

〈翻訳〉

Mukouda Kuniko: ‘The Boiled Eggs’ & Two other Essays

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‘The Boiled Eggs’¹ by Mukouda Kuniko²

When I was a fourth year student in primary school, in my class there was a child with a bad leg. Her name was K. Not only did K have a bad leg, she was also visually handicapped in one of her eyes. She was also by far the shortest student as well as being the bottom of our class. It seemed that her family were not well-off. Her collar glistened with sweat and grime. She used to wear a poorly-fitting sailor suit, the skirt of which looked like it would fall down. Her character was also warped. So whilst thinking of her as someone to be pitied there were occasions when both we, her classmates, as well as our form mistress shunned her in spite of ourselves.

I think it was definitely the autumn excursion. Carrying rucksacks and water bottles, we gathered together in the school playground in the early morning. I was the class monitor and K’s mother came up to me. She was short like a child and her hair was wrapped in a hand towel. From under her apron she produced a bundle and thrust it upon me saying over and over again in a low voice, “These are for everyone.” The contents, wrapped in old newspaper, were a large quantity of boiled eggs. Feeling awkward at going off on the excursion carrying the warm, light-looking, but in fact heavy bundle, I flinched for an instant but was unable to say ‘No’ to the figure of K’s mother who was bowing.

At the front of the procession of students there was the figure of K trying desperately to keep up with the others, her shoulders heaving up and down. K’s mother was at the school gate seeing her daughter off, standing apart from the other parents and older brothers.

1 Originally published as 「ゆでたまご」 in *Akebono* in October 1977.

2 Mukouda Kuniko (1929~1981) Writer of TV screenplays, essays and short stories. Won Naoki Prize in 1980. Died thirty years ago aged 51 in a plane crash in Taiwan.

When I see the Chinese character for ‘love’, without knowing why, I always think of the figure of the mother coming to see her daughter off and the warmth of her boiled eggs, wrapped in the dirty, dark grey cloth.

I have one more memory of K. It was at Sports Day. When K was in a race she always finished a long way behind all the others. On this occasion, when the other children had already finished the race, just one of them was continuing to run. Rather than running it would probably be more accurate to say that she was staggering along dragging one of her feet behind her. When K was about to stop running, a female teacher rushed up to her.

I’ve forgotten her name but she was a person well advanced in years. She was a grouchy person given to reprimanding us and was the most unpopular teacher in the school because even though she was not a form mistress she used to do things like complain about our way of cleaning. This was the teacher who started to run with K. She ran slowly with K and they finished the race together. She put her arms around K as if she was hugging her and they proceeded to the marquee where the principal was. The students who finished the race each received one pencil from the principal there. The principal got up and bending forward handed a pencil to K. I associate the Chinese character for ‘love’ with this scene.

This occurred more than forty years ago. There were no TVs or weekly magazines then. It was an age when the abstract word ‘love’ had little or no meaning for children. For me love meant warmth. Needing a little courage, it is a natural impulse, which is irresistible. I have heard the saying “God is in the detail”³ and for me love is in the same way to be found “in small actions”.

‘The Battered and Bruised Eggplants’⁴ by Mukouda Kuniko

When I heard the news of the approaching typhoon, it inevitably came back to me. When I was a child immediately at the back of our house there was a doctor’s surgery. They kept a monkey there. It was small but very clever. It was said that in the morning when it caught the sound of the footsteps of the newspaper delivery boy, it

3 Quotation attributed amongst others to the architect Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) and the novelist Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880).

4 Originally published as 「傷だらけの茄子」 in *Shukan Bushun* in September 1981.

darted out before anybody else, snatched the newspaper from the boy and laid it by the pillow of its sleeping master.

This monkey, which in the midst of a typhoon may have changed into a wild animal when it heard the sounds of the storm, tore off its chains, climbed up to the roof and shrieked. After the typhoon had passed, whether it was because it had been knocked down from the roof by the wind or had slipped on the roof tiles, I don't know, but it was said that its small, cold, lifeless body was found lying on the ground. I had never seen this monkey. In spite of never having seen it, I can't help feeling that I saw a small monkey hanging on to the roof with its wet hair standing on end, howling.

Speaking of approaching typhoons, I wonder why people in the past became so tense as they approached⁵. If we were told that one would come around evening time or after midnight the students on cleaning duty worked in a hurry and we didn't play in the school playground and suchlike but went straight back home. Going back in the same direction as three or four of my friends, walking into the wind, even now I can see in my mind's eye our feeling of excitement at going home quickly while larking about: my friends' smooth, silky, page-boy style hair being lifted upwards towards the heavens and the pleats of the skirts of their sailor suits being blown up and inside out.

When I got home my mother and grandmother were bracing themselves running with short steps between the kitchen and the hall. "I wonder how much rice we should prepare for boiling," my mother asked. Grandmother replied, "For the time being, one pot would be enough, wouldn't it?"

They boiled the rice and prepared the side dishes early because they wanted to remove the wood, which heated the oven before the typhoon came. We children went to our bedroom, and took out textbooks from our bags replacing the with others, as we had been told to go and pack our school things into our knapsacks so as to be able to take them out with us even if it was dark.

