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Indra's Net

Miyazawa Kenji

Translated and introduced by Roger Pulvers

The Phenomenon Called Miyazawa Kenji

Miyazawa Kenji must certainly be the world's only author who described himself as a single illumination of light. The actual lines—the very first in his "Preface to *Spring and Ashura*"—go this way.

> The phenomenon called I
>
> Is a single blue illumination

This ray of light comes from "karma's alternating current lamp"…

> Flickering unceasingly, restlessly
>
> Together with the sights of the land and all else

Or is Kenji describing all of us with this "I"? After all, the "blue" in this poem is the blue of the other world, the place where we are all headed (albeit not necessarily in an upward direction). Blue is the most commonly used color by Kenji in his works; and the sky appears as a transit medium for all living creatures.

Among his poems, perhaps this "Preface" best describes his take on life. This take is all-encompassing. He does not view human life—or any other form of life, for that matter—as separate from the rocks, mountains, rivers, the light, the wind…. This is what he means by "Together with the sights of the land and all else."

If "Preface" is his clearest pronouncement of this in verse, then "Indra's Net," which appears in English here for the first time, is his most inspired and direct shot at his universe in prose. Fiercely lyrical and unmistakably devotional, it describes a vision of Paradise as seen at the Tsela Pass in northern India. At 4215 meters above sea level, he may be halfway to Paradise already.

How did this man, born into a well-to-do entrepreneurial family in the provincial Iwate Prefecture town of Hanamaki at the end of the 19th century, come to envision himself in such a remote spot, ecstatic at the floor of heaven?

Osawa Onsen just outside Hanamaki. Kenji often went to the rotenburo (outdoor bath) there.

Though he never left Japan in his lifetime, that didn't stop him from pursuing a gamut of interests that transported him to what we call "the outside world." This is an apt phrase for Kenji, whose outside world extended into the cosmos.

He studied German, English and Esperanto. He was obsessed with classical music, Beethoven in particular. (He owned the largest collection of records in Iwate.) Many of his characters have non-Japanese names; many of his stories take place outside Japan.

Years ago I described Kenji as "a dilettante typical of the Taisho Era," and I would still stick to this description. Millions of his compatriots at the time were into foreign languages, Western music and fantasies about foreign places they did not have the opportunity or means to get to. Kenji, in this, was no exception. The exception was his fanaticism for these things, his obsessiveness. He was generally a highly obsessive individual; and today, psychiatrists would have a justifiable field day with his symptomatic hyperactive behavior.

But the focus of this hyperactivity in a myriad of spheres is, in his case, unique: faith. Kenji was a devout and dogmatic Buddhist. He was also a dedicated proselytizer. He wanted to see all of us, someday, gathered around that big bonfire in the sky, sending heat and light out to this world, laughing together and singing songs, preferably one of his own compositions, "Once Around the Stars."

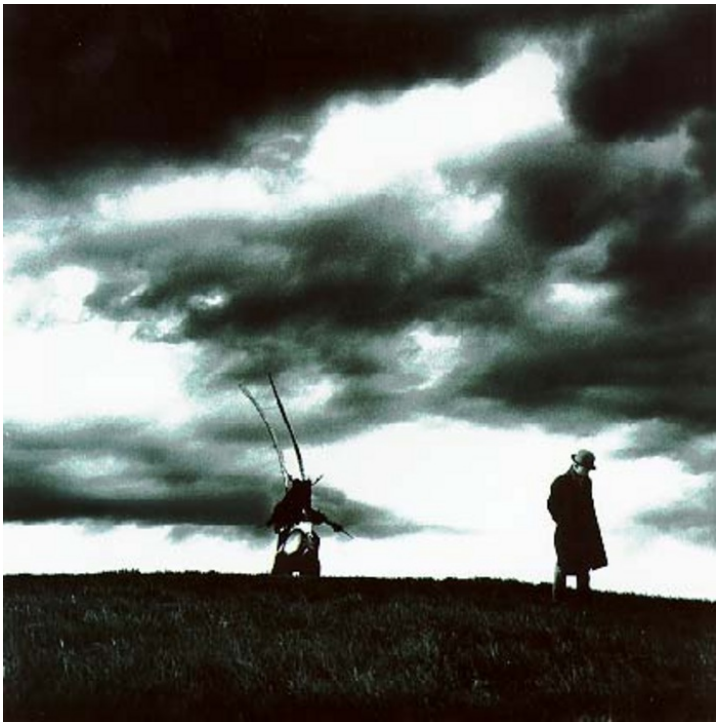
We often encounter in Kenji's phenomenology rivers and rocks in the sky. As an amateur geologist—there is now a museum in Hanamaki featuring a collection of the minerals mentioned in his works—he knew his rocks well. His nickname at school was "Rocky" (石ころ賢). One of the themes in his poetry and prose is that reality cannot be portrayed merely in the present and that a description that does not consider what the scene or object was like in the past and what it will be like in the future is, at best, fragmentary and, at worst, inaccurate.

