

Seth Howard

## LATE SUMMER IN ASAKUSA

Drifting along the purple line of silk that floats into the tunnel. I sit quietly in the seat across from two Japanese women, one in her forties, the other somewhat older. & I sink down as I listen to their quiet speech, as a poem overhead, or a far-off radio, in which the words are not entirely mine, or theirs, but subject to that primordial in-between. A permeable membrane, where God resides, & double-speech is not simply an element of fiction... The younger woman wears a sick-mask, she gently pulls at on occasion, & I feel, for a moment at home. The rhythmic-pulsing of the train as it slips through the green darkness. & a feeling of rest, of release, that I now had nothing to fear... I recalled nights along Sumida river, fireworks with Toma-san. Cans of Asahi beer, or a glass from the local brewery... The austere look of a lovely girl in the crowd, & this sensation of being in love. There was a shell of darkness from which we made a breakthrough, the long hours in stillness along the pulsing river lights... Yes, it was said we had lived multiple lives, but where were they to be found? In silent memories, in the stirrings of a word that took one back to a place somehow still alive, a distant-flame that lifts in the last hours... & I wondered if she had remembered me, this new figure I had become, who somehow

encompassed those histories. A hope still  
alive in the purple-filament, those orange-gates  
that stood drawing me in.

How was it I was now  
someone entirely different?  
& yet, there was a ghost  
of my former self, that breathed  
in greenish-shadows, those  
unsuspected moments that  
arose, when a memory refused to die...

## SOLITUDE AT TENJIN MATSURI

Paper lanterns line the darkened-pathways,  
& you are held a moment in stasis.  
It was late-summer, an event in which  
you think of death.  
A dream came to you  
then, like the weightless wisp of a drake-fly at nightfall.  
& you stood waiting for her  
who seemed always to be near you.  
You think of death  
when boats float by with paper  
torches, & young girls in *yukata* walk the  
lanes with serious faces. A pale mask drops to the ground like a stone.  
You light a cigarette, & the distant trees  
move in darkness. The warm wind of late summer lifts,  
& you return  
to that place where you felt safe.  
How will it end? Or perhaps it already had.  
You hear a broken music  
somewhere distant, & the Schizophrenic-movements  
of your limbs seem almost  
a dance, in this night-festival.  
Had the gods known  
something you had not, had they some  
sense of how it all would  
end? You think of death, & the dying-embers of her last words spoken to you.  
You think of the crows perched  
along the electric-lines.  
Yes, you had arrived  
late, & they had denied you  
entrance. You who  
embody a trinity, who encompass  
a multitude in your solace.  
& still they do not believe you.  
A luminous-moth floats  
in the air before you, & this  
broken music returns, to guide you beyond what  
is known.  
Your mind slightly out  
of balance, your days  
roll on without consequence.

## WAITING FOR HER ANSWER

Night fires aside the mountain's heart,  
moments alone, or with a few  
distant voices. I recalled what the world seemed to have forgotten.  
I kept with me a few things of probably no importance.  
There were days scattered with ash,  
there were nights  
on the lakeside in which  
fish slipped past. I drank from the clear waters  
of a well that no longer exists.  
I walked the path  
of crimson sorrow.  
There were days that arose in the glimmer of a coin,  
a castle from which the elms settle back.  
I hunched down in search of something.  
I rose from the red river that caressed the mist.  
& there, a solitary soldier.  
There moved in the motions  
a question I  
wished to answer.  
O what was it the world had forgotten?  
Liquid mystery, I must  
ask of you once more. Luminous wheel that transcribes the residue  
of sounds. I look, & a grey chrysalis floats before me.  
I search, & the sun is a forgotten rose.  
They had told us we had been  
wrong all the while, they had spoke  
of some loss we had never witnessed. A remnant  
opened like a nocturnal flower.  
& I returned to the locus that had no  
name.  
I opened the glass doors that  
bore another chance.  
There was no one listening when I woke on the other shore,  
& the darkened tracks were silent when  
she asked me who I was.  
Greenish phantom I arose from in a daydream,  
double figure that followed  
me at dusk.  
In what haze comes this question, what  
night a flame that lifts at distant

shores? I long to see her, if but  
one more trial will provide us with some hope.

## WHEN TIME HAD RETURNED TO US

Held in the stasis of this pulse of the afternoon.  
It seemed at last we were to burst  
forth from the bindings that had kept us in stagnation...  
Perhaps there are some things we must  
realize on our own,  
& having found a key, our  
invocations become visible, to leave the  
temple with its  
orange leaves, the bluish light that swims across the steps.  
& so, we seek a connection with the past,  
those steam-room-chambers where we had dozed,  
& a woman snatched crisp  
bills from  
your hand. You viewed  
the screen as if half-drugged, those cycles  
that return us to who we are...  
Where is there a gate for us to enter?  
& like a seagull's slow arc across the waves, we come to this place in our histories.  
Dream-fragment, a broken night, when  
you had stumbled into the bathroom stall...  
Somehow, it seemed, you would find your way home.  
The city lights that swim  
in the motions that  
move us through time, & the magnetism that held us together...  
So, we begin once more where we left off,  
& find that some things had been  
out of place. You search for a foothold, a folded piece  
of paper you had kept, as you entered the bluish-lights of a bar & grill...  
Faint music,  
a pulse of someone's latent  
memory, as if they had  
forgotten they had known you all the while.  
White-wisp that drifts in the silence  
surrounding, there is a faint, far off memory that calls.  
A beacon that sings through the air like  
a hawk, & turns  
upon a moment's thought  
that we may have some intimation of who  
we are, as we observe a scroll unfolding in the shadows...