Then father came home. Due to the driving rain, the shoulder area of his raincoat was soaking wet and his pale, slender shins appearing below the hem of his rolled-up trousers seemed funny but all of us knew how he would react if we started to laugh so we tried our best to make a face as though we were at the end of our tether. We lined up at

5 Even in the hi-tech, sophisticated Japan of the 21st century, we are in many senses still powerless in the face of such forces of nature. Typhoon Talas, which made landfall in Kochi Prefecture last month (September 2nd 2011) claimed 73 lives with 20 more missing.

the entrance of the house and chanted in unison “Welcome home.”

“What are you doing standing here calmly in a row when you’ve been told that a typhoon is coming,” he bellowed, bustling into the living room.

If we hadn’t been there to greet him at the door, as we should, he would have said “What’s the matter with the children. They shouldn’t get nervous over a mere typhoon.” In other words, he would have been angry whether we had been at the front door to greet him or not.

“What are the side dishes for supper? Stop any cooking. There are tins of salmon and beef boiled in soy sauce. Turn that off.”

I was hovering around the hall but when I caught this with my sharp ears, I rushed to the children’s room with the message, “He said the side dishes will be tinned food.” “Hurraaay!” A cry of joy went up.

Usually there would never ever be tinned foods on the dining table since this reeked of indolence. I think it was because we were only rarely allowed to eat tinned food that it was the favourite food of us children and the bones of the tinned salmon in particular we loved so much so that we would scramble amongst ourselves to get them. Grandmother would open three or four tins with what I now realize was in fact an old-fashioned tin-opener with a long wooden handle.

At that time both the wind and rain were increasing in strength and although we had closed the storm door in good time, wind was blowing in through some gap causing the glass door to rattle, the light to sway and sometimes it became dim and flickered.

Father who always drank two holders of sake had confined himself to one and wearing the clothes he used to go fishing in i.e. a jacket from his suit from the year before last and knickerbockers like construction workers wear, he said to mother, “The batteries in the torch are alright, are they?”

In the kitchen grandmother was making riceballs from our leftover rice. Rain was leaking in the corridor and the closet in the hall. When we let the water out of the wash basin, for a short time it made a racket in the house.

On this sort of day since it would have been dangerous to go to the public bath, we refrained from doing so. I don’t know whether our family was over-cautious or not but on a night when a typhoon seemed likely to come, we did not change into our pyjamas but were sent to bed after having merely removed our socks.

When I was checking that I had put my knapsack and a change of clothes wrapped in

a bundle close to my pillow, there was a power failure. By the light of a torch I went to the toilet. Mere child that I was, falling asleep hearing the sound of the wind and rain was strangely exciting.

For just the night of the typhoon an armistice was reached covering any hostilities between us children, between my father and mother and also covering any small degree of bad feeling existing between my mother and grandmother. Relationships cemented and the whole of the family became one. I don't know why but I was intensely delighted by this. Both father and mother as well as everyone else became full of life.

When I woke up in the morning the typhoon had moved on somewhere else as if it had never existed. Without realizing it, we had changed into our pyjamas. Probably in the middle of the night someone had said that the typhoon had changed its course and we had been made to change into our pyjamas, but I had absolutely no memory of this. I wonder how children can sleep so soundly at night. Since it is said that "Sleep brings up a child well" maybe we were sleeping so soundly in order to grow.

There was nothing less fun than hearing that the typhoon which was raring to come and which everyone thought would come, had in fact changed its course. The grown-ups in our house were all delighted, saying "Thank goodness, thank goodness", eating the rice balls which my mother and grandmother had made too many of the night before. We children, on the other hand, all seemed to be down in the dumps. In cases of emergencies like these, we would be putting away the pairs of boots in the entrance, which had been previously taken out and arranged for the family to make a quick exit if necessary, saying things like "Damn" and "Boring".

Although even adults must also feel slightly disappointed and this will show itself somewhat in their way of speaking and acting, the fact that they don't display their emotion is slightly aggravating.

Father was scraping out the dead leaves from the gutter at the eaves. Holding a long broom upside down at the ready, above my father, out of breath from working in the garden, which he was not used to, was a deep blue sky. Red dragonflies were a familiar sight at these times. It might have just been my imagination but on the evening after a typhoon the cries of the insects sounded noticeably louder and more beautiful than usual.

And then the next day in front of the greengrocer's there was a row of chipped plates and baskets piled up with egg-plants and cucumbers covered in bruises after having been pounded by the rain, blown down and looking like they had been trailed along the

ground. The vegetables on each of the chipped plates and baskets were being sold by the pile at bargain prices.

Even though it occurred as long as forty years ago, I can remember as if it were yesterday grandmother pulling my mother's apron sleeve in the kitchen, saying "Would you believe, Mrs So and So has so many children that she has bought three platefuls."

'Father's Balloon'⁶ by Mukouda Kuniko

Even though my childhood is now ancient history, I still dream about homework. There have even been times that I jumped out of bed drenched in sweat having dreamt about the problem 'Work out English words by breaking them up into them into factors.' I have been earning a living writing plays for radio and TV but the lack of self-control which results in my taking it easy until the last moment has not changed at all since I was in my first year in primary school.

