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KOIKE Masayo 小池昌代, one of the most prominent Japanese poets now writing, was born in 1959 in Fukagawa, Tokyo. Her first book of poems was *Walking Out of the Water Town*『水の町から歩きだして』, 1988, and her third book, *The Bus That Will Never Come*『永遠に来ないバス』, published in 1997, won the Contemporary Poetry Camelia Prize 現代花椿賞. When *The Most Sensual Room*『もっとも官能的な部屋』, her acclaimed best so far, was published in 1999 and won the prestigious TAKAMI Jun Prize 高見順賞, she began to be considered one of the most important contemporary Japanese poets. In this book of poems KOIKE’s urbane sensibility came into rich fruition and her poetic voice was established as her own. Almost all critical comments on her poems and on her person as a poet appeared after this poetic masterpiece.

She published two books in 2001, one of which was *Ten Minutes Before the Dawn*『夜明け前十分』. An anthology of her selected poems was published in 2003 by Shichôsha, Tokyo, to add a new and younger voice to this series of contemporary Japanese poetry anthologies.

Urban scenes such as the subway station, bus stops, and concert halls are the main settings of KOIKE’s poems. However, with those scenes as background, what strikes the reader is what may be referred to as the primitive force of the poet. With the protagonist’s tentacles quietly but surely spread, she ensnares the invisible and likewise every sensual detail of her daily life and, with unexpectedness, is rewarded for her waiting with a revealing glimpse of the interrelationship of those details. This magical moment when the sensuous qualities of light and sound and urban
landscape reveal their secret is primitive, and the poet’s fascination with the moment can be called primeval. The treadmill of uncertain modern life as it shows its core quality, however hesitantly, is also what the readers rejoice in in KOIKE’s poems. The poet works as an electric medium to transform our perception and experience of daily life and show the reader each moment’s weightiness along a path so superb that one can almost visualize them in tangible and sensual form.

1. Unbeknownst but undoubtedly

The setting of ‘The Beginning’, from Walking Out from the Water Town (1988), can be any spring scene in any urban city; the tube, high heels, a traffic light, and a crowd of people busily crossing the street. Since T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, these are typical ingredients of contemporary urban life. “Uniformly blank and blue-suited” businessmen, “one and all presenting a weak-chinned face”, seem inevitable in this scene.

The Beginning

I climbed up the steps one by one from the tube
and suddenly there it was — April.

My eyesight seemed to strengthen unbeknownst.

Now my high heel toes are worn away,
and this year too spring has warmed up.

As I waited at a traffic light,
a crowd of company recruits
uniformly blank and blue-suited
flowed by,
one and all presenting a weak-chinned face.
“Ask me a different question, please.”

With its shards of greenery and sunlight
the town took on the air
of a pointillist painting.

“I love the sound of your voice.”

Last night, suddenly, inexplicably
a man appeared in my dreams
with long thin fingers
trembling with nerves.

Aren’t you like a tree ...

How can it be
I can spend an entire day
spellbound by this man?

There’s no doubt about it
I am beginning to fall in love.

But the “shards of greenery and sunlight” encompassing this typical urban scene reminds the poet of a man in her dream, a man “with long thin fingers / trembling with nerves”. This equivalence of a tree and a man, “with long thin fingers” and “trembling with nerves”, is a curious but striking visualization of our tree-man image which goes back to the examples of Ovid’s Metamorphoses. The word “spellbound” illuminates the primitive element hidden in our beings and reminds us of the primitive physical force of “fall in love”. The force is “inexplicable” and comes
“suddenly”, and, if we keep the residue of our primitive sensitivity, we will be able to recapture the almost forgotten magical humaneness in our lives. Interestingly, this sudden insight is arrived at through the use of negative expressions such as “unbeknownst”, “inexplicably”, and “no doubt”.

The following two poems, from *The Bus That Will Never Come* (1997), show how life’s everyday treadmill and casual gesture cue the poet’s further enlightening moments. The two concrete and vivid images contain an inexplicable primitive force. The first scene is nothing but an experience of waiting for a commuter city bus. Its close reading tells us of a one-time wait for a bus, but the scene is such a typical suburban one that it gives us the impression of a repeated experience.

