

THE DAY LAID BARE

POETRY BY KIWAO NOMURA

- 川萎え (*Dried River*, 1987)
反復彷徨 (*Repeated Roams*, 1992)
特性のない陽のもとに (*Under the Sun without Character*, 1993)
風の配分 (*Distribution of the Wind*, 1999)
ニューインスピレーション (*New Inspiration*, 2003)
スペクタクル (*Spectacle*, 2006)
plan14 (2007)
ZOLO (2009)
難解な自転車 (*Difficult Bicycle*, 2012)
デジャヴュ街道 (*Déjà Vu Highway*, 2017)
骨なしオデュッセイア (*Boneless Odyssey*, 2018)
薄明のサウダージ (*Twilight Saudade*, 2019)

IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Spectacle & Pigsty: Selected Poems, translated by Kyoko Yoshida
and Forrest Gander (2011)

POETRY AND TRANSLATIONS BY ERIC SELLAND

- The Condition of Music* (2000)
Inventions (2007)
Still Lives (2012)
Arc Tangent (2014)
Beethoven's Dream (2015)
Object States (2018)

TRANSLATIONS

- Yoshioka Minoru, *Kusudama* (1991)
Takagai Hiroya, *Rush Mats* (1999)
Takashi Hiraide, *The Guest Cat* (2014)
Genki Kawamura, *If Cats Disappeared from the World* (2019)

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KIWAO NOMURA

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ISOBAR
PRESS

This translation first published in 2020 by

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



14 Isokon Flats, Lawn Road,
London NW3 2XD, United Kingdom

<https://isobarpress.com>

ISBN 978-4-907359-32-4

ヌードな日 (*Nuudo na hi*) originally published by Shichosha
(Tokyo, 2011).

English translation, introduction and notes
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INTRODUCTION

Eric Selland

The Day Laid Bare by Nomura Kiwao¹ opens with a quote from Gherasim Luca, a Romanian surrealist poet who lived in Paris from 1952 till his death by suicide in 1994. The statement, ‘There is no place left in this world for poets,’ is something that Nomura can relate to. For Nomura himself, when he began writing this book, felt that poetry had lost its central role in Japanese culture.

Hence the book begins with a sense of crisis – a general cultural crisis. In fact, Nomura locates the very source of modern Japanese poetry in crisis – ‘without crisis, there would be no modern Japanese poetry. This is true beginning with Hagiwara Sakutarō in 1916 and it is true for the postwar poets and those writing just after the end of the Showa period’² (Nomura Kiwao, *Shi no Gaia wo Motomete*, [In Pursuit of Gaia in Poetry], 2008).

It is this feeling of cultural crisis and the sense that the poet has now become an outsider or exile from Japanese culture that is the original impetus of *The Day Laid Bare*, but then in the process of writing, the Great East Japan earthquake occurred, making this crisis something very real and very physical, affecting everyone in Japan. For many artists and intellectuals, the earthquake and the nuclear accident that followed seemed to be a sign of Japan’s imminent collapse. This is where the poem becomes even more passionate, gaining in momentum and texture. The political begins to appear in the form of deeply ironic statements about Japan (using the English rather than the Japanese name for the country) suggesting the possibility of a post-colonial interpretation of Japan’s status in relation to the U.S.

Certain key words are central to Nomura’s poetic vocabulary: words like ‘flesh’, and ‘parade’. The words ‘roadblock’ and ‘parade’, which name the various sections of the poem, have

metaphoric meanings. Nomura doesn't like to say exactly what they mean in precise terms, but there is a range of meanings, or a field, which naturally forms around these key words, and which the reader gradually develops a feel for.

The parade is a metaphor for society, i.e. the world or the worldly. It is mostly negative. The pieces of flesh move along in the parade like a Felliniesque carnival, unaware and unconscious of themselves or the deeper meaning of existence. They are inhuman or subhuman – or sometimes 'all too human' (Nietzsche).

In contrast, the roadblock stops everything. The term, *bousaku* could also be translated as 'barricade', bringing an echo of the French Revolution. It also may be an allusion to Nomura's own past as a Leftist student during the protests against the renewal of the security treaty with the U.S. in 1970. The roadblock brings a halt to the parade of flesh and we are given a moment of contemplation – the poetic moment, which is the real heart of the poem. While the parade sections read more like fragmented descriptive prose with free verse interludes (and with an ample amount of irony and sarcasm), the roadblock sections are passionate and expressive, moving into the territory of not only the lyrical but something like Rimbaud's 'derangement of the senses.' This is Nomura's poetic ideal, one that stands in contrast to his academic learning in which knowledge and the rational are central. In a way, Nomura's Apollonian side must give way to the Dionysian in order to reach a deeper space, which is also the realm of the sacred. Nomura's method of composition is of some interest here. He types directly into the computer, composing spontaneously in something like a stream-of-consciousness approach to writing. Here is where the poem develops its momentum and its rhythm. Reading aloud in live performance or with music is an important activity for Nomura, and it is here where the spoken tone of the poem begins to make sense. Nomura does not lack that element of *écriture* or inter-subjectivity so important to many contemporary experimental

writers, but there is a direct path open to the spoken. Voice – the actual voice (*nikusei*, the Japanese word for the natural voice – that is, without microphone or amplification – means literally ‘flesh of voice’) is yet another important word in Nomura’s poetic vocabulary.

