



YOKO DANNO – POEMS

dance of fire

the sky aglow

as it blew
through

the blades
of pampas grass,

fanned

the smoke
of silvery flowers,

dyed

the edges
slightly carmine

as

in a
sword dance

*

deep

in
the
blue

cave

eyeless
fish

felt

the warm under
current,

rocks

burning
in the dark,

ears numb with an explosion,

sulfur

into
gas

(from "trilogy": the IKUTA PRESS, 1970)

The clear sun-goddess, disguised
 as a warrior, stamping her armed feet,
confronts her wild brother-god
 the violence, a brief peace settled,
eight children are born to them,
 three goddesses from his snapped sword,
five gods from her crunched beads,
 the balance broken, she withdraws,
he in excess of force intrudes into
 her divine weaving house, violates
one of her purified women weavers,
 causing darkness in the world below.

Black in pure white, space in the atom,
 the fire in ice, the water in rock,
stars born through burst and fusion,
 lakes coming after volcanic cave-in,
death, birth and growth of all creatures,
 homes, cities, countries, universes,
the destroyer-creator-preserver held
 in the eight-armed pliant quick body,
the three-faced god of love dancing
 his cosmic dance in a flaring circle,
the reunion of man and woman in him,
 in the embrace of opposing goddesses.

Through the slender body responding
 to the cries of men, women and children,
the sick, the suffering and the dying,
 fish, birds, animals, plants and trees,
seas, rivers, fountains and cascades,
 sand, stones, rock, dells and mountains,
the multi-million sounds transformed
 into golden dew in the process of thought
flow out in a voice shaking the void,
 penetrating the deafness like laser rays
the unified man-woman holding lightly
 a medicine bottle in its sensitive hand.

(from "Four Songs": *NEW DIRECTIONS* 47, New Directions, 1983)

PRAYER TO THE GODDESS OF MERCY

Who can witness it all, if
in the moment after usual
breakfast, bread and butter, coffee,

a huge fire ball
suddenly
explodes overhead, if

lethal rays
evaporate every
being on earth –

if our flesh blown apart
by the blast, skin hanging,
bleeding, like rags,

hair burnt, eyes
jetting out, mouth torn,
only the heart

beating, a swarm of crumbling
bodies creeping
toward a boiling river,

a smoldering woman rocking her
dead child as if to waken
it from a nightmare,

a man, arms gone,
naked, carried
by a woman in a tattered robe—

who can tell it all?

Where are you now?

Will you stop all this at once
and reverse the scenes?

Otherwise, freeze us

as we are

and burst out
laughing,

or spare us a few moments
for a last
cry

for help,

Maya, Maria, Kannon!

(FROM "Eleven-Faced Kannon": ANTHOLOGY 83/84)

NEKOPRATI

Fire Realm

you have the map,
i, a compass,

let's get out of this smoldering
land, in haste—night is approaching,
hot gasses thickening, deadly fallout piling—

the dormant volcano, a ferocious god,
awakened from one thousand
years of stone sleep,

is now active—

a perilous moment,
the flush of the glorious
sunset fading

in the purple western sky.
image after image
of a holy face appears,
fluttering about, disappears
from the walls of razed monasteries—

the god/goddess
housed in a single body,
the slender hand holding a crystal

bottle of a merciful
potion

to counteract

the sulfurous
poison,

melts down to elements.

after

in legend
the mountain
walks into the sea
in a single night—

in truth
humans relay tons
of impure woods, soil and stones

in secret
until all are buried

unnoticed— underwater

a couple of lustful

gods do the rest,
standing on
Heavenly Floating Bridge
churning the muddy seawater,
the brine trickling

from
Jeweled Spear
into the sea—

they dump
garbage
with
lots of
bottles
plastics
computers
crushed cans
shattered glass
broken chairs, bird
cages, bloodstained toys
debris of blasted skyscrapers
contaminated with radioactivity,

the celestial wastes
hail, rain, snow
subsidized

to solidify the shaking
shapeless land,

and call it

Dream Island—

sea swallows
in need of
home
choose it

as their colony,

wings fatally

deformed

by a lethal breeze

the feathered tribe

lulled into sleep

at starry night

off their guard

cloistered

in the concrete

man-made thick walls.

