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Ferns by Kaneko Mitsuharu

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Doug Slaymaker
Ferns

Kaneko Mitsuharu
齒朶

Let's talk about ferns
Not like there's anything else to talk about.

About hands
One supple hand placed atop another
Timidly, timidly, softly
Placed.

About
The tips of hands
Quivering slightly
All five
of the fingers.

About
Those five fingers
Quivering like the murmur of a stream
Ever so narrow, those fingertips.

Let's talk about ferns
There is really nothing else to talk about.

On one shiver
another shiver layered;
From beneath a breath
another breath leaks.

From what deep past do they come,
From thick growth, growing thickly
Ferns, white-backed ferns, bracken ferns?

Delicate,
like those that breathe through gills,
come clammy
ferns'
exhalation.

A broken body, wrapped in bandages
A brittle,
like porcelain,
life-force.

Like youthfulness
that does not depart this world,
like a sadness
that only youthfulness knows.

The leaves that are spread open
the leaves that are clenched shut
we should wash,
with a toothbrush
one, by one.

In France
which is not content to leave a single word without a gender
you are Fougère.
It's because you are, of course you are,
a woman.

The growth, spread as far as the eye can see
towards the women, inclines.

A foot extended into the growth
towards the women, buried.

With hands, grasped in other hands,
forming sloping valleys,
send up droplets of mist
tumbling into the marsh-edge.

Their bodies wrapped in robes
now stepping out of, trying to be the first
the young girls in this shower
with white skin, submerging into silence.

Astride the ferns
rocked gently by the ferns
buoyant, playful
moon!
This body of mine, however, much too heavy for this.

In this country too a man
of this country a woman he loved.

But that love was devoured
by those malevolent lolling imps.

In this country too the very rich
In this country too, the poor.

The poor had to dig up the potatoes while
the rich, they ate them as porridge.

The country is a damp oppressive country.
This country is a sad country.

With a long history, enough to make one seethe
searching through that dark secret passageway,

Ancient, with no exit,
the heart and soul of which
like a spider in a corner
sits, stares, waits.

In this country,
the walls, they say, have ears,
the ceilings, they have eyes.

The anger of young brides, the curses of mothers-in-law,
vengeful living spirits, the ghosts of the dead,
encircle the houses.

In this country, grief
turns into tuberculosis,

In this country, resignation
leads to arthritis.

And no question, to this country as well
civilization, it has come.

And civilization, with the stench of coal smoke,
wiped out the smell of miso and the old ways.

With the reading of Western books, the people,
posed as Westerners.

And then, in this country
just when we thought that unhappiness
had been wiped clean away,

came even more stubborn afflictions,
we took on Western unhappiness,
shouldered it.

And now
like there's a pebble in our shoes
we find that days and days, when it is hard to walk, have come.

And now, more than ever
with a clanking
we have been saddled with Westernization.

With no space to offload that Westernization
it piles up in layers on this country.

No point thinking about happiness in this country,
having lost sight of one's own unhappiness.

With everyone so worried about what others think
we cannot criticize the people of this country.

Even were one to judge correctly,
in this country, all gets washed away,

Having been chewed up by the new cogs in the machinery
and spit out onto the world's sandpile.

What is unchanged appears again following deaths
with fits and starts: people continue to be born.

As long as there are men and women
this, too, will not end.

And after passing through the East, and through the West
men and women will, no doubt, remain.

Even if, perchance, men and women cease to exist
the landscape, arid and pungent, will remain.

Crushed flat by wind and rain, broken by earthquakes
crawling its way over the garbage heap
a slug.

Into this rich damp loam
the fern, the royal fern,
extends its roots,

Towering above such grand fruitless effort
the fern, the royal fern
flourishes.

The "Orient," that we thought had retired already,
has just one final thing to do.
Following the end of the human race
its swan song is to lower the final curtain.

The ferns have aged too.
They have gone completely white-haired.

Old hermits turned to stone in their sleep:
do not strike them with a cane
and awaken them.

Everyone
needs a rest.

Even if the gods extend
no support,
even if life's debts
cannot be brushed away,

With the grave comes the right to lie back and be at ease.
We can, there, unload the corpse, the baggage we have picked up,
and carried, this long way.

When the entire surface of the globe becomes a graveyard
and all is tranquil and calm,
the spirit of equality
mankind's dream, now over,
will be actualized.

There above our faces,
weary of wind and rain,
the undersides of leaves, of the ferns.

Extending to the height of a man
dripping on us
the ferns;
spreading across the landscape
among their roots,

Clumps, and tangled groups, there,
innumerable, still increasing
the eggs of snakes
the eggs of lizards.

The ferns, with roots like the hard beaks of silky fowl, tap open the hard rocks to scoop up crystalline drops of water.

Centipedes curl around their roots: the jet black of those centipedes, said to be servants of the fierce guardian Bishamonten, there in the ever-flowing water of the conduit, turns it faintly purple.

