

# Miyazawa Kenji's "Aomori Elegy" and Two Other Poems

Translated by

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## Aomori Elegy

When going through fields on a dark night like this  
The windows of train cars all become windows in an aquarium

(Rows of dry telegraph poles  
Seem swiftly passing by,  
The train in the galaxy's luminous lens  
Is running through a big hydrogen apple)

It is running through an apple,  
But where in the world is this station?

A fence of burnt railroad ties lined up  
(Night's silence, August's agar)

A row of poles with crossbars  
Is made only of dear old penumbras

Two yellow lamps lighted, and  
The tall and pale stationmaster's

Brass baton cannot be seen,  
His shadow too cannot be seen

(That university assistant in entomology  
Within such liquid filling the interior  
With a tangle of lusterless, red hair  
Is dozing leaning on a valise)

While my train is supposed to be running northward  
It is running southward here,  
With the fence's burnt stakes fallen here and there

And the faraway yellowish horizon  
Stagnant with beery precipitation  
Confused with night's ominous sun-shimmerings  
And flickerings of sad mental actions,  
The Blue Station, of the Blue River  
    (That terrifying blue void)  
The train's reversal is the simultaneous contrareity of aspiration  
From such lonely illusion  
I need to float up swiftly  
Here are many, many blue peacock feathers  
And drowsy glycerides of brass  
The interior's five electric lamps  
Liquefied more and more coldly  
    (What I should start to think about  
    Because of pain and fatigue  
    I am trying not to remember)  
This day around noon  
Under the clouds starkly shining  
Certainly around that heavy, red pump  
We drew and poked it like idiots  
I was the captain of them all in yellow clothes  
So I am sleepy, like it or not  
    (O! du, eiliger Geselle,  
    Eile doch nicht von der Stelle  
    ((Primary School first grader, German first grader))  
    Who is the one suddenly to fling  
    Such a malevolent cry?  
    But surely it is a first grader  
    In this late hour past midnight  
    To open his eyes wide open  
    That must be a German first grader)  
Did she pass such a desolate station  
And go away all alone?  
In the direction leading where no one knows,  
Along an uncertain path to some kind of world  
Did she go walking all alone sadly?  
    (Grass and marshes  
    Also a tree)  
    ((Giru-chan she was sitting with her face blue))  
    ((Though her eyes were wide open like this  
    She didn't seem to be seeing us at all  
    ((Naagara, with his eyes red and fixed like this  
    Made the circle narrower and narrower, this way  
    ((Hush. Break the circle. Hold out your hand))

((Giru-chan looked blue like you could see through her))  
 ((Birds, many birds as in the time of sowing  
 Crossed the sky at a burst  
 But Giru-chan didn't say a word))  
 ((The sun looked strangely amber))  
 ((As Giru-chan didn't look at us at all  
 I felt awful))  
 ((She was frolicking too much around the arrowhead grass))  
 ((Why didn't Giru-chan look at us?  
 Did she forget us when we played with her so often?))  
 What I should start to think of  
 I must anyway think of  
 Toshiko passed  
 The way we call dying  
 And we don't know where she went beyond that  
 That couldn't be measured by our spatial directions  
 When trying to sense the directions we cannot sense  
 Everyone of us is giddy  
 ((A roar in the ear, and I hear no more))  
 Having said this endearingly  
 Surely of the people around her  
 Whose familiar faces her eyes could see  
 She did not hear the voices  
 Suddenly the breathing stopped and the pulse beat no more  
 And when I ran and came to her  
 Those beautiful eyes of hers  
 Were vainly moving searching for something  
 They could not see our space any more  
 What then after that did she sense?  
 She must have seen visions of our world  
 And must have heard auditory hallucinations,  
 When I at her ears  
 Having fetched the voice from far away  
 The sky, love, apples, the wind, all these elements' joyous origin  
 The precious Name of the Living Being where all return  
 I shouted it into her ears with all my strength,  
 She breathed twice as if nodding  
 With her white pointed chin and cheeks trembling  
 Making her wear that accidental look as  
 When she was small and doing something funny  
 But surely she nodded  
 ((Doctor Haeckel!  
 I would be greatly honored if I were entrusted  
 With the matchless task of verification))