(Poetry Kantyo 28, 2012)

Terrible Goddess

Among pile of dust and ashes lie
yesterday's fireflies—motherfucker
mother earth, who swallows all
sentient beings—have you ever
thrown up corpses from indigestion?

“I will defy death by setting up
1,500 maternity homes in a single day
in the land of the living” god retorts
to his wife, the eater of bizarre food,
the multi-faced goddess with centi-legs

Her white hair floating in the air
like dandelion puff—rootless,
will-less, antenna-less—she goes
sailing with every shift of wind—
Tomorrow maybe a turn for a new life

“Animals don't escape to somewhere,
but from something,”* god says. In time
a moonlit pear tree may grow—but for now
he is singing sweet love songs for humans
under the shadow of nuclear umbrellas

(A glimpse of, Issue 17, 2014)

* Quotation from “Life of Pi” by Yann Martel

IN PURSUIT OF A BIRD

*I am in my brain,
you are in your brain
You are in my brain,
I am in your brain*

I feel that time flies faster than ever. Because I digest food more slowly of late? Or am I already traveling around another sun, or another moon? I hope the orbit of my thoughts can be traced more precisely and the geography in my brain explored more in detail. Ethereal fragments of consciousness, along with earthbound urges, should be eventually put together into a meaningful whole. Is there a mastermind behind all of this mysterious integrating process?

I sent a letter to my friend with a wrong address. I didn't know he had moved. Someone told me he has gone in search of a bird. Where?

*In pursuit of the swan, he arrived at the land of Harima by way of Ki, then crossing Inaba he came to Tanba and to Tajima. He followed the bird east-ward to the land of Ōmi, crossed Mino, chased it through Owari, past Shinano, and finally in the land of Koshi spread a net at a river mouth...**

The man in the topic was instructed that if he found the bird, the child—an emperor's son who was unable to speak—would be able to speak. But is it possible, at the present time, to wander over the Japan Island of the 8th century? Let alone to find the bird? I'm told 'past' is a mirage, 'future' a phantom, and 'now' becomes 'past' from instant to instant—a flower never stays the same. But then what is the present time exactly? If there's no 'now,' we live only in 'past'? If so, no wonder he has gone looking for the bird into 'past'... What has he been doing all the while? Where on earth has he flown to?—the one to whom I sent a letter, I mean.

My letter must be carried around in a postman's bag in search of his whereabouts. I hope it won't be abandoned in a box of 'undelivered mail' at a post office, since I forgot to write my return address on the envelope. My fatal fault. Once lost, a letter will never be delivered. I may not know whether he has actually caught the bird or not, although I desperately wish to know.

I have recently lost my voice, caused not by a laryngeal cancer, but from hypertension—I need to perform magic in front of old people in a nursing home. Most of the audience is suffering from dementia, but I am warned they are strangely

quick-eyed in seeing through tricks. It is rumored they are trained nightly by particular owls to see through the darkness. If only I could regain my voice, I might distract their attention by my mumbo jumbo.

I wonder, however, if we should always expect replies to our letters. Emily Dickinson wisely stored in her small casket the letters to her ‘Master,’ which has kept the world in perpetual suspense and contemplation. Thinking I might perhaps have forgotten to mail my letter, I rummaged all drawers of my desk and cabinet—in vain. There’s no doubt that I posted it—*the letter is in my brain*.

(a glimpse of, issue 13, 2013)

*Excerpt from “KOJIKI” (trans. by Danno), the oldest collection of songs and stories concerning the founding of Japan and the beginnings of Japanese culture, compiled in the 8th century.

WILD NIGHTS

*Puffing and panting, to the hilltop ascending,
what do I expect to see—flat surface of a writhing sea?*

I wanted to prolong my stay downstairs a little longer so that she might be finished for good in the bathtub upstairs—a horrifying dream. But instead I hurriedly ran up the stairs to pull her out of the water—just in time—while she was still alive. I wonder who was the drowning woman. My indispensable other—a flagpole to fasten my tightrope to?

I was struggling for days to write a poem about a woman—without success. The woman appears in the mirror on the wall from time to time when I look at my reflection and sets my nerves afire on conjuring. I just wanted to ask her how she had managed to escape from her cocker spaniel and the Spaniard, who she said were untiringly stalking her.

She is a big woman, followed by a lot of friends, but whenever I try to observe her closely the spaniel and the Spaniard appear and form a triangle with her. I usually lose sight of her in the ‘magical’ triangle, utterly lost in the thick mist. Incidentally, a few days ago I read a mystery in which a murderer is ambushed by the assumed victim.

