

## "Water" by Kiriko Nananan Exposition, Translation and Explanation For Poetry Plurilingual II

Jack Breukelaar, June 2014

Hi everyone. I'm going to do a Japanese work called *Water* by Kiriko Nananan. Does anyone here know Japanese? (No? Phew!) Does anyone here know the author?

Even though the piece is short (it's not a *haiku*) I've decided to only do one piece because I'd like to devote some time to talking about the language of the poem after reading it (I love nerding-out about language), and also to give a brief introduction to the work and the author.

My first exposure to Kiriko Nananan was *this* striking image. [show *Garo*]

This is a 1994 "cool female authors" special edition of *Garo*, an avant-garde *manga* periodical that started in the 60s. I didn't know any of this when I came across it three years ago at a discount book store in Japan but was drawn to this cover image by Nananan, reminiscent of Schiele or Baudelaire I think, and bought it...for about \$1!

This is sort of going to be like a show and tell.

For some reason I didn't get around to reading the piece that I'm going to translate until nearly two years later but when I did I was blown away by the fact that her skill with words easily matched her skill with images.

She is actually a relatively well-known underground *manga* artist in Japan and two of her works, *Blue* and *Strawberry Shortcakes*, have been made into films. She is also popular in France, being associated with the Franco-Japanese *la nouvelle manga* movement, and more of her work has been translated into French than into English. I don't think the work I am going to read has been translated into either language so...

So, I've mentioned that Nananan is a *manga* artist so it should come as no surprise that the work is not a traditional poem but sort of a *manga*-poem or illustrated poem *a la* William Blake. Another thing I'd like to point out before I read the original is that it uses the male personal pronoun throughout, indicating that it is from a male point of view.

Anyway, let's start! [show photos in *Garo* of Nananan whispering to a fish in a bag of water] Here she is! With "water". Can everyone see that? Her last name means "fish whispers"—get it? Just a little taste of some of the wit that's to come!

# Water



魚喃キリコ

僕は僕を好きじゃなくなってしまう。

君は僕になんにもないことが嫌になったの？  
そうだよ君は 今フウで  
うらやましいくらいにカッコ良かった

それに比べて僕ときたら  
君の真似してマーチンの靴を穿いただけ。  
君が流す音楽をただとなりできいてただけ。  
君が話す映画論で題名をうっすら暗記しただけ。

僕は恥ずかしいほど空っぽなんだね。

なんにもない  
なんにもない  
なんにもない

でもそのなにかはなんのために？

無音テレビのチカチカ。  
古時計のカチカチ。  
たかまったエゴイズムのかたまり。  
かたまったエゴイズムのたかまり。

ねえ、考えてたら思ったんだけどね

それでもちゃんと僕はここに居て  
僕は僕で他の誰かじゃないよ。

THE END

# Water



*Nananan Kiriko*

*boku wa boku o suki janakunatteshimau.*

*kimi wa boku ni nannimonai koto ga iya ni natta no?  
sou da yo kimi wa ima fuu de  
urayamashii kurai ni kakkoyokatta*

*sore ni kurabete boku to kitara  
kimi no mane shite maachin no kutsu o haita dake.  
kimi ga nagasu ongaku o tada tonari de kiiteta dake.  
kimi ga hanasu eigaron de daimei o ussura anki shita dake.*

*boku wa hazukashii hodo karappo nan da ne.*

*nannimonai  
nannimonai  
nannimonai*

*demo sono nanika wa nan no tame ni?*

*muon terebi no chikachika.  
furudoeki no kachikachi.  
takamatta egoizumu no katamari.  
katamatta egoizumu no takamari.*

*nee, kangaetetara omottan da kedo ne*

*soredemo chanto boku wa koko ni ite  
boku wa boku de hoka no dareka janai yo.*

THE END

# Water



Kiriko Nananan  
Translated by Jack Breukelaar

I will come to dislike myself completely.  
Did *you* come to hate the nothingness in me?  
that's right you, in such a "now" style,  
were enviably cool

compared to that I  
Only wore Doc Martens in imitation of you.  
Only listened to the music that you played when I was right next to you.  
Only dilettantishly memorised the titles in film theory explained by you.

I am shamefully empty, aren't I?

nothing  
nothing  
nothing

But what is the purpose of that *something*?

The flicker of a muted television.  
The tick of an old clock.  
An upsurged cluster of egoism.  
A clustered upsurge of egoism.

well, that's what I just what I think when I ponder it...

And yet, assuredly, I am here and I am no one else but me!

THE END

So, there is one stanza of the poem that I'd like to explain because it is not only one my favourite pieces of written language but also because I believe its nuances are only accessible in the original Japanese version. Its use of wordplay also illustrates some key aspects of Japanese.

It's edutainment time, children!

Ok, so the stanza is:

無音テレビのチカチカ。	<i>muon terebi no chikachika.</i>
古時計のカチカチ。	<i>furudokei no kachikachi.</i>
たかまったエゴイズムのかたまり。	<i>takamatta egoizumu no katamari.</i>
かたまったエゴイズムのたかまり。	<i>katamatta egoizumu no takamari.</i>

Each couplet is linked by inverse anagrams. The first couplet's anagrams make use of the repetitious nature of Japanese ideophones, these sort of onomatopoeic words that pervade the Japanese language. One of these words that you might actually be familiar with is Pikachu's infamous "pika-pika", which means "sparkling". Others include "ふわふわ" [*fuwafuwa*], "fluffy", "どきどき" [*dokidoki*], "thumping" and "きゃぴきゃぴ," [*kyapikyapi*], "brimming with youthful energy".

You could take almost any combination of two Japanese syllables, repeat it and you'd have a word. In fact, I'll buy a drink for the first person to come up with a combination that *doesn't* make a word.

This particular couplet uses "チカチカ" [*chikachika*], meaning "flicker", and "カチカチ" [*kachikachi*] meaning "tick".

無音のテレビのチカチカ。	<i>muon terebi no chikachika.</i>
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The flicker of a muted television.

古時計のカチカチ。	<i>furudokei no kachikachi.</i>
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The tick of an old clock.

The second couplet is a word palindrome that takes advantage of the syllabic and grammatically stable nature of Japanese, playing with the past and noun-forms of the inverse anagram verbs "たかまる" [*takamaru*], meaning "to rise" or "to swell", and "かたまる" [*katamaru*], meaning "to clump" or "to harden".

たかまったエゴイズムのかたまり。	<i>takamatta egoizumu no katamari.</i>
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A risen clump of egoism.

かたまったエゴイズムのたかまり。	<i>katamatta egoizumu no takamari.</i>
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A hardened swell of egoism.

The idea of "rising" and "hardening" is lost in my earlier translation (I use "upsurge" and "cluster") but these implicit meanings in the original give a particularly Freudian edge to the idea of "egoism". But, as a counterpoint to this, and to continue along the theme of inverses, the self-reflexive structure of the couplet also hints at the idea of eternal return and its ancient personification, Ouroboros, the snake that eats its own tail, which Jung used to symbolise a pre-ego state of the psyche. I don't know if anyone remembers the symbol that was on the title page. [show circle on front title page]

In fact, the stanza is sort of an all-encompassing existential morsel—the first couplet sandwiching light, the "flicker" and time, the "clock" between sound, silence and ticking. The second wraps the most abstract sense of the psychological together with the most tactile sense of corporeality, "swelling" and "hardening", into a sort of self-reflexive, ever-cycling orbit.

Thank You!