

2019

Three Poems by Umezaki Haruo

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Recommended Citation

Lofgren, Erik R. (2019) "Three Poems by Umezaki Haruo," *Transference*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol7/iss1/4>

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Three Poems by Umezaki Haruo

Umezaki Haruo

Death Bed

死 床

On my sickbed, damp with ruination as a sponge
I sprawl listlessly
Outside the window, a night of sobbing crickets;
I hear the sound of approaching footsteps
Pushing through the dew-shrouded autumn grass

In the window, the sliding lattice panels tremble with disquiet
The pressure of the night weighing upon each single paper pane
An illusory Asian fear
My consciousness, pushed along like driftwood
I feel a fear all the stronger
I feel the soaring mercury in the thermometer
I feel the clammy residue of secretions on the surface of my skin
And then, vanquishing the mewed gloom
I hear the sound of approaching footsteps

In this room of sickness there is absolutely no one
I tremble like a sheet of paper
At death nesting in my heart, and my attachment to life

I have a vague premonition of the mountains obscuring the moon
It also seems the chirrups of the crickets have faded;
Even as I am floating on a fever high
A single ray of moonlight, the last, from the moon about to slip behind the
 mountains
Is the fantasized scenery I frantically cling to

I hear the sound of approaching footsteps
I measure my faint pulse
I stroke my four atrophied limbs
When I strive to inscribe in my head
An image of a life replete with memories
I anguish over this lonely sorrowful endeavor

Closer and closer, the sound of approaching footsteps

In the end, spreading across the entire window, shadow shadow shadow
Hallucination of a raging storm engulfing the world outside
Phantasm of a succubus oozing from the grey walls
With all my might, I clutch the sheets

Finally, finally, the shadow pushes open my window and rushes in—
In my mind, the plaster breaks off and showers down in clumps
The dismal landscape of this sickroom is wavering,
Something straddles me atop the bedding, crushing my throat
In that appalling fear
My consciousness is careening down, careening down—
In that boundless nothingness, crashing to earth like a bullet

Autumn Ballad

秋 の 歌

Like a secret mistress, Autumn
Comes with furtive footsteps

From the thin extremities of a cicada
From the ribs of a discarded fan—
The morning cold of a *blanc de chine* vessel
The dribble of sherbet melting in the mouth

(Cumulonimbus throughout the sky ascend waveringly; yet
the heavens are so high as to be sad and sickly)

Although she comes with furtive footsteps
Yet I know it
As if I were waiting for a woman creeping in to see me
I prick up my ears
I strain to hear
Her affectionate coming

My mother's wizened breasts
The smell of grilling corn

The children head to town with dying snakes
Hung upside down in their hands and
Wearing faded straw hats on their heads

Like a forbidden paramour
Autumn comes in secret

You are wearing that black mantle ill-suited to your body
I mean, your filthy feet are sticking out as if you have some sort of skin
disease

Why does your beak curve in such a disagreeable way

When nobody is watching
You loiter about graveyards
Furtively pecking at people's decaying flesh

You sniff out shrewdly the fetor of the dying
Preening like a dandy on their rooftops
Letting loose your repellant cry

That's why nobody wants to play with you
Occasionally facing the setting sun you launch into flight
Even if you caw with apparent sadness
"Oh. It's you, again" they all say, averting their gaze

With your doleful eyes
Where are you flying off to

Let me, too, fly off with you
Lend me your black mantle

Commentary

Umezaki Haruo (1915–1965) is not an author known for his poetry. Indeed, his efforts in that realm are minimal (there are only 16 in his published collected works) with all examples dating from the middle third of his life (age 18 to 34). The poems here span that period and begin with his first effort. After graduating from Shūyūkan Middle School in 1932, he entered the Fifth High School of Kumamoto. As a second-year student there, he became a member of the arts and literature club which put out the school literary magazine *Ryūnan*. Membership virtually assured publication of his poems—ten, as it turns out—something he had been unable to achieve the previous year. His works were in good company for this magazine provided a platform for numerous literary luminaries including Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916) who had been a teacher at the school, Shimomura Kojin (1884–1955), and Kinoshita Junji (1914–2006).

Although Umezaki would later evaluate these high-school-era poems as “undeveloped and immature” (*UHZ* 7:64), the works are more notable than he allows, for they mark his entry, troubled though it may have been, into the world of literature. The remaining two poems here were published posthumously in *Bungei* (March 1966) with no date of composition indicated; however, scholars agree that they were penned prior to 1949. We can surmise that “The Crow” was written in the relatively narrow two-year window between 1947 and 1949 because of evidence in another poem published in *Bungei*. All we can say about “Autumn Ballad” is that it was penned sometime during the 14-year period between high school and Umezaki’s emergence as a member of the *après-guerre* writers soon after the end of World War Two.

Two of the poems here share a somber tone. “Death Bed” (1933), Umezaki’s earliest work of poetry, is intriguing in its role as a harbinger. The picture he paints is not a pretty one, but it is compelling, all the more so because there appears to be no evidence that Umezaki was seriously ill at the time he wrote this poem. It is, in other words, a product of his imagination, a piece of fiction, if you will. As such, it reveals a nascent literary skill that would become more broadly apparent—and remarked—in his many short stories: an incisive and unflinching look into suffering, often psychological, but with undeniable physical dimensions, as well. Where “The Crow” also seems to

evoke this inchoate sense of disquietude and discontent with its plaintive plea to carry the writer away from some unspecified tribulations, even as there is the fascination of attachment to the unseemly ways of this scavenger, “Autumn Ballad” is the outlier by virtue of its brighter tone. Its portrait of autumn’s approach as a secret inamorata is an almost whimsical reversal of the expected sense of the year slowing down into the bleak death that is winter. The contrapuntal positive and negative images occasion a sense of dynamism that invites the reader to join in the restrained excitement expressed by the poet and lend this poem a surprising poignancy.

From the perspective of translation, the primary challenge of rendering these poems into English lay not with unusual vocabulary items and idiosyncratic imagery; rather, the most exigent aspect was the lack of punctuation in the originals. With the exception of m-dashes, none of the poems has any explicit punctuation. I have, therefore, added some sparingly where I felt the juxtapositions were too awkward to survive the transition from one language to the other. Making that determination, however, involved balancing the need to trust the reader and the desire to ensure a particular reading. A secondary challenge was in determining tone and register of language. In general, the poems evince a relatively quotidian lexicon, yet there were places in which Umezaki uses words that have wildly divergent, although related, meanings. For example, the metaphorical woman of “Autumn Ballad” is a *shinobionna* (忍び女) which describes a continuum from an unlicensed harlot to a hidden mistress. The tone in which the poet describes elements of the fall argued, I felt, for the more tender end of that spectrum. In all three of the poems, then, I have tried to balance word choice with tone. Finally, although I generally strive for an approximate reproduction of the word order in an attempt to convey the progression of images, there were inevitable passages for which this produced infelicitous results. This was most noticeable at the end of the fifth stanza of “Death Bed.”

Source text:

Umezaki Haruo 梅崎春生. *Umezaki Haruo zenshū* 梅崎春生全集 [*Umezaki Haruo: Collected works*], 8 vols [UHZ]. Chūsekisha 沖積舎, 1984–88, vol. 7, pp. 19–20, 28, 29–30.