone
About the fishy-smelling water droplets
And the fluttering tail of the bright red fish
I didn't tell, I didn't tell
Anyone at all
Did she take what she didn't want to show a soul
And dissolve it in the warm water?
What was it
That dissolved?

She smells of hairspray
Mat-chan, the discolored goldfish
Slips through narrow channels between
Floating photographs, ink oozing out
Between cut-out men and women
Flapping back and forth, back and forth
Flapping back and forth, back and forth
Swimming with her nylon scarf
Where on earth
Could she have
Possibly flowed?

Or was she simply carried away
Down the muddy river flowing by the factory?

—Translated by Jeffrey Angles

Dolloy

Oh! You're even rounder than I expected. Cinched in by a skinny belt.
Every spring you need a new red dress, so now you're fat with layers, a bundled-up ball Girl-doll. What a stink when your hem's picked up—as if those layers were stewed in soy for days. Layers, layers fraying, then more layers.

Fresh layers every year. You put on new ones as the ones inside mature. And there inside you tend your many moulds. In spring they wriggle, teem and like blossoms fall away.

Well, it all makes sense—the silk threads are both the spit of the worms and their boiled-up flesh, so of course they stink. You've been to the silk mill, right? The stench burns your nostrils because the cocoons are peeled skin. And so these layers, rotten with damp, turn back to flesh.

Of course. Girl-dolls are the mummies of silk worms.

Of course. Girl-dolls are the mummies of young girls.

Once there was a girl like a girl-doll pole—whack, whack!—standing, with arms chopped off. Human sacrifice, yes? The human pole offered to the mountain goddess. We give thanks for all the lumber we're given, of course!

Standing, she can't stop the flow of blood from her shoulders. Moon-blood. She's cinched to the pole and it splashes, even from her womb.

And can't stop, even after her last breath is gone,

even after the goddess has stripped her skin.

Girl-doll is standing in for you.

Girl-doll is standing in for the mountain goddess.

Every spring you need new skin, so now you're plump with life. Goddess. Celebrating the breath-push. Blossoms, then more blossoms from within your mountain gorge. For hundreds of years, thousands of years

layering age—

Please, please make a corpse for me, slowly, slowly put the skins on

give me red ones

because I'll dye them, because I can't stop. Of course it stinks when you lift these layers.

That's
the moon.

—Translated by Rina Kikuchi & Jen Crawford

Galápagos

Just gossip!, The damn economy is
Just a fairy tale!, Stock prices,
Come on and do it!
  Make fun of them all the more
I'm sick of it
All this goth clothing, all this Uniqlo-ing

It's a mess!, Eros
Left out all the time!, Thanatos
Bring it back to life!,
  Alienate them all the more
Incessant cellphones
Microsoft monsters

--------Isn't that all you'd ever let us wear?
  Wasn't that our national uniform?
  Before the quake
  The tsunami of the recession
  All we ever worried about?

That
Is our protective wear
It thrives on adversity
It can withstand high waves
Up to six meters tall
No,
It's more like swimming gear
It looks like it might drown
In the cold global
Womb of grotesque globalism
In Lehman Brothers
Salaried men
Don't want anything
Don't say anything
Won't do anything, won't do it anymore
Girls, boys, the intermediate sex
Not more procreating, unisex

    Just look
    At that fission
    They say they can't get any fusion
Between those sperm-like neutrons

It's just been let go!, Nuclear fission
Just exposed!, The womb of the reactor dome too
Fuel rods (henryōbō), safety hats (anzenbō), egg cells (ransaibō), stinginess (kechinbō), thieves (dorobō),
Refrigerators (reibō), heaters (danbō),
Babies (akanbō), deceased (hotokenbō), floating (ukabō) on the great plain of the sea, on the verge of screaming (orabō),
The reactor building about to fly off (buttabō),
Embankments (teibō), conspiracies (inbō), ministerial offices (kanbō),
    Unbelievable
    Incredible
TEPCO
    Puts on their Uniqlo
    To bulwark
The tsunami

    No nuclear dome
    We'll make electricity
    In our con-domes
Is a half-life
Good enough?

Us

—Translated by Jeffrey Angles

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