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# *Ribbons of May, Fading, Green, and Angels of the Sea* by Sagawa Chika

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Rina Kikuchi and Carol Hayes  
*Ribbons of May*

Sagawa Chika  
五月のリボン

the air laughed loud outside my window  
in the shadows of the multi-coloured tongues  
the leaves blow about in clumps  
I am unable to understand  
is there anyone out there?  
I stretch out my hand into the darkness  
it was only            the long hair of the wind

Rina Kikuchi and Carol Hayes  
*Fading*

Sagawa Chika  
白く

glimmering like a flame on the grass  
amethyst buttons glittering  
slowly you come down this way  
A mountain dove listens for the lost voice.  
Latticed rays of sunlight slant through the branches.  
A green terrace and thirsty plants.  
I remind myself to wind my watch.

Rina Kikuchi and Carol Hayes  
Green

Sagawa Chika  
緑

from the morning balcony          invading like waves  
flooding over everywhere  
I feel I am drowning on the mountain path  
as each breath catches in my throat I stop myself falling again and again  
the town captured in my vision opens and closes like a circling dream  
they come crashing in with a terrible force engulfing everything  
I was abandoned

Rina Kikuchi and Carol Hayes  
Angel of the Sea

Sagawa Chika  
海の天使

again and again the cradle crashes  
sea spray dances high  
like severed feathers  
waiting for the one who sleeps  
music heralds the coming of the bright hour  
I scream aloud trying to make myself heard  
the waves follow after and wash my cries away

I was abandoned into the sea

Sagawa Chika (左川ちか, 1911–1936) was a pioneering Japanese woman poet who made an important contribution to the developmental stage of Japanese poetic modernism in the 1920s and 30s. She was born in Yoichi, Hokkaido, Japan. Soon after she graduated from Women's High School, she moved to Tokyo, possibly to follow Itō Sei (伊藤整, 1905–1969), who later became a well-known novelist, translator and literary critic.

Even though there is no clear evidence, it appears Sagawa was in love with Itō, whom she was first introduced to by her half-brother when she was only thirteen. They became more than friends after she moved to Tokyo. Itō's influence is apparent throughout her poetry, and Itō's sudden marriage to another woman in September 1930 clearly affected Sagawa and her poetry deeply.

Sagawa started to publish translations in literary journals under Ito's supervision in 1929. She also became closely involved with a group of young modernist writers that included Kitazono Katsue (北園克衛, 1902–1978) and Haruyama Yukio (春山行夫, 1902–1994), who later came to be acknowledged as the fathers of Japanese poetic modernism. Her first extant poem, entitled "The Beetle," was published in 1930 and her avant-garde spirit was praised by not only these fellow modernist poets but also a number of her literary contemporaries. Her poetic career was cut short when she died of stomach cancer at the age of 24.

During her short literary career, spanning 1929 to 1935, Sagawa published more than one hundred poems, prose writings and translations in various literary journals. Sagawa also published the first Japanese translation of James Joyce's *Chamber Music* in 1932. The first collection of her poems, *Selected Poems of Sagawa Chika*, was edited anonymously by Itō Sei and published in November 1936, eleven months after her death.

With regard to our translation process, we choose to translate together, as one native speaker of Japanese and one native speaker of English. We find this creates an interesting negotiation around the meaning in both languages. It is not a case of one of us translating from Japanese into English and then the other checking that work, but rather a jointly shared process. First we read the Japanese original aloud, as we feel this allows us to better understand the rhythm of the work. Then we play with a number of translations before we are happy with the result. It is also important to note that we each bring a different knowledge base to the table, with one of us a Western researcher of modern Japanese literature and the other a Japanese researcher of comparative literature with a focus on Ireland and Japan. In Sagawa's case, we have chosen to try to express the sometimes uncomfortable or ambiguous expressions she uses. We usually translate a single poem in one three-hour session, spending a lot of time thinking about the tenses, the grammatical particles and whether certain words are plural or singular.

In these translations, we have approached the poems as independent works and the format of the translations attempts to reflect on the internal structure and cohesion of each poem. As a result, the presentation of Sagawa's

work in English translation is not consistent, as she herself often varies her style. Many of her poems are experimental, reflecting her engagement with the poetic modernism movement in Japan and her reading of Western writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Some poems even step across the border between prose and poetry. To demonstrate the flavor of the original poems in the English translations, we have intentionally included some awkward phrasing and grammatical structures that challenge English poetic conventions.

Sagawa's use of titles is quite distinctive; the word or phrase used as the title is rarely included in the poem itself. For example, in the poem "Fading", the Japanese title 白く is a non-complete phrase which, grammatically, should be connected to something, such as 白くなる. We chose to translate this with an 'ing' ending in order to reflect this sense of adverbial becoming, or change of state. We also felt quite strongly that this image was not a specific color but rather a fading of all color and all things: hence our title.

We have also tried to reflect on the poetic forms and styles used by Sagawa, including her unique language usage, punctuation and grammatical reordering. The following points demonstrate something of Sagawa's stylistic experimentation and how we have dealt with this experimentation in our translations:

- The capitalization of the first word of each line, a common English poetic convention, has not always been followed, in order to better reflect Sagawa's modernist experimentation.
- If Sagawa has not used punctuation in the original, we have also chosen not to use punctuation in our translations, as long as the grammatical structure allows.
- The large gap (ten spaces) included in some lines of the translations indicates a similar space intentionally used in the original poem. Note that Japanese sentences do not usually include any spaces and so this was quite new in her work.

Our translations are based on the poems collected in *New Complete Poems of Sagawa Chika* (『左川ちか全詩集 新版』) published by Shinkasha in 2010.