From inside the clouds of silica doze-inducing  
That shameless yell to freeze...  
    (In the night crossing Soya Strait  
    Standing all night on the deck  
    With my bare head soaked in insidious fog  
    Body filled with unchaste wishes  
    And so will I truly take the challenge)  
Surely at that time she nodded  
And as until the next morning  
Her chest remained rather warm  
Even as we wept because she was dead  
Toshiko might have been sensing the body of this world yet  
And within a faint sleep far from fever and pain  
She might have been dreaming as dreamed here  
And that the dream vision serene  
That leads to the next world  
Could be shining and sweet-smelling  
I wish, and never cease to wish  
Really a piece of that dream  
Entered vaguely into that dawn  
Of Shigeko and others dozing  
Exhausted by nursing care and sorrow  
(Yellow flowers, I will get)  
Surely Toshiko in that dawn  
Still within the dreams of this world  
Walked alone in a field  
Covered with leaves blown by wind  
Whispering as if she were someone else  
And in the lonely wood just as she was  
Did she become a bird?  
Hearing "I'estudiantina" in the wind  
In a dark grove with running streams  
Did she fly around singing sadly?  
And soon there like little propellers  
With new friends coming by flying with a light sound  
Twittering innocent songs of birds  
Did she go wandering aimlessly?  
    I don't in any way find myself thinking so.  
Why isn't communication permitted?  
It is permitted. And the communication I received  
Was the same one Mother received in that nursing summer night.  
Why don't I think so when it is so?  
The dreams of the human world gradually thinning  
Sensing the world of a dawn to be colored rosy

Sensing new and fresh receptive faculties  
Sensing in sunlight smoke-like gossamers  
Glimmering and faintly smiling  
Among scintillating clouds and icy smells  
Passing by intersecting shafts of light  
Unto the wondrous direction we call upward  
Surprised that it is as it is  
Ascended more freshly than the winds of the Great Circulation  
I can even follow the traces  
There looking at the surface of a lake blue and tranquil  
Its excessive flatness and brightness  
Its unknown manner of total reflection  
Its rows of glittering trees gently swaying  
Mirrored accurately to cause our wonder  
In time knowing it to be the heavenly surface  
Of lapis lazuli in shuddering joy  
Sounds and tunes in the sky flowing in ribbons  
Or in hanging ornaments or strange gossamer  
Not shifting but calmly coming and going  
Enormous living things with bare feet  
The scent of a flower in a faint distant memory  
Did she stand amid all this serenely?  
Or after not hearing our voice  
Dark vermilion caves deep and bad and  
The cry uttered when conscious protein is crushed  
The odor of sulfurous acid or laughing gas  
Seeing these in the place  
She would stand amid them turning utterly pale  
Not knowing whether standing or tottering  
Putting hands to cheeks like the dream itself standing  
(Can it be real for such as I  
To sense such things at this time?  
Can it be possible in the world  
for the being I am to see these things?  
And I am really seeing) So  
Would she grieve, all alone...  
Such sad thoughts of mine as these  
Have come because of the night,  
When day breaks and comes over the shore  
And the waves glitter all over it  
Maybe everything will be good  
Yet that Toshiko has died  
Is a harsh reality which when I think  
That it is not a dream

Can even now make me shudder anew  
When sensing is too fresh  
Its conceptualization is a mechanism  
For a living organism to defend itself  
Not to go insane  
You should not cling to it indefinitely,  
In fact after she lost this place's receptive faculties  
What body did she get and  
What receptive faculties did she sense?  
How often I thought about it  
From innumerable experiments long ago  
Vasubandhu told us as noted above  
I should never repeat this again  
Outside, monads of nephrite and silver  
Filled with gas emitted from the half Moon  
Into the guts of cirrocumulus  
The moonbeams penetrating  
To make a weird phosphorescent plate  
Exuding the weirder and weirder scent of apples  
Which comes through the smooth and cold windowpanes  
Not that it is only in Aomori  
When the Moon near the dawn like this  
Enters cirrocumulus clouds...  
    ((Hey, hey her face at that time was a bit blue))  
You shut up!  
Whether my sister's dead face  
Was blue or black  
I won't allow you to speak of it  
Wherever she has fallen into  
She already belongs to the Supreme Way  
Whoever advances there forcefully  
Jumps into any space filled with courage  
Soon the East's steel will shine  
Really this day...yesterday around noon  
Around that heavy pump we...  
    ((I will tell you one more thing  
    Eh, in fact  
    The eyes then were white  
    Seemed unwilling to shut))  
Are you still speaking!  
Very soon the dawn will break and  
Everything that is as it is  
Everything that shines as it shines  
Your weapon and all the things