**The Bus That Will Never Come**

One morning, I was waiting for the bus.  
Azalea flowers were in bloom.  
Buses are never on time in Tokyo.  
Three people, four, the queue got longer.  
Buses are never on time in May.  
Everyone leaned forward  
heads turned in the same direction.  
Four people, then five. Twenty past eight, already.  
And then at last all saw beyond a bridge  
a vague splash of green that grew larger bit by bit  
taking on the shape of an approaching bus.  
Relieved, the sharp-eyed watchers relaxed,  
Five or six people crowded to the stop,  
Six or seven of them boarded the bus, heads bowed.  
Waiting for what never comes is what I do —  
how odd then, when the long awaited actually comes.  
Once aboard I may sense the presence
of a late-coming woman who missed the bus
still waiting, probably, at the stop, alone.
That vague shape rising beyond the bridge
coalesced, one day, into something like hope.
Her mud-spattered skirt tossed by the wind,
she gazes after the departing bus
as clouds swim across the sun.
This morning too the chimneys of the dust-swept town
stand tall.
Pulling away from there
towards the next sunlit station,
we just allow ourselves to be carried forward
without a word.

The repetition of the same sentence “Buses are never on time in ...” and the repetitive counting of the waiting people give the effect of a glimpse into the banality of everyday life. The passing of time is visualized in the form of a bus. As the protagonist waits, however, a strange visionary woman intrudes into the poem — a woman who “missed the bus”. Unlike we who get on the bus and “allow ourselves to be carried forward / without a word”, she epitomizes the other in ourselves who keeps waiting for “something like hope”, but who will have to see it depart forever. One-time-ness and everlastingness, the duality in ourselves, these contrasting elements are epitomized by the picture of bus passengers being carried off as in a scene from a movie.

The second scene, a walk with a mikan in a pocket, also depicts a one-time occasion. However, the poet’s tactile encounter offers the chance to probe deeper into the human connection.
Like a Mikan

Well, good-bye then,
I say, putting my hand on the door
and he
slips a single mikan into my pocket;
without a doubt
it’s meant
not for me
but for the pocket.
The weight of the mikan,
such a sorry shrivelled mikan,
I’ll soon forget all about it.
But on the cold February night
the wretched mikan deep in my overcoat pocket
keeps bumping against my leg,
reminding me of its existence
of his gesture at the moment of our parting;
without a doubt
it’s meant
not for me
but for the pocket.
The subtlety of his feeling dawns on me at last,
which delights me.
How slow of me,
how singular the mikan.
It’s how we live
failing to notice things like that.
Kindness is a foreign substance,
a rough and strange thing,
a parcel from afar, delivered to a remote place.
Shoving my hand deep into the pocket
gingerly I touch the mikan.
It is colder
than the chill in the air tonight,
this healthy palpable thing.
I take this universal kindness
and, as I walk,
I roll it casually
in my pocket
like a mikan.

"Without a doubt", is the protagonist’s quick response when the mikan was slipped into her pocket. The poet, the feeler with such sensitive antennae, will not leave it forgotten. The coldness of February air, the darkness on the street, and the insisting bumping of mikan against her leg trigger the insight into the kindness of other people.

Scepticism is general in modern society. Love, hope, or kindness are hard to depict in contemporary poetry with their due weight. The foreign and casual character of the “shriveled thing”, the mikan, rolling deep in the pocket, is a brilliant image of an opening to their weightiness. Its paradoxical function of awakening the reader to the essence of human relationships in its inconsequentiality conveys persuasively the protagonist’s new perception of the mikan as “healthy” and as an embodiment of “universal kindness”.

II. Ecstatic deliquescence

The following four poems are from The Most Sensual Room and they are remarkable in that they show the poet’s further fascination with physicality. Fascination with what lies behind the interrelation between things, people and ani-
mals, and the poet’s tactile and visual probing into these things develops further into the history of a human relationship with a horse in ‘About a Horse’. The poem delves into the animal quality in men and the intertwined history of the animal and man.

