

Yasuhiro YOTSUMOTO**Poetry and prose****Accounting (会計)**

First, imagine an infinitely vast wasteland spreading in front of you.
Second, draw a straight line from your feet to the horizon.
Look! This is our world as a whole and the watershed that divides it.
All the elements in this world
must maintain perfect balance between both sides of the line.
In other words, Right and Left, that's the key.
OK, then, place what you own on the left,
and what you owe by acquiring your possessions on the right.
For example, pleasure and reproduction, beauty and poison,
being alive now and dying someday.
A young zelkova tree and lost memories.
Whatever you do, you should not bring in a concept such as Chaos,
for the world is finally acquiring order.
Cast away anything that doesn't fit this system beyond the horizon
even if it turns out to be yourself.

Translated from the Japanese by the author

Family Room (団欒)

The father doesn't know
that his son is smoking a Marlboro in a forest clearing
solemnly and ceremoniously
as if in a ritual among Native Americans.

The son doesn't know

that his sister has been standing for more than an hour
in front of the bathroom mirror
like a princess who got turned into a spider by magic.

The sister doesn't know
what Sancho the cat felt other than pain
when he was run over and his brilliant pink intestines
fell out onto the pavement.

The cat doesn't know
what the ash tree in the garden was trying to say
to the cloud which had drifted away over the roof
by shaking out its leaves frantically.

But the cloud does know
that a white alligator is growing slowly and steadily
deep inside the body and soul of
the mother.

The mother doesn't know
how sullen her face looks
in the eyes of the husband
and what prophecy it gives him.

In the name of great grandfather's love letters, the laws of Mendel
and salted salmon,
a family is constituted. Its members gather
in a living room littered with fish bones and bird feathers
and momentarily attain immortality with laughter and quarrels.

Sancho the cat,
now resurrected and sharpening his claws
is watching it all go by.

See'ya later! (行ってきまあす!)

My son who left for kindergarten in the morning
came home tonight as a 35-year-old man.

You' re late, I said.

Yeah, he replied in a man's thick voice
looking up at the cuckoo clock with affection.

What have you been doing till this late, asked my wife.

Well, he showed that smile of his, and said
he's been married for three years, working as an aerospace engineer,
summarizing his life in the same way as I once did myself.
Hey, isn't his hair already quite grey!

I found it odd having my sake cup filled by my son who was the same age as I, and murmured
"thanks, that's fine."

My wife stared at us, comparing my face to his, his to mine,
as he started to tell us about the planet in 30 years, which
knocked us both back in horror and surprise.

How have you survived in such a terrible world!

Environmental disasters, population explosion, nuclear weapons,
racism and terrorism.

Sure, I can see the seeds of those problems right here and now,
and this here and now has somehow become the irrevocable past for my son and his family in
the future, confusing as that may be;
the only thing clear is that they ended up with the worst-case scenario.

Say, what if Mom and I try to change all those things starting now?

I'm not sure, Dad, once it's done it's done.

My wife held him by the sleeve and begged him to stay home in an oddly theatrical manner.
I see his point, it would go against providence.

It's all our fault
yet my son utters not a single word of reproach.
Could it be because I am already gone from his world?
I am mildly curious about it,
but it really does not matter one way or the other.

"Don't worry about us. If we are lucky, we can win the lottery for the lunar emigration."
With one hand on the small of his back,
he shook my hand with the other, and kissed my wife
on the cheek like a western foreigner.
Midnight darkness falling behind him,
he said,
See'ya later, in a 5-year-old's voice.

Translated from the Japanese by Akiko Yotsumoto

September Eleventh (9.11)

The world is abuzz about the second anniversary
Saying all has changed from that day forward but
For us this is the day to celebrate our anniversary

Until last year an armful of roses marked the day
But today there are only two stems of roses
One for each decade we've been together
The twin towers stand tall in the vase

Our kids use their knives awkwardly
On the meat my vegetarian wife cooked
We urge them to grow

Yet between us

We want time to leave us just as we are

What gifts can we give each other

While these two stems of roses leaning on each other

Collapse soundlessly at the bottom of our days?

