

VOLUME 4 | 2023

MONKEY

NEW WRITING FROM JAPAN



MONKEY

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Hiroko Oyamada

Flight

translated by David Boyd

I FAILED MY EXAMS and ended up going to the local middle school. Taking the exams was more my parents' idea than mine, but it still stung when I failed to get into the school that was supposed to be my backup. Only a few other people in my year took the exams, but they all got in somewhere. When my classmates heard the bad news, some of them looked at me with genuine shock on their faces. No way. . . *you?* All sorts of stories sprang up around school: Takanashi-kun had a bad case of the flu. I heard it was diarrhea. . . and he was vomiting, too. Didn't he have a stress fracture in his wrist? But the reality was I just had a cold, and threw up the expensive energy drink my dad had given me in the bathroom of the school I really wanted to get into. The smelly liquid was bitter and sweet as it made its way up my nose. When I got to the local middle school, my classmates were nice to me. I felt like I'd spent enough time at cram school during elementary school to last the rest of my life, so I told my parents I wasn't going back, and they said fine. My grades weren't that bad, either. But when I got to my second year my mom suddenly started talking about getting me a tutor. I refused. She just chuckled and said, "Hear me out." According to my mom, my cousin's wife used to teach part-time at a cram school when she was in college—and she'd done a little private tutoring, too. When she and my cousin got married last year, she quit her office job. Now she was working a couple of days a week, but she was thinking about doing a bit of tutoring on the side. "Anyway, I think it would be nice if the two of you gave it a try. It's not all about where you went to school, you know. Some people know how to teach and some don't. From what I hear, Honami-san is one of the good ones." I'd only seen my cousin's wife once—when they got married. Behind her veil, her dress, and her bouquet, everything about her had seemed so small and white. But what if I don't get into my top choice? Wouldn't that make things weird within the family? "It's not like you have to stick with her until your high school exams or anything. If it doesn't work out, we can come up with any number of reasons to call it off. . . But listen, this is Honami-san we're talking about. She's good. And, you know, she's a newlywed. She tried to sign up as a tutor, but the agency turned her away. They didn't

want her getting pregnant in the middle of the year and leaving her students high and dry." So it's okay if she leaves *me* high and dry? "You're family. . . It'll be easier for her to fit you in. . . Trust me, this is a win-win." Is Honami-san that desperate for money? "Come on. How much do you think a tutor makes meeting up with a middle-schooler once a week? Besides, I'm sure Tsukiyuki-kun's making *moore* than enough. . . This is more of a mental thing." A mental thing. . . so, once a week, on Saturday afternoons, I got on my bike and went over to my cousin's house to study math and English.

The first time, my mom drove me over. Even though it was a Saturday, my cousin was apparently at work. Honami didn't look the way I remembered—she didn't seem at all small or white. This time, she was wearing glasses. Their house wasn't big, but it was new and looked pretty clean. Honami glided silently over the woody floor in cream-colored socks. My mom shuffled after her in stiff-looking slippers that were apparently for guests. We sat at a rectangular table made of pale-colored wood, drinking black tea and eating the cake my mom had brought. There was a picture on the wall right across from where I was sitting: an ink sketch on what looked like a regular sheet of paper. "My friend drew that." Even though it was just Honami and my cousin, they had four chairs set up around the table. Two of them were on one of the long sides, and the other two were on the short sides. My mom and I sat next to each other on the long side, and Honami sat on the short side by my mom. The tea had a sour-sweet smell to it—like grapes, maybe—but it didn't taste even a little sweet. The picture on the wall was of a monkey in a tree, looking this way. It wasn't a macaque, but one of those tropical-looking monkeys with a small face and a long tail, the kind of monkey that spends most of its life in the treetops, only occasionally hopping down to the ground and looking around awkwardly before scrambling back up again, eating mostly fruit and nuts, but probably snacking on the occasional insect, too. It wasn't the most realistic portrayal of a monkey, but there was still something real about the way it looked. "In my experience," Honami said, "it can be hard to stay focused over an hour-long session. . . for both the

Music

A Monkey's Dozen

Unlike a baker's dozen (one extra!), a monkey's dozen is one short. In this section you will find eleven stories, poems, a Noh play, and graphic vignettes that feature music—the special focus of this volume.