Why even bother, boiling the roots down for glue? That must be why the impotent gods, waiting until human systems disappear, continue to cultivate the ferns. But then, what does that make the ferns? Not like I know. They seem to exist on a plane far from humans, shrouded in jade-green fog, at the outer edges of the monotonous, endless, and mind-numbing—I don't know what exactly—I can only make sense of them as hypnotic, sleep-inducing and repetitive incantations. But in the palms of those hands is a palpable, other-worldly magic, pacifying the gods' murderous intent. They even put the sun to sleep, make it look easy. The sun, speaking of the sun, now the faint red outline of a light bulb just extinguished, quivers among the ferns, barely there, more like jellyfish, like goldfish.

Listening to the ferns' cool silk-like rustle, wandering in the sun's lacey-murmuring stream spilling from the fern leaves, was when I first experienced it: the blood circulating through the bodies of the plants commingling with the sap flowing through my body comprising a sense of release that comes from the unified, the now single flow that yields an ecstasy that cannot be expressed without reference to its form of sadness; the first time that I experienced this was when I got lost and disoriented in the grove of giant ferns in the Buitenzorg botanical garden in Jakarta. At that time I was still lingering on the shores of youth, enthralled with a Jurassic period in which nature was a grand bathing pool, an expansive forests of ferns and rushes. But maybe that developed from the poverty of my youth. Body mass and physique were out of sync, living things were composed solely of lumps and tumors for that generation and its exoticized sense of beauty; I was looking for something to overturn our impoverished days. It is not unlikely, indeed it is possible, that in following our passion that was like sun worship, had we been paying any attention to what was going on around us, we would have entertained the

extravagant desire to be consumed by wild beasts. All I could see in the forest following each shake of the fern stalks covered in tortoise-shell colored scales, when the gold leaf of the sun flaked off, as the spores dispersed their dark red clouds over the area, were the horned beetles of all sizes resembling the weird outlines drawn on Sumatra shields, that came plopping out of the sky.

The teeth of those ferns no longer held their profound ancient power of fierce mastication.

And yet, those gods, they have not been fooled, they see the ferns' murderous intent, and nurture their hopes for the near future when the ferns, whose entire bodies are comprised of rows of teeth, will grind the world's body and its organizations into tiny pieces, and then grow and spread thick across the vast empty rubbish heap that remains. Such would seem to be their dream; but think how the leaves of the ferns will cover the faces of the gods in that time when death is the only option for them.

Commentary

Kaneko Mitsuharu (1895–1975)—poet, painter, memoirist—is well-known as an eccentric outsider in Japanese letters and culture. He is also one of the best poets of the twentieth century. His outsider status, and the middle, in-between spaces he occupied, literally and figuratively, enlivens his poetry and his Japan. And while it is unlikely that a reader would go to Kaneko for ecopoetic practice and sensibility, this particular poem is rich with an awareness of the physical human body existing with plant and animal life forms. This is the power, for example, of a transformative experience of the life-blood of the narrator commingling with the sap of the plants, itself echoed in the play of hands and teeth, seemingly shared by human, plant, and supernatural beings.

Non-human worlds occupy a central place in his writing. Among his most famous poems are those in the 1937 collection that includes the title poem 鮫 “Sharks” and which opens with おっとせい (“Seals”). These poems are strong with an anthropomorphic impulse to portray human society, and Japanese society in particular, as an animal society, but one that is vicious and rapacious, cruel, destructive, cannibalistic. The historical background is the imperialist warmongering and the extractive industries of mining and plantations being set up by Japanese companies in Southeast Asia, where these poems are set. His animals provide imagery of resistance and critique, of cruelty, and of the individual turning his back on the masses following blindly. They are deeply unsettling poems critical of a Japanese society that he sees as both somnambulant and voracious, as conformist while lumbering towards war and multi-layered destruction.

The poem translated here is the very rich and multi-layered poem called *Shida* (“Ferns”), published in a volume entitled simply *IL*. This poem is also based on his travel through Southeast Asia, particularly the Japanese expatriate communities of Indonesia. What he found in Malaysia and Indonesia unsettles a human-society-land equilibrium. It was written in the 1960s, drawing from his experience of the 1930s. Which is to say that Japan’s domestic environmental crises of the 1960s

layer this recollection of the environments encountered in the 1930s.

This experience of disorientation and subsumption by the forest changed Kaneko's poetry and his relationship with the world. (He covered this material in a three volume autobiographical set of stories, also published in the 1970s.) The experience of nature as he found it in Indonesia is reflected in the move from the precious, self-absorbed, ornate style of his earlier poems to, in my mind at least, the richer, more satisfying, more corporeally physical work of the rest of his life. The thick vegetable growth of the jungle left him feeling lost and overwhelmed; these feelings provide a springboard for the anger and frustration at what he saw and experienced as a Japanese subject in the 1930s, but also provide the site for broader connections and spillovers between the body and something larger.

The richness of Kaneko's vocabulary and the manner in which he exploits the associative capabilities of Japanese make translation a challenge. I was compelled to capture the richness of his poetry and, in this poem especially, to recreate his thick visceral representation of the natural world. I was also compelled by the piquant prose-like poetry with which he chose to conclude this work. Here, even more than in the poetic lines, Kaneko makes use of the potential in Japanese to have modifying words, phrases, even whole paragraphs and ideas modify multiple objects at once. Teasing these apart to make sensible English was one challenge; preserving at least some of that multiplicity was the another.

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