## THE ONE PLACE I FELT WELCOME

Lined across the bar, shot glasses captured blue lights that shone from somewhere behind... There was a flash of orange ember, as someone lit a cigarette, their face a brief illumination of pale flame. & so, the cool release of a day's work done, they had followed you only so far, before they'd given up the insidious game, to leave you for a moment in your chair, a fixed presence, until the music began to pulse, & the faint fire seemed to awaken on her lips...

It was the cool blue behind the bottles of vodka, & a smooth line into the night... They had spoken amongst themselves, & you somehow had joined in, though not entirely trusted. They had known you only through rumor, or the words you had etched on the glass ceiling beneath smoke trails that drifted in the cool burn of vodka that slipped down her pinkish throat...

There was something perhaps frightening about one who had begun to speak, after years of remaining silent, in the shadows' pale reluctance. & so, at last you had found yourself, & still they had not known you... Was it then too late to emerge in the grey silences, the faint rouge of her lips, & the brightness of her open eyes.

I gazed upon her naked face, & she had seen me in my liquid movements, to place myself amidst the rhythms of translucent intimation... & the pale blue lights reflected off the bar.

That night in open acceptance of all that had come our way. On the back of her shorts, the letters written: C.R.E.A.M. as she had walked past, her slightly wavy blonde hair, cut so that it hung almost to her shoulders... In these beginnings of possibility, I was some solitary figure amidst this collective consciousness, with my blue cap, on which was sown the letter H... & I felt the air hum with an elliptic rhythm, that grew distant as I realized this lifestyle couldn't last...

## A LIFE YOU HAD CREATED FOR YOURSELF

Within the confines of the afternoon, I found a place to exist.  
A sharp pain in my side as I locate my breath,  
time, vacant, stretched out before me as a gateway that would lead me  
beyond the day's recurrence, past  
*gyūdon* & *donburi* shops, in the cool  
darkened-air of mid-summer,  
where young girls stretched gracefully in the sun,  
& smiled at me like they knew who I was...  
We had met in the cafés, reading novels together, analyzing the lines, & trying not to flirt.  
We would meet at the Starbucks not far from the station,  
where I had written fictions.  
My life tortured, but immersed in  
symbol...  
The slightly-dangerous-feeling of perhaps having gone too far your own  
way, & yet a sense of release at the freedoms  
I had experienced, creating a world for myself in which  
to thrive, working to master the  
foundations of Japanese... & yet now that  
I had been away from the country for  
so long, after listening to Japanese-Web-Radio for eight years, I came upon  
a new fluency. So began my studies of French...  
A new clarity of thought, & a mind free  
of much of those discrepancies  
which had deterred me in the past.  
Perhaps we were not destined to live long, but I had seen  
many drop off along the wayside...  
& still that barrier between  
me, & the rest of the world, who  
was so eager to choose the other way, set on confinement rather than freedoms...  
Was it because I  
had known who I was?  
& so, I scrounged around the basement of Ikebukuro's  
*Junkudo*, for what *manga* may be of interest,  
along with the eighth floor, where I'd found volumes of Franz Kafka,  
Jorge Luis Borges, & Marcel Proust...  
Such was the love-nest I had found for myself,  
in the days gradually becoming  
darker.  
Had they not yet  
known who I was? I who was so



controversial, who had barely  
done anything wrong, & yet remained a rebel inside...

## PROGRESS OR DECLINE

Rain in the city, grey of the windblown-buildings... & a figure  
down below, I watch as he moves in silence. Perhaps  
he had seen me above, huddled  
under the overhang, as I search for  
a moment to light my cigarette...  
These late-afternoons, & yet this one  
somehow different. I had sensed some quiet  
beginnings in the texture  
of the air, & still a subtle-nag  
that I must press on, in my late-pursuits...  
I had searched for a way to speak  
with her, amid the walls that rose from a place of stasis. & somewhere  
behind us, as if in the night,  
a giant machine rolls by, moving slowly through  
the back-streets  
toward some unknown-destination...  
We were putting in the work  
they said, though the city was  
gradually being overrun.  
& so, we fought our quiet-battles, slipped back into  
the intimacy of our solitudes.  
There was an almost-imperceptible-hiss  
emanating from somewhere  
beyond the door, that only now had tapered off...  
& so, we laid new plans, for this future  
that had not always entirely supported us.  
Had not always felt safe,  
in the darkness of the late-afternoon, the hum of a fan, & the fragments  
of speech that pool in the anticipation of progress  
that arises, in a moment  
of minutest change. A door closes in the  
far-back-hall, someone's faint footsteps echo  
behind a fuzzy-logic.  
& we who work with primordial language, now recognize  
the imprint of our lives, that breathe  
in the stop & go of our fixed-routines,  
those rituals to which we make  
the slightest-adjustments... Let us enter this gate  
that guides us in the lateness of our days,  
& not forget the reason we came to these countries...