Aoko Matsuda

Angels and Electricity

translated by Polly Barton

THE CARD EMERGED FROM the envelope along with a handful of two-dollar bills. The faded envelope was lilac in color, and on it my name, written out in the English alphabet, had been scrawled in ink of a similar shade. Both lilacs had once been brighter.

On the front of the card was a unicorn with peculiarly long eyelashes, together with a blonde angel, a rainbow arching across a blue sky in the background. The image was dotted with glittery patches, which felt strange to the touch. It wasn't just the glitter that gave the card its strange texture, though. Noticing the lumpy bit in the bottom left corner, I recalled what had happened when I'd first opened it.

I hadn't known what was going on. After a moment, it came to me that I was hearing an odd noise that could only be described as electronic, and then I realized that the noise was coming from the card in my hands. Peals of warm-sounding laughter rose up among the adults sitting around the table. So distracted was I by the card's jittery sound that I couldn't take in the message written inside it—couldn't take in those lilac words commemorating my seventeenth birthday. The melody was like a mosquito flying around the room, oblivious to the person frantically chasing it, which made it hard for me to think of anything else. Still in that state, I opened the long thin envelope inside the card to find five pristine two-dollar bills.

"I thought they were kind of unusual," said a voice in hesitant Japanese from the end of the table. The voice was Yuka's.

Yuka must have been in her mid-twenties then. Born and brought up in the US, she'd learned Japanese at Sunday school from an early age, and her parents spoke Japanese almost exclusively at home, so her mastery of the language was decent enough. Yet when she spoke Japanese, Yuka—who held a demanding job in an IT firm—would instantly take on the air of a diffident child. Partly due to that, partly due to how I was back then, not to mention some other factors as well, there was always a certain tension when the two of us conversed, and time didn't flow by smoothly.

"Thank you," I said, just as hesitantly, without looking at her, and closed the card. I was relieved to hear the strange electronic sound stop.

Ichiyō Higuchi

The Music of the Koto

translated by Hitomi Yoshio

I.

THE SUN AND THE MOON illuminate the sky and all that abide below. In spring, the flowers bloom for everyone to enjoy. Why is it, then, that the storm brings so much turmoil on this lone treetop? Here was a child, innocent and alone, dragged through misfortune as his family was scattered like leaves and broken branches. For fourteen years, he'd been pelted by the rain and battered by the wind—in spring, in autumn. He was adrift in this cruel and uncertain world.

His mother had left when he was just four years old. She had no wish to abandon her child to escape her own suffering, but her parents, seeing the decline in the fortunes of her husband's family, reasoned with her and begged her to return to them. "If you entrust your life to an unworthy man, you'll only waste away your life in tears. As hard as it is to leave a child behind, at least there is only one . . ." These words made their way into her still youthful ears and took hold of her heart. She was not sorry to leave the child's father. But her beloved boy . . . What would happen to him after she left? The thought was so agonizing she could have coughed blood. But the duty she felt toward her parents held her in an iron grip, and in the end, her heart was too weak to resist. And so, knowing that their life was about to collapse like pillars of frost, she left her home and her child—and the father of her child.

After she left, the child's father would come to her parents' house to seek her out. Sometimes he would be alone, sometimes he would bring the boy. He would even try to leave the boy at their doorstep. "I don't care what becomes of me," he begged and pleaded. "But please, come back, for the boy and his future. I won't say forever . . . just give him five more years, until he can take care of himself." He grasped at the hope that she would return—after all, what mother can resist doting on her child? Surely she would find it unbearable to remain apart. So when would she come back? On the fifteenth, or perhaps on the twentieth? Perhaps any day now—today or tomorrow. He waited and waited, but the days passed in vain. On his final visit, she was nowhere to be found. What had become of her? Was she a wet nurse now, looking after another

Note from the translator: This story was originally published in 1893, just two months after Ichiyō moved to Ryūsenji-cho in Tokyo and opened a shop to support her family. The title, “The Music of the Koto” (*Koto no ne*), is a reference to a poem in the Suma chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, and there are allusions to classical poetry throughout the story. During the Meiji period, a woman rarely left her husband unless her family, often of a higher standing, intervened. In such cases, the woman did not usually get custody of the children, especially if they were male, who remained part of the father’s household. This dilemma of a married woman facing the decision to suffer in her marriage or get a divorce and leave her child behind is explored from the woman’s point of view in “The Thirteenth Night” (Jūsan’ya, 1895).