When morning came I remembered the homework of copying the whole story of Momotaro⁷ out into our notebooks and wrote it out sitting on top of the warm rice tub almost in tears. Maybe as a result of this even now when I hear the word Momotaro it brings to mind the smell of freshly-boiled rice and I feel vexed.

My strongest memory of homework is of a balloon. I wonder which year of primary school I was in then. I was unable to make a balloon for my homework and was on the point of crying.

In mathematics we were taught something to the effect that a sphere is composed of many ovals and the teacher gave as an example a paper balloon. Since I hated maths and science, I whiled away the time staring out at the playground. Then I returned home and was at a loss as to what to do.

At that time there was no good quality, highly effective adhesive so sticking the sides of a long, narrow oval together to make a paper balloon was an extremely difficult task. When you glued one side together, the other side would come apart. Finally when I began to cry, father shouted "Go to bed."

When I woke up in the morning I discovered a paper balloon on the dining table. Irregular and heavy-looking, it was a really unshapely balloon. Mother put in a

6 Originally published as 「父の風船」 in *Ginza Hyakuten* in June 1969.

7 Momotaro aka Peach Boy. Popular hero from Japanese folklore.

good word for father saying, "After trying many things, in the end he succeeded using a small teakettle as a model. Say 'thank you' to your father." Father was eating breakfast with an angry look on his face. I put the balloon into a large biscuit bag and went to school in high spirits. However I was the only person who had made a balloon. There was no such homework as making a balloon. When I went home that day I told a lie saying "The teacher praised me saying it was very well made."

In hindsight it seems that this was a shrewd thing to say but I probably felt that I had to say it. Talk about father's balloon was as popular a topic of conversation as that of my appendix and father's footrace. The following episode is a dream that father had right after my appendix operation on the night before I took the exam for the girls' secondary school.

Although they had promised that the exams would only be academic subjects and I would be excused from taking a P.E. test, for some reason the examiner told me I had to do some running. Father flew into a rage and proposed that he be allowed to run instead of me. He lined up with the other girl students. 'On your marks! Get set! Go!' He had just started to run when he tripped up and was unable to continue. He broke out in a greasy sweat and he ended up waking up mother with his groaning. It seemed that mother of her own accord spoke about these two episodes as PR to show that my stubborn, short-tempered father was in fact a devoted parent. I was increasingly losing my chance to own up to my lie.

And then this February⁸ all of a sudden father's life came to an end at the age of sixty four. The cause of death was heart failure. Just like the impatient father that he was, he suffered pain for less than five minutes.

When I was able to breathe freely again after the funeral and the winding-up of my father's estate and so on had brought this chapter of my life to a close, the cherry blossoms were already lying scattered on the ground.

This year, as for spring-like things, I hadn't bought even one sweater. I thought that at least I would like to buy myself a scarf so after an interval of two months I set out for Ginza, went as far as the entrance to Bunmeido⁹ and came to a halt.

Oh now I remember. Once when father was drunk hadn't he told us about the bean-jam pancakes? He had said that when he was young, he had become intoxicated and he

8 this February: February 1969.

9 Bunmeido: Shop famous for its castella (sponge cake).

and a friend had bought many bean-jam pancakes and had walked from the 4th block in Ginza to Ginza Street slapping these pancakes onto the glass doors of the shops.

It struck me that I might try doing the same thing. I would buy about 10 thousand yen's worth of these pancakes. I wonder how many there would be. Since there was coating on both sides, I could break them in half and then there would be twice as many. Starting with the window of Wako¹⁰ I would go along slapping the pancakes on the shop windows. The people in the street would probably think that I had taken leave of my senses; or else that they were maybe observing an unexpected fashionable happening. I wonder how many minutes it would take for the police to arrive.

Before the police came, the shop workers would appear and I wondered if they might forgive me if I said "Sorry, I'm doing this as a memorial service for my father." This idiotic daydream of mine was destroyed when a female shop assistant said, "Can I help you." In the end I walked out without buying anything.

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Translator's Note

This is my second attempt to translate something by Mukouda Kuniko. Since my previous translation, I have been meaning to try something else by her and this year being the 30th anniversary of her death, provided the stimulus to shake off my sloth and finally do so. But where to start? Our school library contains three volumes of her collected works but I was at a loss as to which essays would prove the most rewarding, albeit I was intrigued by many of the titles. Fortunately browsing around a bookshop I found a book 「向田邦子ふたたび」 in which the late essayist Yamamoto Natsuhiko recommended five of Mukouda's essays. From those five, I selected the three shortest. The above-mentioned book also contains some striking photos not only of Mukouda, convey-

10 Wako: Shop selling watches, clocks, jewellery etc.

ing her extraordinary elegance, but also of her exceedingly handsome Korat cat, Mamio. Mukouda was from exactly the same generation as my parents and one of the interesting things for me in translating these essays is to have a glimpse at the pre-war patriarchal society through a girl's eyes.