**About a Horse**

A horse enclosed within an eye.

*Hor-se*, even before the word escapes my lips,

I can see a single horse come leaping out of you.

A scarlet horse, a pallid horse,

a horse comes within me too.

The passing wind sweeps the grass aside.

A horse! A horse! A horse!

Viewed with the eyes of a horse the world dissolves from its very center into ecstatic deliquescence as if it were a piece of candy.

See how the savagery coursing along the flanks betrays the melting sweetness in the eyes. The flesh on its lustrous flanks trembles at the touch of the wind. Down to the very tips of its delicately bent hind-legs, the horse’s body is an utterly original creation. Its resolve surprisingly weak, the horse stands still caught between the desire to go and the desire to stay.

When it runs, a horse,

little by little, is released

from being a mere horse;

trying to be something other than a horse,

it finally becomes a horse;

it finally embodies power;
it is in the process of becoming
the absolute essence of a horse.

The horse cannot see the goal. It has nothing to do with those in power. Like a samurai lacking will power. The sight of the creature stirs the loins to the point of exhilaration. The bond which joined man and beast in the distant past is, in a flash, brought right into the present. And is then scandalously reenacted. The lower halves of both horse and man are sunk in the same muddy water.

Plough.
Copulation.
Nuptial bond with a horse.

A horse on a bridge. I was six. The sound of thick sticks falling hit my ear. The horse pissed, steam rose. A warm splashing sound on the road. It was an aged horse, its head drooping. I was standing too. Beside the bridge.

The wet surface plashed by the horse’s forefeet. The world is a cold consommé soup grown cold, the horse is a swelling vaporous vision, a hot-blooded phantom imbued with the dark water.

Through the horse’s body coursed both the rebellious desire to rise up against the enduring servitude of horses throughout the history of man, and the pleasure of being lashed by a whip.

Where did the horse spring from?
From some borderland village small enough to fit into an eye
in every human eye there has existed a horse
in every horse’s eye there has existed a human being.

The “ecstatic deliquescence” of the horse looking at the world also applies, by
deduction, to the man who shares the same essence as the horse. “See how the sav-
agery coursing along the flanks betrays the melting / sweetness in the eyes. The
flesh on its lustrous flanks trembles at the touch of the wind.” What we want in the
modern world is simply to ‘see’ and feel the primeval force in the center of our
lives.

The poet’s ‘seeing’ derives from her childhood memories and the shreds of
ancient Japanese expressions such as, 馬錐, for a plough, and 麻具波比 (まぐわい),
for copulation. “Things from afar will visit poets. Something from their childhood,
forgotten shreds of words, memories, darkness and light, something will fall on
them”. So writes IIJIMA Koichi in Taking a Stroll on the Poetical Riversides — from
Edo and France, talking highly of KOIKE’s poems and choosing her as one of the
two most promising Japanese poets (129). It is “the freshness and sensuality of her
sense of life” in the powerful way she grabs and points to “life’s core” or “life’s cen-
tre” that makes KOIKE’s poems link with the readers’ lives (128). The poet’s
antenna, then, is not one gained with age, but one she already had as a child, and
she, as a child standing by the bridge, must have felt the same ecstatic deliquescence
as the warmness of the horse’s pissing sound.

The ecstatic deliquescence derives again from ‘seeing’ in the next poem.

Penis from Heaven
In the centre of the man’s splayed legs
the woman’s timid hand touches.
He is big
and his head is getting bald.
She is a schizophrenic
possessing a beautiful soul and mind, and

“How could you not have touched a man till now?”
would be a question any man would like to ask.
In her virginal bed,

(Here, have a look)
(Touch it)

such unuttered words
were in the tender thoughts
of the warm-hearted man.
He watched his thing and the woman
in turns, it was a pleasing scene.
It was a story on the screen.
I have never beheld a more beautiful scene
Never was there such a tender scene as that.
One day
on a sad day
when I was feeling down and gloomy,
without reason
with the most natural of movements
that very scene
came back to life in me.

