otata 20

August 2017
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from otata’s bookshelf

John Perlman, Florida Keys, II
Letter

With my stomach full after eating lunch
I'm writing this letter to the once hungry me.

It used to happen sometimes.
You won't be upset, will you?

There were times of luxury too, you know.
I hope you won't forget that.

I was sure of tomorrow
for twenty years!

Now that I'm full
I'm worried I might forget all that

so I'm
writing this letter.

— Ch’on Sang Pyong
Translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé
and Kim Young-Moo

with thanks to Jeremy Seligson
cremation ...
ashes enough
for the wren box

the chrysalis
splits-open
The Middle Way

a young hoody
stops me on the street
I think of Merton's cowl
tra i rami oscillano
desideri di uomini
la Via Lattea

human desires
swinging among branches
Milky Way

bora di luglio —
tre piccoli fagiani
corrono in fila

July bora
three small pheasants
run in a row

(bora: a kind of wind of northwest Italy very strong and cold in the winter period)
cumulonembi –
il ronzio di una mosca
sale a spirale

cumulonimbus
the buzz’s fly rises
in spirals

semi di lino —
si arrotola alla tenda
il vento estivo

summer wind
rolling around the curtains
flaxseed

solstizio estivo
in giardino una bambina
canta Hallelujah

summer solstice
in the garden a child
sings Hallelujah
brucio l’incenso  
nella stanza in penombra —  
solstizio estivo

burning incense  
in the shaded room  
summer solstice

cumolonembi  
Il gatto al mio fianco fa un cerchio perfetto

storm clouds  
the cat at my side make a perfect circle

lo sguardo fisso  
delle orate al mercato —  
canicola

at the market stall  
a sea bream’s stare  
heat wave
moniack monochords

dedicated to gibby keys and beatrice robertson were written as part of our jessie kesson literary fellowship
2016, moniack mhor - scotland's writing centre

4/3/16 three knives-blocked, three on the chopping

5/3/16 this s/lightest ov flake snows rant-and-reel over strawberry bed

6/3/16 snow strafing the blackest where mole jes hilled

7/3/16 hoodie grubbing branches ov pine, cone falling

8/3/16 winds dartings making the pine for clàrsach

9/3/16 for the sixth day canny-crow shrugging her shoulders at us

10/3/16 spider in the shower - how long have yu been waiting? yr flies are in the living room!

11/3/16 mountain no-one can name peek-a-booing amid the dreich

12/3/16 paint-peel the bathroom near-enough butterfly before flit

13/3/16 blading air, wing-beat-none in this glide-ride ov current

~ 9 ~
14/3/16  moon cleft in hyacinth-skies, later she will turn electric

15/3/16  buttercup jcb marracking a neighbouring field

16/3/16  shrugging a spider outside into the shroud-silk-mist

17/3/16  steel toe-caps and two (double) espresso’d morning

18/3/16  dvoraks cypresses - their string-quartetting years, tears and

19/3/16  snow-melt watering more than eyes

20/3/16  two red kites joust hours, heartbeats ov cloud thudding beyond

21/3/16  tornado jet chunters, meanwhile the desperate-for-suncatcher-crocussings

22/3/16  wagtail s/pied runnelling gutters, meanwhile my washing-up awaits

23/3/16  long-time friend txts she’s carving out writing space in wishaw

24/3/16  egg-shells ov palest blue, olive, cream - their omelette bursting sun

25/3/16  overnight, the forgotten chopped onions reach first floor

26/3/16  misread postcard in printer-room: aching a poem?

27/3/16  ... rainstrikeglassstrikerain, patterning in gain&loss & loss again, meanwhile i ...
(i.m frances horovitz, see her last poem orcop haiku)
28/3/16  trees caressing shadow over pebble-dash ov writers cottage

29/3/16  paper, plastic, glass to recycling then stuck behind their lorry en-route to train south

[Ed. note. A lovely short film, Sean reading in background, can be found [here](#). His most recent book, *is that a bruise or a tattoo* is available from Shearsman.]
così limpida
la luna fra le case —
cosi vicina
so clear the moon
among the houses-
so close
notte di luna —
si destano i papaveri
da un sonno breve
moonlit night —
poppies awaken
from a short sleep
notte d’estate —
cosi intensa la luce
dei fiori bianchi
summer night –
so intense the light
of white flowers
flowing river —
the way mother
touches wolfberries

early snowfall
clinging to starlight —
winter deepens

melting snow —
a waterfall spills
from our rooftop

Easter night -
a rabbit's eyes blinking
through the mist
Elisa Allo

midnight swim —
eyes closed
the sound of waves

life drawing...
jasmine scent
impregnates the canvas

from the window
a cricket reminds me
to clear the table
singing the sun drunk cicadas

waiting for the last boat those unripe figs

his scarab wingbeats starlight
Short history of love

How can I forget when we first met? Even the ratio of cloud swirls to the poplars against a cerulean sky was perfect.

abandoned dovecots
the way the sun lights up
each nest-hole

Nearly everything

This summer the house martins arrive well before the rain, animatedly chirruping as they criss-cross the cloudless May sky. The monsoon too is punctual, almost to the day of the long-range forecast. It seems everything is on course. You would have whistled in delight to see your avocado tree brim with the promise of a good harvest.

anniversary
prayer flags shedding mist
at sunrise
Should we have known?

