

Miyazawa Kenji:
Poems from "In Sickness" and Some Others

Translated by
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Sickbed

On a plume poppy
It is the wind blowing

Also on a colony of plume poppies
It is the wind blowing

[When I Open My Eyes the Winds of April]

When I open my eyes the winds of April
Come tumbling down from the azure sky
The maples are spreading tender pale-red
Sprouts all over the window,
Last night's blood has not stopped
Everyone is gazing at me

The thing which again wells up lukewarm is
Vomited, but not knowing who does that
Blue, deep blue I am asleep.

What is again passing over my brow is
From the top of that extinct volcano
A row of clear, shining winds

[Cho Cho Cho Cho Cho]

Cho cho cho cho cho
Cho cho cho cho cho
Beaten down Cho
Beaten down Cho
Pitch-dark with algae Cho cho
Salt sea Cho cho cho cho cho
Feverish Cho cho cho cho cho
Feverish feverish Cho cho cho
(Honor Honor Kill Kill Kill
Kill Kill Honor Honor Honor
Honor Honor Kill Kill Kill
Kill Kill Honor Honor Honor)
Genie you gave yourself away
Do that Cho cho cho
(Try that)
You won't defeat me
Shadow of some big bird
Phew Cho cho cho
Sea dawning pale blue Cho
In clouds of vapor rising
Fragrant, breathing, flowing up
A huge flower bud

[My Chest Now Is]

My chest now is
A saline lake hot and sad
Along two hundred miles of the shore
A forest of coal black rhododendrons continues on
And really do I need to
Until a reptile turns into a bird
Motionless
Lie down here?

[With the Beautiful Colors of a Setting Sun]

With the beautiful colors of a setting sun
One respiration opens
One year above me

Again I Have a Fever

Mercury shineth blue
Tonight again I have a fever,
Gathering dispersed pieces of mind
Musing on ancient bodhisattvas
With quiet breaths I will rest

In the flowing sediment of light,
Fields, towns, public offices,
Remembered faces or people's voices,
Every silence or movement that is,

From all this now return back
You dispersed phases of my mind
Gather and have a rest
Tomorrow, then, you will burn

[Though My Hands Are Hot, My Feet Numb]

Though my hands are hot, my feet numb
I am one to build the tower

Along the axis of time sliding down
Both far and near beautifully becoming
Lighting darkness luminously
How precious is the figure of the tower

[My Chest Is Now Pale Blue]

My chest is now pale blue
Nothing more than a piece of board
Yet nevertheless out there in good health
Billions of respirations every one of them
Aren't they the fresh breaths of my beautiful spring?

[Fever, Gasps, Losing the Real]

Fever, gasps, losing the real
On the border of dying dozing
All the night, through the day

Thou, like this, guardeth me

Without ornaments, without shoes
Only in sackcloth ashen-colored
Assuming the habit of humble ones
Thou resideth with a calm heart

Awesome it is to know thy name
Yet 'tis truly right to surmise
Thou art the goddess supreme
The one recorded thrice in the Book

Hence in time of agony and fever
Of a mind disordered in this way
Thou camest not through the name of god
But through Dharma's precious Name

Without ornaments, without shoes
For the offspring of endless karma
With clouds of sorrow on thy brow
Thou resideth serene

[In the Glass Vessel Pale Blue]

In the glass vessel pale blue
That which in silence settleth shining
Was by bodhisattva for my sake
With blood made good and redeemed into
What is called water

Pneumonia

This big room bluish and dark,
How on earth is this my lung?
A bunch of resentful elementary school teachers
Are holding a meeting sputtering, sputtering four long hours
The pump, the pump creaks and shakes
The arms and legs I don't know where they are any more
All those things no longer seem to be mine
Only painfully thinking, it is me.
Damn it! Thinking is only thinking,

Who knows it is I that does that?
But then there is no more of me?...
Oh shit! Why that now

[Here Two Rivers Merge Whitened]

Here two rivers merge whitened
Loud resounding for a brief while,
Ill and weary as I go
Light from the sky accuses my flesh.

Karma walnuts, alder cones
On the mudstones cracked and blue
Alas alas my shadow projects
The figure of a vile demon.

Vastly bluish the summer wind
Ripples and flutters grass green,
Patches of reeds blown flat
Woven into letters weird.

Unable to live, willing to die
But unable to die, the shadow of I
Lapped by water faintly muddied
Whispering endlessly resounding loud.