(Here, have a look)
(Touch it)

At that moment
instead of the woman’s hand
a hand within me extended itself
and fingered something very warm.

Half gloomy
a deeper place than any other, the human crotch,
what kind of man, I wonder
can spread his crotch like that?
The human experience
in the film
reshaped itself
at that moment,
warming the oppressed person in me
from the core.

“Don’t you think everything (in her) bloomed by marriage (with me)?”

The hand softly extended from within me
and the image of the touch the penis warmly gave.
This tenderness like grace,
where on earth has it come from?

Like a bold black sod
appearing unexpectedly from under the snow in spring,
like freshly boiled hot water —
to which no metaphor can do justice.
That was
assuredly
the very core of life.
This is another situation where probing is not only done by “beholding” but also by “touching”, “a hand within me extended itself”, and what she finds is an inexplicable quality to which “no metaphor can do justice”. The “unexpected” quality of the poet’s ‘finding’ reminds us of the previous poems, but instead of “undoubtedly” or “without doubt”, the affirmative word “assuredly” shows the poet’s grasp of “the very core of life” more firmly than before.

This change of stance, the poet’s “assured” sense, can be felt more in the following poem. The poet is probing how people make a connection with each other even in silence, especially when surrounded by nature, and in the silence made in music.

**Soundless World**

In August, I met an American in the town of Santa Fe. Quiet.

Tall. Grey-eyed and living alone.

In the evening, he sings to the sound of his guitar.

During the day, he plasters the walls of houses.

“When we meet him in town, it’s hard to keep up small talk. He is such a shy and quiet guy. It’s not that he gives us a bad impression.”

A friend of his said to me.

I’ve heard him sing. His voice did not impress me much, but the music had its own unique beauty. Composed by himself.

In the running stream of the music, strange rests were placed like pebbles. As though tripping over these, the music paused, breath stopping, which fascinated me.

“At dawn, we often go out fishing. We make good fishing companions. His eyes and movements convey his love of fishing. I can even understand his thoughts. Not that we talk about these, or anything else.”
What would it be like to throw a fishing line, the first person at dawn, on the clear unbroken surface?

“Dawn is the best time of day for fishing. We go to the lake deep in the Indian wood, gently throw in our lines, and catch rainbow trout.”

What resounds over the lake when a catch is made is a man’s subdued shout for joy and the sound of water. The fish will not cry. Of course, the fish have no voice. But, why not? Never thought about it. Plants and fish are voiceless. Caught or picked, their world remains ever silent.

“Nice tune.”
“Marvellous.”
“Beautiful.”

His song over, the strings’ reverberation faded, the response came at once as one after another they praised his music. These words came pure, just simple thoughts ... and nothing more. He lowered his eyes and mumbled a few quick words. I could not hear a thing. Nobody could, I don’t suppose. It was dark inside the room and outdoors a cricket was chirping.

The night before I left for Tokyo, I met him again.

“I am going back to Tokyo tomorrow.”

He inclined his body and said,

“Goodbye. See you sometime soon.”

He gave me an ephemeral smile, tilting his face with the utmost delicacy and tenderness, and that face brought to mind the lake surface and the quietly spreading ripples from a fishing line.

Why do people go out at dawn and go fishing on a lake?
Why do men ask for the company of men to watch the water surface in silence?
Then again, why do fish have no voice like men?
And why the music with the silent rests?

“I’ve never met a man who can play the guitar so well as he. He could do better as a musician in a bigger town.” He was born in Santa Fe and lives there still. He has never lived in any other town. In fact, Tom Adler’s never been out. A cricket was chirping. It’s autumn in Tokyo, too.

Even at this moment, by himself, he will be plastering red earth on someone’s wall. I have never seen his quiet back, but every time I think of it, its soundless ripples reach me like the dawn lake’s ripples, and expand me slowly from inside.

