

Hiromi Itō, *Wild Grass on the Riverbank*. Translated by Jeffrey Angles. Notre Dame, IN: Action Books, 2015. 103pp. \$16

Hiromi Itō is said to have called the English-language version of her narrative poem *Wild Grass on the Riverbank*, translated by Jeffrey Angles, a lost original of her Japanese text. “As I read out loud the English of the English translation,” says Itō, “I feel as if that is really my true voice, and I am caught up in the illusion that this is the way that I have been telling the story since the very beginning.”

A remarkable account of the textual prosthesis as the text’s origin, this story is also about the theme of *atopy* (placelessness) in Itō’s work, which has always reflected the author’s unusual position in the ecology of world literature and the transnational avant-garde. Itō is indeed a “shamaness of poetry,” keen in her ability to channel different voices and registers. Inspired by traditions ranging from Native American narrative verse to the medieval religious Japanese storytelling art of *sekkyō-bushi*, she also counts among her influences Allen Ginsberg, Miyazawa Kenji, Swedish poet Siv Cedering, and Austrian poet Georg Trakl. This transnational circulation of voices does not have a particular name, nor does it need to. It is embraced within the mythology of past voices that animates contemporary colloquial Japanese. Poised on survival, it is a resourceful “making do” in the manner of bricolage: it makes, as Michel de Certeau said, a “mobile organicity of the environment.” Itō’s comfort with atopic circulation also makes the best of a bad social reality. Like the anthropomorphism of the South American *Verbena brasiliensis*, which “stutters” in *Wild Grass on the Riverbank* with a “strong accent,” Itō’s own strange relationship to language captures the experience of migrants whose lack of English has, in Angles’s words, “condemned them to silence.”

Wild Grass on the Riverbank can be read as a simple allegory. A mother and her children shuttle back and forth between the landscapes of the riverbank and the wasteland— southern Japan (Kumamoto) and southern California, respectively—enacting what seems like a sexual drama between two fathers and a choice of two different lifestyles. The catch is that both places are equally grotesque, and that the father and the stepfather are both desiccated corpses come back to life occasionally, or seasonally: describing one of them, the child narrator tells us “the law of the plants had extended to this man who had been our father.” These men find themselves on the receiving end of the mother’s hatred: she snips off one of their penises and says, “leave it alone and it’ll grow again.” In place of impotent fathers, we get old men masturbating by the riverbank, looked over by the narrator and her siblings, and a dog whose “penis growing longer and longer... intertwined with mother.” Itō’s treatment of sexuality and motherhood is

startling and dramatic, to say the least, and there is no telling what form reprieve may take.

Sometimes reprieve comes in the form of landscape, environment, or natural settings, though the idea of place ultimately provides no stable ground for Itō's characters to orient themselves. The hot spring is more than benign and naturalistic; it cleanses and heals sicknesses, raises corpses from the dead, and conquers death:

Mother said, that hot spring
Will fix you up right away,
Soak yourself, open your pores, scrub your body, swell up,
It'll heal your eczema, your blisters,
Your skin infections, your ringworm,
Your dermatitis, your infectious diseases,
Your atopy, your allergies,
Your corpses, your impending death, your having died, and even death
in general

Jeffrey Angles's choice of the word *atopy* refers here to the condition of hyperallergy, but it also indexes Itō's fascination with the Greek concept of placelessness. Throughout *Wild Grass on the Riverbank*, not a single place is identified using a proper noun; "L. A." is only sung in a Neil Young lyric. The only real place is memory, knowable exclusively through landmarks and monuments like the burial site of a "samurai-monk's big camphor tree." Often, sickness and being-out-of-place seem to collude, as in the figure of an old man sitting like a thicket of horseweed by the riverbank: "he had a mild case of dementia rather like *Erigeron canadensis*." Physical and mental sicknesses take the form of forgetfulness of the present, not to mention the past—the result of having migrated from another place.

