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Flared Skirt and The Healds by Arai Takako


Carol Hayes DR

The Australian National University, carol.hayes@anu.edu.au

Rina Kikuchi

Shiga University, kikuchi@biwako.shiga-u.ac.jp

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It was...

I was...

It was the spring holidays just before I started girls' high. Our tabby cat Buchi had kittens, only one though. But then she was very old. She twisted it out using up all her strength, wearing herself out, furious like the edge of a knife, *eeeek-mew eeeeek-mew*, the tiny mouse-like creature snuggled tight against her breast, as she tried desperately to hide the little one from view. Like an unwed mother birthing a bastard child.

A while ago, that first bleeding happened, to me. On the narrow back deck where we handed over the money to the newspaper boy in the evenings, suddenly, stained, my flared skirt. The next day, mother cooked up twenty cups of celebratory red bean rice:

“Miss, you’re finally one of us women,”

says Kat-chan, one of the weaving girls, pulling up the skirt on the clothesline to expose the inside...

‘They’re the latest fashion,’

says Misa-chan giving me some peach-coloured panties...

Shimo-yan, who fixes the looms,

strokes my bottom with his work-gloved hands, saying, “Such a pearl, a beautiful pearl!”

It’s not a newspaper story! My period!

Mummm!

Buchi was originally a stray. But then, at that time there were no pure house cats. Scrounging for food scraps under the eaves, slyly crawling in under the *kotatsu*, she’s absolutely shameless. When I try to stroke her back she slips past me with a hiss. She snorts and turns away. I never manage to get my arms round her.

It was hard wasn’t it? It was for me. When Shimo-yan, with his tobacco stink, stroked my bottom, my blood oozed out in a slimy glob. An’ then thinking about having to go out into town wearing the same panties as Misa-chan. And then at the 3 o’clock break, when the front teeth of the factory workers lined up for the red bean rice, my inner void clenched in emptiness. They’re saying somebody’s buried a house mouse in Kat-chan’s lower belly. Six months already.

It was the night when we took down the New Year pine decorations.

Huh? An abandoned child?

It’s a factory girl again.

The crying was so heart wrenching, coming from the factory yard. I pulled on my *hanten* jacket to look around near the base of the fence, and there she was. That Buchi. Yowling with a cry that would melt frost, rubbing her belly along the ground.

Waaah-meiooooowww

As the tomcat starts to ride her, the cougar forces up her tail and sticks out her arse. After the deed is done,—raaww—her unyielding willfulness returns and she drives him off, that male cat from next door.

The daughter and heir, the only child, I'm the same.

I'll finish girl's high, get a husband, inherit the factory, continue to pay Kat-chan and Misa-chan, their children, and even their mothers-in-law. My marital intercourse will feed them.

It's my monthlies—my moon drops

That feed them!

The factory house mice

All of you—congratulations!

It's rising up

In me

The blood red new moon

Quivering like a trembling heart

Shining

Dripping

A sticky trail of drops

This is it genuine red rice!

Look at it!

Shimo-yan! Don't slip and drown.

Hey, Kat-chan. Tasty isn't it.

Newspaper man! Come on, go ahead take as many photos as you like

My smiling my shamelessness inside my flared skirt

Don't stand on ceremony! Go for it!

The next morning, when mum opened the shutters—it was stained. The *tatami*, where we had the altar to the family dead. There was Buchi. She looked up at us with dark shadowed eyes, her mouth thick with a filthy wetness.

She'd eaten it. Her own lovely sweet little house mouse. Impaled on her canines.

I don't want to be

A woman,

I want to go back

As the mouse

In mum's belly, me too
Hey, Buchi,
Couldn't you squeeze anything out
Of those bony breasts
No one fed you any did they? Any white rice?

With only a sidelong glance, ignoring me crying, the cat soon left the factory.