If people can connect with each other in silence, the poet seems to express, it can be possible to overcome time and distance too. It is fascinating to the reader too, to see the influence of silence and to hear that the ‘soundless ripples’ reach to the poet and let her “expand slowly from inside”. There is an assured tone here, different from the ending line of ‘The Beginning’: “There’s no doubt about it / I am beginning to fall in love.”

III. Beyond and Behind

From the collection of poems, The Most Sensual Room, four more poems are selected here. One of them is the title poem, ‘The Most Sensual Room’.

At the time it was published, in 1999, it was still sensational to have the Japanese word 官能的 in the title as the adjective had accumulated the connotation of sexual forwardness as a stock word in pornographic publications. KOIKE’s use may have taken the word back into wider usage once again. Actually, the room is the most sensual in the sense that it used to contain the couple’s love life. It is not there in the room any more. How can one keep a memory when the container no longer has what was contained? What does a room become when what went on in the room is no more? The poem asks. It also allows us to see and touch, tangibly,
these questions.

The Most Sensual Room

On the toilet wall of J’s room, cat’s paw prints remain. Absence is like this. Evidence is the proof. I see, by winding back the world, the sight of cat running up the wall and out the toilet window. And then in turn the wind let in flows on with time to the present from the moment past when cat was gone to the present, blowing all that it touches to the past. The neat arranged light letters on the desk in disarray, the wind goes by. Then it too is now gone. J and I are contained within this room. And yet, there is an emptiness somewhere. Am I here? Do I exist — clearly? I’m passing by. And will be gone.


Sunday morning I leave J’s room. There is J’s room where I am not. I leave no footmarks, but unseen fingerprints are all around. At night I think of the room. Look in from a window, I see the absence of myself and the cat. J is part of the room. He tenses his long body firm, and sleeps quietly as penis of the room. I stretch my hand and touch the room. The wall is soft. Pushing harder, the room-space leaves the room. Leaving J and empty now, emerges like a soap bubble, elastic, at first.
In our daily life we do not usually separate the room and the room-space, but naturally take them as one. Here we see the room as just a container. At the end, when what was physically contained in the room-space empties out, even J having left, its elasticity, expressed as a soap bubble, seems extremely fragile. The phrase “at first” at the very end is a loaded one.

The sense of passing time is strong in the poem and also of the invisible. The poet stretches her physical sensitivity like an antenna or tentacle to see and touch the “unbeknownst” quality of substantially recognizable things and the connection between them. Now she is probing into the invisible. The next poem, ‘Behind My Back’, exemplifies the same sense.

**Behind My Back**

“Surely imagination can be born from hurt.”
Beyond the shoulders of the one who said so
a bird flew away and
a thin twig
was left shaking
unsteadily, incessantly.

“How much can I, as a singer, betray my fans?
If it ends in failure, it’s just a betrayal.
If all goes well, I can move them even more.”
Behind the singer who said so,
the cold rain was pelting on the window pane.

“I dreamt I held down a white sheet of paper with stones on its four corners
to prevent it from rolling up.
‘Calm your soul’ were the words from that sheet of paper.”
Behind her back
a painting by Vermeer
is hung slightly crooked.

At that time
beyond my inadvertently distracted sight
there ran a strip of time
parallel to their words.

Behind the uttered words
was the quiet and unwary world.

Shaking branches.
Cold rain.
A crooked painting.

How many scenes there were behind my back
I had not turned to see.

Using me as a reflex mirror
the words refracted
to the world behind my back
unknown to readers.

One slip.
One illusion.
With a slightly different angled eye
the world will sudden by collapse,
and intersect,
and mingle
with the mirror-image world.

Do not look back!

Behind my back
a waterfall cascades.
People, too.

As the poet sees the invisible, interestingly enough, the apparently negative words come back, “unsteadily”, “incessantly”, “inadvertently”, “unknown”, and “unwary”. These words emphasize the insubstantial quality. ISAKA Youko, a well-known modern Japanese poet and critic, writes in ‘A Poet Who Brings Into the Center’, The Contemporary Anthology — KOIKE Masayo, “it seems like KOIKE’s eye shines when she slides the center a little bit and brings in the marginal and minor things to the center” (143). Here in this poem not only “the marginal and minor things” but also the invisible are brought in. A cascading waterfall and the people beyond and behind KOIKE’s poems, expressed in an unexpected mirror-image to the reader, again shows her sense of primeval force in herself.

