

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

*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
Sway your spine, lift your legs
Shake your hips
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

—Translated by Jeffrey Angles

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 shadow" that appear toward the end of the poem is a euphemism for the vagina.

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 empty
When the moonlight pours in
It is not just the tide that is full

Empty

Empty

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 loose
 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... Ticked 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 looked 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,
Splash, splash—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

Dology

Oh! You're even rounder than I expected. Cinched in by a skinny belt.

the moon.

—Translated by Rina Kikuchi & Jen Crawford

Galapagos

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 (nenryōbō), 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 (buttobō),
 Embankments (teibō), conspiracies (inbō), ministerial offices (kanbō),
 Unbelievabō
 Incredibō
 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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