

■ Essay

Enjoying Ban'ya Natsuishi's Haiku

Sayumi KAMAKURA

English translation by Leanne OGASAWARA

Ban'ya Natsuishi's international haiku journal **Ginyu** is published four times a year in Japan. I serve as an editor on the journal, which in addition to publishing many new and noteworthy haiku poems also contains articles on literary criticism, including those concerning haiku; as well as book reviews and information about Ban'ya's activities, as well as those of the journals's many friends. In addition, the journal contains essays, including a series I write called, *Tenchi no hyojo* (Expressions of Heaven and Earth).

In the series, I usually pick up a keyword and explore the various ways this keyword is expressed in haiku. For example, examining such themes as “sea,” “sky” or “trees,” I utilize five or six poems to see how such themes are given expression and voice. These essays of mine will often include poems by Ban'ya Natsuishi, such as the following, which I discuss below.

階段を突き落とされて虹となる

『獵常記』(1983年)

Shoved off the stairs —

falling I become

a rainbow

Trans. Jim Kacian

From *The Diary of Everyday Hunting* (1983)

One usually doesn't use the expression “shoved down” when it is just one or two steps. And, of course, “shoved off” is quite different in meaning from simply “falling down” stairs. The hatred and malice is quite vivid in the poem, and reading we know that we are speaking of an act of murder. Why did the person commit such an act? Why did someone receive such ill intent? Perhaps the reason is hidden in the expression, “I become a rainbow.”

Jesus Christ was crucified. Galileo Galilei was accused and killed by the Inquisition. The Jewish people were persecuted during World War II. Indeed, no matter what time and what place, we find human jealousy and fear; hatred and resentment and human beings engaged in extreme cruelty to other human beings, who in turn try to protect themselves. But is their death simply all there is to it? Does the person shoved down the stairs cease totally to matter? We know from history that the truth does appear sometimes after death and crimes and punishments reevaluated. Examples of regained honor are too numerous to mention. Even if the person is dead, the truth can still someday come out and shine brilliantly. In changing the murdered person into a rainbow, Ban'ya has restored the honor and glory of the woman and brought the truth into the light of day.

In the ancient past, rainbows were seen as a bridge between the gods and human beings. In the Bible, after the flood, the rainbow was taken as evidence of God's covenant with Noah. In Japan, rainbows are seen as pathways leading to the gods. Viewed as objects of awe, rainbows were also seen as sacred snakes. Our world is filled with those things that surpass rational thought, and rainbows, as objects of hope and salvation, are one of these things.

天ハ固体ナリ山頂ノ蟻ノ全滅

『真空律』(1989年)

The solidity of heaven—
at the mountaintop
all the ants destroyed
Trans. Jim Kacian
From *Rhythm of Vacuum* (1989)

Until I read this haiku, I had always believed that heaven was a kind of realm composed of colorless, odorless and transparent gas. While I thought there could be a liquid quality, like the feeling of rains, I never imagined it would have any solid quality, such as the way a rock feels when held in the palm of one's hand. This poem moreover is intriguing in the way it utilizes the auxiliary verb "will become."

What would happen if the heavens above became solid like a rock? In the poem above, the ants crawling on the summit of the mountain—that very place closest to heaven—are annihilated. Usually, one doesn't pay so much

attention to ants. However, imagining the plight of dozens or hundreds or even thousands all wiped out on the mountaintop is a startlingly depressing image, don't you think?

In Japanese mythology, when the sun goddess, Amaterasu, was hiding in the Celestial Rock Cave, the earth grew dark and was wrapped in unfathomable darkness. This caused even all the ants to die. The world only came back to life with the dancing of Ame-no-Uzume-no-mikoto. As all the other gods laughed at her dancing, Amaterasu growing curious as to what the fuss was all about emerged from her cave, bringing light back into the world again. When the heavens grew solid, it was not just that the ants had died. All the people died as well, and such was the extent of the annihilation that after all was said and done, even the ants were shown to have died as well. Nothing escaped the annihilation. Heaven is not always sparkling and full of tranquility. Nature can be severe and violent. Sometimes it can even be unforgiving to all life. It is something to be feared—and this intensity is highlighted in the poem by the use of the katakana script.

地の果ての光の網よみどりごよ

『楽浪』(1992年)

A net of light
at the end of the land!
A newborn!
Trans. Jim Kacian
From *Waves of Joy* (1992)

One of my favorite painters is the Italian Renaissance artist Raphael (1483 - 1520). The newborn in Ban'ya's haiku reminds me of a "Madonna and Child" by Raphael. With its restless eyes, soft cheeks and plump arms and legs, I imagine Ban'ya's newborn to be like this: a mischievous and precious little cupid. Like the young Christ baby, I image it to be perched on his mother Mary's knees—seemingly ready to jump up in play at any moment.