The clatter and chatter of the looms and the women had faded into the dusk,
There I was, still in the thread storeroom
Leaning on the spools of thread, the stiffness in my neck has disappeared
A tang of sulphur, the night air the silk spits out
Is a magic lantern
Alone, a single bulb glows
Peering through the hole in the wooden door, the factory
Is a magic lantern

Cold fingers
About to touch the healds of the loom
Just at night, when the looms are at rest, he appears, the man
The warp threader
About to push through, the thread
Into the healds, glittering in a draft of dry wind
Under the filament of the bulb
Into their tiny, tiny eyes
Forbidden to blink
Vacant eyes,
Because the looms
Before they are hands
Are the transformations of numberless, nameless eyes
Because they are such eyeballs that
Watch every single threaded intersection
The hanging healds can be called the artificial eyes of the factory girls
The night man
First one, then the next
Lightly moistening each with his tongue
Must push it through
It will hurt
The man's back too is trembling hard
Grimacing, the healds
Will look away
Through the window grating towards the new moon

Are the looms
Perhaps marionettes? At this textile factory
If they don't let it in they can't work
If they let it in, they can get moving eyes, the healds
Towards the man
With a clack
Fold their necks
Releasing a pale breath, along the needle
A spreading blur
This ruby red blood gives them vision

Hung up, one beside the other
From the ceiling,
The sneaking whirlwind catches
This thread
Then that
All entangled
Arms lift in *banzai*, legs kicking
Leaning forwards, embracing shoulders, holding bellies, laughing jaws
The man
Races over, desperate to untangle them
Each demanding more attention
More more, penetrate me
Make me come!
Slyly exposing their breasts
The feminine wiles of the marionette factory girls
When their coaxing gaze
Returns to the moon
Running down both cheeks
Sweat drips from the man's temples

Just about now
The real flesh and blood bodies of the factory girls
Taking their baths at home, boarding houses or public bathhouses
 or watching the sleeping faces of their daughters, or just about to hang up their phones
No,
No,
Combing their locks
Their rich hair, tangles in the wind
At precisely eleven o'clock

They try to force it through their hair, the comb
Is reflected in the mirror

Leaning forwards, embracing shoulders, holding bellies, laughing jaws
The marionettes are tangled in threads
The healds are
No, we are
Being manipulated, allowing ourselves to be manipulated, manipulating him
to manipulate us
As the man rolls up the warp beam
All pulled up
The roots of our hair, each and every hair follicle
How good does that feel!
Delicately
First one strand, then the next, weaving them together
Hoisting them up, the man works on
The multicoloured threads, our hair,
How alluring it looks!

The night factory, the night factory girls, the night coiffeur
All a magic lantern
The single light bulb
Like a pendulum
Swinging
Suddenly
Vanishes
With the warp threader
Before the echoing of the motor bike delivering the bottled milk

The morning light
Makes the marionettes
Look like looms
But you know
About that wooden comb the man leaves behind

If you're a factory girl, that is.

Arai Takako was born in Kiryū in Gunma Prefecture in 1966. A graduate of Keio University's literature department, Arai now lives in Tokyo. Kiryū has a long history as a textile-manufacturing town and Arai's family was engaged in this industry for many generations. Since the Meiji era, carrying the burden of industrial change, Kiryū became the home to great numbers of female factory workers involved in the textile industry. However, economic change has meant that this once-strong local industry is now facing an increasingly rapid decline. In what seemed like a blink of the eye, these factories disappeared leaving nothing but empty lots. Few even remember what once stood on these vacant plots. Through her poetry, Arai brings these factories back to life, fighting back against the enormous powers that so easily wipe away the past. Beyond that she hopes to highlight something of the complexities of women and work—holding up the stubborn strength and the fragility of these factory women.

Arai Takako's first collection of poetry, *Hao-bekki (The King's Unfortunate Lover)* was published in 1997. Her second collection, *Tamashii dansu (Soul Dance)* was published in 2007 and was awarded the 41st Oguma Hideo Prize. Several of the works from that collection have been translated into English by Jeffrey Angles in *Soul Dance: Poems by Takako Arai (Mi'Te Press, 2008)*. Arai is the editor of *Mi'Te*, a magazine featuring poetry and criticism (<http://www.mite-press.net/index.html>). Her third collection, *Betto to Shokki (Beds and Looms)*, was published in 2013.

The two poems translated here are included in *Betto to Shokki*. "The Healds" was first published in *Mi'Te* Issue 105 (Dec. 2008) and "Flared Skirt" was first published in *Mi'Te* Issue 117 (Dec. 2011). In her poetry, Arai creates her own distinctive language, which appears to Japanese readers as a form of colloquial regional dialect. This is not the language of Kiryū or any other actual place, but rather an imagined dialect that helps her create her own poetic world. Although it is impossible to transfer this specific sense of dialect into the English, we have worked to evoke the effect of her language in our translations.