In a mouthful of tart I taste the summer sky we shared on our trip

I play riddles with Daughter, then

Oblivious of praying or loving

.... I fall asleep

Encounter in the Shadows (影のなかの邂逅)

Was it before I fell asleep at night?

Or was it right after I woke?

My wife said

I saw your Mom,

I simply said umm then, but

I knew that my mother, dead for 25 long years

Did not come over on her own

My wife went to see her

Crossing the field of dreams, down the valley of deaths

Timid, yet full of blind faith

Just as she was twenty-five years ago when we first met

She'd jump up at the door banging shut

Fondled easily by the inviting sunlight

She could dance all by herself

Yet when the wind falls she is deadly quiet
From beyond the hills of closed eyelids
She walks over
Muddled, blood oozing on her cheek
Nursing silence like a rare beast in her heart

Wind Seduces Stone (風、石を誘う)

Stone, dear,
where did you come from?
Did you fall from the deep of the blue sky?
Did you well up from the bottom of the earth?
Or from inside the pocket of someone's jacket?

Stone, dear,
what is on your mind now?
The time a Mammoth stepped on you?
The time you were hurled at a radiant martyr's face
on a gallows in the capital city?
Or the morning after a nuclear war when you alone will survive?

Don't worry, dear. You don't have to answer me.
I like you
with your silent and lonely stubbornness
better than water so agreeable with anyone;
better than flames that burn out so quickly
in spite of all their flare

Yesterday, I was over the sea
over the Savannah before that, and the Sahara before that

I know every little alley on this planet
 except for one –
 the place called “home”
 Freedom is arduous, you see, more than you might imagine

Stone, dear
 won't you try to sail on me?
 We can surely make it, if we pull our forces together
 Try to levitate
 just one millionth of a millimeter will do –
 even a stone will have its hair stand on end

Translated from the Japanese by Takako Lento

A Cloud on Top of the Slope ----Novel vs. Poetry

□ □ □ □ □ □ —— □ □ vs □ □

1

On top of the slope in a novel, the cloud
 is dutifully pretending to be a piece of cloud.
 To the bird who flies outside the novel, however,
 the cloud is more than a cloud:
 it is rain, the sky, twinkling stars,
 and even the bird itself.

Still obsessed with the act of storytelling,
 humans hold on to the tentatively set-up subject and kept
 hitting the rusty tacks of languages
 into the Milky Way that has never ceased to flow since the Big Bang.
 Faces in the sand of a beach,
 Drawn and washed away, washed away and drawn again...

Poetry is a girl's bare tanned foot,
kicking the sand and collecting seashells.
She holds one up to the bright sky
then throws it away with the hem of her skirt whirling
into the sea of predicate that swallows
the plot and names and digests them into transparent waves.

From within the waves, the fisheyes
watch the wings of what used to be a cloud.

2

You were the flapping of wings
when I was an insect pin for piercing a butterfly

You were the grains of time falling through fingers
when I was a white bone

You were the glitter of a rainbow trapped in the waves crashing on a rock
when I was the reef that ran aground on itself

You, the sweet lies
I, the bitter truth

When you weave out the dramas of one thousand nights and days
and throw the net over the starry sky

I am the gravel that falls upside down
through the underground towards the magma.

Translated from the Japanese by the author

Fish Variations □ □ □ □ □ □

Translator's note: "Fish Variations" presents very interesting challenges to the translator in its play with linguistic form. The poem involves a very high degree of phonetic engineering, with some verses grouped together by vowels and some by consonants. For more detail, see the translator's blog.