The “net of light” in the poem also calls to mind Jabob's Ladder. One imagines countless rays of light radiating through the clouds. The poem's ending, by using the Japanese ending-particle “yo,” conveys a deep sense of love that seems to connect this all-encompassing light to that of the existence of the newborn. No one knows where the end of the earth lies. Even if one were to search for the rest of their life, it is not likely they would find a net

of light rays where there they would discover a newborn child. This is, I think, the light of the future, which the poet wished to see for his own son; that is, it is a parent's great wish for their child: that they will always be healthy as if embraced in a beautiful net of life. One cannot help but feel moved by this honest prayer.

In my essay series, I used the "stairs" haiku for an essay on "rainbows" and the "solidity of heaven" haiku for an essay on "heaven." Likewise, the "net of light" haiku was used for an essay on "light." For those reading my columns they will already understand that my essays are not aimed at explaining the various poems. Although one can indeed get a feeling of the haiku through my essays, the essays are largely written out of pure inspiration inspired by the keywords—not the haiku per se. The real aim of my essays is to try and tease out the way reading haiku can be enjoyable. When people tell me, "reading haiku is fun," I am filled with great delight, because it's true!

「私は水」あらゆる塵を浮かべます

『右目の白夜』（2006年）

"I'm water"
letting float on me
any dust
Trans. Jim Kacian
From *Right Eye in Twilight* (2006)

Whether a river, a waterfall, a lake, a swamp, a pond or in a puddle or rice field, dust floats on water. It even floats in beautiful clear streams, where perhaps it doesn't collect, but it does float along with the current. Where dust does collect, it can become a place to play. Leaves, twigs, and straw; and if light enough even sand and dirt will instantaneously float. What is more beautiful and evokes more serenity than the vision of cherry blossom petals floating along the river? It's like a prayer. Even these petals will break down over time and become dust. One could also try thinking of the dust from the water's point of view. What does water think of dust? Does the water wish dust would go away? Or does water actually like the dust floating within its embrace?

The above haiku, after all, begins with the phrase, "I'm water." The poem does not come down decisively in

either way. The dust is not seen as good or bad; nor is it seen as beautiful or ugly. What is maybe wonderful is the way nothing that comes is resisted. Indeed, “any dust” is all and everything that is floating together down the water. There is no hesitation or stance—just a confidence in water’s unflappability. The great breadth of heart and depth and richness of water is fully conveyed so that one cannot help but feel that all dust must truly float in joy.

月光を堪え忍ぶ山ここへ来い

『神々のフーガ』（1990年）

Come here!
The mountain
enduring the moonlight!
Trans. Jim Kacian
From *The Fugue of Gods* (1990)

How beautiful the mountain is! How majestic it looms before us. It makes us feel so alive! When gazing at the mountain, one’s heart opens and takes flight. Painful and negative thoughts disappear for a time. But why is moonlight something to be endured for the mountain? Bathed in moonlight in the middle of the night, the mountain becomes a dark silhouette, and we feel its height and its presence. It seems somehow inconceivable that the mountain would feel being lit up in the moonlight something to be endured.

Why is it suffocating at night? Why is the moonlight that thing which must be endured?

Over the mountains,
far to travel, people say,
Happiness dwells.
Alas, and I went,
in the crowd of the others,
and returned with a tear-stained face.
Over the mountains,
far to travel, people say,
Happiness dwells.

Trans: Jakob Kellner

The German poet, Karl Hermann Busse once wrote a poem called, "Over the Mountains." In the poem, we feel all of our longings to be held in the embrace of the mountains. Large and overflowing with majesty (maybe even like our parents), they tend to make us more hopeful of greater tolerance. Surely there are good things beyond the mountains. Surely we will encounter happiness and a better tomorrow there. No matter what mountain we are looking at; no matter whether success is already in the palm of one's hand or whether happiness is futile, somehow mountains inspire hope.

Isn't that how we feel when we look at mountains? Or am I wrong and only speaking of my own feelings? Perhaps the mountains are not there to grant human wishes and that this is why the mountains are sad. A mountain like that would have to endure the moonlight. Ban'ya's poem seems to enter straight into the mountain's heart and in great sympathy, gently calls to the mountain, "Come here!"

