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Four Poems by Toshiko Hirata

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Eric E. Hyett & Spencer Thurlow
Four Poems by Toshiko Hirata

Toshiko Hirata

Is It February?

二月七日

Endless road construction.
Long-faced men
under a fake sun
scrape
asphalt's skin,
dig out stubborn earth.
I try to sleep in my pale bed,
a diffuse scream
slices my ears.

I would call myself
Vincent Van Gogh in this country.
But I'm worried
about those two V's.
In fact, a crow flew in
flecked at them
now
I'm Fincen Fan Gogh

My vast name:
Vincent Van Gogh.
My feelings:
Fincen Fan Gogh.
My Eyes:
a fickle future.
How can I make it so I never
lose anything
again, never gain anything?

The main character in the story I read yesterday
is a 35-year-old A.I. researcher.

In the daily I read today
a 36-year-old man
received an organ transplant.

Van Gogh
was still alive at those nostalgic ages,
daunted by daily sunlight,
wheat fields instead of parking lots
the *mistral* instead of exhaust gas.
He didn't know himself past
37 years, 4 months.

Even after I die,
people will be born in painters' toolboxes
crying red and yellow
counterfeit lifetimes
counterfeit selves.

A doctor calls the bullet that remains
in my belly a polyp.

Polyp Not angry enough, that
soft *p* sound.

Outdoor production: *Night of the Water Carriers*.
Playwright takes her seat
at the final dress rehearsal.

Dress Rehearsal—
Abbreviated: *D.R.*
Shortened to: *D.*
The theater lights, on cue.
The sound, on cue.
The costumes, in place.
Actors take their positions on the stage.

The park at night whispering trees
dirty water drips from faucets
light hits yellow streamers
the giant jungle gym seems to breathe.
Audience seats, empty outlines on the grass.
The director, the crew and I watch the play
from our own spots
we glare at the same scene,
have separate thoughts.

It's already Dress Rehearsal!
Even now, a single line could be changed
lighting changed
costumes changed set changed
but what I want to change
is the one thing I can't.
I have this urge to scream
Stop the play!
Stop the play!

The script isn't working. I'd murmured my worries to myself at studio
rehearsals,
now all flaws are revealed on Dress Rehearsal night
Stop the play!
Stop the play!
Stop the play!
Stop the play!

(Excuse me...I know it's not reasonable but...)
(Changes at what level? At this late date? We've booked
the park at night, we've changed the date once...)
If we wait until I'm satisfied with my own script,
There'll be
no opening night.
No opening night

In pitch blackness,
I tear my script in two;
the actors
alive onstage
speak my words
that have no
heart.

Is It November Again?

二十三月七日

Be the rhinoceros. Wander alone.
Wander alone Buddha says,
be the rhinoceros. Wander alone
without violence against any living thing.
without troubling any living thing.

Last night I went too far.
There was no reason to be so mean to my love.
Oh Buddha, Oh Buddha,
though I could have been more gentle,
I couldn't hold back boiling emotion.
The insult I hurled
came back to me today as endless tears.

Buddha also says
In any given group of people, someone always falls in love.
They suffer this romance.
Be the rhinoceros. Wander alone
to see how love suffers.

That was me, alright. I fell in love.
I love him still.
but people are people, I am me.
The real reason I was so unkind
is anger
at never getting what I wish for
no matter how badly I want it.

Have mercy on your friends and loved ones,
Buddha continues,
when the heart is troubled, the heart loses its mind.
Be the rhinoceros. Wander alone,
knowing you've lost your mind.

Harsh words from the Buddha.
I don't mind losing my mind.
What good is it to have a mind?
I threw out my mind
for love's sake.

Buddha also says:
*Desire's colors are delicious and sweet,
disturbing inner truth in many ways.
There is suffering in desire.
Be the rhinoceros. Wander alone*

That was me all right, love, the object of my desire
source of sweetness, source of suffering.
I don't want to be the rhinoceros,
wandering alone; I'll be the cow, unable to wander
away from him.

Is It December Again?

二十四月七日

A gentle voice swims through the bus:

Ladies and gentlemen: rough road up ahead. Please take care.

That will be a problem, driver.

I'm holding a plastic washbasin

with a goldfish in it,

The goldfish sloshes almost out of the water

at every bump.

Ladies and gentlemen, rough road up ahead. Please take care.

Driver, are you sloshing my goldfish on purpose,

or is the bus doing it on its own?

There are flu shots,

so can't there be an anti-sloshing shot?

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm about to throw up, please take care.

I'm prone to motion sickness.

No motion sickness bags on board.

I do have a washbasin

but there's a goldfish in it:

driver, do you really want

my goldfish covered in puke?

In my life, I've known two people named Journey.

(What parent in their right mind gives their child a name like that?)

One was a young teacher from elementary school;

the other, a fellow high school student in Literary Club.

Did they both go on journeys after that?

I'm guessing no.

Kids rarely live up

to their parents' expectations.

This goldfish is also kind of a *Journey*.
What could he be saying,
his little mouth opening and closing?
Will we die? Will we survive?
Will we survive? Will we die?
I feel he is proposing an adventure.
A journey?

Ladies and gentlemen, rough road up ahead, please take care.
The goldfish leaps from the washbasin,
I leap from the bus window
and so the journey begins,
a very lively jaunt
full of bruises:
Will we die? Will we survive?
Will we survive? Will we die?

Ladies and gentlemen, the rough stretch is ending, please take care.
Ladies and gentlemen, we should be experiencing some dying up ahead, please
take care.
Ladies and gentlemen, we'll survive up ahead, please take care.

