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Geta, My House, and Bowing Low (The Promulgation of the Constitution) by Takamura Kōtarō

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Leanne Ogasawara
Geta

Takamura Kōtarō
下駄

All that can be seen are the ground, the doorway, and boxes of *senbei* crackers
Seen from out the window of a street car, stopped along a narrow street
It's only a shabby little cracker shop
And left there in the doorway are three pairs of *geta*
One of them tiny *geta* with red straps
Brand new
And placed there with such care
Warmed in the winter's morning sun

Leanne Ogasawara
My House

Takamura Kōtarō
わが家

The soaring roof of my house cuts into the sky above
And there below, seven windows
A small bay window lets in the morning sun
Bathed in the bright red light of the summer mist
Looking up to the top of the tall zeklova tree
A sparrow is singing
And there below the bay window
Three steps
And leading from those steps, a road

The cherry leaves, wet in the dew
Are lit up and scattering silently
Cherry trees stretching their arms
Dark green, are not yet awake
The sky is a deepening shade of blue
Its brightness inexpressible
The summer morning sunlight
Soundlessly
Stealthily lights up the road
And stepping out onto the road
Covered in mist
The road bends

Leanne Ogasawara
Bowling Low (*The Promulgation of the Constitution*)

Takamura Kōtarō
土下座

Carried on someone's back
The hill in Ueno was buried under a crowd of people.
Over their heads, I saw
The two lines of cavalrymen, advancing
Down the center of the snowy road, cleared of all people.
And still carried on someone's back
We somehow broke through the crowd to the very front
 Where I was lowered to the ground
Everyone bowed low
 Foreheads to the ground in reverence.
The horses kicked up the snow in front of my head
Several carriages passed, and then came more cavalrymen
 Carrying the Imperial flags, held high
And in the carriage that followed
I saw the figures of two people
When, at that moment, my head was pushed down hard toward the ground
"Otherwise you'll go blind," the voice said.
And I smelled gravel wet with snow.

Commentary

The sculptor and poet Takamura Kōtarō (高村光太郎 1883–1956) is best known in Japan for his *Chieko Poems* (智恵子抄), which are a chronicle documenting the evolution of the poet's relationship with his wife as well as a celebration of his love for her. While it is for the *Chieko Poems* for which Kōtarō remains famous, it was his first anthology *Dōtei* (道程) that probably had the most significant literary impact. The son of a famous sculptor, Kōtarō traveled to Europe to study art in 1906. Studying in London and Paris, he returned back to Japan in 1909 and began working on what was Japan's first poetry volume written in the Western free-verse style. Published in 1914, *Dōtei* (*Journey*) had a profound influence. "Geta" and "My House" came out not long after the publication of the *Dōtei* anthology. While at first glance, the poems might not appear particularly unorthodox, they were in fact revolutionary for the time; for despite the traditional themes, the vernacular voice and poetic free-verse form were brand new in Japan. In "Geta," *senbei* are rice crackers and *geta* are a form of traditional footwear.

The final poem, "Bowling Low," was written at the end of his career, in *A Brief History of Imbecility*. This collection was written after Chieko's death, when Kotaro was already quite famous. Composed in Hanamaki, in Iwate Prefecture, where he had evacuated and spent the war years, the book would undergo harsh criticism because of Kōtarō's wartime artistic contributions and nationalism. In addition to its historical context, the poem is also interesting from a translation point of view.

We know from the title that the context is the promulgation ceremony of the Meiji Constitution. With the Meiji Restoration of 1868, political power was handed back over to a Japanese emperor for the first time in 1,000 years—and this was Japan's first-ever constitution. The promulgation ceremony itself took place on February 11, 1889 and was celebrated throughout the country. Many Western dignitaries were invited to the banquet, which was held in the newly constructed Western style *Rokumeikan* (Deer Cry Hall) in Tokyo. And, after reading aloud the new constitution, the Emperor and Empress then rode out to the Aoyama Parade Ground to attend a military parade before riding out in the streets. The night before, it had snowed, but despite the cold, crowds of people turned out to line the streets where the emperor would pass.

It is in this crowd that the "I" of the poem—a child, carried on "some-

one's back" finds himself pushed right to the front of the crowd. As the carriage approaches, everyone bows low in reverence. This word "reverence" was not in the original Japanese poem. But the word *dogesa* signifies bowing down to the ground, to prostrate oneself in reverence, although several translators have taken this verb in the sense of "to kowtow." I would argue that the child is not being ordered by soldiers or guards with swords to "show submission and bow down," but is rather being pushed down by a relative, who is the one who says, "if you look at the emperor, you'll go blind." The Emperor was considered to be descended from a god, and in what is probably a universal sensibility, to look at a god can cause blindness.

In addition to the poem having punctuation and the use of the formal pronoun *watakushi* for "I" (both these things being somehow modern and Western-style feeling), another interesting challenge to this poem was the last two lines. In Japanese, one can play with word order in very creative ways not available to us in English. Often this is done to emphasize something. For my English translation, I could have very well kept to the Japanese order of, "Otherwise you'll go blind" for that last line (and readers may have different opinions about what works here). In the end, I decided to retain the English logic. That is, he was pushed down to show reverence and no longer able to see, he smells the "gravel wet with snow."