Nomura’s major influences are largely French. First, René Char – whose complete poems he translated – and of course Rimbaud. He could almost be a European poet, but this does not make him less Japanese; Paris has in fact been the Mecca of Japanese artists and poets since the early twentieth century, hence the above is nothing unusual. The same can be said regarding his reliance on continental philosophy for the source of his ideas and poetics. This too is shared with other Japanese writers. What is unusual is the breadth of this knowledge. In fact, if we were to unpack each one of the words in Nomura’s poetic vocabulary we would find a web of complex philosophical and poetic relationships. For instance, the word ‘flesh’ featured so prominently in this book derives from the thought of phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty and his attempts to map human perception.

Nomura has a very respectable list of Japanese influences as well, including the post-war poet Naka Tarō (1922–2014) and the important earlier poets Hagiwara Sakutarō (1886–1942) and Nishiwaki Junzaburō (1894–1982), both major figures in modern Japanese poetry during its formative years.³ In particular, he shares the sense of poetic ecstasy, of the Dionysian, with Hagiwara.

Nomura has a sense of the Felliniesque. His poetry is filled with absurdities, humor, and even silliness. The absurd or silly tone is effected with the use of colloquial expressions, verb forms and tag phrases which are common in daily speech patterns. The problem for the translator lies not only in the fact that many of these expressions or grammatical forms are impossible to translate into English, but that even where translatable they simply do not work in the same way. Perhaps this is matter of

cultural sensibility, but it is not easy in English to be silly and absurd, yet dead serious at the same time. This mixture of styles or modes of speech can make Nomura difficult to pin down, and it means that the translator is forced to make some hard choices.

Translation in general is of course a highly complex, time-consuming and often frustrating process, but even in this context, translating Nomura is an extremely intensive, all-consuming activity. One has to give oneself to it body and soul. In a sense one is obliged to become a medium, allowing the soul of the poet, the spirit of the poetic process itself to enter one, and to re-enact the process of original poetic production. It is a process which at its end finds the translator himself transformed, perhaps even more so than language as such. And hopefully, the reader of the new work in translation will have been transformed as well.

NOTES

- ¹ Throughout this book names of Japanese people appear in Japanese order with the surname first, except in the case of the cover and the title page – where Nomura's name appears in the English order – and in mentions of Japanese writers or translators who publish primarily in English.
- ² The Shōwa Period ended in 1989.
- ³ For Naka Tarō, see *Music: Selected Poems*, translated by Andrew Houwen and Chikako Nihei (Isobar Press, 2018); for Hagiwara Sakutarō see *Cat Town* (New York Review of Books, 2014) and *The Iceland* (New Directions, 2014), both translated by Hiroaki Sato; for Nishiwaki Junzaburō see *The Modern Fable* (Green Integer, 2007), translated by Hiroaki Sato, and *The Poetry and Poetics of Nishiwaki Junzaburō: Modernism in Translation* by Hosea Hirata (Princeton UP, 1993).

THE DAY LAID BARE

There is no place left in this world for poets.

– Gherasim Luca

PARADE 1

The day laid bare

Exposed

ROADBLOCK 1 (*Sand on Lips*)

When disquiet
With its as many as one hundred legs
Puts down roots all around me

Whose voice is this?

You have to go on with your own water
As far as that of which we cannot speak

With water?
All wet and shiny?
Losing all my color?

A distorted face appears
A monkey wrench for a neck
Sand
On lips

PARADE 2

The day laid bare

Go in pursuit of unknown flesh, of the disappeared
If not, you yourself will become a fugitive

Stripped to the bone

Ground of unraveling sutures
Remains of dissolved flesh
Awaken
Go, follow – give chase

It's a parade. **FIRST FLESH** arrives. Seems like a mere octopus, or something an octopus has on its exterior. It moves forward, spewing nonsense, but then, as it grows distant, it is revealed, revealing, no doubt, the human. Then it multiplies, from belly to belly, a fetus with only a head seen in perpetual motion.

Seen in perpetual motion

With **FIRST FLESH** in front, **SECOND FLESH** undulates. Go in pursuit of that wretched nerve center mimicking animated ashes

Because it is equal to the fate of the breast

All is laid bare

The stones give off a scent in the confusion (according to internet media rumors, there was a tattoo imprinted on the breast)

THIRD FLESH – of all things, masquerading as sand, or engulfed by sand, in either case, all that can be seen is sand, an enormous amount of sand, its sun-soaked, smug expanse.

