

WOMAN IN A BLUE ROBE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Epitaph for Memories (The Bunny and the Crocodile, 2002)
trilogy & *Hagoromo: A Celestial Robe* (Ikuta, 2010)
Aquamarine (Glass Lyre, 2014)

WITH JAMES C. HOPKINS
The Blue Door (Word Works, 2006)

WITH JAMES C. HOPKINS & BERNARD STOLZ
a sleeping tiger dreams of manhattan: poetry, photographs and sound
(Ikuta, 2008)

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Songs and Stories of the Kojiki (Ahadada, 2008;
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WOMAN IN A BLUE ROBE

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for my granddaughters

Sakino & Yasuha

Squid Ink

one of a thousand flowery goldfish,
fluttering in a huge LED-lit glass bowl,
my voice silently rising as tiny bubbles

*

shaggy peaks shine before sunset,
lava erupts from a crack of a smile

*

a word is a tool
that shapes bloody sea fish
into exquisite *sashimi*

*

a slave of words, in sorrow or delight,
sole resident in a mushroom of a house,
attending sincerely on my 'chronic disease'

*

sunlit maple trees burst into red and yellow
preparing for loneliness in deep snow
and the approach of silence below zero

*

wind beats against the window
dim light leaks through a gap in the cloud
the full harvest moon is nowhere in sight

*

in the deep sea squids targeting fish
always win the game; in love they go
into close rapport with their mates
without any use of ink, ichthyologists say

*

staring into a crystal ball is of no avail
in looking for hair-pins or the future

*

Recipe for Tonight

1. a spoonful of madness
2. some kind of bait to lure fish
or the opposite sex
3. a phosphorescent simile
4. a pinch of secret vice added
to the chicken broth

*

cups and glasses not wrapped,
clothes still hanging in the wardrobe,
bundles of goods for removal on the floor –
stop falling *sakura*, I'm not yet ready to depart

Herb Tea Time

*Sea swallows dive
for fish – wind blows
across the reed-grown shore*

Hung high up on the wall of my living room is a framed photo – the profile of a horse, browsing, or smelling the fresh grass, his eye fondly looking down on the tiny yellow flowers at the tip of his nose. The photo my friend gave me as a keepsake of her late husband.

His end at 58 years old came abruptly. You might say there's no end or beginning in time but only the continuous present – a horse browsing the grass, a sweet smell rising from the flowers. The scene freezes – or starts living – when the shutter is released with a click.

One cold morning in midwinter in a park near our house, my baby son suddenly pulled his hand free of my grasp and stood on his own two legs for the first time. He trotted a few steps and fell, got up and resumed his new-found adventure, over and over again. He launched himself forward as if diving for a prize. He looked so determined and alone.

Time lapses: a blur on the seashore, and I'm lost in a warm, soft breeze, in a reverie, out of myself; my son might be my twin brother or a lover, and I, his daughter or a girlfriend, basking together in the sun on the white sands. Laughter wafts through the pine needles, and the sound of bathers one after another diving from a high platform into the sea slightly disturbs the salty air.

He is always smiling in his photos: in his baby bathtub, in a mountain stream in the Japan Alps, or in a hot spring in India. No hint at all of the precipitate fall from a Himalayan peak at the age of 22. It happens in a flash, a fall from a knife-edge ridge, or from a horse. But whether you've lived through many summers or not makes no difference to the delight of smiling in a hot spring, of smelling flowers or of sipping tea.

Herb leaves are steeping in the hot water – the aroma is rising...

Woman in a Blue Robe

Who are you?

Why are you here?

Where are you from?

Who are your parents?

May I have your name, Ma'am?

Do I have to answer all of your questions right now when I'm totally occupied with finding a trash can? Don't be disturbed by my apparition, noble Monk. I have no intention of distracting you from performing the ceremony. I've been going through a list of my own names I want to discard. I don't need a personal name any longer.

Once I was called 'Princess Light' and was loved dearly by my own brother. People used to say my beauty shone through the layers of brocades – as if sunlight were filtering through all shades of yellow and scarlet maple leaves. Our names became the talk of the townspeople, and the rumor drove us to a bare mountain. Among rocks and stumps of trees, the cold steel piercing each other flashed like lightning.

Some hundreds of years before this incident two young men wanted to marry me. In those days I was called 'Blossoming Maid' as I was just arriving at puberty. Taking up swords and bows and arrows, the two youths fought for my sake. My heart was broken. I preferred my own death to theirs. They followed me soon after. Three tumuli in a row were built by the grieving families, mine in the middle. Buried with me were earrings of gold and necklaces of blue beads, as well as bronze mirrors imported from China.

Many times I exchanged love poems in courtship, and on several occasions told fancy stories. One time I even set fire to my parents' house to win back a boyfriend's attention. Another time I went berserk when I found my husband had taken a mistress. Out of jealousy I changed into a column of fire, a female demon, a snake in pursuit of the one who had deserted me. Each time I was called by a different name.

Earth rotates throughout summer, autumn, winter, spring – a simple cell grows into complex life, evolving into all forms and sizes, and then decomposes into elements, cycling through dark and intricate passages between life and death, over and over again. I no longer see flowers, nor smell incense, nor taste liquor, nor feel a caressing touch, but only hear the vibrations of light flowing over my transparent skin.

Pray for me, my dear Monk. Tonight the full moon, multiplied in the flooded paddies before rice-planting, shines alone in the deep sky. I'm wearing only a blue kimono, which is enough for me to live in.

NOTE

WOMAN IN A BLUE ROBE: The anonymous woman is recorded in the Tōdaiji Temple's register of the dead who contributed to or were closely connected with the construction, restoration and maintenance of the temple from the time of its establishment in AD 745. Most of them are emperors, peers, shōguns, daimyōs, high priests, etc. Very few women are registered, but 'a woman in a blue robe' is recorded as the eighteenth name after Minamoto-no-Yoritomo (d. 1199), the founder of the Kamakura shōgunate. During the *o-mizutori* (water-drawing) ceremonies of the Tōdaiji Temple the names in the register are read aloud by a monk to appease the souls of the dead. Sometime during the Shōgen era (1207–1211), when a monk called Jukei was reciting the names in the register, a beautiful woman in a blue robe appeared and asked him, 'Why haven't you read my name?' She looked very sad. The monk was disturbed to see her, but quickly called out 'a woman in a blue robe' and the woman smiled contentedly and disappeared. Since then her 'name' has been recited along with the names of the other benefactors.

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