

**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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