Are to you dark and terrifying  
But in truth joyous and bright  
    ((Since everyone of us is a sibling from long ago  
    You should never pray for one))  
Ah, I have never done that  
Days and nights after she was gone  
Never have I once prayed, I think,  
That she alone would go  
To some good place

(August 1, 1923)

## Bird Transitions

June 21, 1924

A bird is crossing the leek-green heavens,  
I hear two voices of a cuckoo.  
As its body is so big  
And the course horizontal,  
It looks like someone flying a model plane propelled by a spring.  
There's something pitiable about it.  
The bird shifted, its voice then on the axis of time  
Drew a graph of a blue arrowhead  
    ... Ridges plied brightly  
    Water-blue sky's edges...  
The bird cannot be seen now,  
It is crying by  
My sister's grave  
    ... From behind a pine tree in the graveyard's woods  
    A yellow electric train is gliding,  
    A pane of glass flashes trembling,  
    Another beside it flashes...  
The bird, though I wasn't aware,  
Is now crying in the brickyard's woods far away.  
Or it might be another cuckoo,  
And the previous one maybe needing water  
With its beak closed, looking up at the sky  
On a pine tree behind the grave  
Might still be perching

## Blue of a Dewdrop on a Leaf of Leek

July 17, 1924

On its surface guidepoles toss nostalgic,  
In the pure space of the sky, the blue of a dewdrop on a leaf of leek  
Surges and gurgles lonesomely  
Water flowing into the Southern Cross all night,  
In the pitch-dark chestnut wood on its shore  
From the night's enormous, unfathomable respiration  
Particles of silver are deposited  
    ... The poles' shadows reflect on the water beautifully,  
    And the waves refract from the Pliocene coast and collapse,  
    Now and then throwing weak phosphorescence...  
The planks of the bridge and the sky suddenly illuminated  
Perhaps by lightning from a rainless heaven  
Water, the sorrow in my bosom  
So overbrimming I don't know where to let it go  
Send to the faraway Magellanic Cloud,  
Where red fishing lights lurch  
And scorpions creep on flimsy clouds  
    ... Always endeavoring, always saddened  
    Always going on in destitution,  
    What is flowing to no end...  
This starry Night's great River's balustrades already rot  
And I am faced with the faint remnants of twilight in the west  
And thin blood onyx  
To hear the quiet respiration of fish scales  
    ... Dreamy rows of poles nostalgic...

Silk factory girls with beautiful voices  
Pass me singing as if mocking me,  
When inside their singing is clearly heard  
My dead sister's doubled voice  
    ... That voice with all her strength  
    From a woman's thin, weak throat...  
The space above the cedar wood suddenly lighted,  
Because the moon is now rising  
And birds are making noises  
    ... rows of poles dream soldiers...  
Again from the south lightning flashes  
And fish emit an acetylene odor,  
Water running to the horizon like a projection from the Milky Way,  
The sky's circle gray steel  
    ... Ah that the loved one



Is gone and I know not where she went,  
What a good thing it is...  
Sadness falls from the clear sky  
When black birds pass sharply,  
Rusty shades of Autumn sweetfish  
Cross the sky in white stripes

These are the translations of three poems by Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933), derived from various experiences after the death of his sister Toshi (or Toshiko) in 1922. On this theme the most well-known are the ones in the section “Voiceless Grief” in the book of poems *Spring and Asura* (1924), the only collection of poetry published in his lifetime; they have the date of her death attached, and deal with the immediate circumstance of that day and Miyazawa’s thoughts and prayers. Their translations can be found in several attempts to render Miyazawa into English (Snyder, Sato, Strong, Suzuki, Pulvers), whereas of the three poems presented here as far as I know only “Aomori Elegy” (青森挽歌) has a previous translation (Suzuki).

