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Gray Toad and Color of the Season by Ōte Takuji

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Cover Page Footnote

Ote, Takuji 大手拓. Ōte Takuji zenshū『大手拓次全集』, Vol. 1-2. Tokyo: Hakuōsha 白鳳社, 1970. Snow Comes Closer (Yuki ga kuru) (Ote, vol. 2, 618) Gray Toad (Hairo no gama) (Ote, vol. 1, 562) Color of the Season (Kisetsu no iro, Ote, vol. 2, 118)

Dean A. Brink
Gray Toad

Ōte Takuji
灰色の蝦蟇

Languidly surfacing, silently
licking sweet trickles of secrets entangled
in the dim shadowy dark
the blue gray toad wriggled.
A toad big as a fist
like a sea slug from the sea
the toad rumbles and spews smoke
hopping along, stitching the dreams of spirits.
That skin rough,
those lips festering black,
drenched from the start.
When a yellow wind blows in the middle of the night
this gray toad,
as if doing its duty, swells up.
Toad! Take care of yourself,
bear that torment.
Goodbye goodbye
my precious big toad.

Dean A. Brink
Color of the Season

Ōte Takuji
季節の色

As if trying to topple and nothing falling
only a slack
streaming between leaves
with nothing clear forthcoming,
only a calm shriveling
of the caressed surface,
feeble, slickening the palm
delighted tongues of wind frolicking on the water
in water-blue
in green
in sky-blue
and then an unflagging shade of silver in the distance.
My body shakes
in the shifting hues.

Ōte Takuji (1887–1934) had a gift for (or an obsession with) understated erotic imagery. Even beyond Theodore Roethke’s lolling roots, sensuous experience becomes bound up in an interplay of body and nature, incrementally decentered and rearranged in many of Ōte’s works. Reading his work thus provides new models for exploring emerging affective dimensions in current ecocritical discourse on the function of actants, including photons of reflected colors. Interestingly, rather than focusing on the psychological makeup of erotic experience, Ōte has a way of weaving actions of the human and nonhuman by presenting simple, impressionistic elements within a dynamic, somewhat rhythmic whole, entangling evocations of qualities of the human body with those of animals, the wind, and colors without reducing them to pathetic fallacies. Thus, the omnipresent problem encountered in translating Ōte’s work is that of drawing a line between what is erotic and what is everyday without reducing the latter to the symbolic. These poems beg the translator to foreground erotic nuances in the choice of combinations of imagery so that what seem simple descriptions of natural objects remain intact (as if material) and readers may explore the interplay as they wish. For instance in “Color of the Season,” in the lines “only a calm shriveling / of the caressed surface” (*nodoka ni shinashina toshite / omote wo naderu mono*), a tension is suggested by way of a phonetic link between *nodoka ni* (“calmly”), modifying “shriveling,” and *naderu* (“to caress,” “to stroke lightly”), whose object is “surface,” together intimating a sensitive touching and being touched. After the synesthetic leap to various colors in the poem, it closes with “silver in the distance. / My body shakes / in the shifting hues,” suggesting both an erotically engaged nature and an autoerotic climax within an emotionally charged (Romantic) sensuous realm.