The house martins suddenly leave for the warmth of Benares. Our winter visitors, the black-necked cranes are late arriving in the valley. One day, the paddy stubbles glow in the low sun, the next, they are enamelled in hoar frost well into dusk.

how still
Orion’s belt and sword
night of the quake

has spring come early
to the winter-bleached valley
cress shoots in the snow

Deep winter
untrammelled by the urge
to sow, weed and reap
I let things be
revisit ancestral dreams
Even if
the Bar-do Tho-dol
is recited every day
How will I find the Clear Light
without you by my side

if nothing else
when it is time to go
I shall be enrobed
in the deepest purple
of a mountain night
Margherita Petriccione

autunno —
il volto nello specchio
come una vecchia foto

autumn—
the face in the mirror
like an old photo

mattino d’inverno —
sulla piazzale della chiesa
le persone più anziane

winter morning
on the church square
the oldest people

zazen on the grass —
appears and disappears
a poppy

zazen sull’erba -
appare e scompare
unpapavero
5
fog wall –
from nothing to nothing
a magpie

muro di nebbia–
dal nulla al nulla
una gazza
how long
it takes
the vapour trail

sunlight
all of us
in first class

in the end
the weight of white
blossoms
from day
one
the sun

at the end of the walk a man waiting for his dog

opening the balcony door
to my neighbor
the rain
Angela Giordano

Afa d’agosto
Già appassiti i fiori
colti al mattino

August
the flowers picked this morning
already dried

Onde di grano
Piccole barche rosse
i papaveri

Wheat waves
Small red boats
And poppies

Dentro il cortile
Lo starnazzare d’oche
tra le peonie

Inside the courtyard
The cackling of geese
among the peonies
The apple
has a partner
in the orchard
hand-picked
a hard worker.
The apple
gives a thump
in the grass
when the moon
is hidden
and no one is listening.
There are others.
The apple
turns about
with the earth's orbit
lightning and thunder
and the deep fountain.
The apple
pressed
and fermented
I drink and
this moment
see
a meteor shower.
**Editorial**

Fresh poems are fresh meat for the locusts. They eat all the words, leave only punctuation. So. You write another. Then another. Eventually one will come along that is indigestible to insects, fit for a human palate.

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**Conversation Piece**

"The art of conversation is dead."

Do you agree or disagree? SMS your answer to 1234 567 890.
a piece of meat

Alexander Alekhine died seventy years ago.

Elevated levels of ammonia have since been discovered.

Also, artificial sweeteners that lead to weight gain.

We are stuck in the real world.

An opened icon is already a postscript.

of Proto-Germanic origin

This may be counterintuitive, but when a black dog started chasing him, the heartless robot became emotionally available & forgot all his baggage.
The young Han Solo

describes the past decade
as a really tumultuous
time for the beef industry

but he is excited about
what the future holds.

"Aliens' sex life," however, returned 106 hits

An analysis of the incidence of local

searches for the jailing
of blacks reveals that,

even when combined with contains a peel-
off sticky card, it still attracts no interest.
A 1920s flapper

Be comfortable & intimate.
An entire home/apt for $29.
New types of fibers offer
new possibilities. Do you
have healthy boundaries? If

your answer is yes & you live
in Brooklyn then check out
TripAdvisor members' 1507
candid photos of genetically
modified sexual fetishes.
più lente le ore
nella canicola estiva —
formiche in fila

more slow hours
in the summer heatwave –
ants in a row

muri di pietra —
nella frescura a sera
menta e lavanda

stone walls -
in the night coolness
mint and lavender
mare d'estate —
il turchese del cielo
ai miei piedi

sea in summer —
the sky’s turquoise
bathes my feet

pioggia d’estate —
appaiono dal nulla
le lumachine

summer rain -
snails appear out
of nowhere

formiche —
vanno … vengono … vanno
su fichi caduti

ants -
they go ... they come... they go
on fallen figs
blueberry stains
counting the mistakes
on a white tablecloth

old love letters
an agave flower
among his words

*Agave flowers only once before dying: a symbol of great
love that comes to destruction.