This primitive force, obviously alien to KOIKE’s distanced and urbane sophistication, however, introduces into her poems an oblique sense of humour. We can see her distanced and yet approving voice of narrator in her “practical” marriage in ‘Ombra Mai Fu’.

Ombra Mai Fu

We got married
not because we were deeply in love with each other.
He and I were both burning
with the awareness of solitude then,
as indeed, now.
Let us live together.
I will stand by your side.
You can live your life
with one true ally.
Oh, you, clear-eyed, you, my cheeky little brother.
There was nothing inevitable about our getting married,
which may be all to the good.
But somewhere deep inside my heart
at such a speed
a reason, like an unexpected rain drop, fell
and I made up my mind
to go to you.

Can we make a choice? Choose a man?
It would be such a terrifying and insolent thing.
If such were true, I would rather it happened like an accident.
*Ombra Mai Fu* (O sweet tree shade!)

The sight of an old couple walking side by side
was the most beautiful scene to cross my view.
So said Greta Garbo, and died.
I could not imagine then
what it was like for a woman and man
to live together for years
so blindingly long.

One morning
with its big wings wide open
a bird alighted on my breast.
Taken by surprise I awoke
to find it not a bird but a man’s heavy right arm.
But then I thought with peace in mind that at least
at least I had never had a morning such as this.

*Ombra Mai Fu* (O sweet tree shade!)

When I awoke, there was a man beside me.
I touched him, to find him warm
and in extravagant poverty.

The narrator observes her marriage to a man as a marriage not because of love for
him but prompted by the “scorching” loneliness they both felt. The use of the double
negative “nothing inevitable” about her marriage is slightly squinted when she tells
of a reason deep inside her, “like an unexpected rain drop”. The man’s warmth
and “extravagant poverty”, which are casually put side by side as if they can be
equally measured by a touch of a hand, add a touch of obliqueness to the basic hap-
piness in the poem.

Either by grabbing fragments with physical force or by humourously sliding
them to the centre, KOIKE’s poems in this section show how the poet steps further
towards “life’s core”. They show, furthermore, that the usual barrier between people
or things in the form of distance can be overcome with the poet’s fascination for life.
Music has always been included in the poems and now it is taken to center stage in
the following poem, ‘An Invisible Lord’. On this stage, the poet overcomes the
invisibility of music, as she visualizes it “like at a construction site”.

**An Invisible Lord**

I once saw a rehearsal, before the concert began, with no audience present.
On stage was a solitary violinist. One of the evening’s soloists. The main pro-
gramme for the evening was Mozart’s concerto for violin and viola.
She alone may have arrived early. There arrived no other orchestra members nor the viola soloist. At first it sounded like practice but, gradually, her Mozart gained in passion when, from behind the stage, there joined the viola.

The viola player must have arrived at last. She was playing off stage along with the violin.

The visible
and the invisible
were joining hands on stage.

Are musicians like “rails” to the listeners? In the sound of that viola from back stage I felt I saw the music itself, its rails taken away.

Now I realised that, like this, musicians are united through music. Like at a construction site, where there are bare props and bare clasps, I felt I touched things that until then were dissolved dreamlike in the music. This ‘connection’ is music’s sensuality. This must be the spinal cord of music.

After some time, the viola player finally showed herself on stage playing her instrument. One by one, the orchestra members also came up. In this way, little by little, the fragments gather. This is the construction site of the music, the invisible lord. I watched the scene with a refreshed eye, feeling myself also at the scene as one of the fragments.

In Haydn’s symphony, Valediction, members of the orchestra leave the stage one by one as it plays on, and I thought this is just the reverse. Then abruptly the word “completion” came to mind.