Arai likes to play with word order and grammar to challenge the accepted language patterns of the Japanese language and as a result her punctuation and word order add a sense of dislocation to her poetry. We have tried to recreate this linguistic deconstruction in our translations. While we have used Arai's line order as far as possible to maintain this sense of dislocation, we have modified the punctuation and included a number of empty spaces within poetic lines to better express her idiosyncratic language usage.

With regard to our translation process, we choose to translate together as one native speaker of Japanese and one native speaker of English. We find this creates an interesting negotiation around the meaning in both languages. It is not a case of one of us translating from Japanese into English and then the other checking that work, but rather a jointly shared process.

We would like to thank Arai Takako for her support and encouragement.

Translators' Notes—"Flared Skirt"

Buchi: Buchi is a common name for a tabby cat because in Japanese it also refers to the brown splotches on a tabby cat.

kotatsu: A *kotatsu* is a low, square-shaped Japanese-style table that is used as a heater. The tabletop sits on top of a quilt which is placed over the frame and the heater warms from underneath the table.

eeek-mew eeek-mew: This phrase is Arai's original onomatopoeia, which is a combination of the squeaking noise of a mouse combined with the meowing of a kitten. We chose to combine the English onomatopoeia for a mouse's squeak with a kitten's mew rather than romanising the Japanese sounds (*chiimyaa, chiimyaa*: チィーミャア、チィーミャア) as we felt that our English readers would better understand the imaginative link between a mouse and a cat using English animal sounds.

celebratory red bean rice: While a number of Japanese dishes are now commonly used within English, such as sushi or soba, *sekihan* is not sufficiently familiar. In this rice dish, small red *azuki* beans are cooked together with white rice to celebrate special occasions, as the color red is associated with happy occasions in Japan. This dish was commonly made by households to share with their neighbours on the birth of a child or a marriage or, as in this case, the start of womanhood, allowing them to share the happiness symbolically as they shared the red bean rice.

Kat-chan, Misa-chan, Shimo-yan: These are three names of workers in the factory. Both *-chan* and *-yan* are suffixes used in Japanese for addressing or referring to people or animals to indicate familiarity and affection, and are therefore commonly used by "in-group" family members or very close friends. While *-chan* is most commonly used for females or young boys, *-yan* tends to be used to refer to men.

hanten jacket: A *hanten* is a short padded jacket that was worn over kimono, pajamas, or other relaxed home clothes.

waaah-meiooooww: Like "eeek-mew eeek-mew", this phrase *ogyaua-aan* (オギャーうあアーン) was also invented by Arai, combining the cry of a wailing baby and the yowl of a cat in heat. This example also demonstrates one of the characteristics of Arai's "imagined" language, her distinctive mixing of *katakana* and *hiragana* within a single word or phrase.

The tatami, where we had the altar to the family dead: We chose to use this somewhat explanatory phrase to express *Butsuma no tatami* (仏間の畳). In a traditional Japanese-style house, this is the room for the family Buddhist altar where the memorial tablets for deceased relatives are placed.

Translators' Notes—"The Healds"

heald: A heald frame is part of a weaving loom. Technically, the frame works to separate and lift some of the warp yarns above others, thus allowing the shuttle to

pass through holding the weft threads. Heald frames are rectangular and are supported by a set of thin wires called “healds” or “hettles.” The healds are attached to the frame vertically and the threads move through their eyeholes to weave the fabric.

magic lantern: The term *gentō* (幻燈) used by Arai is the Japanese translation of the Western term “magic lantern” referring to the early slide projectors, first developed in the 17th century, that directed light through small rectangular photographic image slides onto a wall or screen.

the warp threader: The Japanese term used for this profession is *tsumugiya* (繋ぎ屋) which translates literally as the “vertical thread or warp connecting professional”.

filament: This refers to the wire filament in an old-fashioned electric incandescent light bulb.

whirlwind: The Japanese word used here is *kamaitachi* (鎌たち) which is a term used to describe the cutting turbulent winds common in Japan’s northern snow country. Traditional folk tales tell of weasel-like creatures that fly on the whirlwinds slashing at human skin. In this poem the focus is on the wind rather than these mythological creatures.

banzai: Roughly translating as “hurray” and literally as “long life.” In contemporary Japan, *banzai* is used to express congratulations, although the term was most commonly used during WWII to express respect for the emperor.

warp beam: A part of a loom. The ends of the warp threads are wound onto the warp beam roller at the back of the loom.

coiffeur: The Japanese term *kamiyui* (髪結い) refers to the traditional profession of a Japanese hair dresser or barber.