Preface

The phenomenon called I
Is one postulated, organic alternating-current-lamp
Blue illumination
(A complex of all transparent ghosts)
Together with scenes and with everyone
Busily, busily flickering
Very surely to keep on lighting,
One karmic alternating-current-lamp
Blue illumination
(Light persisting, its electric lamp lost)

These, from twenty-two months’
Direction sensed to be past
Papers and mineral ink assembling
(Everything that flickers with me
Everyone senses at the same time)
Continuing on to this,
Are links and links of light and shade,
Sketches of mental images as they are

About all this, people, galaxies, asuras and sea urchins
Eating cosmic dust, inhaling air or saltwater
Might think up fresh ontologies
But they are ultimately a mental climate
Yet surely these recorded scenes are
Each the very scene recorded as it is
And if it is nothing, nothing itself is as it is
And so to an extent is shared by everyone
(All is within me everyone
So everyone within each one is all)

Yet within the Cenozoic alluvial epoch’s
Enormous shining accumulation of time,
The words supposed to have been rendered correctly
In a light’s eclipse, time’s mere speck
(Or a billion years of Asura)
Might have already changed composition or quality
And yet both I and the typographer
Might sense them to be not changed at all,
That, as a tendency, is possible,
Really as we sense our receptive organs
And scenes and characters
Just sensing them in common,
So what is called records and histories, geological histories
Along with various data
(Under the temporal spatial constraints of karma)
Are no more than what we sense
Perhaps two thousand years from now
A pertinently different geology will be adopted
Relevant evidence will emerge one by one from the past
So everyone will think that two thousand years before
There were colorless peacocks filling the blue sky
And then aspiring scholars at the upper stratum of the atmosphere
From the place of glittering frozen nitrogen
Will excavate splendid fossils
Or might well find
In a stratified plane of Cretaceous sandstone
Gigantic footprints of transparent humankind

All these propositions are asserted
As properties of images or time itself
In the fourth dimensional continuum

January 20, 1924       Miyazawa Kenji
Spring and Asura
(mental sketch modified)

From the gray steel of mental images
Akebi vines coil around clouds
Wild rose thickets, humus marshes
Everywhere patterns and patterns of duplicity
(When thicker than the noon’s wind-instrument music
Amber splinters fall down)
Anger’s bitterness, blueness
At the bottom of the light in April’s atmosphere
Spitting, gnashing, coming and going
I am an asura
(The scene swaying in tears)
Unto the limits of visible smashing clouds
In the limpid sea of the heavens
The winds of Sacred Glass go far and wide
Zypressen one single row of spring
Breathes in ether, black
From the column of their darkened feet
Snowy ridges of Mount Heaven can be glimpsed, however
(Shimmering waves, white polarized light)
True words are not here
Clouds scatter and fly in the sky
Ah, at the bottom of shining April
Gnashing, burning coming and going
I am an asura
(Chalcedonic clouds flowing
Where does it sing, a bird of spring?)
The Sun Wheel darkening to blue
Asura resonates with the woods
From heaven’s bowl collapsing in a dazzle
Throng of black trees extend
Their branches grown thick and sorrowful
All the duplicated scenes when
In the dispirited woods from a treetop
Flashes, darts off, a crow
(The atmosphere clearer and clearer
The hushed cypresses stand in the heavens)
Someone is passing the grass field’s gold
One ordinary human form
In a straw coat looking at me, a farmer
Can you really see me?
At the bottom of the blinding ocean atmosphere
(The sorrow deeper and bluer)
Zypressen swaying quietly
A bird again cuts the blue sky
(True words are not here
Asura’s tears fall to the dirt)

Breathing in the sky anew
The lungs shrink, pale white
(May this body be dispersed into particles in the sky)
The treetops of ginkgos flash once again
Zypressen blacker and blacker
Sparks of clouds flow down

(April 8, 1922)