mandala ...
a little sunbeam
from petal to petal
drops of ink
all the words
I didn't tell you
Christina Sng

the things
that tear at me
thorny bramble

flowering thistles
caring for one generation
after another
it's mine
now. this mask from
the 17th century
nearly five hundred years old
cherry blossoms
waiting to rot
talk of frogs!
my son's pebble
scares them off
up and down the coast
the long line of
mountain dwellers
marsh grass with all windows rolled down

teeming:
under the rainmaker's truck
a sparrow hops in place

alone so long...
the upper Amazon
of her simple predicate
after Nietzsche letting my rope burns air

high school biology to see the lamb’s eye moon
Indian summer
the treehouse
makeover

Sunday morning
more silent
than an open coffin

birthday dinner
she carefully makes
sixty cuts
mom's cancer
I can't stop shaking
the snow globe

nothing in the pond a frog croaks

one-breath morning like no other before it
In 1919, Santōka left Sakino, his wife, and Ken, his 8-year-old son, in Kumamoto and went to Tokyo. His used book shop, on Shimo Avenue in Kumamoto, had not prospered and he had to take to selling photos of famous actors and actresses on the streets. At times he would use whatever money he had gathered from sales to get drunk.

Some of his haiku compatriots were leaving for Tokyo to pursue studies or an occupation, and there was a better chance at finding steady work in the great metropolis. Things at home with Sakino were souring. Santōka left for the capital and left the book store for Sakino to continue operating.

His first employment was physical labor working for the Tokyo water works. He worked a sieve to sift sand to make cement.

One young man whom Santōka had befriended in Kumamoto was Kudo Yoshimi. Kudo was from Saiki in Oita Prefecture, also on Kyushu, and had come to Kumamoto to study at Kumamoto high school (now Kumamoto University) in preparation for medical studies. But Kudo also wrote and was interested in haiku poetry and literature in general. One day he found his way to Santōka’s book store. A friendship began. It may be that the older (by 16 years) poet’s influence was what turned him away from a career in medicine, which his father was pushing him into. Kudo entered Waseda University in Tokyo where he chose to study British literature.

Kudo Yoshimi had a younger sister named Chiyo. She went to Tokyo too, in part to cook and clean for her brother, but she also worked as a librarian. According to Kei Furukawa, whose book Santōka’s Love I rely on for many of the details in this chapter (and the account in Furukawa’s book is found only there—not in Ōyama and not in Murakami), it was Chiyo who got Santōka a job as a librarian.
Those years working as a temporary employee for the Tokyo municipal government at the Hi-
totsubashi Public Library were likely the happiest years of his adult life. He had a steady income,
he was not too exhausted—as he had been from working at the water works—to continue his
literary work (not just poems: for example he wrote an essay comparing Chekov to Bashō).

During that time there were no tragedies in his life. No one died. No one committed suicide.
The only regrettable event—depending on how one looks at it—was receiving divorce papers
from Sakino's elder brother, along with the brother's fuming letter accusing Santōka of all sorts of
inappropriate behavior and irresponsibilities. Looking only at the surface of things, none of those
accusations can be denied. (Sakino herself seems not to have expressed complaints about her
husband. According to various accounts, she was 良妻賢母, a good wife and wise mother. Sup-
posedly she “understood” him and was tolerant of his unconventional ways.)

Another reason for his comparatively happy days during that time is his deepening friendship
with the Kudos, Yoshimi and Chiyo. Like Santōka, Yoshimi liked haiku and liked drinking saké
(though maybe not as much as Santōka). Chiyo was able engage Santōka, get him to open up. He
felt comfortable with her.

We know that where Santōka lived in the Yushima area of Tokyo was not far from where the Ku-
dos lived. We know he visited them. Was the relationship between Santōka and Chiyo (19 years
apart) an elder brotherly sisterly thing, or was there a romance going on? She was in her early
twenties. He was in his late thirties.

Late in 1922 Santōka suffered another nervous breakdown and had to quit his job at the library.
This was the second major occurrence of what was medically termed neurasthenia. The first was
as a university student at Waseda when his father stopped sending money for tuition and Santōka
was forced to quit school.

In Murakami’s biography, the reason for the 1922 breakdown is left as unknown with only a
guess that it might have been brought on by a change of Santōka's boss at the library, with whom
he apparently did not get along well.

The 1904 breakdown happened because his student life and chance for a stable future had been
shut down because of his father’s flagrant misuse of money. But, 18 years and various family loss-
es, employment and marital troubles later, his second breakdown occurs because of a new boss?
Hmmm.

