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 cowled 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 cowled 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.

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

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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