Annelida Tänzerin

(Well this is water sol
Hazy agar liquid)
The sunlight golden roses
A small, red wriggling worm
Wearing water and light around its body
Is alone doing a dance
   (Eh, 8 γ e 6 α
     Truly arabesque letters decorate)
Fly corpses
Dead yew leaves
Pearl bubbles
Moss stems ripped up and so
   (Princess Nachiranatora
     Now at the bottom of the water on a granite stone
     Together with Mister Yellow Shadow
     Deigns to dance for pleasure
     Oh but, no, before long
     Her Highness will float up, soon)
The red Annelida Tänzerin
Has two pointed ears
With segments of phosphorescent coral
Adorned primly with pearl buttons
She turns and twirls around
   (Eh 8 γ e 6 α
     Truly arabesque letters decorate)
With her back brightly glittering
She twirls her body with all her strength but
The pearls are in truth false ones
Not even of glass but of air
   (And yet, still
   Eight gamma e six alpha
   Truly arabesque letters decorate)
Peeped through the opera glasses
Of crystalline lens and membranes
Even though you are said to be dancing
When pearl bubbles disturb you
You are not at all at ease
   And the sun is now hidden by a cloud
   And my feet have gotten numb sitting on the stone too long
   And the wood chip at the bottom looks like a worm or a sea slug
   And most importantly your form can’t be seen now
So, have you really melted away?
Or from the start has everything been
Just a faint blue dream?
   (No, Her Highness is there, surely there
   The Princess is there
   8 γ e 6 α
   Truly arabesque letters decorate
   Hmmm the water hazy
Lights meandering
The worm Eight gamma e six alpha
   Truly arabesque letters decorate, aren’t they?
   Ha ha ha
(Yes, that’s it exactly
   Eight gamma e six alpha
   Truly arabesque letters decorate)

(May 20, 1922)

Wind Woods

(In an oak tree no bird builds a nest
   Because it rattles too much)
Here the grass is too rough
And doesn’t suit breathing air from a faraway sky and
Falling over as hard as I like
There lying down watery-colored
A row of students rests
   (Their shadows a synthesis of night and zinc)
With them behind
I throw myself on the grass
The moon is now gradually losing silver atoms
The oak trees bend their backs blackly
Yanagisawa’s cedars are dearer to me than colloid
And beyond bald Numamori
A cavalry regiment’s lights stagnate
   ((Ah I wouldn’t mind dying))
   ((I too could die))
   (Was that Miyazawa standing so forlornly?  
    Or Odajima or Kunitomo  
    The darkness behind the oak trees there  
    Just now trembled, emitting lights  
    That must be from the Egmont Overture  
    Who said such a thing  
    I need not wonder really  
   ((Hey Den, how many shirts do you wear? Three?))
Tall and good-natured, Sato Denshiro
In the dim twilight of reflected moonbeams
Buttoning up his shirts
Smiles and twists his mouth firmly
With night particles and wind fragments cascading down
And next to them like lead needles, flow moonbeams dimming
   ((Oh I...))
Saying that why did Hotta stop?
The last part of his voice echoes sadly
He should’ve finished saying that  
   (If not say it write it down in a notebook)
Toshiko, Toshiko
Coming to a field
Or standing in the wind
Without fail I remember you
Are you on that gigantic Jupiter
Beyond the steel-blue, splendid sky?
   (Ah but in that space that no one ever knows  
    Really are there light ribbons and orchestras?
    ..........Here a day is long, long  
    Can’t even say what time of day.....
    Only a bit of communication from you  
    One time on a train reached me)
Toshiko, shall I cry out loud?
   ((My hands are numb))
   ((Numb hands?  

