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Four Poems from *Thorny Roses* by Ichinohe Kenzō

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to acknowledge Ito Yumiko of Tsugaru Shobo for securing translation and publication rights.

Joshua Solomon
Four Poems from *Thorny Roses*

Ichinohe Kenzō
茨の花コ

Thorny Roses

Growing curbside, sprayed with grit,
unbending, thorny roses bloom...

Sand Pear Petals

The cuckoo bird
is still calling out at the dreary, dismal sky!

The sand pear petals all,
he says, were scattered by the nighttime showers...

Rice Fish

As rice fish drift up,
 upon the sand below
 are cast their silhouettes.

Early Spring

Beneath the hedge of cypress
butterburs sprouting, oh, so soon

Commentary

“Dialect poetry” [*hōgenshi*] adds a complex, but difficult flavor to the literary history of Aomori prefecture, Japan. Deliberately crafted as a new genre by Fukushi Kōjirō (1889–1946) as a vehicle for his regionalist philosophy, it was taken up by a small cohort of students including Takagi Kyōzō (1903–1987), Ueki Yōsuke (1914–1971), and Ichinohe Kenzō (also, Ichinohe Rintarō, 1899–1979). The work of these three men has been canonized in the pages of *Tsugaru no shi: Hōgen shishū* [*The poetry of Tsugaru: Poems in dialect*], first published in 1964, and now in its fifth printing.

The poems translated here are excerpts from the final section of Ichinohe’s “Neputa” (reproduced in the volume above) called *Bara no hanako* [*Thorny Roses*]. *Thorny Roses* is comprised of seven short poems, five of which take the form of two short lines and focus on the poet’s encounter with a floral scene (e.g. “Early Spring”). The length and content may evoke traditional haiku in the reader’s mind, but the poems formally differ in line construction, use of punctuation and space on the page, and inclusion of a title. Although similar to haiku, they should instead be read as vernacular free-verse works [*kōgo jiyū shi*] written for a regionally-limited audience familiar with the poet’s choice of imagery and idiosyncratic language.

Ichinohe was a devotee of meter, prosody, and form. Traditionally, Japanese verse was almost always composed in units of five to seven morae; for example, a haiku is made up of three units of five, seven, and five morae. While these examples do not fit metrically into any standard units of five or seven morae on the page, when read aloud in a vernacular style (employing the “inner rhythm” of the language) they often approach the frame of standardized metrical units (“outer rhythm”). For example, the first line of “Sand Pear Petals” reads: *ku-wa-[tsu]-ko-o-a-ma-n-da*, an ungainly nine morae. When read aloud, however, the first two morae **ku** and **wa** converge into the single morpheme **kwa**, as the subject marker **a** blends into the concluding **o** of the prior noun, creating a **wa** sound. This lowers the overall mora count to a familiar seven. The latter half of the

second line can similarly be read fluently with two condensed morphemes, as *so-ra-sa-nae-de-rwa-ne*, creating another seven-mora unit.

It's important to focus on prosody when translating Ichinohe, as one can easily become too entangled by issues of vernacular speech. The representational techniques he employed were first introduced by Fukushi and refined by Takagi, and involve a general reversal of the roles of kanji and furigana (phonetic reading guides), in addition to deploying a mixture of katakana and hiragana syllabaries for tonal (rather than semantic) effect. Typically, furigana are supplemental, either acting as reading aids, or providing nuance to the interpretation of the Chinese characters, which represent something of the main body of the text. In these poems, however, the furigana represent the phonetic body of the text, and the kanji are supplied to parse local language potentially unfamiliar to the reader. For example, with the exception of “sand pears,” all of the flora and fauna named are either written in a heavily accented style or given a regional moniker.

Taking these two central aspects—spoken prosody and vernacular language—into account, I deployed several translation strategies. The unfamiliar vernacular vocabulary and accent is slightly alluded to in the oral quality of language chosen and some unexpected grammatical inversions and vocabulary choices. I decided that in this case relying on strongly accented English (à la Robert Burns) or the fabrication of an artificial “dialect” would be inappropriate, as the language used herein, while unfamiliar and at times slightly ambiguous, is not particularly alienating. At the same time, I try to preserve the strong rhythmic quality of the original text, and use mid-line caesuras to replicate the feeling of the linked syllabic units in the original.

Source text:

Ichinohe Kenzō. “Thorny Roses.” *Tsugaru no shi: Hōgen shishū*, Tsugaru shobō, 1974 [1964], pp. 32–38.