When you read the descriptions in "Indra's Net" please bear this in mind. You are looking not at the surreal. There is no surrealism in Kenji's world. Everything that is is a part of everything that was or will be. The universe may be chaotic, but it makes perfect sense.

As the Buddha says to the two little brothers in his exquisite story "Barefeet of Light" (「ひかりの素足」)…

"There's nothing to be frightened of. Compared to the great virtue that envelops the world, your sins are what a little drop of dew on the point of a thistle's thorn is to the light of the sun."

The life of one of the brothers in "Barefeet of Light" is saved by the Buddha, thanks to his spirit of self-sacrifice. Kenji's kaleidoscopic visions of the real world were grounded in his sharpened sense of moral justice. In that way, his faith was as down-to-earth as it was visionary.



Miyazawa Kenji. Kenji had this photo taken with him consciously imitating the pose and clothing of Beethoven. Photograph by Oshima Hiroshi

Indra's Net

It seemed then that I had collapsed, out of utter exhaustion, on a bed of green grass and wind.

In that faint autumn wind I exchanged bows, courteous to a fault, with my tin-colored shadow.

Then, I stepped alone onto a dark cowberry carpet and traveled about the Tsela Plateau.

Tsela plateau

The cowberry boasted red fruit.

The white sky blanketed the entire plateau. It was a cold white, whiter than kaolin china.

The rarefied air sang in a high-pitched whirr, no doubt due to the sun making its lonely way beyond the white porcelain clouds. The sun had already sunk below the black barbed ridges in the west, creaking in the dim light of a late afternoon.

I looked around, gasping like a fish.

Wherever I looked, there wasn't even a shadow of a bird, nor was there so much as a trace of any gentle beast.

"What on earth am I visiting here in the upper reaches of the atmosphere, moving around in this air that cuts through me?"

I asked this of myself.

The cowberry was, before I knew it, gone, and the ground was covered in a sheet of dry ash-colored moss. Red moss flowers were blossoming here and there. But all this did was to intensify the cold grief of the plateau.

Before long, the late afternoon was in twilight, the moss flowers appeared reddish black, and the color of the sky above the ridges turned a faint and somber yellow.

It was then that I caught sight of an all-white lake far in the distance.

"That's not water! It's natrium salt or something that's crystallized," I said to myself. "I mustn't lose heart by getting all happy and

taken in."

Even so, I hurried over there.

The lake came closer, glittering. Before I knew it I was gazing at pure-white quartz sand and, beyond that, a place brimming darkly with real water.

The sand squeaked. I picked up a pinch of it and examined it in the dim light of the sky. It was made up of dihexagonal pyramid grains.

"This has come from dacite or rhyolite."

That's what I figured, whispering to myself, standing on the water's edge.

"Hey, this is supercooled water!" I whispered in my mind. "This is the granddaddy of water in both a liquid and a solid state!"

My palm absolutely gave off a pale phosphorescence in the water.

Suddenly there was a high-pitch ring all around.

"It's the wind. It's the green grasses. There was a rumble and a roar." These were the words ringing in my head. It was pitch dark, pitch dark with a faint red tinge.

I opened my eyes wider.

Night had fallen and the sky was as transparent as it could be. The water of the galaxy flowed silently over the sky's plain, which was made up of beautifully fired, polished steel. Little corundum pebbles shined, and every grain of sand on the banks could be counted.

The cold dark-violet plate of the sky was studded with the cleavage planes of diamonds and pointy grains of sapphire, and fragments of silicon the size of smoke tree seeds had been picked up in exquisite tweezers and inlaid into it, and all of this separately and on its own breathed in and out, trembling and quaking.

When I took another look at where my feet were, small yellow and blue flames were flickering and twinkling in the grains of sand in the sky. I suppose that supercooled lake in the Tsela Plateau was a part of the galaxy itself.

Yet, dawn seemed to come quickly on the plateau.

It was very clear that something like glass molecules you could see right through were floating up into the air and, above all, what looked like a fountain in the sky surrounded by nine small blue stars in the east was quickly transformed in the terribly dim light of the sky from steel to amazonite.

I saw an angel fly through space that had a dark-violet, subtle sheen.

"At last it's slipped in," I thought, my heart jumping with delight. "It has suddenly made its way from the Tsela Plateau of the realm of humans to that of the heavens."

The angel soared straight ahead.

"It's covering 10 kilometers in the blink of an eye!" I whispered to myself. "But look! It isn't even budging. It's soaring ahead so far without moving, without changing place, without changing form."

The angel's robe was as thin as smoke, and its holy necklace absorbed whispers of light from the dimly-lit plate of the sky.

"Got it," I thought. "The air here is rarified almost to the point of becoming a vacuum. That's why there's no wind to disturb the folds in that delicate robe."