[It Flowed]

It flowed
The night collapsed ominously
 What loomed wavering was a waft of
 Eyeless cathode-ray light
 Fluorescence turning pale and
 Polarizations sad and white
The water looked white and cold
The horizon barely rouged
Seemed like the break of day
 (Which river's sight is this, forsooth?)
Truly flowed the color of water
As it liked to flow, the color of water
In the daybreak the look of water
Like it knew no end, flowed on
 (Which river's sight is this, forsooth?)
The water looked light and loose
The water looked cold and light
 (The water of the river in the color of water
 Upon the color-of-water river water
 Things unidentifiable in the color of water
 Some shapes flowed on)
Bluish men and corpses numberless
Chafed in water streamed by
Color-of-water water and corpses numberless
 (It flowed as it liked to flow)

Also came down a big raft,
Eyes set deep and a high nose
Arms crossed and looking around
There sat a man
Didn't we see the raft in the color of water
Was pieced together by corpses?

A youth with hair disheveled
Caught the rim of the raft
The raft's master with red eyes
Anger flashing across his cheek
Untangled the youth's hands

Truly flowed the color of water
Flowed as it liked to flow the color of water
In the daybreak the look of water
Like it knew no end, flowed on

Turning pale to save themselves
They came to each other in the stream
But found themselves fighting with each other
Some flowed on with hair disheveled
 (The sky on the other shore inflamed,
 What sight is this, the redness?)

The river flowed as it liked to flow,
Like it knew no end as it flowed
My eyes were exhausted and for now
Things mostly dimmed, only
The river water barely white
The look of the sky faintly light

Oh only the head, the head
Gnashing gnashing gnashing the teeth
Cutting the water came along

One bit the shoulder of a dead man

And then his back too,
That one awoke and was angry

The river flowed as it liked to flow
The river water lightly shining
Only swiftly flowed on
(Which river's sight is this, forsooth?
Men and corpses together flowed on)

Ah it flowed on, flowed on
Carrying corpses and men in the color of
Water, in the color of water
Flowed water with no end

No.1076

Dreaming in Sickness

June 13, 1927

My sin now turned into illness,
Helplessly ascending I
Doze above fields in the air

The Great Void shines and is endless
And my flesh lighter than hydrogen
Unable to till the earth again

Oh that there in black and white
Rows of towering cumuli, I could
Break into rain to fall down

[At the End of the End of the Blue Sky]

June 12, 1927

At the end of the end of the blue sky
 Where even hydrogen is too rare above the atmosphere
 "I am all the things of the world
 The world is a shadow of shifting blue dreams"
 Even things like this
 Are too heavy to think
 For the eternal, transparent beings who dwell there

In Sickness, Water, Sky

Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933) left most of his works in manuscripts. The poems in the group "In Sickness" (「疾中」) were found in a cloth binder as loose sheets of paper, with no hint of their intended arrangement. "In Sickness" is the title written on the label of the binder, with the date "August 1928-1930." These poems do not cover the later period of his last illness. Yet they obviously show a man who is going through an extreme situation.

The group contains poems in colloquial free verse and in traditional meter and diction. However, the distinction between the two can be misleading, since Miyazawa's so-called "free verse" is closely related to traditional meter. Volume 5 of the latest variorum of collected works puts the colloquial first and traditional second; we followed this order with these translations. So, of the translations here, "Sickbed" (病床), "[When I Open My Eyes the Winds of April]" (「まなこをひらけば四月の風が」), [Cho Cho Cho Cho Cho] (「丁丁丁丁」), and "[My Chest Now Is]" (「胸はいま」) are basically colloquial; and "[With the Beautiful Colors of a Setting Sun]" (「美しき夕陽の色なして」), "Again I Have a Fever" (熱またあり), "[Though My Hands Are Hot, My Feet Numb]" (「手は熱く足はなゆれど」), "[My Chest Is Now Pale Blue]" (「わが胸いまは青じろき」), "[Fever, Gasps, Losing the Real]" (「熱とあえぎをうつゝなみ」), and "[In the Glass Vessel Pale Blue]" (「そのうす青き玻璃の器に」) are traditional in diction and meter. Hence, some archaic English appears in the latter translations. On the other hand we did not try to render all of the complex meanings onto the surface of the translated text, when to do so would overly lengthen the line, make it clumsy or lose too much of the rhythm.

One example is the title and first line of “[Fever, Gasps, Losing the Real],” where the original “losing the real” contains a pun on “wave.”