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Toshio, you get that numbness often
The other day you made me button up for you))
Which Toshio of the two? Kawamura?
That pale genius of comedy, an actor in “The Plant Doctor”
I should jump up to my feet
((Oh you said Toshio, which one?))
((Kawamura))
As I thought,
Moonbeams stir the throng of oaks
The oaks rustle all over

(June 3, 1923)

White Birds

((They are all thoroughbreds
That kind of horse, that anyone can go catch?))
((But only by the people who really know))
Under the antique looking Mount Kurakake
The tufts of pasqueflower sway
Under the light blue birch trees
A gathering of chestnut horses
Shine truly splendidly
(The Japanese scroll of a sky’s ultramarine
And the horizon’s turquoise is not rare
But such a large ring of light,
A phase of mind in the scene, is unusual)
Two big white birds
Sharply, sorrowfully crying to each other
Fly away in the wet morning sunlight
That must be my sister
Must be my dead sister
Crying so sorrowfully as her brother has come
(That is wrong up to a point
But not thoroughly wrong)
Crying so sorrowfully
Flying in the morning light
(Not in the morning sunlight
But like a ripe, tired afternoon)
That however is also a vague silver illusion
Caused by walking all night long
(Surely this morning I saw the twisted molten gold liquid
Rise from the blue dream of the Kitakami Mountains)
Why do these birds, two of them
Sound sorrowful like this?
When I lost in me a power to rescue
I also lost my sister
That is the reason for the sorrow
   (Last night in the moonlight of an oak woods
      This morning among the throng of lily bells
      How many times I called that name
      And a voice, whose it is no one knows,
      From the end of the field where no one was
      Responded to ridicule me)
That is the reason for the sorrow
Though really that voice too is sorrowful
Now the birds, two of them, flash and flutter white
And in the distant marsh, fall among the blue reeds
Or seem to fall but rise again
   (In front of the new burial mound of Yamato Takeru
      The consorts prostrated and grieved
      And when by chance a plover flew
      Thinking it was the spirit of Takeru
      Hurting their feet on the blue reeds
      Along the seashore, they followed him)
Kiyohara stands, laughing
   (Sun-tanned, shining, a real child of the village
      The bodhisattva-like shape of the head came from Gandhara)
The water shines, clear silver water
   ((Now, there’s water over there
      Let’s rinse our mouths and go refreshed
      This field is now clear))

(June 4, 1923)

A Letter

Rain is falling, pitter-patter
Transparent rain falling intermittently, among flickering mental images
Wetting, horsetails and sorrels
Cypress’ hair grown too long

My chest is dark and hot
It seems to begin fermenting
This side of the green bank wet with the rain
A mantle coated with rubber as if blue with mud
Is moving slowly, slowly
That surely is a tough thing

Where are you right now?
Already in the yellowish shady space on the right side of me
Are you standing straight?
The rain has turned more transparent, and stronger

Is some child chewing?
Over there that man sputters noises from his throat

Now I think I’d like to go into the hallway
Please come and go with me ten more times
With your big, bare feet shining white
On the cold boards
Please walk with me

(May 12, 1922)

[The hanging ornaments are hard, and drop down straight]

[the beginning lost]
The hanging ornaments are hard, and drop down straight.
Really, shimmering and shining, the living things fall down.

Truly those heavenly beings’
Sorrowful cries more transparent
Than hydrogen sometime somewhere,
Have you not heard?
The spears of ice sticking straight into the heavens,
Their cries, you must have heard.

But when you hear about those who
Fall down, or those who drowning try to
Gulp down bitter salt water wholeheartedly,
You only hear it now as
A pitiable story of certain silly things
Or a slightly unusual tale.

Yet only to think so
And actually to bite into water
Are utterly, utterly different.
It is cold enough to be hot,
Bitter enough to be tasteless,
Sad enough for blue darkness to become transparent.

Those who have fallen there all cry out,
Is it I who have fallen into this lake?
Has the fall really happened?
Completely. Who could believe that at once?
But in the end they believe it,
And are sadder because of it.

I have told you such a thing
Not so that you may not fall
But for you to fall, and to swim all the way.
Everyone will see it, and
The strongest ones fall down wishing it,
And then fly upward, together with the other ones.

