

## COREY WAKELING

### *Pandemic Bathing*

An enormous faucet and the steam cloud. The scene where Chihiro is visited by the seemingly oblivious ghoul, Kaonashi, that is, No-Face. Is the spirit world one infinitely unfolding bathhouse? Dogo Onsen in Matsuyama, Ehime Prefecture lies not in the spirit world, but does stage the expiring faucet, bathroom, the unfolding, half-stepped mezzanine stories within the bathing complex, at the opening point of the subterranean spring. Every ghoul vying for the hot bath. The decongestant steam. Dogo Onsen closed for two years for renovation. Dogo Onsen, open December 2021, welcoming guests back to Shikoku. An enormous faucet and the steam cloud.

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I spent part of my first coronavirus summer holiday in Kinosaki. Unlike Shiga Naoya's<sup>1</sup> first-person narrator in "At Kinosaki," no determined convalescent purpose as such. No, I was attending the Toyooka Theatre Festival, a theatre festival made sustainable mid-pandemic thanks to what were at the time cutting edge infrastructural approaches to crowd management—a spectator registration system, updated in real-time by a Bluetooth and GPS tracking tag device worn as a lanyard; isolated intake, outtake routes at the theatres; spaced seating; pre-production "bubble" quarantine of actors and producers; elaborately partitioned reception areas—alone, bathing in recently but conditionally re-opened bathhouses of this illustrious historical resort. I remember a powerful flesh mural perched on the rim of the central bath at Ichinoyu. A Yakuza man unperturbed—or rallied?—by the usual expectation of circumspection toward those belonging to criminal associations. Had the pandemic brought him here? The very place one is always told the criminal associate is not welcome. I had just an hour before seen Ichihara Satoko's *The Bacchus—Holstein Milk Cows*, a hallucinatory restaging of the Euripidean tragedy exploring transmuted Dionysian posthuman forms of fecundity, lampooning the fetish of the goodness of reproductivity at every turn. The listlessness of the willows overhanging Kinosaki's rivers among uncommonly light guest traffic. The wailing dragon on the back of the Yakuza man, self-satisfied in steam, few other humans circling in Ichinoyu.

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Immobilised by tuberculosis, Masaoka Shiki—more often called Shiki, his first name, as a gesture of affection—spent years in bed. Certainly his last ones too. The final three he wrote using the most intimate object of his greatly diminished surroundings, in this case, the hechima, or sponge gourd, its central thrust and agent. You know the sponge gourd as the

loofah, that corn cob-looking skin-aggressor some like to think of as a felicitous exfoliant. I ask myself where this word “loofah” comes from: OED says Arabic, *lūfa*, the Latin name *Luffa ægyptiaca* betraying its Egyptian roots for the English-language context. 糸瓜 is more easily parsed for etymology—the Chinese characters are “thread” and “gourd.” For Shiki, the sponge gourd must have been the most blessed living thing, for the sponge gourd, while providing not only its husk as an exfoliant, its inner fibres as a readymade noodle, but most critically to Shiki the antitussive and analgesic *hechimasui*, or sponge gourd juice. I note that a sponge gourd drink appears in Ayurvedic medicine, known as *Lauki* in Hindi. Shiki’s last three poems occupy one page. These are all undeniable haiku, undeniable in the sense of indispensable, indispensable in the sense of insinuating a new immediacy.<sup>2</sup> More than imagism; nowism. Which is to say that, if there is a way out of one’s final enclosure, one’s sweat-soaked bed, from the repetitions of squares that cross-hatch and categorise the epiphenomena of this unarrestable now, it will have to 込みあがる, which is to say, well up, stem from, breach the inscrutable, undeniable, and inexorable now.

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the day before last’s  
juice of sponge gourd too  
not taken just yet

the gallons of phlegm  
the juice of sponge gourd too  
both now out of time

gourd now in flower  
congested with sputum still  
Buddha is it

Read right to left. That is how we read in Japanese. That is the order and the chronology by which Shiki wrote the three. One’s last breaths as one’s last lines, one’s last lines referring to one’s last, imperilled breaths, wracked with phlegma and disease. If it isn’t already clear from my translations: Shiki has discovered the acutest eye, the eye not his, which is to say the eye—no, the after-selfhood—of the moment. The first haiku tends to be the most cited, because it is the most optimistic; even the antitussive medicine comes drawn from a fruit now in flower; the most brutally factual also happens to be the garden bed of flowers.

But I cannot but read each haiku in dependence to a final triptych of the page, like three shadow plays revised, to rest on a final interval. Because the sphere of observation can only take stock of intervals, while whatever it is that exceeds the moment’s brutal facticity may,

if we are materialists, or, indeed Stoics of various traditions, including the Zen, if we permit the parallelism, be uncovered in the true mute exhalatory pause. While the last of the works is the most ghoulishly open-ended, the middle work is the wittiest. The only comedy is black comedy? Slapstick, pantomime, commedia dell'arte, rakugo, kyogen—whatever your comic tradition, the morbid and fatalistic transformatively reiterated in its defining failure or existential limitation beats out the most enduring resonance. The fluid world's desperate responses to Shiki's disease, one corporeal, the other refined from plant. Phlegm—not a gallon, actually, but a similarly figurative quantity of liquid, the archaic measurement of "itto," eighteen litres, an impossible amount—is out of time, or late, because the body's immune response is inadequate, however copious and desperate, to overcome tuberculosis. The gourd water Shiki has been drinking is too late because Shiki is dead. This time, he cannot drink it, or won't, or, it doesn't matter. However you wish to read it. An alternative reading is common, that his sisters, Shiki's devoted carers during his years of illness, are out of time to conduct their usual tasks of feeding him the death-fending (or death-assuaging) gourd water and clearing away his sputum. His death sets a new interval. Dead before what is likely their routine arrival, too late to provide the means of extending his life a little. For me, both are being evoked at once. We are all out of time.