Some of the poems are clearly religious and draw on Miyazawa’s devotion to a form of Buddhism centered on *The Lotus Sutra* and the 13th century Buddhist monk Nichiren. But these religious expressions are not couched in obvious, conventional Buddhist terms, but instead are rendered in unique images and original phrases. For instance, the identity of “Goddess” in “[Fever, Gasps, Losing the Real]” is not so clear. She might be “Kishimojin” (originally a savage, child-killing demon who later turned into a defender of the believers in *The Lotus Sutra*) or “Kannon” (a Bodhisattva who is strictly speaking not a female but often portrayed as one). The “Book” where her name is “recorded thrice” might be *The Lotus Sutra* or some writing by Nichiren. We can read the poem without settling on an answer, which sometimes leads to substituting a piece of information or visual image for actually experiencing what the words evoke. The latter is certainly more in keeping with the poetic intentions.

The next poem, “Pneumonia” (肺炎), in substance belongs to the “In Sickness” group. However, it was not in the binder, nor written on the sort of sheet Miyazawa used for poems having taken a definite form, though not without the possibility of subsequent changes. In Volume 5 of the variorum collected works, it is located in the “Supplementary Poems I” (補遺詩篇 I) section. It was written in colloquial, raw speech, though its abrupt movements are superbly controlled.

The next three poems are in traditional diction and meter; later in his life Miyazawa concentrated on poems like these. They should not be considered throwbacks or regressive in any sense. Miyazawa often condensed various aspects of his life into these strict but incantatory forms, and also experimented with filling them with audacious, even whimsical, themes. “[Here Two Rivers Merge Whitened]” ([川しろじろとまじはりて]) and “No.1076, Dreaming in Sickness, July 13, 1927” ([一〇七六 病中幻想 一九二七、六、一三、]) belong to the first kind, whereas “[It Flowed]” ([ながれたり]) is one of the latter.

The setting of “[Here Two Rivers Merge Whitened]” is the shore of the Kitakami River near his hometown, Hanamaki, near where the Sarugaishi River flows into the Kitakami. Miyazawa found the fossils of walnuts and alder nuts in the mudstone riverbed there. It would be transformed into the riverbed of the Milky Way in his story, “Night of the Milky Way Railroad.” As to the poem’s complex meanings, the original of “loud resounding for a brief while” in the poem’s second line can be translated putting emphasis on the image of “water bubbles.” We tried to retain the interaction between the “resounding” in the first stanza and the same

expression in the poem's last line: we chose to attach importance to the tightly composed auditory "resoundings." Incidentally, we can learn from the manuscripts that this connection was achieved in the last touches of revision. One more formal point: in the manuscript, the poem was surely composed in the quatrain form, but in the later copy it was arranged into two-line stanzas where each has two lines, with some space put between them; but we kept the original form, as we surmise in English its rhythm would be more readily grasped.

The next poem, "[It Flowed]," is an extraordinarily visionary poem. It is based on a group of tanka poems written in his youth, and is said to have derived from the images incited in him by the news of victims of a tsunami. The insistent use of tautological depictions of things in the color of water is quite deliberate and discerningly executed. This poem could be known as, "The Ballad of Eternal Return."

"No.1076, Dreaming in Sickness, June 13, 1927" is among the poems in traditional meter; it is exceptional in that it retains the number of composition given by Miyazawa and the date. How Miyazawa assigned the number to poems has not been clarified, and the nature of the dates attached to them is problematical. Often, the date is not simply the date of composition, but rather the day he was inspired by some event or thought. The summer of 1927 was the time when Miyazawa tried to go into the village, organize an association to help and edify the common people there about agriculture and education, and failed. It seems that around June 13, Miyazawa despaired of his powerlessness to help change the situation, and had a vision of becoming part of a cumulus cloud to fall down as rain. It was at the same time a vision of liberation and self-sacrifice. The present form is a metamorphosis from earlier, colloquial versions.

The last poem here, "No.1074, [At the End of the End of the Blue Sky], June 12, 1927" ([一〇七四 [青ぞらのはてのはて] 一九二七、六、一二、) is colloquial and belongs to the "Poetry Notebook" (詩ノート) group whose poems bear dates from 1926-27. Though it was not to be transformed into a poem in a traditional meter, originally it was written on the same sheet next to an early version of "No.1076, Dreaming in Sickness, June 13, 1927." During those days of June 1927, apparently Miyazawa had a commingling of a premonition of watery death, an aspiration for liberation-cum-sacrifice in the sky, and a vision of unearthly beings hovering in the sky.