<https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2012-07/on-fish-variations/>

A fish
Swims its way
Through the deep dark sea
Ah! There is nothing
Now left undone
Letting out a little breath
I start to walk across the endless
Fields of cotton wool

[Consonantal variation]

A scribbler called Takada
Trips one day and falls
Down the mountain of no education, employment or knowledge
Ah! Here take the bones out
No pink cheeks or long johns over thighs
Cleaning dry ears with a conductor's baton
A tanuki looks at the grave of a mongrel dog almost as
Bad as Pegasus

[Vocalic variations]

The face of despotic government
Bored for seven days his crew hoisted sails
There's great risk So shall we now
Leave Damn it's bad
In the last minutes sincerely then unnamed for ever
Hurt of love in vain held on to still

Performing the holy dance every year again and carving out names

Ditches sex appeal

[Interlingual variation]

i i i o a a a a	(a i)
u a u u a i u i o a a o	(i u e)
o o i e u u	(mm)
a a o e e o u	(a (i))
o o i o o u o o a a i o a i	(mm)
a a i a i i a u i i o a u o	(i)
i a a u a i i o a i e o o a a o	(mm)
a u i a i e a	(mm (u))

Translated from the Japanese by Angus Turvill

10 Tanka of the Corona Moon (□ □ □ □ □ □)

A particle of a word on the surface of the doorknob.

You came in. You touched my silence with that hand.

*

Being deadly alive.

I am the virus and it will be sunny then cloudy with some annihilation.

*

My giant panda and your king penguin

dancing a waltz on the pedestrian crossing, as we pass each other
casually holding our breath.

*

Used surgical masks on the streets all over the town.

What makes me want to bend down, pick them up and press them to my mouth? Love?

*

So, it's just another petal of a moment that gets you infected.
I am watching the hydrangea from the top of piles of moments.

*

They say that the Chinese character for cloud ☁ includes a fragment of soul ☁ .

The sky is filled with clouds today.

*

Looking at the rain makes you feel like the core of your body is melting away
I'm still here I'm still here I'm still.....
leaving behind just the sound of the rain.

*

No more counting, please. Death is the one and only Klein bottle.

*

Cobblestones, honeycomb, nebula.
It oozes out through the cracks of the thronging masses.

*

"Saving lives precedes anything else"
Is that so? The portrait photo of Shiro our late dog
gathering dust.

Translated from the Japanese by the author

Haiku made on the Kumano Ancient Pilgrimage Road

(□ □ □ □)

<p>1</p> <p>Enter into the mountain</p> <p>then</p> <p>the mountain</p> <p>enters</p> <p>into me</p> <p>2</p> <p>a rock</p> <p>bears the lightness</p> <p>of the sky</p> <p>the sky</p> <p>bears the hardness</p> <p>of a rock</p> <p>fluttering</p> <p>wings</p> <p>3</p> <p>beads of sweat</p> <p>on the temple</p> <p>dew</p> <p>on the tips of the leaves</p> <p>capsuled in a droplet</p> <p>is this spring</p> <p>4</p>	<p>fingertips</p> <p>on the moss</p> <p>eyes shut</p> <p>woods</p> <p>awaken</p> <p>5</p> <p>I</p> <p>walk on the road</p> <p>watching</p> <p>my back</p> <p>6</p> <p>the ridge</p> <p>is a woman</p> <p>lying down</p> <p>soft skin</p> <p>of the country</p> <p>caressed with eyes</p> <p>7</p> <p>a cuckoo</p> <p>totteringly tells</p> <p>the time is</p> <p>now</p>
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a ripple spreads in the sky

9

draw

8

in the air

mountains

and clouds

a circle

mixed

without

into the sea

an end

a boat

in it

receding away

floating

leaf

what

a deep

surface!

*Translated from the Japanese by the author
and Michele Hutchison*

My 'Wonder Years' in Hiroshima

She starts talking at the kitchen table after dinner, following some casual chit chat. There is nothing extraordinary about it. She talks as if she just remembered it. She talks to me, to my mom and to her two children.

*

It was 1964 that our family moved from Osaka to Hiroshima. I was four then. It now takes only two hours by the bullet train, but back then it took a whole day even on the express train. "What kind of place is this Hiroshima?" I asked my grandpa. "It's where Pika-don was dropped" was his answer. "They said no trees or grasses would grow there for the next 100 years, but ..."

