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Flower on a Grave by Doi Bansui

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Nicholas Albertson
Flower on a Grave

Doi Bansui
墓上の花

On a grave where rest the traces
Of death and sadness and spite,
One flower rests that shows a heart
Of beauty and happiness and life.

Light, dawn, the days and years to come—
And the flower is an image of hope;
Dark, twilight, years gone by—
And the grave shows traces of tears.

What is the voice of a colorful flower?
What is the meaning of a voiceless grave?
White dew of the same tomorrow,
Fall on one and the other.

A grave of sorrow is the trace of a man,
A flower of life is the work of a god;
Light of the same evening star,
Shine on one and the other.

Commentary

Doi Bansui (1871–1952) was a poet, translator, and teacher from Sendai, Japan. “Flower on a Grave” is from his first and most famous poetry collection, *Nature Has Feelings* (*Tenchi ujō*, 1899). The poems from this collection present the translator with difficult choices in rhythm and diction. They follow a regular meter of twelve-syllable lines, with each line divided by a caesura after the seventh syllable. These alternating seven- and five-syllable units have been the building blocks of nearly all Japanese poetry since the earliest recorded works. But because the “long poem” (*chōka*) fell into disuse over a millennium ago and was only revived in the nineteenth century as a tool to translate European sonnets and odes, it was considered quite modern to write regular stanzas like these. Hence, such poems were called “new-style poetry” (*shintaiishi*).

In translating a poem like this, I feel it is important to create a more or less regular rhythm, if not a strict meter. The difficulty in adhering to meter is most acute when a particularly pithy Japanese word or phrase cannot be rendered succinctly in English, often because that word or phrase is loaded with allusions or connotations unfamiliar to English readers. Such cases are quite frequent in Bansui’s poems, which retain classical references even as they introduce European literary references into the ambit of Japanese poetry. (And while Bansui gave his readers footnotes for the European references, I try to avoid them in my translations.)

The more dangerous pitfalls are in the choice of diction. Can I make my diction sound both traditional and fresh, the way Bansui’s works did in Japanese when they were published a century ago? Should the translations sound as pleasantly dated as the originals have come to sound? It is tempting to use creative anastrophe and obsolete verbal inflections to echo Bansui’s own style—and often smooth out the rhythm at the same time—but this risks sounding too precious or pompous. I try to hear Bansui’s voice and not my own, but in practice I am simply making one choice after another, often trying to mitigate the effects of previous choices.