The angel opened its dark blue eyes wide but didn't blink them once. It soared absolutely straight ahead with the faintest smile on its lips. Yet, it was neither moving, nor changing place or form.

"This is the place where all hopes are purified. The number of wishes is alleviated. Gravity is neutralized within itself, and a cold scent of quince floats through the air. And so, the cord on the angel's robe neither ripples, nor does it hang straight down."

But then the amazonite in the sky was transformed into a weird plate of purple agate, and I could no longer see the figure of the soaring angel.

"This is the Tsela Plateau after all," I said, explaining it to myself. "You can't count on just one single episode."

But what was strange was that the cold quince-like scent was still permeating the sky. And once again I sensed that this mysterious world in the sky was like a dream.

"There's something really funny here!" I thought to myself, standing there. "This celestial space seems to be right beside my sensations. As I walk on the path here and fragments of mica gradually appear in great number, it seems to me that I am getting closer and closer to granite. It may be just a fluke, but the more often it appears this way, the more true it gets. I'm sure I'll be able to sense this celestial world on this plateau again."

I turned my eyes from the sky to the plateau. The sand was now as pure white as can be. The blue of the lake, now more ancient-looking than verdigris, gave my heart a chill.

Suddenly I saw three heavenly children before me. They wore the thinnest robes, woven, it seemed, from frost, and transparent shoes, standing on the water's edge, peering intently into the eastern sky, as if waiting for the sun to rise. The eastern sky was already alight with whiteness. From the folds in their robes I could tell they were from Gandhara. I recognized them as being from a fresco that I had excavated at the ruins of the great Khotan Temple. I approached them quietly and greeted them in a very low voice, so as not to frighten them.

Buddha subdues the serpent and converts onlookers. Gandhara 2nd-3rd century

"Good morning, children of the fresco at the great Khotan Temple."

The three of them turned toward me. The radiance of their holy necklaces and their imposing and magnificent black eyes….

I spoke again, continuing to approach them.

"Good morning, children of the fresco at the great Khotan Temple."

"And who may you be?" asked the child on the right, looking straight at me without blinking.

"I am Aoki Akira, who excavated the great Khotan Temple from the sands."

"And what are you doing here?" said the same child, looking sternly at me straight in the eye.

"I want to worship the sun together with you."

"The sun? It won't be long."

The three of them turned away from me. Their necklaces briefly shined like yellow and bitter-orange and green needles, and their robes fluttered in the colors of the rainbow.

In the fiery platinum sky, from the edge of the olive green field beyond the lake, something that looked like it was melted, something seductive, as old as gold, crimson like that seen in a kiln, a single ray of light appeared.

The heavenly children stood perfectly erect and brought their hands together, looking toward it.

It was the sun. It was the sun of this heavenly realm, solemnly rocking its strangely round body that was like a thing melted down, in an instant climbing properly up in the sky. Its light now flowed in needles and bundles, and everywhere you looked you could hear a clicking and clacking.

The heavenly children jumped up and down in rapture, running over the silica sand of the pure-blue lake of True Enlightenment. Then suddenly one of the children bumped into me, and jumping back, screamed out while pointing up to the sky.

"Look, look, look at Indra's net!"

I looked up at the sky. The zenith was now azure blue, and from it to the four corners of the pale edges of the sky, Indra's spectral net vibrated radiantly as if burning, its fibers more fine than a spider's web, its construction more elaborate than that of hypha, all blending together transparently, purely, in a billion intermingled parts.

"Look, heavens, it's the drums of the wind!" said another child, bumping into me and running off in a flurry.

What can only be seen as the sun's minus counterparts, shining indigo dark and gold and green and ashen, drums seemed to fall from the sky, and, impervious to human striking, pounded out a sound with all their might; and while those countless heavenly drums called out, they seemed to be making no sound at the same time. I watched it all for so long that my eyes clouded over and all I could do was stagger about.

"Look, look at the blue peacock!" quietly said the same child who was on the right as he walked by me. Sure enough, beyond Indra's net in the sky, on the far edge of those countless resounding heavenly drums, an enormous and strange blue peacock, fanning out its jeweled tail feathers, sang out in an ethereal voice.

That peacock was most certainly present in the sky. Yet, it was not to be seen at all. It was certainly crying out. Yet its cries were not to be heard at all.

After that, there was no way that I could see the three heavenly children.

Far from it, I vaguely recalled my own figure collapsed deep into the green grass and the wind.

Roger Pulvers is an American-born Australian author, playwright, theatre director and translator living in Japan. He has published 40 books in Japanese and English and, in 2008, was the recipient of the Miyazawa Kenji Prize. In 2009 he was awarded Best Script Prize at the Teheran International Film Festival for "Ashita e no Yuigon." He is the translator of Kenji Miyazawa, Strong in the Rain: Selected Poems. *He translated this story for* The Asia-Pacific Journal.

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