Whether present or not in the Japanese, the pun on the word *atopy* can be linked to Itō's larger critique of common metaphors, especially in US immigration discourse, that cast immigrants as diseased people, animals, invasive plants, or even objects of war. As quickly as a human character is introduced as a weed, it transforms into something that cannot be "weeded out." The result is a nightmarish and grievous landscape of corpses, like the two fathers, "[m]ultiplying, dying, coming back to life, and multiplying again." Presumably, the boundaries between human, animal, and vegetable are what guarantee life, and when these boundaries break down, life becomes unsustainable. Dangerous and unpredictable is Itō's monster-image of life: one moment the narrator finds succor and her own self-image in the weeds, and the next moment she and her friend, Alexa, are sexually assaulted by

tendrils of the kudzu plant. When the narrator and her family are treated by state authorities as objects of war, in a story based on real newspaper reports, they are presented as animal-vegetable-human life forms: having returned from abroad, and found illegally squatting near a river, the father turns into a mummified corpse, the mother is detained as a suspect for murder, child negligence, and abuse, and the children are left defending their household with dogs and hunting rifles.

Sometimes being eaten alive by nature in this way is how Itō's poem tropes the social and political process of "naturalization." Assimilation, in other words, is cultural death. But when the word "naturalize" is broken down by the narrator, it's shown to contain the character "return," which could suggest nature's resilience and resistance to the deadly forces of naturalization itself. Here the narrator tells how she learnt a plant name, *Paspalum urvillei*, from an old man who had moved to Japan just as the plant "came fifty years ago to the riverbanks of Japan":

We looked it up in a plant book once, but it wasn't there
I pointed at the grass with the white spikes of seed
He said, *Paspalum urvillei*
I said, why wasn't it in the plant book?
He said, it was first discovered in 1958 in northern Kyūshū, so it's
 only newly naturalized here, you know, the word "naturalize"
 is written with the characters that mean "return" and "change,"
 that is what they call plants that have come from somewhere else
 and settled down
I said, I've seen that word in the plant book
He said, that's right, that's a word you'd be sure to see in plant books
He looked around with a happy expression and pointed, that's a
 naturalized plant too

As if to enact a "return" in its very telling, the narrative turns even further at this point toward the history of immigration to Japan:

The other plants are older,
Some of them came a hundred and fifty years ago when Japan opened up,
Some of them came after World War II,
But this one is different,
Paspalum urvillei is from South America,
It reached here about the time I was born,
We grew up together, the whole time, here on the riverbank,
But neither of us has ever gotten used to the place

The revelation that the plant has not been documented opens up the entire oral narrative to its current material form. *Paspalum urvillei*'s missing entry in the narrator's remembered plant book is later mended by its inclusion in a miniature plant glossary at the end of Itō's book. That book exists precisely so that the narrator can heed the lesson to document her own absent history as a migrant. The poem becomes our narrator's way of sorting through multiple identities: "Alexa was me / The wild grass was me / I was Alexa / I was the wild grass / We were exactly alike, just like *Erigeron Canadensis* and *Conyza sumatrensis*." The scientific brevity of taxonomies cannot capture the complicated histories of a person, let alone a community. But recourse to the facticity of plant names is one way to come to terms with the painful event of diaspora.

Perhaps there is no definite place but in plant names. The immersion in a hot spring around the riverbank may cure one's *atopy*, but there may also be some palliative significance in the placelessness of cultural entities that are held together only by the knowledge of names and immaterial histories. As in the old man and *Paspalum urvillei*, the separate yet sometimes coterminous tracks of human and plant migration suggest the ecocritical possibility of organizing human migratory patterns around the history of plant mobility. Yet towards the end of *Wild Grass on the Riverbank*, Itō makes clear that the characters' anxieties from ceaseless movement come down to political constructs that cannot be easily naturalized: their legal residency statuses, or identities mediated by the state. In the fine distinction between having "flawless passports" and a "dirty spot on your passport," there is the enormous difference between the emancipatory text of one's own history and the state's interpretation of that history. By the end of *Wild Grass on the Riverbank*, Itō has upended in turn the carnivalesque images of transmutable human and plant life, insisting that the problems of human immigration are ultimately larger than the metaphors of natural history.

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