(May 12, 1922)

[When I go through this woods]

(July 5, 1924)

When I go through this woods
The path will return to the waterwheel I saw
The birds are crying, glimmering
They surely are thrushes, migrating
All night long as the southern tip of the Milky Way
Exploded in shining white
Fireflies flew too often
And moreover the winds incessantly shook the trees,
So the birds could not sleep peacefully
And now are so noisy
Yet
Only because I barely stepped into this woods
Loud like this
Louder like this
They are crying like a shower of rain
What strange fellows!
This is a big cypress woods, and
Upon each of the pitch-black branches
Here and there shreds of sky are
Trembling and respiring,
To send out a kind of catalog
Of the lights of all ages
......As the birds are so noisy
    I am standing, blank......
The path flows far away, barely white
And from a dent in a clump of trees
A red, turbid Mars rises
Only two of the birds at some time came here stealthily
And went away leaving clear, screeching sounds
Ah, as the winds blow sending the sensations
Of warmth and silver molecules
And all the tetrahedrons,
And fireflies fly fitfully,
The birds cry louder than the rain
I hear my dead sister's voice
From the farthest end of the woods
......So even if it's no longer so,
    As with anyone it's the same
    No need to think about it again......
The grass vapors and cedar smell
The birds are noisy again
Why do they cry so loud?
Even when the men drawing water for rice paddies
Walk furtively at the edge of the woods
And the stars shoot again and again in the southern sky,
There's nothing very dangerous
One may sleep quietly

Of these translations, “Preface” (序), “Spring and Asura” (春と修羅), “Annelida Tänzerin” (蠕虫舞手), “Wind Woods” (風林) and “White Birds” (白い鳥) belong to the only collection of poems published in his lifetime, in 1924, Spring and Asura (『春と修羅』). “A Letter” (手簡) and “[The hanging ornaments are hard, and drop down straight]” (堅い瓔珞はまっすぐに下に垂れます) are from the unpublished, additional poems relating to Spring and Asura grouped by his editors as “Supplementary Poems to Spring and Asura” (『春と修羅』補遺). “[When I go through this woods]” (この森を通りぬければ) comes from the “Spring and Asura, Second Series” (春と修羅 第二集), a collection of poems prepared by Miyazawa but never published.

Of those from Spring and Asura “Preface” and “Spring and Asura” can be characterized as representative poems of Miyazawa, and have been rendered into English by several translators, including Snyder, Strong, Sato and Pulvers. The versions here obviously rely on theirs, and we
did not pursue difference for its own sake. Still, the ones here are different in several aspects. For instance in “Preface” we present the metaphysical/religious announcements in parentheses to sound like coming from someplace else. In “Spring and Asura” we handle the lines as being hurtled forcefully but with clear syntactical connections.

“Annelida Tänzerin” observes a worm in water, transforming it into a princess. It attests to Miyazawa’s fertile imagination. Its refrain of numerals and Roman and Greek letters, an auditory and visual mimicry of the worm’s movements, is quite striking. It is one of the early, joyous poems and in the collection comes after “Vacuum Solvent,” a rambling, fantastic and pataphysical poem dealing with the merger with, and dissolution into, Nature’s forces. We have already published its translation in Poetry Kanto, No. 24.

The next two, “Wind Woods” and “White Birds” form one phase of Miyazawa’s tortuous spiritual vicissitudes after the death of his beloved sister Toshiko on November 27, 1922. They are followed by several groups of astonishing poems, including “Aomori Elegy,” “Bird Transitions,” and “Blue of a Dewdrop on a Leaf of Leak,” published in the No. 24 of this Gengo Bunka journal.

“A Letter” and “[The hanging ornaments are hard, and drop down straight]” are poems not included in the Spring and Asura collection. They have a certain raw, unfinished feel, but are subtly cadenced in their own way. The former deals with a sense of loneliness and fragility, after contracting a lung disease which would eventually kill him, and an inkling of a visionary presence. The second one, though the first lines seem to have been lost, is a strong religious poem presenting the fall of heavenly beings and the possible reversal of falling and rising.

As noted, “[When I go through this woods]” belongs to “Spring and Asura, Second Series,” and is one of the poems tracing the aftereffects of the death of Toshiko.

These poems span several aspects of Miyazawa’s complex oeuvre.

English Translations Cited