

A SUITE OF TRANSLATIONS FROM NAKAHARA CHUYA, WITH
A CONCLUDING POEM IN TRIBUTE

Translations from Japanese by Jerome Rothenberg & Yasuhiro Yotsumoto

"A BONE"

Look at this, it's my bone,
a tip of bone torn from its flesh,
filthy, filled up with woes,
it's the days of our lives
sticking out, a blunt bone
bleached by the rain.

There's no shine to it,
innocent, stupidly white,
absorbing the rain,
blown back by the wind,
just barely
reflecting the sky.

Funny imagining, seeing
this bone on a chair
in a restaurant
packed to the gills, & eating
mitsuba leafy & boiled,
a bone but alive.

Look at this, it's my bone,
& is that me staring
& wondering: *Strange*,
was my soul left behind
& has it come back
where its bone is,
daring to look?

On the half dead grass
on the bank of a brook
in my home town, standing
& looking – who's there?
Is it me? A bone
sticking out
a bone stupidly white
& high as a billboard.

POEM: SAD MORNING

sound of a brook
comes down
the mountain:
spring light
like a stone:
the water running
from a spout
split open:
more a grey-haired
crone, her story
pouring out.

mica mouth
I sing through:
falling backward
singing:
drying up
my heart
lies wrinkled:
tightrope walker
in between
old stones.

o unknown fire

bursting in air!

o rain of echoes

wet & crowned!

.....

clap my hands clapping

this way & that

POEM: EVENING WITH SUNLIGHT

hills retreat from me
arms crossed over chest
& sunsets colored golden
mercy colored

grasses in fields
sing oldtime songs
on mountains trees
old hearts remote & still

here in this time & place
I've been meat of a clam
a babe's foot stamps on

here in this time & place
surrender stubborn intimate
arms crossed walking off

POEM: AN EVENING IN SPRING

the tin roof eats the rice crackers
spring now the evening's at peace
ashes thrown underhand soon turning pale
spring now the evening's at rest

ah! it's a scarecrow – is it or is it?
& a horse neighing? – nothing I hear
only the moon shining slimes itself up
& an evening in spring limps behind

a temple out in a field dripping red
& the wheels on my cart lose their grease
the historical present was all I know
the sky & mountains mock me & mock me

a tile has just peeled loose from the roof
now & forever it's spring
the evening is moving forward & wordless
where it finds its way into a vein

AUTUMN POEM

1.

The field until yesterday
was burning now
it stretches under clouds
& sky unmindful.
And they say the rain
each time it comes
brings autumn that much
closer even more so
autumn borne cicadas
sing out everywhere,
nesting sometimes in a tree
awash in grass.

I smoke a cigarette,
smoke spiraling
through stale air,
I try & try
to stare
at the horizon.
Can't be done,
The ghosts of heat
& haze
stand up or flop down.
And I find myself alone there,
squatting.

A cloudy sky
dark golden light
plays off now
as it always was,
so high I can't help
looking down.

I tell you that I live
resigned to ennui,
drawing from my cigarette
three different tastes.

Death may no longer be
so far away.

2

"He did, he said *so long* & then
he walked away, he walked out from that door,
the weird smile that he wore, shiny like brass,
his smile that didn't look like someone living.

His eyes like water in a pond the color when it clears,
or something. He talked like someone somewhere else.
Would cut his speech up into little pieces.
He used to think of little things that didn't matter."

*"Yes, just like that. I wonder if he knew that he was dying.
He would laugh and tell you that the stars became him*

when he stared at them. And that was just a while ago.

.....

A while ago. Swore that the clogs that he was wearing weren't his."

3

*The grass was absolutely still,
and over it a butterfly was flying.
He took it all in from the veranda,
stood there dressed in his yukata.
And I, you know, would watch him
from this angle. Staring after it,
that yellow butterfly. I can remember now
the whistles of the tofu vendors
back and forth, the telephone pole
clear against the evening sky.*

*Then he turned back to me and said "I ...
yesterday, I flipped a stone over that weighed
maybe a hundred pounds." And so I asked
"how come? and where was that?"*

*Then you know what? He kept on staring at me,
straight into my eyes, like he was getting mad,
or something ... That's when I got scared.*

How strange we are before we die ...

PROSE POEM: NEVER TO RETURN

Kyoto

World's end, the sunlight that fell down to earth was warm, a warm wind blowing through the flowers.

On a wooden bridge, the dust that morning silent, a mailbox red & shining all day long, a solitary baby carriage on the street, a lonely pinwheel.

No one around who lived there, not a soul, no children playing there, & I with no one near or dear to me, no obligation but to watch the color of the sky above a weathervane.

Not that I was bored. The taste of honey in the air, nothing substantial but enough to eat & live from.

I was smoking cigarettes, but only to enjoy their fragrance. And weirdly I could only smoke them out of doors.

For now my worldly goods consisted of a single towel. I didn't own a pillow, much less a futon mattress. True I still had a tooth brush, but the only book I owned had nothing but blank pages. Still I enjoyed the heft of it when I would hold it in my hands from time to time.

Women were lovely objects but not once did I try to go with one. It was enough to dream about them.

Something unspeakable would urge me on, & then my heart, although my life was purposeless, started pounding with a kind of hope.

*

*

In the woods was a very strange park, where women, children & men would stroll by smiling wildly. They spoke a language I didn't understand & showed emotions I couldn't unravel.