Hiroshima was covered in green leaves. On the day of our arrival, Mom took me to the Peace Memorial Museum. In the evening, we were joined by Dad and three of us stayed in an inn near the central station. I woke up crying in the middle of the night. I had a dream about this mannequin of a woman whom I saw earlier in the museum. She was totally naked except for a white string around her loin. Her hair was burned and standing on end. She had her arms forward, the skin hanging from the tips of her ten fingers, just like the batter of Tempura slipping off. The woman was alive and watching me. She was not crying or mad, but very quiet. Her eyes were kind and gentle. That was the scariest part of the dream.

The dialect spoken by the Hiroshima people was quite different from our Osaka dialect. While Dad kept himself busy working in his new office, Mom and I did not have a single person we knew in the town. Every day, she had a long walk on the streets with me tagging along. There were seven rivers flowing through the city. A big ruined building with a round roof stood on a sandbank in the middle of them. Along the riverbanks stood rows of shanties. That is the Atomic Bomb Slum, said Mom. People who lost everything in the Pika-don live there. On the street, we often came across with people who had keloid scars on their faces, throats, or hands.

One day we found a forest not too far away from our house. It was a huge, fathomless forest. At least that's how it looked to me, who had grown up in a commercial district of Osaka city. Dark and silent even in daytime, it was a bit scary. Mom said there was not such rich nature in Osaka and that it was after all the right decision that we came to Hiroshima. Over and over, as if she were trying to convince herself.

The forest became Mom's favorite place to pass time, while Dad was scarcely at home. He was busy helping our country achieve the economic miracle. In the town, new buildings were emerging one after another, soaring to the sky. In the woods, however, the tree branches closed off the sky and the sound of cicadas echoed all around us. It was like a huge cathedral ... or a dome. There, for the first time in my life, I captured cicadas with a butterfly net. There were so many of them that even a 4-year-old kid could catch them. When you put them in a small plastic case hanging from the shoulder, they got furious and vehemently waved their wings. High up on a tree, we also found a beetle with a beautiful rainbow on its back. Mom took my net and jumped for it. She uttered a joyful cry like a little girl. I put the beetle carefully in the case. Then we saw a swallowtail butterfly with blue wings. We took her and put her in the case, too. Now the case

was full. It was vibrating with the maddening waving of the cicadas' wings. In the evening as we left the wood, Mom told me to let them all go. I opened the lid of the case. The cicadas flew out right away. Then the rainbow beetle crawled out. But the butterfly could not come out. Her blue wings were torn away by the cicadas. Without the wings, she looked powerless and ugly. She could not make a slightest sound unlike the cicadas. All she could do was to watch me with her eyes. A pair of huge, sad, and gentle eyes.

I was a talkative kid in Osaka, preferring to talk to grown-ups rather than other kids. But in Hiroshima I became quiet. I felt self-conscious and even embarrassed with how our Kansai dialect sounded in this strange town. And being the only child, I did not know how to get to know the local kids. One day, Mom invited a couple of boys to our house and served them with sweets. I then started to hang around with them. Soon I mastered the Hiroshima dialect and, by the time I went to the elementary school, I was busy every day, swimming in the Ohta River, running around in the riverside field, or exploring the neighborhoods with other kids. I no longer went to that wood with Mom. I do not know how she spent her days back then. I doubt if she had found her friends yet.

The elementary school I entered was located near that wood. It was in the north of Hiroshima, right where the Ohta River made its first split. M was in the same class. But before we became friends, our moms got close to each other. M's parents were tailors. I often came from the school to their tailor shop because my mom was there, just spending time with M's mom or choosing her new dress. Soon M and I became 'real friends' and started to hang around in the tailor shop even when my mom was not there. We did our homework together among the piles of clothes in the second-floor storage space. Sometimes M's mom took us to a Sukiyaki restaurant next door for dinner. As for my mom, she was either seeing or talking on the phone to M's mom all the time. I guess she finally got her 'real (and only) friend' in Hiroshima.

Sometime later, M's family built a house in the suburb on the upper stream of the Ohta River. It was a big house, a mansion with a pond and swimming pool, overlooking a golf course on the riverside. That was the first house I ever stayed in overnight away from my parents or relatives. M and I spent many weekends together there. My mom came to pick me up, but very often ended up staying for a while, eating and chatting with M's Mom till late at night. By the time she was finally ready to go home, I was already sleeping in M's bed.

