



8-30-2013

*Direction, Funeral Train, Pain, and When the World
Perishes* by Yoshiro Ishihara

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Recommended Citation

Takano, Goro (2013) "*Direction, Funeral Train, Pain, and When the World Perishes* by Yoshiro Ishihara," *Transference*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 16.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol1/iss1/16>

When you have a direction, it means that you can instantly find an old landscape amid a new one. It also means that an old position revives instantly in a new one. Therefore, when you have a direction, you're still directed to a direction set before and, even in the midst of your wandering days, your route will be always provided; even if you are amid confusion, you can hardly enjoy deviations; even if you have no definite point of departure, only your direction will exist unshakably; in spite of a severe limit to the number of your possible routes, your ultimate goal will be left ungraspable in the end; only your direction will be left intact after you disappear along with whatever has shown you which route to take.

A direction you will have will be aimlessly certain. It will never lead you to its expected end. It will end up without any breakthrough. It will keep letting you slide without going through anything. It will show you not its rear but its flanks. Then it will show you not its flanks but its front. It will continue to follow the same process without repeating anything. And, eventually, it will close completely an unmanned circle and leave your final question to the outside of its range.

Goro Takano
Funeral Train

Yoshiro Ishihara
葬式列車

Nobody remembers
The name of the station the train has departed from
Across a strange country where its right side is daytime
And its left side is midnight
The train keeps running
At every station it stops
A red lamp peeks through its windows
And some new black masses are dumped inside
Along with some dirty artificial legs and ragged shoes
They all are still alive
Even after the train starts running again
They are still breathing
Nevertheless
The stench of death lies everywhere in the train
I am also aboard it
Every passenger looks half ghostly
Leaning on one another
Snuggling one another
Still eating and drinking little by little
But some of their buttocks are already transparent
And on the verge of fading away
Ah, I am also aboard with them
Resting wistfully against the window
Either I or my own ghost
Starts nibbling at a rotten apple, sometimes
Just like this, day after day
We overlap with our own ghosts again and again
And separate from them over and over again
While looking forward to the day when
The train will finally arrive at the unbearable distant future
Who is in the engine room, anyway?
Every time the train crosses a giant black iron bridge
Its girders roar
And a great number of ghosts stop eating abruptly
And they make a brief pause
While trying to remember
The name of the station the train has departed from

Pain is inherent, just as death is, in your life. That's why modesty is necessary whenever you're in pain. You cannot feel anybody else's pain. Especially when pain is caused by your soul, it becomes still more inherent in you than the other cases. This particular inherency is the ultimate reason why your life in pain is doomed to be solitary. Pain always occurs with reason, and you can always seek for the very reason in everything except yourself—you, you are allowed to do so, but, at the same time, it is nobody but you who has to be held accountable for the very pain. What is eventually left in your life as the only undeniable reason is your own vulnerability. You're the first and last master of your pain.

Pain has to be healed in the end. Healing is not a method, though. Rather, it is the purpose of pain. When you have an ache, don't forget it is an original statement of your pain. Just as your life in pain is compelled to be solitary, you're obliged to be solitary when you heal.

That's all I can say about the inherency of pain. In fact, in the process of this explanation, the importance of the word "you" has been already negligible, and your pain's resistance to healing has already been in progress. You can call it the self-assertion of pain. All things considered, the only thing left truly unchanged here is a view that the true master of this world is pain itself.

Goro Takano
When the World Perishes

Yoshiro Ishihara
世界がほろびる日に

When the world perishes
Don't catch cold
Beware of viruses
Dry your futon
By hanging it out in the sun on your veranda
Don't forget to turn off the gas at the main
Set the timer of your electric cooker
For eight o'clock

Commentary

Yoshiro Ishihara (石原吉郎: 1915–1977), who burst upon the scene of Japanese modern poetry in the mid-1950s, is now remembered as a “poet of silence.” During the Pacific War (1941–45), Ishihara was dispatched to the Chinese mainland as a member of the Japanese Imperial Army. Right after the war, he was taken in custody by the Russian force and imprisoned in an internment camp in Siberia until 1953. The eight years of severe hunger and hard labor influenced his life immeasurably in post-war Japan as a poet, which started in 1955.

From the 1963 publication of his first poetry collection, titled *The Homecoming of Sancho Panza*, he kept writing poems and essays prolifically, until he drowned to death at home (in the bathwater, in fact) in 1977, mainly due to excessive consumption of alcohol.

It is often said that the strength of Ishihara’s poetry lies especially in its meditative quietness devoid of grief and anger. That is partly why, some experts say, the sudden appearance of his poetics stood out amid the post-war world of Japanese poetry packed with a number of poets with war experiences. “A poem is an impulse to resist writing,” he once said, “and every word for a poem exists merely to speak about silence—or—to be silent” (Yoshiro Ishihara, “The Definition of a Poem,” in *Poems and Essays of Yoshiro Ishihara*, Tokyo: Kodan-sha, 2005, p. 11).

The biggest challenge posed by Ishihara’s texts is how to deal with the absence of subjects in several key lines of, say, “Direction” and “Pain.” The omission of subjects is not strange at all in the Japanese language, but it seemed to cause a needless lack of readability in my English translation. Thus, I tried using the pronoun “you” in those poems and attempted to make the texts more accessible to the reader.