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A Selection from the *Chieko Poems* by Takamura Kōtarō

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Leanne Ogasawara
A Selection from Takamura Kōtarō's
Chieko Poems

Takamura Kōtarō
智恵子抄

My Heart One Night

或る夜のころろ

The moon in July
—Feverish and shining—
See it burning in the poplar woods
The fragrance of the cyclamen wafts gently
As you quietly cry
The forest, the road, the grass, the faraway town—
All cast in senseless sadness
Sighs are white in the cold
Side by side we walk
I take your hand as we tread across the dark soil
The sound of the night's last train echoes across the landscape
An unseen devil takes a swig of sake
Mocking our fate
The soul succumbs in convulsions
Your batik obi, slightly damp with sweat
And like a Zoroastrian martyr you suffer in silence
The heart, the heart
Wake up my heart
Wake up thy heart
The meaning of this feeling
Seeking to escape
This insufferable thing
This excruciating thing
And yet, too sweet
Unbearable to wrest ourselves away
The heart, the heart
Arise from your sickbed
From these sweet hallucinations
No matter where we look

Nothing but madness
And, the moon in July
—Feverish and shining—
See it burning in the poplar woods
My feverish heart
Writhing in pain
Tormented by a beautiful scorpion
Lying in the grass of a hothouse
The heart, the heart
What is it you call me to do?
On this night ruled only by silence

—August 1912

Song for a Storyteller's Picture Show
(In praise of peering into a children's
picture box and seeing a story
unfold before our eyes)

からくりうた
(覗きからくりの
絵の極めてを
さなきをめつ)

Deep in the Northeast,
In the land known as Michinoku
Lies the town of Nihonmatsu
And there, in a red brick building
Stands a *sake* warehouse
One day, a woman popped out of a sake bubble
—A woman just like sake—
Bursting free of the bubbly brew—
Running away from there
Running as far as Kichijōji
But before long Kichijōji would burn
In a fire
That not all the waters of the Abukumagawa River could quench
Sake and water—like born enemies
Can't hardly stand each other—
That's just the way it is

—August 1912

Shooting Long Range

人生遠視

A bird takes flight from beneath my feet
My wife is going mad
My clothes are tattered
Shooting long range
At three thousand meters away
Alas, too far to hit anything

—January 1935

Atomized Dream

噴霧的な夢

Chieko and I are in one of those elegant railway carriages
Riding up to see the crater at Vesuvius.
Dreams—like perfume—are atomized
And I am sprayed by this atomized dream of Chieko in her twenties.
From the end of my telescope—like a thin bamboo cylinder—
Gas flames blow out as if from a jet engine.
I could see Mount Fuji from my telescope.
Down in the crater, something is happening
A crowd stands there watching.
Chieko throws in a bouquet
—Made from the “seven grasses of autumn” found around Mt. Fuji—
It lands deep into Vesuvius’ crater.
Beautifully innocent and heartwarming
Chieko is endlessly fascinated by the world.
Her body—transparent like the waters of Mt. Fuji—smolders
As she leans against me walking across the crumbling gravel.
We are suffocating on Pompeian fumes.
The angst of yesterday, gone in an instant
I awoke at 5 a.m. in the crisp autumn air of my mountain hut.

—September 1948

Commentary

Theirs was one of the most famous love stories in Japanese literary history. In an age when marriages were arranged and romantic love of one's spouse rarely spoken of, Kōtarō and Chieko's story took the Japan of the 1940s by storm. The "Chieko Poems" tell the story of the poet's love for his wife. Reading the anthology chronologically, we begin with poems that describe the passion of their early romance and elopement against the wishes of their parents, following along as the poems become concerned with the trauma of Chieko's mental illness and early death in 1938. The four poems selected here were written between 1912 and 1941. Even after she was gone, Chieko remained the central figure in Kōtarō's life, and he would continue to write poem after poem about her. That these were love poems written by a man about his wife makes them unique even today, but in the Japan of the time, these poems created a tremendous stir. They have continued to remain a best-seller in poetry in Japan up to today—yes, in Japan poetry can be a best-seller.

My Heart One Night (August 1912)

Love as sickness—around the time this poem was published in September 1912, the two lovers had spent a few days together at a beach in Chiba Prefecture. Staying by plan in the same inn, they were seen walking on the beach and sketching together, sometimes even sharing a meal. In those days, this was scandalous behavior, and when news of this reached their parents it caused quite a stir. Kōtarō and Chieko, however, had fallen—madly—in love. It had been during a previous visit at that same inn that Kōtarō had by chance caught a glimpse of Chieko naked in the bath, and he had written that she was his destiny. Their path would not be easy, however, with parents and social mores working against them. The repeated incantation-like use of the word *kokoro* (which in Japanese conveys the mind and heart, but also the soul and self) were challenging to translate. The use we see here is perhaps closer to Soseki Natsume's use of *kokoro* in his famous novel by the same name, as Kōtarō is conjuring up the feverish, tormented state of a lovesick person's heart and

soul. The moon and the fragrance of night blossoms all contribute to the frenzied feeling of a tropical fever.

Song for a Storyteller's Picture Show (August 1912)

In Kōtarō's day, old-fashioned storytellers could still be found entertaining audiences on the streets. There were also peep-shows, where people could peer into a box and see pictures of a story unfolding before their eyes. This poem is unique, because Kōtarō tells the story of their early romance in words that evoke pictures in an old story. So the reader "listens" to the tale of a woman born to *sake* merchants in Nihonmatsu (as Chieko's parents were), who one day runs away to Tokyo (Kōtarō's atelier was located in a Tokyo neighborhood known for its temple named Kichijōji). This causes quite a fuss when their parents discover them living together there. But as the poem relates, so passionate was the woman that nothing could put out her fire, not even all the waters of the Abukumagawa River back in her hometown. This is the most challenging poem I have ever worked on—both because of the local dialect (which I tried to convey in the last two lines) and its fairytale quality.

Shooting Long Range (January 1935)

This is the first poem that directly deals with Chieko's schizophrenia. The poem describes Kōtarō's acceptance of the reality that with her mental condition, all their goals and dreams now appear impossible—like trying to shoot a bird from 3,000 meters away. Indeed, by this time, her condition had deteriorated to extreme instability and sometimes violence. I chose to cut the word *rifle* in the last line to try to retain the clipped and despairing tone of the Japanese poem. A closer translation would read: *Alas, still too far to hit anything with this rifle.*

Atomized Dream (September 1948)

Chieko, long since passed away, appears to Kōtarō in a dream. He is still in the mountains, having evacuated from Tokyo dur-

ing the war. His memories of her comfort him, reminding him of the time they had once spent time together walking in the mountains in Kamikochi. The Seven Grasses of Autumn (*aki no nanakusa* 秋の七草) have figured in Japanese poetry from ancient times. Traditionally associated with moon-viewing festivities in autumn, there are many poems about them in Japan's oldest poetry anthology, the 8th-century *Manyōshū*. The grasses are *hagi* (bush clover), *susuki* (Japanese pampas grass), *kuzu* (arrowroot), *nadeshiko* (pinks, or *Dianthus superbus*), *ominaeshi* (maiden flower), *fujibakama* (*Eupatium foltnei*), and *kikyo* (also called *asagao* or balloon flower). Kōtarō had visited Italy while studying in Europe. At that time, there was a mountain switch-back train that traveled up the slopes of Vesuvius.

Source text:

Kōtarō, Takamura 高村 光太郎. 智恵子抄 [*Chieko Shō*]. Shinchōsha, 1967, pp. 17–19, 27–28, 83, 104–105.