

**Hiroshima Maidens: Imaginary translations from the Japanese**

Mankind, fleet of life, like tree leaves, weak creatures of clay,  
 unsubstantial as shadows, wingless, ephemeral, wretched, mortal and  
 dreamlike.

— Aristophanes, *Birds*

In front of us  
 thin roads lead  
 down to rivers  
 tilting sunlight,  
 a brightness out of fog.

We seek meekness;  
 the wind chases dead leaves.

Gentle and silent,  
 massed at the edge  
 where goldfish snap  
 and graze, we come  
 creeping along  
 the sandy wetness,  
 the warm stones,  
 sit softly down  
 beside you, afraid of being  
 knocked down again,  
 reach into dreams  
 like bits of water  
 caught in crevices,  
 dreams that will not breathe,  
 dreams that will not cleanse  
 dreams that will not cure.

Murasaki presses the heels  
 of her hands against  
 her closed eyes;

her dream blossoms,  
 pulls you inside  
 like youthful hope,

whitens and melts  
thin bones:

A moment,  
a long moment  
in morning light,  
Shiahatsu turns,  
his face singed,  
black as coal;

grease runs,  
streams from splits  
in his face,  
rivulets of memories  
soaking the earth  
with pain.

Life disdains honor,  
shadowy figures cross  
and re-cross  
the patches of this dream:

A cowed band of Buddhist monks  
and Catholic priests dance  
around the edges of his bed  
banked with flowers  
funereal and elaborate.

Their long, narrow fingers  
weave thin trails of fragrant smoke,  
cross and re-cross  
divide in squares;

in each the likeness  
of Shiahatsu's face,  
an ill-contented soul  
beckoning, demanding,

*come over*

chanting,

*sunyata,*

*dasein,*

*docta ignorantio;*

*nomos,*  
he drones;  
*autos,*

*its nemesis is the empty space,*  
*it is not wrecked by self-contradictions,*  
*it produces the vacuum, the space,*  
*in which new absolutisms will pour.*

Day breaks  
on their cowed faces,  
gray, cerecloth faces.

Ardent beggars,  
infected, incurable sores  
ooze on their lolled tongues;

turning corners, turning in time,  
they deliver their swollen edict:

*From the original sin*  
*of nature, they say, flows*  
*every other wrong.*

\*

Sometimes,  
in the morning,  
in earliest light,  
the curtains hang askew,  
hesitant, stirring,  
carrying to us  
deep aftermaths  
of painful privacy,  
of bad nights, and  
afflicted stiff shapes.

\*

Sometimes,  
we would like the dreams  
to shrink to nothing,  
or narrow like a sharpened pin

to burst the vacuum's chamber,  
to show no globular face.

\*

On the day's edge,  
in the morning hours,  
we pray for a pure moment,  
a long beauty,  
a living into light,  
a soft wind fanning the earth  
faithful to the ebb and flow.

\* \* \*

For hence I believed Evil also to be some such kind of substance, and to have its own foul, and hideous bulk; whether gross, which they called earth, or thin and subtile, (like the body of the air,) which they imagine to be some malignant mind, creeping through that earth.

— St. Augustine, *Confessions*

There's sightless Natsume  
picking her way along the river's bank,  
standing away from us  
these long August days;

she's learned at last to say,  
*This was my home.*

The twin of Doi,  
she thinks reluctantly —  
familiar lands,  
leaves in midsummer,  
small and delicate paper boats,  
an officer in a blue coat,  
lips about to part,  
a face

burned on the inside  
of her eyes.

And you, can you  
begin to see  
if she sits  
softly down beside you?

Don't fidget so,  
this too is important.

Her head is tilted up at you,  
so try to understand  
this simple speech of hers,  
help her lay bare the whispers  
of time and death and chaos,  
help her lay bare this place  
of no weight / mysterious creeping  
motions, where words murmur sounds  
less clear, less defined,  
starved, stale, and stiff,  
they, and she, sweep you in:

*It is  
a bit strange,  
but I did not worry  
so much about things  
beyond the edges  
of those hills.*

*Nothing,  
I felt,  
not even love,  
would ever push me  
beyond the edges  
of this river.*

*Wind and sunlight  
were languid things,  
drawn to each other  
by the fragrance  
of this water.*

*In August,*

*the water would dry up,  
the lilies fell,  
and lifting up my dress  
I would arrange  
the bottom stones  
in rows and lines  
coherent, profound,  
like a sense of the past,  
simple, reconciled, patient;*

*the path beyond anger  
was plain.*

*Now,  
those bottom stones  
are like big  
pedantic words,  
all in pieces,  
sad canticles  
petty, exhausted,  
crumbled into kernels,  
and like so many other things  
hardly worth mentioning.*

*Daniel James Sundahl*