

MY BROTHER GOES DOWN TO THE SEA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Umbrella Bones: Poems and Translations
Another Wrong Fedora
Ueno Mornings

TRANSLATION

100 Poets One Song Each: The Ogura Hyakunin Isshu

MY BROTHER
GOES DOWN *to the* SEA

John Gribble

ISOBAR
PRESS

First published in 2024 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 978-4-907359-47-8

Copyright © John Gribble 2024
All rights reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, with gratitude, to the following publications: *IOX3 plus*; *California Quarterly*; *The Font*; *four W*; *Minus Tide! International*; *Moon*; *Pearl*; *Sow's Ear*; *Tokyo Poetry Journal*; *White Enso*. The quotation at the end of 'The Village of Praying Hands' is from Chapter 80 of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

COVER IMAGE: Sesson Shukei (1504-?), *Tempest*, Nomura Art Museum, Kyoto.

This book is dedicated with love to my wife Miwako and my children, Judith and Andrew. Great thanks to my friend, editor, and publisher Paul Rossiter for his perseverance and good-natured patience. I would also like to acknowledge the support and encouragement of past and current members of the Tokyo Writers Workshop and the community which has grown around the Japan Writers Conference.

Contents

Niagara River, Above Horseshoe Falls / 9

I

- To Carlo Rossi / 13
My Father as the Buddha / 14
 Rowing / 15
 On the River / 16
Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Omval, near Amsterdam*, 1645 / 17
 He, ardent, / 18
Dandelion Scarecrow / 19
 Brothers / 20
 Wheels / 21

II

- Flute / 25
Heaven / 26
My Japanese Garden / 27
 Spring / 28
 Frog / 29
 The Conch Shell / 30
 Harps / 31
 Nails / 32
 Bolo Tie / 33
An Evening Stroll / 34

III

- Glaze / 37
Bon-odori Dance / 38
The Visit / 39
In Okinawa / 40
The arches of Nakai are all but gone, / 41
Ghazal – Wanli Vase / 42

IV

- Juicer / 47
Note to Edgar / 48
Edward Hopper, *Sunday*, 1926 / 49
Photo of the Poet Steve Orlen / 50
Tonebar / 51
'If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day' / 52
Pioneer Service Union 76 / 53
Pants / 54
Three Senryu / 55
Done from Love / 56
Sakai-Machi / 57
'So when you moving back to America?' / 59

V

- My Brother Goes Down to the Sea / 63
Passing / 64
The Shakuhachi Lesson / 65

Memory / 66
One night in an offshore wind / 67
Autumn / 68
Worshippers / 69
Returning to Port / 70
The Village of Praying Hands / 71
untitled / 73

VI

On Payette Lake / 77

Niagara River, Above Horseshoe Falls

The water makes its stately way:
some small wind ruffle,
but mostly smooth, swift, and calm
until it isn't.

A faint unrest, a slight dis-ease,
a tugging forward. A hump.
A buck. Small surges, disorders
quelled, tried again. Elasticity
failing, the one becomes
the many, the millions.

A roar becomes a presence.
A thousand years of order
will come undone
beneath the mists ahead.

To Carlo Rossi

So what's this in the neighbor's trash?
An upscale bottle, corked but emptied
of your cheap red wine. Here's your caricature
on a brassy paper medallion, your Bozo grin,
your mitten hands holding up a bunch of grapes.
I have Kinescope memories of you, sloppy,
annoying, but sort of loveable –
certainly no Orson Welles, pitching for Paul Masson,
claiming, *We will sell no wine before its time*,
covering a few of his own debts. You were your own man,
peddling your own brand.

Yours was the second
cheapest drunk in town – three liters for three-forty-nine,
in a jug like a green glass tomato, a finger ring
on the side of the neck. The stuff didn't hurt me
half as bad the next day as one might expect. I too
was my own man, willing to pay for pleasures
suffered alone. Still, your wine, a little weed,
and Willie Nelson got me through years of nights.

I think I'll take this bottle home. I think I'll score a line
around the base of its straight and elegant neck,
and heat it over a flame. With a tap, I'll knock the neck free.
With it I'll touch the strings of my guitar
and sweep it weepingly up and down.
Memories. Distant. But close enough, thanks.

My Father as the Buddha

He's Chinese, 7th century, and stone.
Most of the head survives but the neck
is pretty jagged. Yet for all the loss
and damage, he appears serene.
The vision behind those mostly-closed eyes
is mostly tranquil, happy. The Truths
remained true. Pain and its causes,
the end of pain and the path,
all were on his mind as this was being carved.

He's young. His cheeks are full, even plump.
And he's clean-shaven. So this came before
the beard he wore the last 30 years of his life.
Maybe this was carved just before his marriage.
Wedding pictures show him in a similar mood,
though in those he's proud, too,
proud of his pretty young bride.
And in those photos, his eyes are open wide.

Rowing

I'm clumsy boarding
and getting settled.
I splash with the oars.
But what I learned
years ago soon returns.

I pull and the boat slips forward.
The murky water shows my wake.
The oars leave eddies swirling behind.
My grip stays firm.

Across, then up and down the lake,
around a tiny island. The hour passes,
flowing like an evening spent
with a friend. A skill reclaimed –
purposeful, now useless, but fine.

On the River

Industrial brown dragonflies dart beneath Kiyosu-bashi,
a squat blue bridge with sagging jowl arches.
It crosses Sumida-gawa, which looks like a river,
smells like the sea, and heaves slightly against its banks.
Low tugs pull voluptuous dirty barges
with extravagant half-submerged rudders,
controlled by tillermen, erect and shirtless in sultry air
perfect for the work at hand,
as brackish water eats at the boats' steel hulls.

Rembrandt van Rijn,
The Omval, near Amsterdam, 1645

Bowered in our little nest, we hear the footfall
of the fellow going down to the Amstel's edge,
hear him call out to his friends rowing past,
hear the creaking oars, and the flap of a sail –
another boat coming about in the wind. My love
murmurs, laughs low at their noise and our secret.
Her braid's come loose in my hands, her skirts are riding up.
Here we're invisible, even to that old boy sketching –
drawing, I suppose, the windmills across the river.

He, ardent,

she, entertained,

flattered, a little,

and annoyed.

Behind them,

the bright pink lanterns

of a very short festival.

Dandelion Scarecrow

for Morgan Gibson 1929-2017

their leaves are gone
but in the trees persimmons
continue to glow

next to the train tracks
pampas grass leans, shakes its hair,
dances in the wind

city, then river,
then more city – outward bound
to give a goodbye

the poet's photo:
hawk-beaked, peaceful and smiling –
the group celebrates

a dandelion scarecrow
now cartwheeling forever