I chose the haiku "I'm water" for an essay on "water." The haiku on "moonlight" was not selected for an essay on the moon, but rather on "mountains." Rather than working with literary concepts or principles, I tend to choose poems intuitively from my heart. Somehow certain poems are lodged in my mind and when a poem truly moves me, I find that I wish to write about the poem. This seems somehow important: to work with the poems in my writing. In other words, appreciating poetry is not simply about being moved. It is also about stopping to question whether there are not things about which the haiku is further appealing. One must quietly sit with poetry and intently look at it. In that way, one can really hear what the haiku is saying.

日本海に稲妻の尾が入れられる

『神々のフーガ』（1990年）

Into the Sea of Japan
the lightning's tail
is plunged
Trans. Jim Kacian

From *The Fugue of Gods* (1990)

A lightning storm is made known from its great flashes of light. Of course, there is also the sound of thunder to go along with the lightning. But in general, when we talk about lightning storms, we are thinking about those great dazzling flashes that light up the night sky, where we see intense and violent zigzag streaks of light traveling from the sky down to the ground. And, anything in lightning's path will be struck and burned—maybe even electrocuted. Lightning is indeed terrifying.

In the haiku above, we see the tail of the lightning plunging into the Sea of Japan. But wait? Usually, when lightning strikes the ground, it connects with its tip or end, right? In Ban'ya poem, however, the lightning seems to be traveling rotated at a 180 degree angle. What would happen in such a case? Well first of all, lightning grows a tail like an animal –or perhaps a gigantic creature with a head, like a snake or maybe a dragon. With its tail plunged into the sea, the entire length of its body would become exposed to our vision. Another point of interest is the mention of the Japan Sea. Looking on a map, we see that unlike the seemingly limitless waters of the Pacific Ocean, the Sea of Japan is quite hemmed in. Surrounded by Sakhalin Island, Russia, China and the Japanese archipelago, from above it must look almost like a great lake or swamp.

With its tail plunged into the Sea of Japan and its body elevated above the water, this lightning storm could only be a dragon or great snake. For the creature, the sea is not the sea, but more like a lake. Or perhaps not even a lake, the sea might be more like a pond or puddle to such a great creature. This is a haiku concerned with grand scales. But then this great creature moving to the dictates of its heart with flashes of terrifying light and roaring with thunder, is in fact just trying to play, like a kitten or puppy. It is a wonderful image don't you think?

朝日夕日も見えざる河口を母と呼ぶ

『獵常記』 (1983年)

The estuary where
neither the rising sun nor the setting sun's visible
I call mother
Trans. Jim Kacian
From *The Diary of Everyday Hunting* (1983)

What kind of place is an estuary where neither the rising sun nor the setting sun can be seen? Where is such a place? An estuary sits facing the sea. Therefore, whether facing the north or facing the south, still somewhere along the infinite horizon one will catch a sight of the sun—either sunrise in the morning or sunset in the evening. The waters too would reflect the beautiful yellows and reds of these sunrises and sunsets. And the sky too. I become entranced just imagining it. But, in the estuary of this haiku, all of that is invisible. The estuary of the haiku is a place endlessly shrouded in darkness; an estuary closed off in hazy gray. And that is the place the poet calls “mother.”

Is there such a place as this?

Taking “mother” as a hint, doesn’t it perhaps suggest the uterus? Lying deep within the female body, the uterus is a place that does not know sunrises or sunsets. There, it is always dusk. For approximately 266 days, the unborn child grows in a mysterious state of chaos; always connected to the mother. The water of the estuary encounters that of the ocean, and without any effort, the waters are pushed out to merge with the great waters of the sea of life. I used the "Sea of Japan" haiku for an essay on "the sea." And I used the "estuary" haiku for one on "mother."

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My essay series, *Tenchi no hyojo* has been included in **Ginyu** almost immediately from the journal’s start, when it first began being published over fifteen years ago. During that time, I have examined many haiku in my essays, but I have probably taken up Ban’ya’s haiku more than anyone’s. In writing my essays, what I have found most difficult is not straying fundamentally away from the poems. Trying to express those things I want to express, I do stray from the haiku themselves. But after all since these are my essays, it is up to me to decide how to handle this issue, and in the end I have come to feel that essays and haiku should be differentiated. That is, the essay should somehow inspire comparison to the original poems. But the essay should also be able to stand alone. This is, I believe, the key to the success of the *Tenchi no Hyojo* essays. Ban’ya’s poems inspire so many associations. And, they allow the reader’s imagination to take flight. This is the reason I have employed so many of his haiku. Or to put it another way, I would suggest that it is for the purpose of incorporating all these many elements into the work for which Ban’ya creates his haiku.