

describes the circumstances surrounding an invitation to return to his hometown for a dinner honoring him and a few other artists, which ends in absolute disaster. The story shows the narrator overwhelmed with feelings of insecurity. The account is both amusing and touching as the narrator commits blunder after blunder, from the moment he accepts the invitation to the moment he arrives late and, racked with fear about having to introduce himself, becomes so drunk that he humiliates himself by yelling, 'Shut the fuck up!' when someone asks him to speak louder. It is a moment of deep self-loathing, but for Dazai it is also a moment of truth and triumph over the literary establishment.

Let's just say that I exposed all the corruption of my soul in one fell swoop . . . I was laying my true, satanic nature bare. . . . That night I finally realized the truth. I'm not the sort who gets ahead in the world. I have no choice but to resign myself to that. I must now unequivocally abandon the dream of a triumphant return in robes of gold. . . . Only those who want to listen to my moronic obstinate music — only they should listen. Art cannot order people around. Art dies the moment it acquires authority.

Again, the rose bush signals the easing of his suffering, as he learns from a friend that the roses are in fact of an exceptional variety. And Dazai's gloom vanishes:

I considered myself a fortunate man. They say to experience sorrow at any price. That the blue sky is most beautiful when seen through a prison cell window. And for a moment, this thought flashed through my mind: As long as these roses are living, I am king of my own heart.

Through this all-consuming need for artistic and emotional freedom, represented by what he called his 'moronic obstinate music', Dazai was continually at odds with society, the literary establishment, his family, and finally himself. In this way, he waged his controversial 'battle against what he considered the antiquated, hackneyed style, affectation, and the transparent pose of respectability, as well as against smallmindedness and smallminded people.' His literary battle was waged by trying to transform what was simple and natural into something unique.

When it came to portraying his own existence, Dazai employed a similar principle, striving to surmount life's limitations by manipulating the truth. In each commentary that introduces these stories, McCarthy discusses how much each deviates from fact. In 'Thinking of Zenzo', he quotes Dazai's wife: 'Many of the things Dazai wrote seem to me to have been gross exaggerations or pure inventions that give the impression of being true.'

But even though Dazai tried to free himself from the ties of society and literary traditions, he was at the same time continually trying to come to terms with them. He yearned for recognition his entire life and sorely wanted to win the prestigious Akutagawa Ryunosuke Prize, perhaps the highest award for a Japanese writer. In his writing, Dazai seemed somehow to be unable to accept the finality of a dark, unhappy ending, frequently searching for a lighter alternative. Thus, instead of exposing 'the corruption of his soul', he mostly succeeded in doing otherwise, revealing what was most admirable about it. In this way, Dazai waged a losing battle, as he persistently struggled with traditions and his own nature.

Some readers may be disappointed as the 'truth' behind Dazai cannot be pinned down through these works. But then such a truth would be contrary to the spirit in which he lived and wrote. Instead, these stories give testimony to the beauty that sprang up from the morass of doubt and conflict which he experienced in trying to come to terms with his life. Even when Dazai finally chose to end that life, he blurred the lines between cowardice and heroism, just as his life and writing cut through the boundaries of bad and good, fact and fiction.

Osamu Dazai, *Self Portraits: Tales from the Life of Japan's Great Decadent Romantic*, translated by Ralph F. McCarthy, Kodansha International, 230 pp, ¥3,000

SONGS OF THE OPEN ROAD

Richard Evanoff

Sherry Reniker, *Geo Frictions*

THIS FIRST COLLECTION by Sherry Reniker works almost as much as an album of songs as it does a collection of poetry. Some of the melodies were obviously learned here in Japan, where Reniker formally studied renku under Tadashi Kondo. Consider the tight and evocative renku-like effect of 'Lament', presented here in full:

Vine trumpets
/morning

Who will sweep
red notes
the wind has blown?

Porch
blossoms . . .

Cicadas in the poplars
drumming

Vine trumpets are a red, trumpet-shaped flower common in North America, but here the trumpets are also heralds of the morning, accompanied by the drumming of the cicadas. The double play on 'trumpets' as both a noun and verb is repeated in 'porch blossoms'. Are the blossoms falling on the porch or is the porch itself mystically blossoming in the morning sun? There's also a good play on 'blown' — the wind blows the trumpets just as Dizzy Gillespie blows his horn. The red notes which fall are both musical notes and the paper-like petals.

Geo Frictions has nine poems written specifically in/about Japan, but the American geography of the book extends from the Susquehanna River near Sunnyburn, Pennsylvania to the east side of the Mississippi in St. Louis (where Reniker was once associated with Michael Castro and the *River Styx* poets), from 'Colorado rocks' to 'Kansas rolls'. We can hear the blues all the way up the Mississippi to Chicago. 'Footpedal Shoes Blues' has an interesting call-and-response stanza with two voices that communicate, although not necessarily with each other:

Daddy and I used to sing as we drove
Now I used to think that I was cool
Give me land, lots of land
Runnin' around on fossil fuel
Under starry skies above
Until I saw what I was doin'
Don't fence me in
Was drivin down the road to ruin
Don't fence me in

On the one side we see the old 1950s version of America as an unfencable continent with no limits but the stars above — the open road Neal Cassady burned up cars on. On the other, we're faced with the fact, not altogether lamentable, that wanderers of the future, as with those of the past, are going

to have to walk. There will always be songs of the open road, though, and Reniker is a fellow-traveler in the good ol' American vagabond tradition of Whitman, Guthrie and Kerouac.

'Broad Brimm'd Love' is a ballad reminiscent of some of Ginsberg's. The line breaks don't match the natural rhythm breaks, which gives the piece a good poem-like appearance on the page, but doesn't disguise the music underneath:

Oh my love he wore a broad brimm'd hat &
I saw it sink in the river; so I vowed to bring him
another one back from across the Atlantic Ocean.

Sung to the tune of a song like 'Boots of Spanish Leather' it can be seen how these three lines actually make a quatrain, with a break in the penultimate line just after 'another one back'. But what is really attractive about this poem isn't the rhythms, but the images: 'Max in a fresh suit and coffin' and 'Friday afternoon at the Crown of Thorns'. The loss throughout is permanent.

Not all of the poems bring meter and message together so successfully, however. 'Tokyo-Seattle' has someone asking for handout:

change change change
can you / sister / can you
can you change change change
can you spare
some change?

The change called for here is, of course, personal, social and political. It would have been more in tune with her other work if Reniker could have further developed the many possible layers of meaning only hinted at here. The cries in this poem are coming from out of the deep but the meanings remain buried much too far beneath the surface. We hear the voice of the suppliant here, but don't see the face.

Geo Frictions covers a lot of ground both geographically and poetically. Yet because the poems were written over an extended period of time and in many geo-locales, the book seems to lack any unifying theme, style or approach. While many of the individual poems are strong, I sometimes felt as if I were being rushed through a whirlwind tour of Reniker's poetic imagination. I wish there had been time for the vine trumpets to do a second set. It would be interesting to hear what else they can play.

Sherry Reniker, *Geo Frictions*, Membrane Press (distrib. Word Press, 318-2B Noborito, Tama-ku, Kawasaki, Kanagawa 214), 24 pp, ¥1,000