Probe deeper, humour's referents are not funny. Only the language of humour, the spirit of humour, is funny. It arrives here by way of Shiki's outstanding wit and pellucid sincerity, the self-absenting candour needed to draw this parallel between what is at hand, what expires, and what time leaves. Indeed, I see two parallels: (i) the two fluids, both the "expressions" of Shiki, and both out of time, and (ii) that sense of the outer world out of time to save him, echoing with the out-of-timeliness of Shiki's two liquids, fire of phlegm and balm of gourd, two substances no longer relevant to the expiring self. Shiki's phlegm provides a counterpoint to the false triumphalism of George Herbert's nonetheless sparky moral declaration to cast out the "flegme," which references the humour putatively responsible for indolence, benighting an immobilised society:

O England! full of sinne, but most of sloth;  
Spit out thy flegme, and fill thy brest with glorie  
Thy Gentry bleats, as if thy native cloth  
Transfus'd a sheepishnesse into thy storie:  
Not that they all are so; but that the most  
Are gone to grasse, and in the pasture lost.  
(Herbert 6)

This is not the only matter I disagree with Herbert on; Herbert has the "gall"—yes, gall!—to exhort that we "Laugh not too much: the wittie man laughs least" (13). Herbert does also say "For wit is newes only to ignorance," mind you, and that is something I can certainly approve, or, I should say, Shiki evidently accords with.

No, I review my position. I think I misunderstood Herbert.

Yes, given that wit is never news, but some excoriating discovery from the real and the given, wit, while it spins its perverse centrifuge in our diaphragm, should at its best draw a gasp and not a laugh. The most *humorous* gasp at least. Wit is courage to observe the kindness of the clarified instant. Wit is the deadpan delivery of *ma ni awazu*—of "out of time."

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From the *Areopagitica*: “Yet it is not impossible that she [Truth] may have more shapes than one. What else is all that rank of things indifferent, wherein Truth may be on this side or on the other without being unlike herself? What but a vain shadow else is the abolition of those ordinances, that handwriting nailed to the cross? What great purchase is this Christian liberty which Paul so often boasts of? His doctrine is that he who eats or eats not, regards a day or regards it not, may do either to the Lord. How many other things might be tolerated in peace and left to conscience, had we but charity, and were it not the chief stronghold of our hypocrisy to be ever judging one another? I fear yet this iron yoke of outward conformity hath left a slavish print upon our necks; the ghost of a linen decency yet haunts us. We stumble and are impatient at the least dividing of one visible congregation from another, though it be not in fundamentals; and through our forwardness to suppress and our backwardness to recover any enthralled piece of truth out of the grip of custom, we care not to keep truth separated from truth, which is the fiercest rent and disunion of all. We do not see that while we still affect by all means a rigid and external formality, we may as soon fall again into a gross conforming stupidity, a stark and dead congealment of ‘wood and hay and stubble,’ forced and frozen together, which is more to the sudden degenerating of a church than many subdichotomies of petty schisms.” (Milton 53)

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What made you laugh during that world-watching called pandemic doom-scrolling self-surveilling epidemiologising of your statistically quantified data *bios* called the Covid-self? Eliot Weinberger got me with this one (but not merely this one; read the rest of “The American Virus” for yourself; it’s a gas). I read it in January 2021, but it was written in June 2020, in the Trump half of the pandemic:

Sports return to America, with an Ultimate Fighting Championship in Florida. This is a presidential favourite and the event opens with a video message from [Trump]: “Let’s play. You do the social distancing and whatever else you have to do. But we need sports. We want our sports back.” He does not explain how social distancing may be practised in Ultimate Fighting.

The essay is comprised of relentless contradictions, flagrant misnomers and absurdities, that nonetheless emerge as undeniable facts in the first pandemic year. The UFC one asserts my favourite: life is hardly worth living without blood sport. Andrea Brady, unsurprisingly, provides one of the other outstanding dialectical works of pandemic days: “Hanging in the Air.” I read this very recently, not expecting a pandemic poem. The author of “Drone Poetics,” a staggering survey of the new mimetic order we inherit in the age of drone-mediated biopolitics—a surveillance necropolitics, if we adopt Achille Mbembe’s term; the author of *Poetry and Bondage: A History and Theory of Lyric Constraint* (2021), again, a study of literature’s entanglements with the media of enclosure and arrest, its dynamic responsiveness to it. Once again, Brady charts the reality of the invisible fetters, this time prompted by viral rampancy, a lyric of the threat of un-breath, closing:

In its green and yellow is an image  
of the lungs we will be given

if we cross the horizon and abandon  
the nuclear family, private property, obedient domains  
("Hanging in the Air" S39)

Brady's poem is a political poem because it bears not one critique, but rather a systematic deconstruction of the presumptions upon which our putative safety and security at home are built. Brady censures the privileged inheritance of property, of having a yard at all to be safe in, an occupation in which work from home can even function, a nuclear family for distraction during confinement; all the premises that bourgeois society could erect (in lieu of various other interventional measures to ensure civic and epidemiological well-being) based upon existing capital and infrastructure, with the frontlines as usual defended and maintained by the usual precarious sentinelry. Brady's lyric voice grapples with the urge to "read and not read the accounts of the anaesthetists" (S38).

## NOTES

1 Japanese names throughout this piece appear in conventional Japanese order, meaning Surname–First Name.

2 Shiki's oeuvre and its numerous poems can be viewed in Japanese at the Shiki Museum website: <https://shiki-museum.com/>. A haiku is so short, it is remembered in full, so titles are redundant.

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