“Aomori Elegy,” dated August 1, 1923, roughly eight months after Toshiko’s death, is based on his journey from his hometown Hanamaki, Iwate to the island of Sakhalin, whose southern half was then a Japanese territory. The everyday purpose of the trip was to consult about the possible job position for one of his students, but it also gave Miyazawa a chance to expose himself to the regions of experience (some of them visionary and others even hallucinatory) incited by the aspiration to know what happened to his sister after her death. The poem is included in the “Okhotsk Elegy” section of *Spring and Asura*, as the first poem of the series. Some of the other poems have been already translated (Sato).

“Bird Transitions” (鳥の遷移) and “Blue of a Dewdrop on a Leaf of Leek” (薺露青) are now included in *Spring and Asura, Second Series* as reconstructed by his editors; Miyazawa left them (and many other works) unpublished, with a stimulating maze of different versions. Of the two, “Blue of a Dewdrop on a Leaf of Leek” has a rather peculiar history in the editing: Miyazawa wrote the poem on a sheet of paper, but at some later time deleted it with an eraser, though he did not dispose of the sheet; an editor recovered the poem by reading the scratches.

These three poems are very difficult to explain, let alone summarize, especially “Aomori Elegy.” Still if we persist in summarization we might say that it involves the poet’s attempt to come to terms with his sister’s death, emotionally and doctrinally (he had become in his youth an ardent follower of a Buddhist sect based on a modern, nationalistic interpretation of 13th-century divine Nichiren). If we choose to focus on the declaration at the end of the poem by a mysterious voice saying that we should not pray for one person, we might posit a sort of plot, that of a passage from a state where Miyazawa was confused by the obsession with his sister’s death into an enlightenment, the right understanding of universal love within a

religious totality.

But to summarize like this would be an instance of the very "conceptualization" memorably criticized in the poem itself. It is definitely not that Miyazawa in the poem is considering and evaluating discursive, doctrinal accounts provided by his religion. Rather, various possibilities of experience are tried out; he seems to have wondered if it were not possible for humans to experience worlds other than this earthly one (the repetition in the poem of phrases like "as it is" indicates this). So, for instance, after an abrupt denial of the possibility of the transformation of Toshiko into a bird, the communication with the dead is craved for and, to our astonishment, simply affirmed; but what follows is no record of seance-type "communication" but a transformation of the human world itself into something else; that is, what the passage conveys is not simply that Toshiko ascended to a heaven. In this poem, worlds as verbal passages reveal themselves as self-evidence, as if by their own momentum; without clear boundaries they merge with each other.

Needless to say this is no typical, ordinary form of Japanese religiosity; Miyazawa must have been a man of special psychological and physiological makeup. And he was open to multifarious forces from outside, visual, auditory, visionary and others. Moreover, in his presentation there was no forcing them into premeditated consistency: one example would be the fact that the seemingly "correct" teaching from a voice mentioned above comes, on the page, from the same indented position as the two previous, seemingly malignant pronouncements; though actually no one can tell whether the three are from the same voice or not. The poem is full of blatant or subtle paradoxes and discrepancies, true to the nature of experience enacted. On the plane of poetic form these traits resulted in unique uses of parenthesis and indentation. With them the dialogic fragments of experience are woven into a subtle musical composition, without facile synthesis, sustained by a sure rhythm embodying, it feels, flickerings of light and shade, the repetitions of phenomenal worlds.

"Bird Transitions" is shorter but also memorable, evincing the theme of the uncanny uncertainty when confused about the identity of the same; it also includes the image of the windows of a train. In "Blue of a Dewdrop on a Leaf of Leek," the river is at the same time the Milky Way and the river below: the Kitakami River, if we specify its locality; but the mention of the Southern Cross indicates that it has a wide scope, and is clearly related to Miyazawa's famous story *The Night of the Milky Way Railroad*. Perhaps the most disquieting feature of the poem is the unexplainable appearance of his dead sister's doubled voice: again an emergence of the theme of the same and the other. The paradoxical assertion that the unknowability of the dead sister's whereabouts is "a good thing" is shocking. But if you believe in a religious totality you might have to accept and welcome the absorption of your loved one into that totality; though still confusion could persist, and elicit an inkling of doubles. Miyazawa might have resorted to an eraser because of touching on this unsettling theme.

### English Translations Cited

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