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An Autumn Torso, A Fish in Adolescence, A Night Canal, and A Small Civilization by Shiro Murano

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Goro Takano
An Autumn Torso

Shiro Murano
秋のトルソ

Seen clearly inside
A poison hemlock
Is a ripe waist

A twisted womb which
Will remain sterile
For good

To whom in the world
Will a disjointed arm
Dedicate its momentary passion
Without any change in its figure

In the twilight where
Existence has overcome
A blood disease of humans
And has developed its plumpness
With a sense of nostalgia
The fire of this ruinous autumn
Moves from
Wax trees to
Sumac trees

Goro Takano
A Fish in Adolescence

Until you're pulled out of the water
With the bleeding from your gills
You are not a fish yet

When, as if they want to say something
Your eyes reflect the forest and the sky
And when your tail and fins
Start going into subtle spasm
Death finally makes you fishy enough

From an eternal distance
Someone calls you
In a small voice: "Thou fish"—
What is your depressed shape for

When your body is widely unfolded like a leaf
And your backbone is revealed at last
Neither memories nor language are left there
Except a drop of something rotten which
Makes a bride's hands fishy enough

Shiro Murano
青春の魚

Goro Takano
A Night Canal

Shiro Murano
夜の運河

Somewhere half-sleeping seagulls cry
Small fish, swallowing tar
Sometimes spring up painfully from the water
And sink deep back into the water

I'm talking not about the ocean
But about a nameless river flowing at the bottom of the night
Without its source and outlet
It's a river of destiny
Where destiny remains stalled

In the midst of the lukewarm mist
Smelling of horses
I can see a bloodshot light all through the night
Staggering from behind the shade is
A man of the past
Out of his system, vomit and excrement spout profusely

I'm now talking about a dormant gentle river
Stagnating at the bottom of human consciousness
Due to the residue of no-exit sins

Goro Takano
A Small Civilization

Shiro Murano
小さな文明

A giant hand
Enters my mouth
And breaks with a snap
A tooth coated with blood
And tosses it on a glass plate
A young ghost says to me
“I’ll replace it with a new one
Within four or five days”
But I know the new one
Will be equally dead
Whose tooth was it before, anyway

From now on, at any rate
The echoes of my spirit will have to be
Crunched repeatedly with this gold-crowned stone-like substitute
And I must survive with it a hunger like Christ’s
An inlaid death
A replaced life
What kind of language will this mouth
Continue to speak until the end of time

I get up, finally
And spit the bitter blood into a piece of enamelware

Commentary

The four poems I chose for my translation are originally included in *On Lost Sheep* (The Japanese original title is *Boyo-ki* or 亡羊記) by Shiro Murano (村野四郎: 1901–75).

Murano is one of the most influential poets of the Showa-era Japan (1926–89). His early works were strongly influenced by surrealism, imagism and the German objectivism, while the poetry of his later years was marked by existentialism.

The most puzzling for me in translating the first poem, “An Autumn Torso,” was how to finalize the order of the following three keywords in its last stanza: “twilight,” “existence,” and “nostalgia.” In fact, the arrangement of those words in the original last stanza can be literally translated as “the twilight of the nostalgia of existence.” However, I didn’t like this undue vagueness, so I managed to contextualize those keywords as much as I could, without falling into a superfluous deviation from the original’s basic atmosphere.

When translating the second poem, “A Fish in Adolescence,” the very first obstacle for me was how to treat its title. The literal translation of the Japanese title might be “Youth’s Fish” or “A Fish of Adolescence.” But I chose the expression “in adolescence,” eventually, because it sounds the most natural to me. In addition, I first wondered about using the word “flat” (instead of the word “depressed”) for the Japanese adjective 偏平な (*henpei-na*) in the last line of my translation’s third stanza. I picked the word “depressed” after all, because it seemed to reproduce better the subtle color of miserableness hanging around the fish in the original poem. I also needed to ponder for a while as to how to translate the direct address in the third stanza; the original doesn’t include any pronoun in it (only the word “fish” is used there), but I intentionally inserted the word “thou” into my translation, because it seemed fit for the particular voice reaching from “an eternal distance.”

Intentionally again, I used the word “I” three times in my translation of the third poem, “A Night Canal,” though it doesn’t appear at all in the original. Other translators would choose not to feature this pronoun, but I thought the use of the first person necessary because (1) it would heighten the reader’s feeling of

being in the poem's strange world (2) it would boost the translation's overall readability. In addition, I could not help wondering how to interpret Murano's use of the word "no-exit" in the last stanza of the original. No-exit "river"? No-exit "residue"? Or no-exit "sins"? After much thought, I picked the third choice.

I used the word "substitute" in the third line of the second stanza of the last poem, "A Small Civilization," although it is not used in the original, where Murano merely says: "this gold-crowned stone." My word choice should be justified, I believe, because it seems far better to show clearly in the translation that this "stone-like" thing is here a "substitute" of the wrenched-off tooth. In addition, the fourth line of the same stanza in the original contains another confusing issue: does it say "Christ's own hunger" or "a hunger like Christ's"? In the end, I selected the latter, which seemed more proper for the poet's point of view.