

Poems

Bern Mulvey

BUTSUMA

Time to meet the relatives, only they're dead.
It's like a WWII newsreel, all the black-and-white,
the *marugari* and *fukurasuzume* hairstyles,
the *montsuki*, the formal death kimonos, even a sword

or two. Why am I here? My mother-in-law-to-be
narrates causes of death. This one, stomach cancer,
that one, cerebral hemorrhage. She fast-forwards
to her brother, machine-gunned then left in a ditch to die.

By *Americans*, she says. I look up at his picture,
more handsome than I'll ever be, a dark haired
Emilio Estevez--*this was no monster*
I am being told. She wants an explanation,

they all do--I know it's trite, but I feel them,
all 20 or so, they want an apology. And I can't do it,
and I can't explain, not here, not before the dead,
how I have my own dead, my great-uncle sodomized

by bayonet until he too died in a place called Bataan.
Senso wa hidoi koto da--War is a horrible thing.
I say this, and she starts to cry. After a while,
she says to me, *We will need your picture too,*

just in case.

JIZOU AT TSURUGA BAY

For M

Is this your answer then, to become a god?
They found the body already transformed,

bursting its seams. My wife touched the rents
as if she could still find you in, bent over

your books, too busy to answer a simple
knock. Do you remember that final walk,

the cold water to your ankles, your knees,
then upward until the life bubbled out?

Mother-in-law has shown me your room.
See, she said, *it is untouched*, as if I

had doubted, as if such fidelity
must matter. Brother, on your beach the wind

raises *naminohana*, like quicksilver
ghosts. They summon you, it is the *kagura*,

the dance of the gods. Be with us now,
allow us at least this solace, plum wine

in a shared cup, *daikon* from our garden,
the mourning candle, its long, fragrant leaving.

SUMMER FESTIVAL IN TAMURA VILLAGE

We're busy, for the Dead are coming.
Tomorrow is Obon, the day of return,

12 generations--can you imagine that throng,
that gaggle of souls? So much to do,

tatami waiting to be swept, onigiri rolled,
nasubi laid each into its plate. Outside,

the neighborhood boys cry *Wasshoi! Wasshoi!*
as their fathers bless our house, the mikoshi

lifted three times always, despite the heat,
the incalculable weight of god.

*

Late afternoon is for festival. We fold
like origami into our summer robes,

four awkward cranes, then teeter off *clacketty*
clocketty on wooden sandals. The path

is a rainbow of shades, the men azulene
and indigo, turquoise and daylight, women

carmine and fiesta, a clutch of amaranth.
Above, the shrine's gates signed by their maker,

Abe 1871. Nearby's his family grave,
an old refrain, *senshi, senshi, senshi*.

*

Evening. Mother-in-law tells us to walk ahead.
Her bones are tired. *Just go home*, she says,

make grandchildren. We hear them laugh behind us.
Lanterns line the riverbanks, heart flames each

an invocation. The Dead are coming,
and they must eat. Their photos grace the walls,

whites on shadow, presence. My wife
and I set out plates, pour wine into tiny cups.

Outside, the moon is huge, and in its light,
two figures in the garden, keeping watch.

THE WINDOW TRIBE

Eiheiji Temple

Liquid evening, leaves wind-loosed with thunder.
The old Japanese are naked to the waist,
swollen grey bellies dripping spring water
as they fill their liter jugs. *Umee*, they say,
delicious, holy, a flavor to heal,
to soften the leaving, gravel hardening
with new rain. Light flies like an arrow.

*

Fukui Prefectural Hospital

Shujutsu-chuu...
Like the old *On Air* signs, it means *the Show's On*,
knives out, bellies up. Nervous Dads-to-be
line the halls, you cannot see, do not know whose
is next, his, yours, each of you the same question.
You listen for a sign, eyes on the one god,
your oracle, a red light flashing.
Then, there's a cry, doors open, someone's
a father, and so the numbers dwindle
down until only you are left, the word
complications echoing like death
in that emptied corridor.

*

Bayville, Long Island

Without regard, without regard, the neighbor's children
are in my garden again, my roses are drooping,
my daffodils, my peonies stomped and plucked,
my irises twisted into knots. You'd think
they'd be ashamed, you'd think they'd been taught differently,
that an old woman deserves better in her own garden.

*

Eiheiji Temple

He teaches me the breath of an insect,
bones of a horse. *Polish your arms, leave
water undisturbed*. Above us, the gate,
gods of East and West crouch and glare, a thousand-
year cramp. *It rains spears*. His grandson cries
for his pacifier, the *child silencer*.
Passing it he says, *Ripe grain lowers its head*.

*

Bayville, Long Island

My mother lifting again the plate
shakes with the weight of it. The meat is raw.
I help her upstairs, her bones ache--they are chalk--
each step a milestone, a universe.
She tells me, *I'll dream about you tonight,*
as if that is all it takes, a little
concentration, will-power. She asks me,
How did I get so old?

*

Eiheiji Temple

Three of us, waiting out a storm.
He teaches me, *Decorate the end with beauty;*
the elements up, words dissolve like salt.

WALKING

For Takato

A step! Even the dog
blinks as the now bi-legged
nuisance straightens,
the unsteady lawn
a ship's deck, a carpet
about to be pulled.

You were so
early. I remember leaning
my head to your chest,
how hollow it sounded,
like an empty jar, the faint
rat-a-tat-tat

of a heartbeat.
I imagined
my strength leaking
into you, through my fingers,
my left cheek, as if
I could charge you.

And now, the grass
conspires. Knees buckle,
then find their true
shape, as with a victorious
shake of hand,
you stand.

FACE

She tells me how she flew, how air
became wind, how the jealous ground
rose up. When I lift the pink cloth,
I see a vent, pale eye of bone,
then, quick as breath, the freed blood.
Just four, my daughter exceeds me,
doesn't cry until the doctor,
already masked, taller even
than I, asks, *Are you ready?*

We can put her under, easy
needle in the arm. The stout nurse
moves too slow to my nod. *I'll be good,*
as if *bad* is why we're here, searching
for the true vein. *Hold me,* she says,
my torn, tiny bird, and I do.

KOTODAMA

The word as event

kotodama

raindrops falling

kotodama

the shamaness visited

possessed, the water's light

touch unnoticed

for how could she

filled with *word*,

God, the gather and burst

of it?

A word, say *beauty*

the fat sheep everyone wants

say *home*

pig under roof

the procedure of exclusion

not your pig

the (my) Japanese son

hands two angry points

Go home, he tells me

an event that signifies

Not.

But the word

is it vessel or mirror

to the event?

Not

that dancer always on the rim

of apocalypse

tassels and long hair

weighted with ash

how long have we moved

together (prayer or lesson?)

before the advancing fire?

My most selfish gift

what I am

outside

(r)

round

eyes, my unholstered

nose, long tongue lofting

lateral

liquid 'I's

volition

love.

Kotodama

spirit words God
as breath
event *the possession*
of use

I wait ready

here

my *not home*

a beauty in eight directions
the hunger I feel
the long wait to swallow.

BLIZZARD IN SABAE

Seven years here and never this, drifts three feet and up,
Awara Avenue now this narrow path, the body
a sly numbness, a stumble, a handprint framed in snow.
Besides me, nobody is out, everything shades of white,
houses mushroom-topped, signs bearded in ice,
my awkward steps soundless in the sudden rush of wind.
Miles inland, yet even here how strong the sea smell,
the taste of salt! I walk in my adopted city;
when the hush does come, I am almost home. The moon,
unveiled, shatters, becomes a million reflected stars.