Commentary

In reading these poems from *Shinanoka* by Toshiko Hirata, you'll notice each title is formulated as a question. "Is It February?" "Is It March?" etc. The Japanese poems are numbered in sequence from "Month One Day Seven" through "Month Twenty-Four Day Seven." However, the Japanese word *nano-ka* means both "seventh of the month" AND "is it?" Ms. Hirata goes to great lengths to explain, in the eighth poem as well as in her Afterword, that the humorous wordplay is intentional. Therefore, we have decided to call the English collection that includes these poems "Is It Poetry?" and lose the meaning of "seventh day." Similarly, we honor Ms. Hirata's sense of humor by numbering poems 13 through 24 (the second year of her literary

project) “Is It January Again?” through “Is It December Again?” although the literal Japanese would be “Month Thirteen Day Seven” through “Month Twenty-Four Day Seven.”

Is It February?

Ms. Hirata’s poem begins with a complaint about “endless road construction.” Noise complaints, and a general anxiety about the outdoors, are a recurring theme throughout “Is It Poetry?” Many of the poems feature a certain reclusiveness, the reason for which seems to have to do with noise and external stimuli causing distress. On a side note, when this poem was written in 2002, Ms. Hirata would have been 37 years old, the same age as Van Gogh when he died.

In the second stanza, a crow nibbles off a *dakuten* (consonant change marker), which results in swapping the initial “V” in Vincent Van Gogh to an “F” sound: Fincent Fan Gogh. Literally, the crow must have eaten four strokes off the Japanese phoneme *vu* and left the phoneme *fu* in its place. At the end of the poem, the speaker once again complains about another consonant marker, a *handakuten* which creates the “soft p sound” in the word “polyp.”

Is It March?

This theatrical poem is a wonderful example of how Ms. Hirata can isolate a scene, and is also a good demonstration of her literary breadth. Ms. Hirata is not just a poet, but is a working author who has produced novels, essays as well as plays. We refer to Toshiko Hirata as a “playwright’s poet” meaning she has an allegiance to dramatic narrative, and the poems in “Is It Poetry?” often follow a funny or tragic story arc that is narratively well-constructed. Incidentally, Ms. Hirata told us that she actually wrote the play that is featured in this poem, and that it is still sitting on a shelf somewhere.

Is It November Again?

This deeply moving poem is a departure from the rest of the

book, and is one of only two poems in “Is It Poetry?” that were never serialized in print. About half the lines in the poem are direct quotations from a Japanese book called *budda no kotoba*, or “In Buddha’s Words,” a canonical early-Buddhist text originally written in the Pali language. This is the only poem in the book for which Ms. Hirata adds a note at the bottom of the poem: she acknowledges Moto Nakamura (1912–1999), the authoritative Japanese translator of *In Buddha’s Words*, originally written in the Pali language.

It was challenging for us to translate *In Buddha’s Words* into English, as we are now twice-removed from the Pali-language original. For example, the lines quoted in this poem come from what Nakamura refers to as the “Rhinoceros Horn Sutra,” but we learned that English-language scholars of early Buddhism drop the word “horn” opting to call the sutra the “Rhinoceros Sutra.”

Is It December Again?

The final poem in the book relies heavily on the Japanese verb *yureru*, which appears seven times in the poem. A quick search of the Weblio online dictionary offers the following translation candidates for *yureru*: “quake,” “pitch,” “rock,” “sway,” “swing,” “toss,” “tremble,” “vacillate,” “vibrate,” “jolt,” “joggle,” “waver,” “flicker.” Ms. Hirata evokes the different meanings of *yureru* by replacing the initial kanji character with hiragana lettering, thereby intentionally obscuring its meaning and allowing for numerous interpretations.

The voice of the bus driver, who uses the verb *yureru* three times in the poem, was also challenging. A bus driver delivering polite verbal warnings is typical in Japan, but bus drivers in America are not nearly so polite, so we had to develop an authentic way for the driver to speak in English. In the English version, we chose to reinforce the theme of a journey. “Rough road up ahead” was one way we translated *yureru* without needing to use a verb at all: “rough road” captures *yureru* as well as the sense of a journey.

In preparing to translate this poem, we read an excellent English translation and analysis by Carol Hayes and Rina Kikuchi published by The Institute for Economic and Business

Research, Shiga University. Hayes and Kikuchi's translated version, titled "The Seventh of the Twenty-Fourth Month," gets into deeper exposition of the word *michiyuki*. We agree with their analysis that the word *michiyuki* could be referring to a suicide pact between star-crossed lovers: in this case, the lovers being the speaker and the goldfish. In order to honor Ms. Hirata's lighthearted, humorous intent, we translated *michiyukji* as "journey." We went so far as to translate the proper name Michuyuki as "Journey" in order to reinforce the theme of a journey coming to its end. We feel this whole poem reflects back on the first lines of the first poem in the book, in which Hirata begins:

*I'm going on a trip
Just to write
poetry.*

"Is It December Again?" ends with a new journey beginning, and an existential question: do we die, do we survive?

Source texts:

Hirata, Toshiko 平田俊子. "Nigatsunanoka 二月七日 [Is It February?]," "Sangatsunanoka 三月七日 [Is It March?]," "Nijūsangatsunanoka 十二月七日 [Is It November Again?]," "Nijūyongatsunanoka 二十四月七日 [Is It December Again?]," *Shinanoka* 詩七日 [Is It Poetry?]. Tokyo: Shichōsha 思潮社, 2004, pp. 14–17, 18–21, 98–101, 102–105.