Looking up at the sky, I saw a spider web, silver & shining.

AT THE GRAVE OF NAKAHARA CHUYA (1907-1937)

Yamaguchi, Japan

for Hiromi Ito

1

the boy with the round hat
sang boldly boldly
too encumbered with his loneliness he was
& felt like ice the ground
white underneath his shoe
chameleon was too
sportjacket toothpaste smeared
black teeth like geisha's were
that signaled empty space
& ghosts
— had gone to live with ghosts —
but carried a black flag
we saw him high above our heads
lost children by his side
the black flag in his hand
was waving in a tide of flags
— & frogs —
a frog who dares not see the moon
is like the moon herself
a round hat that the boy wears
that the gang of poets moves
head unto head

the scratching of a nail against a stone
a bone against a wind
this growing doubt that left him
limp like a green leek
speaks out his hatred of all thought
sweet dada boy who sang & wept
Napoleon's tears at night
but found no freedom
had to bring back the babe's bones
morning glory
body's reflex
women transforming to white horses
cold as stone
or history
the voice of Rimbaud too much for his ears
so that he stumbles
wonders if the bones were really his
white tips of bones
emerging from the ground around him
bones that sat in lunchrooms
that munched on watercress & rice
waved to the crowds of riders
bones that wore language like a flag
poured tea
drew deeply on a cigarette
sought out a woman with breasts painted
with a nipple for a nose

that brought the parachutist's nostalgia
to a boil followed a circus
to the edge of town
where it engaged in brown wars
& the boy who sang
& wore a round hat
fell into a broken sleep
& came out of his grave
& sat with us
& sang in a broken sleep

[THE SONG] *As sportscoats are to toothpaste*
as the boa is to scales
as black teeth are to playful ghosts
as seasons are to smiles

As telephones are to toasters
as angels are to air
as wagon wheels are to ups & downs
as horses are to fire

As Buddha is to Buddha
as a toenail is to glass
as the way we make love is tight like that
as ascensions are to cash

As harbors are to hairpins
as napoleons are to joy
as bicycles are to icicles
bones are to a dada boy

2

AFTER NAKAHARA CHUYA

*I want to kill 3000 crows
& stay in bed with you forever*

he is their dada god
& stands there shoeless
with his umbrella ripped away
whatever spills from him
raises up bubbles
over the flooded road

“my friend” he cries “my life
is like the rain” in buckets
here where the candle should be lit
& you inside your room
be safer

women enter the white street
by twos approach them
in the rain
look how they shake their green umbrellas

flower pots bob up & down
wash-basins slither past
ponds are abandoned by their carp

a world of messengers & rain
& disappearing towns

no shoes & no umbrellas

candles light up my room

my chewing gum stuck to my ear

forever

3

AT THE GRAVESIDE

*if you feel your body like a single speck
you will not mind about anything*

N.C.

it is because of you we come here
sixty years beyond your death
& pour a jug of sake
on your stone
the round voice of the priest
the sacerdotal lamentation sounding
high over those hills
the little sticks of incense

plunged like children's toys
into the earth
the century around us fizzling out
its greater terror absent from your life
but entering your dreams like mine
last night in which I waited
on a rooftop
saw a city opening in front of me
a message posted on the mansard tiles
the pope's hope of salvation
written large that tells us
"JESUS KILLS"
until I lose my grip my fingers
barely holding on
your words repeating in my mind
people are strange when just about to die
as you were too poor boy
poor stranger
never to be the ninety-year-old man
the ancient sage
victim of disasters seared
into the flesh
in flight above a disappearing city
dada prophecy
& pope's decree
fusing together in your aftermath
but on this morning in your native town

with nothing better than the air
& nothing worse
a bunch of poets stands beside your grave
the bottle having passed around
knowing the dirty truth
the numbers that have never added up
the dada gods evoked by words
absent in life
the sweet surrender to each other's touch
who come & go
now ready for our dance like children
poets forever
lovers
who make a free fall into empty space
vanishing into the dark sky

Yamaguchi / Encinitas / Paris
5.viii.97

A NOTE ON THE PRECEDING. The concluding poem here comes from my second visit to Japan in 1997 — a festival in Nakahara's home town (Yamaguchi) to celebrate him as a homegrown Dadaist & lyric poet (even lyricist), whose works have had a delayed but powerful impact on popular & literary audiences since World War II. The ceremony at the family's gravesite — the words on the memorial stone are Nakahara's own — was in company of Japanese poets Ito Hiromi, Mikiro Sasaki, Takahashi Mutsuo, Tanikawa Shuntaro, and Yoshimasu Gozo. A hat purchased at the local Nakahara Chuya Museum is a replica of that

in a famous photo of the young Nakahara & was tried on away from the grave by all involved.

It was over a decade later -- & only then -- that I entered into a round of translation with Yotsumoto Yasuhiro, himself a poet of considerable means, then living abroad in Munich & engaged in his own international poetry projects. Over the intervening years, Hiromi Ito, who was living, as she still does, up the street from us in Encinitas, California, had continued to feed my interest in Chuya as a poet & iconic figure. The collaboration with Yasuhiro has continued slowly, moving toward a larger collection which is still in the works. The publication of these six poems is the first appearance of our work in English, while my own poem, "At the Grave of Nakahara Chuya," appeared first in Sylvester Pollet's Backwood Broadsides Chaplet Series (1998) & again in my book, *A Paradise of Poets* (New Directions, 1999). [J.R.]