You know what? However hard you try to flee from your giant or your fellow dog, you can’t, because they’re a part of what you are. If you successfully dismiss them, your whole system would eventually fail—that is my fear. There’s no taming one’s nature except practice—practice—practice. *The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain.* Whose words?

I feel a current of humid air from the south and hear the calls of birds hurrying home. Cicadas have stopped singing—sign of a storm. Clouds are gathering. The sky will soon be entirely covered without a break—through which I may have a chance to peep into a world beyond, as vast and deep as a madness for flight. Yes, an easy breakthrough is rare.

It is blowing wild, sleet banging on the roof tiles, my old house creaking badly; in occasional flashes of lightning a pair of trees are revealed—the boughs in common, the trunks joined together like Siamese twins, tempest of worries howling across the hill, sending shivers up my spine. Visibility becoming poor, how I wish for a clear night!

(a glimpse of, issue 14, 2013)

SLEEPING TIGER

The Pass of Nakayama was dusky although it was midday. The thick and rich leaves of the tall trees blocked the sunlight. My twin brother and I cut through the woods along the ancient pass paved with cobblestones until we came to an open place, commanding the waves of tea fields to the left. Far in the distance the undulating range of mountains in the mist. A breeze felt cool on my sweaty cheeks.

“Have I ever anticipated
Crossing this pass
Again in my old age?
My life is fulfilled
On Mt. Nakayama”*

Had I ever breathed fumes of the early summer grass here? Had I once gone through that gloomy winding road before?

Abruptly an image of a tiger lying among the tea shrubs flashed across my mind, with an odd question—what were you doing when the Bomb was dropped? I had no idea what to answer—then an internal voice, chanting drowsily, “seeds are stars, stars are seeds,” like a fading thunder...

We were just in time for the train, across the mainland, for a castle town—but rumor had it that the whole town was contaminated by radiation—that a flying saucer...no, a huge fire ball burst in the air...ever since the soil itself has been radiating...no grass has grown, no birds sung, no fish swum in the sparkling clear water...

Did I turn off the gas at the main before we left home? The plugs off the sockets? The refrigerator cleared?

That was no-way our understanding of the destination—we expected fireflies would swirl over the grass, owls hoot in the willow trees, rivers run noisily with singing pebbles, and beneath a blossoming wisteria trellis a pair of empty chairs would be waiting for us...

So we transferred to a steam locomotive just before it entered a tunnel—but the change wasn't as easy as a dive into the clear sky—it was hard to inhale the soot-filled air...

Have you closed the kitchen windows? The doors all locked? The burglar alarm on?

I thought our train was bound for south with the sun. But the wind made the clouds dense and it started raining. I wondered if I'd taken in the laundry from the balcony. The scenery beyond the windowpane began to move forward like crazy. The truth was the engine driver had put the train into reverse—rewound time—we became younger as we went upstream along a vast river, laughing like children going home...

We got off the train at a divide where the dust of stars falls on snowy mountain—columns of ice towering ahead like five shimmering fingers—down below an expanse of golden flowers in the purple light—at the last minute before sunset my mobile phone beeped...

We resumed walking. A little further on, there was a stone monument by the roadside, like some kind of a turning point, with a Basho's poem inscribed on it. I stepped forward to the monument, when I felt as if I had crossed a line—an invisible line drawn through the point parallel to the meandering ups and downs...

A bush warbler sang in flight. Time for the dreaming tiger to wake up...

“My life is fulfilled
A cool air flows
Under my small sedge hat”**

(*fourW NEW WRITING*, 4W Press, 2013)

*The Buddhist priest-poet Saigyō (1118 – 1190) composed this waka (5-7-5-7-7-syllable poem) on his second trip (1186) to Hiraizumi in the Province of Mutsu (present day Iwate Prefecture, northernmost part of the mainland of Japan,) on purpose to raise funds for the rebuilding of the Todaiji Temple in Nara, which had been burnt down in 1180 during the battle between the Taira clan and the Minamoto clan.

**Bashō (1644 – 1694) composed this haiku (5-7-5 syllable poem) when he took the same route as Saigyō on his second homecoming (1676) to Ueno in the Province of Iga (present day Mie Prefecture).