

FROM THE JAPANESE

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**ISOBAR
PRESS**

First published in 2013 by

Isobar Press
Sakura 2-21-23-202
Setagaya-ku
Tokyo 156-0053
Japan

<http://isobarpress.com>

ISBN 978-4-907359-00-3

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The cover photograph was taken by Kiyokawa Taiji in 1940 and is used by kind permission of Kiyokawa Mizue and the Setagaya Art Museum.

Earlier versions of some of the poems in Part II appeared in *In Daylight* (Printed Matter Press, 1995). Other poems and translations first appeared in *The Bow-Wow Shop*, *Edge*, *Poetry Tokyo* and *Printed Matter*. The translations by Arthur Binard and Kisaka Ryo were first published in *Gekkan Etegami* and *Kurosu Tooku*, and those by Natsuishi Ban'ya in *Ginyu*. My thanks to Arthur and Ryo, to Ban'ya, and to all the publishers and editors involved.

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READING TU FU IN TOKYO, 1969

An autumn evening in the garden.
Moon rising, birds in their nests,
I sit among trees, alone.

Good now to play this white wood lute . . .
I lay the book aside and watch
the full moon start its climb behind the trees.

The distant clatter of a commuter train,
a police siren Dopplering and diminishing,
the ceaseless weave of traffic in Shibuya –

a faint rim of sound
around the outer edge of nightfall.
Meanwhile, not so far from here –

automatic weapons in their hands
and Hendrix pulsing in their heads –
squads of young draftees head back to base.

Burning villages, corpses in paddy fields,
refugees – Tu Fu had seen all that.
A sleepy chirp from somewhere

deep within the bamboo thicket.
Lute sounds linger, fading, cease –
autumn night, dark – that trembling leaf . . .

KOMACHI

*Ohta Shogo's Komachi Fuden performed
by the Tenkei Gekijo Theatre Company*

an old woman is crossing a bridge by twilight
centimetre by centimetre she's approaching her death

a flock of ghosts shuffle behind her
her furniture stacked high on their backs

she steps off the bridge and sits down to rest
the ghosts assemble her house around her, then vanish

she sits like a *sotoba*, like a tree-stump, like a stone
among battered cupboards and torn paper screens

she cooks instant noodles on a small charcoal stove
it takes for ever, suddenly she slams a cupboard door

she winds up a gramophone and puts on Edith Piaf
an officer in whites appears and shimmers before her

the record ends, the suitor vanishes
the old woman eats her noodles

a doctor and a nurse tiptoe towards her
when they reach her they find that she's dead

the ghosts return and dismantle the house
a clumsy ballet of capering wardrobes and tables

now no one and nothing is here
except for an old woman and her gramophone

she will never move again – but then she stirs
she winds up the gramophone but no sound comes out

she moves to the bank of the river
and kneels at the edge of everything

she cups her hands and drinks
quenching solitude with knowledge of solitude

ZUISEIJI GARDEN

pool
black wind-ruffled water

an island
 two small bridges
a yellow sandstone cliff
a large shallow cave

dry winter season
 a brown gully
the memory of a waterfall

*the garden is simply made up of two elements
rocks and water
this concealed beauty of the garden
enchants us very much*

unimpressive
unexciting

sustaining
in its taste of nothing

absence of flavour which haunts the tongue

BOW, CLAP TWICE, AND PRAY

wooded hills, rice fields and rain
a *torii*, and then a gravel path through trees

leading to a vermilion shrine and its three
objects of veneration, found, not made

a tree trunk forked at the base
with a notch where the wood divides

the torso of a hollow tree, an oval orifice
where a branch once grew

and an empty trunk curved smoothly around
the convolutions of its own interior

here, in a silence without contrivance
in the spacious quietness of this place

a generous spirit suggests her presence
tutelar of the blood-warm folded darkness

in which bone coalesces, eyeball swims to shape
and flesh reaches out to be small fingers

a woman, thirty-five or forty years old
walks with quick steps across the gravel

passing the souvenir shop outside the gate
(videos, vibrators and condoms)

blow-up dolls, their mouths agape
in see-through plastic packaging)

throws a coin into the slatted box
bows, claps twice, and prays

FROM THE TRAIN

Grey roofs, blue roofs, red roofs, as far as the eye can see in morning sunlight. A twenty-year stubble of TV aerials. Concrete and wood-frame and prefabricated panel, and aluminium-railed balconies where bright bedding is displayed to sun and air. How many shades of grey can you see, grey-white and white-grey, flecked with bits of green: a blurred wisp of bamboo, a stroke of pine, a smudge of bush, a speck of rooftop bonsai. Here the adolescent ungainliness of a northern palm tree, there an evergreen bush clipped to a disciplined roundness; or a pine tree with straw knee bandages, its limbs racked and bound on a frame of bamboo poles.

Trains passing over and under trains, at tangents, at right-angles, stitching the fabric of Tokyo; trains vanishing out of the corner of the eye beneath the strict entanglements of the power lines; trains bearing the providers to their sites of loyalty, attrition, and the wherewithal to live.

A LETTER FROM ISHINOMAKI

acres almost cleared of wreckage
here and there a building standing

blank stares of empty window-frames
a wall-less kitchen, a lampshade swinging in the wind
smashed machinery in a burst-open workshop
dislodged girders and loose wires dangling

a fishing boat on its side fifty yards from the sea

we're clearing a plot
of all the small things left behind by the crane

video cassette (*The Twilight Samurai*)
audio cassette (indecipherable)
fragment of a broken CD (pink, indecipherable)
nameplate (Nakamura)
rusted kitchen knives
broken blue crockery
an elementary student's plastic ruler
a tube of ketchup

When a plot's been completely cleared, it's sterilised with a white disinfectant powder; the homeless cats who have out-lived their owners walk across it and then wash their paws, which will make them sick.

*the tsunami was finally stopped
by that wooded hill over there beyond the high school
the first job the next day
was to disentangle the bodies from the branches*

the post office is wrecked
but not the red-painted post-box on its stout single leg –
a car approaches along the pot-holed road
and stops: a woman rolls down the window
leans out and posts a letter

17-18 *December* 2011