M was the biggest boy in the class, good at any sport. I was the shortest and not very athletic, but instead loved books, insects, and the stars. M had a sister called Sacchan who was two years older than us. Sacchan was a bookworm, too. My mom was even worse, a book addict. Sacchan and my mom often talked about the books they read. Those were not 'stories' but 'literature' and I could not keep up with their conversation. But it was a joy to me to sit down at the porch together with Sacchan and read books side by side, just as much as playing with M with GI Joe figures in our hands.

M and I, our two moms, and Sacchan. While two Dads were busy at work, the five of us spent so much time together at M's house. It was as if we were one big family straddling two households.

It was one of those days when M's Mom started to talk. M and I must have been in the 4th grade. Sacchan in the 6th grade or the first year of junior high. As usual, I was at M's big house; my mom and Sacchan were there, too. M's Mom cooked dinner for us, and we were still chatting at the table, when she started to talk, as if she just remembered it.

She talked about that morning. As a 12-year-old girl. How she was standing on the platform of the central station, waiting for the train to the student military service at a plant. She talked about a sudden flash of light and a blast. That she was blown off the platform down to the train rails, where another young woman had already fallen beneath her, face down. Her face landed on the buttocks of this woman, saving her from injury. But when she turned the woman's body around, there was no nose on the woman's face. Just a hole where the nose had been.

There was no train coming. So she started to walk. To her home, crossing the center of the city, or ground zero, from east to west. She talked about the hellish images she had seen, one by one, as she walked for miles. Herds of ghosts wearing nothing but a white string around their loins, their skin peeled from the elbow down and hanging from the tips of their fingers. A woman standing still with a charred kettle hanging from her wrist. People lying at the riverside, badly burned and asking for water. When she poured the water to their mouths from her flask, they said thank you, thank you dear, and died. And behind them, an endless chain of bodies floating down the river towards the sea ...

She talked on and on. Her voice never rising or wavering but remaining gentle and quiet. She talked about everything she had seen, and about anything she could remember. It was as if once

she had started, there was no way to stop.

By then it was midnight. I remember how dark it was around us on the kitchen table, and how quiet. I couldn't breathe. Or I was breathing the darkness and silence instead of the air. My mom was crying. M and Sacchan were speechless, their eyes wide open.

"I have never talked about it before," she said finally. "Not to anybody. This was the first time." The last remark was directed to her own children.

*

We drove home on the deserted road, Mom behind the wheel of her small yellow Corolla and me on the passenger seat; this was before the invention of seatbelts. We went along the Ohta River and passed by the bridge behind my school. We were silent in the car. Silent, but somehow talking to each other without words.

Back then, I had no idea that of all the grown-ups around me, including my four grandparents, it was my Mom who would be leaving us first, and that it was just eight years away. I didn't know that M's parents, despite the radiation from the atomic bomb, would live long and happy lives. I didn't know either that M would become a successful businessman in Singapore while Sacchan would be a novelist and one day write about that morning through the eyes of a 12-year-old girl. Nor did I, or for that matter most Japanese people, have any idea that atomic bombs were repeatedly brought into the Japanese harbors by the US Navy while our government flatly denied any such allegation. Godzilla was just an ordinary *kaiju* monster, nothing to do with the fear of a nuclear disaster, which would come back to us some 40 years later together with a big tsunami ...

But I did know what was in Mom's mind as she drove us home that night. For all the pain and sorrow that M's mom suffered, by sharing her memory with us, she let us in. For the first time since we had come to this city, Hiroshima took the shape of M's mom and opened its door for us. It accepted us as its own people. We finally got our new home. A new citizenship. Outside the car, I could see a huge black shadow, like a bulging mushroom. It was the wood where Mom and I caught the cicadas and the rainbow beetle. And that blue swallowtail butterfly. Through the reflection of my face on the car window, I felt her eyes, sad and gentle, watching me.

I still do now.

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