Why, we don’t know, but Cezanne painted pictures that somehow conveyed a sense of incompletion.

Music too remains unfinished until the very last note, the finalisation.
This, however, can only truly be said about music which has to coexist with time. With paintings and poems, the location of this subtle boundary between the complete and the incomplete remains a puzzle to me.

Perfection denies “imagination”. The unpainted parts themselves, whether in paintings or music, are what inspire imagination.

The concert is over. And so, once again, the invisible lord is hidden away in the reverberations. The audience, once fragmented, is each and all made whole.

At last, we rise from our seats, replace our eyes and noses, and limbs in motion, disperse into the night town.

“This ‘connection’”, the poet is convinced, “is music’s sensuality”. The invisible lord working with the fragmentary instruments to make an entity must parallel the poet working with the daily things around her to make “connection”. And though the poet feels that she is one of the fragments at the concert, she draws the line between music and poetry. The poet cannot be an invisible lord as poems do not coexist with time.

IV. Connection and the Fragments

The last two poems are from the Ten Minutes Before the Dawn. After having attracted much attention by the publication of The Most Sensual Room in 1999, KOIKE’s imagination seems to have settled down, so to speak, into the scenes of daily life, where her poems can be accommodated with their superficial familiarity. Whether in Paris or in Venice, both animate and inanimate populate and share the equal space. Their boundaries are more than ever uninhibited and free so that their demarcation is blurred. KOIKE’s later poems read not so much about “life’s core” but about finding one’s own place in this fragmentary world. At times, it will be a search for one’s own voice, among the invisible inhabitants of windowpanes, blue
T-shirts, and a wet and discarded bundle of letters. Or it will be the realization of books in the bookshop of the freedom to choose one’s life. We may be like those books, quietly occupying our allocated place, but if something happens to awaken us, a hidden desire to be different will also be awoken.

The Voice

A scene I saw many years ago in Paris —
The white window frame’s paint
was peeling off.
It was a room in a cheap hotel.
In the courtyard I looked down on,
a bundle of papers lay,
discarded and struck by the cold rain.
On the window next door, a blue shirt was drying.
Another window was firmly shut.
Yet another was open a slit.
Sound of water washing things.
Sound of steps walking away.
It was a place no human being could be seen
but only a sense of someone living felt.
That was probably a radio somebody had turned on
languidly
broadcasting
a foreign man’s song,
which mingled with no other voice.
In Tokyo, 1998
searching through
to find my own voice,
that low muffled voice
will fleet past me
unexpectedly.

A Book and a Bird

On an autumn afternoon
in Venice
a stray white bird flew
into an old bookshop.

It flew in at high speed
as if mistaking the dark ceiling
for the continuous blue sky.
But as if suddenly noticing its imprisonment,
it held its wings
and stilled a moment in the air.

In this town it often happens
that a bird becomes
a book
and a book a bird.

In the shop where all reads books with lowered eyes,
I noticed then the corner of each book’s spine went tense
and every ear was pricked, to hear the bird’s flight.

Wings are so like book leaves.
Flapping themselves, they will shake
to rouse the sleeping thoughts.
They will swiftly flick to the first page,
or fly straight
to the last page still unread.
That was not a bird,
but a flying book,
as measured by the hardness of the shadow
on the piled up books.

When I opened the door,
the bird skimmed by my shoulder
and zip, flew out into the town.
In that shop that day, that sound of wings
soaked into each and every book, like fog.
And quietly each may well have thought,
when someone next opened the door,
to seize its chance and be a bird.

The prose-style together with the casualness of her voice is the foremost impression made when reading KOIKE’s poems for the first time. The readers and listeners — I should add that the poet is an excellent reader of her poems — feel comfortable as if invited to a private sharing of her art. Her art is also very cinematographic. Reading KOIKE’s poems reminds me of the fact that the poet is not only a scenario writer, but also a director, cameraman, Illuminator, sound-effect technician and sceneshifter. It is an amazing feat to contrive such an orchestration with such an individual voice in prose-style.

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Works Cited and References