We know that just before the breakdown Chiyo was hospitalized with pneumonia, which even-
tually became tuberculosis (tuberculosis pleurisy). From the time of the Meiji Restoration, TB in
Japan had been increasing due to modernization, which produced crowded conditions in cities
and unhealthy industrial working conditions. For many, because antibiotics did not yet exist, TB
was a death sentence, depending on the course of the disease. Mori Ogai, though, the novelist
and medical doctor, lived with TB from the time he was a young man until his death at age 60.
Yoshimi Kudo took his sister by train back to the family home in Oita Prefecture. Chiyo died there at age 24.

In 1923, about a month after the Great Kanto Disaster (7.9 earthquake followed by a fire that destroyed 60 per cent of Tokyo, Santōka returned to Kumamoto.

In 1924 there is the famous event in the Santōka narrative in which, drunk, he stands on tracks in front of an approaching streetcar. It was not a steaming locomotive, but a slow moving streetcar that was able to stop. Mysteriously, no police were summoned, and a concerned citizen took him not to a police station (as would normally be the course recommended by authorities in the case of unruly behavior) but to a Zen temple.

In 1925, by which time Santōka was just starting life as a Zen monk, when he heard of Chiyo’s death. He “borrowed” money and went by train to Saiki, where he paid respects to her family and read sutra at Chiyo’s memorial tablet in the family altar.

Four years later, in 1929, on one of his pilgrimages to sacred sites on Kyushu, he goes out of his way to revisit Saiki.

It impossible to find any reference to Chiyo in Santōka’s diaries. That is because he burnt his diaries of those years. Why? By that time he knew that friends and members of Strata were saving his letters and postcards. He knew he was going to be around as a literary figure after he died. He wanted to protect her, keep her memory private. He wrote in a later diary that he had never loved a woman and had never been loved by a woman. He also tells us that his mother’s suicide made any natural relationship with a woman impossible.

In fact there are precious few Santōka haiku concerned with anything that might be thought of as romantic love. Here is one:

Tread on fallen leaves as if I’d seen my lover
A Santoka Story

Towards the end of 1935, Santōka journeyed north. On June 14th he arrived from Niigata by train at Tsuruoka, which is along the Japan Sea coast in Yamagata Prefecture. A younger member of the Sōun [Strata] haiku group, WADA Akitoshi, was Santōka's host. He put the elder poet up at a hot spring inn called みさご [Misago, Osprey]. That inn is still in business though ownership has changed, as has the name. It's name is now called 仙荘 [Sensō, Hermit Cottage, or, more romantically, Villa of the Immortals].

While there, Santōka was entertained at Wada's expense with geisha, lots of saké, and haute cuisine at the best dining places the resort town had to offer. Santōka was likely unaware that Wada, though from a high ranking samurai lineage, was struggling to get by. In order to host Santōka, who was by then a well-respected (though regarded as eccentric) poet in the literary world, Wada sold off collections of books and took on an extra shift, the night shift, at his job to save up enough money to offer おもてなし (omotenashi) hospitality to the revered guest. (I'm told that the English word “hospitality” does not have the complete sense of “omotenashi.” It might be best to think of it as hospitality on steroids. Imagine an imperial visit and then tone it down a few notches.)

Santōka thoroughly indulged himself for nine days. On the last day, June 23rd, Santōka, borrowing a yukata (a light kimono worn in summer or used as a bathrobe) and a towel, left from Wada's home saying he was going off to try out a local sentō (public bathhouse). Instead he went to Tsuruoka Station and boarded a train to Sendai.

In Sendai he paid visits to members of the Strata group. One day he visited a friend who was an art teacher at Tohoku Gakuin junior high school. Santōka appeared at the school wearing that bathrobe. One evening locals organized a haiku event at which Santōka was the special guest. Other members were in semiformal attire. Either the traditional Japanese formal kimono or Western style suit and tie. Santōka wore the bathrobe. The locals were flabbergasted. “Scandalous!” The impression Santōka made was not a good one.

After Sendai he traveled on visiting some of the Bashō places until he got the northernmost spot Bashō visited, Hiraizumi. All the while with only a bathrobe to wear. That yukata is all he had to wear until he reached Eihei Temple, which was founded by Zen priest Dōgen (1200~1253), in Fukui Prefecture late in July. He’d left his priest robe, his kasa hat, his staff, and his “pouch” (rakusu 絆子) at Wada’s house. From Fukui he sent Wada a postcard telling him to keep the kasa and staff but to please send the priest robe.
On a Zen plane, the only one thing to wear is in accord with having only one bowl, etc. It's just that the one thing didn't conform to conventional dress for those occasions.

Once again in his priest robe, Santōka went on to Osaka, where he came into some money, some of which he sent to Wada to help reimburse him for money Wada had spent playing the gracious host.

This story is one of many that illustrate that, though there is a popular image of Santōka as a freeloader, a fuller picture shows that he tried to repay those who had helped him.
two days
away from the boat
still feel it shift