All is laid bare
Attaboy!

‘Two pages torn from the latest issue of a comic book, *Hunter*
x Hunter’

FOURTH FLESH is working. For instance, when you are immersed in afternoon sleep in the eternity of water, that which multiplies into many fish gathers together and eats the history of your diseased skin, eats it all up nicely.

FIFTH FLESH is so smelly you could call it stench incarnate

All is laid bare
Like gum which has lost its flavor, I who am nothing more than myself

SIXTH FLESH is a hand shaking pom-poms all around. How ridiculous. It’s not as if it’s a cheer leader. It should probably be thrown off the field. It has the limitations of a crustacean.

SEVENTH FLESH is the shadow of flesh shimmering, giving birth to flesh though it is a mere shadow, raising its young in the hollow of an eye socket. Hold them in your arms when they’re grown – you’ll be covered in blood. Why? Are you saying live out the sullen remainder of your days as a monk?

Adenylic acid, guanylic acid

‘While walking in the Western Market someone stumbled toward me, skin blackened as if they had attempted to burn themselves alive’

Like gum which has lost its flavor, I who am nothing more than myself

ROADBLOCK 2 (*Atomic Bomb Brick*)

Of course it's not as if
An atomic bomb brick
Came flying over nor is it the case that
I brought it home
Placed
Here right out of the blue
This suddenness continuing forever
Or something like that
An atomic bomb
Brick
Actually, a screenwriter friend
Came like the wind from Hiroshima to my house
And gave it to me as a gift
Taken
From the Calbee Foods warehouse
Formerly the Hiroshima military supply depot
Its pedigree noted on a piece of paper and again like the wind
He left
But how troublesome
I tried adding it to the objects arranged in the entryway but it
 just didn't fit
Then I moved it to the glass case in the living room
With the rock collection
But still it didn't fit
An atomic bomb
Brick
Wrested from the depths of the earth
A fragment, covered
With fine scars, a mysterious
Fragment
Or something like that
So I placed it on the palm of my hand

Nothing to do but gaze fixedly at it
And then music I'm sure it was
Music I heard coming from somewhere
In the bone at the bottom of the ear
A torrent of metallic blood
Colliding, crushing
Dissipating
The metallic
Rainbow squeaking, made to undulate severalfold
Or something like that

PARADE 3

Stripped to the bone

The day laid bare

No one can escape

And yet there are runaways, always runaways, everywhere – it is the real.

EIGHTH FLESH appears, in every respect its flattened figure a kind of zone – blood zone, knowledge zone, ground zone. Each zone separate, the gaps between their names which matter little are sewn up. A voice is heard from somewhere saying it's all gas so there's not much you can do.

'The collarbone snaps'

NINTH FLESH – one becomes mesmerized by its swimming around and around aimlessly. Said to have the ability to charm, those who have grown weary are warned against becoming so inactive they end up falling in with a plop, to float next to **NINTH FLESH**.

Cytidylic acid, thymidylic acid

In this way **FOURTH FLESH** and **SIXTH FLESH** run strictly parallel, competing in their hushed silence like cotton. Eventually they are surprised to find they have transformed into **NINTH FLESH**. Similarly, **SEVENTH FLESH** and **FIRST FLESH** collide, thereby forming **TENTH FLESH**, while **FIFTH FLESH** and **THIRD FLESH** merge to form **ELEVENTH FLESH**. Meanwhile **SECOND FLESH** and **EIGHTH FLESH** move along arm in arm, the perfectly harmonious couple, but of course, they produce nothing.

TWELFTH FLESH is blind, but it is of course specialized, and is a master at spewing out words, much more so than **FIRST FLESH**, but obviously it has no reproductive capacity. It is a disposable product.

Much like myself

If someone asks, it must be **THIRTEENTH FLESH**. The spirit just makes it in, but the two are at cross purposes. When the spirit tries to lie down the flesh stands up, and when the flesh needs to rest the spirit gets up, walks around in the arcade of bones and joints, and tries to go outside.

FOURTEENTH FLESH wears an expression of anger and indignation, so one must hasten to apologize or else one might get clobbered, or draw its profile using quick-drying ink

Or something to that effect

FIFTEENTH FLESH has discarded eyes and ears, even its beautiful legs, and has renounced mathematics, single-mindedly developing the meaning of its existence in a region inundated by sand, but the result is more like an eye socket laughing meaninglessly above a set of kneecaps, or nerves foaming up in order to dream.

SIXTEENTH FLESH is an old curmudgeon, gradually cozying up to the meaning of existence once he's found it. He opens his big mouth, which can only be described as like that of a comic book character, and gulps everything down at once.

With frightening speed
Actions take hold of the human

Blood drips
From the hands of people become like empty shells

Like testimony

To the here

And the now