This story was previously translated as “The Sound of the Koto” by Robert Lyons Danley in his book *In the Shade of Spring Leaves* (New York: Norton, 1981).

Satoshi Kitamura

**Five
Parallel
Lines**



Kyōhei Sakaguchi

Listen for the Perfume

translated by Sam Malissa

"I'M NOT A HUMAN BEING. I just have a human shape. I can't see that shape. I'm a simple vessel. But nothing is put inside me. I wait for nothing. No rain fills me up, there's nothing to ladle in. I'm just there. There's a bird perched on a branch. Not that I'm looking at it. I'm just there. Legs, move! Move those legs. Legs that don't belong to anyone. Not even to me. Which is why I'm the one moving them. I'm not being moved by anyone. Just watching the body. I'm the bird. I'm this rock over here. I'm not human. Don't look at me. I sing. It's not my song. I'm that person. He's not human. He's getting inside of me. I hold all his memories. Just for now. So ask whatever you want. You won't get a single answer. You don't get what you don't get. The bird, the same age as me, is listening to what I'm saying. Which is why I have bird wings. Out here, where there's nothing, you can hear the city's voice. Its voice carries. Coming from somewhere far away. It comes to me through the electric lines. I'm a telephone pole. I have to stay here. You all can run off to wherever. Just listen to me when you're there. You'll be able to hear me no matter how far you go. Listen for something. Don't listen for an answer, just listen to listen. You can hear all sorts of sounds. There's a rope. Or there was. Rain was falling. I shake my body and it makes a noise. The noise isn't words. It's a scent. There's a scent in the air. You must not smell it. Listen for it, that wafting perfume. Did you hear it? I didn't. I have no ears. I am not an ear. I'm not even a simple vessel. I gather. Look at the things I've gathered. I myself have no eyes. I am an eye. I'm not even an eye. The eye sees sound completely. It remembers the sound. I can't remember. I have no memory. I just know. I feel the scent. Though I feel it, I don't describe it. I don't move. I am here. A telephone pole. My head hurts. The pain has come. Just showed up out of nowhere. The pain is alive. It breathes. I have a body. My body is gone. My eye can see it. But none of you know. Where are you? Come out. Please come out. Here it comes. I can't see the walls; there are trees all around, their colors transparent. Come here come here, come-come-come! I'm not some sort of weirdo. I'm a sound. I make noise. Bang on a rock, on a boulder, on your skin, on your head, bang on whatever you have right there beside you. Bang-bang-bang! Go ahead,

Eight Modern Haiku Poets on Music

selected and translated by Andrew Campana

Takako Hashimoto (1899–1963)

中空に音の消えてゆくつばな笛
its sound
vanishing in midair—
reed grass flute

目つむれば鉦と鼓のみや壬生念仏
if you close your eyes
all that's left are gongs and drums—
Mibu Temple festival

夏雲の立ちたつ伽藍童女うた
summer clouds
surrounding the temple
a little girl singing

祭太鼓うちてやめずもやまずあれ
festival drums
keep playing and playing
I wish they'd never stop

祭笛吹くとき男佳かりける
a man
playing a flute at the festival
is incredibly attractive

踊り唄終りを始めにくりかへし
a song to dance to
its end repeats
at its beginning

髪白く笛息ふかきまつりびと
a festival-goer
despite his white hair
plays the flute so powerfully

踊り唄遠しそこよりあゆみ来て
the dancing song
is so distant now
I didn't realize how far I'd gone

炎天下鉦が冴え音のチンドン屋
under the blazing sun
cymbals sound brilliantly clear—
chindon-ya marching band

太鼓の音とびだす祇園囃子より
the sound of a taiko drum
leaps out
from the music of the Gion Festival

蘆の笛吹きあひて音を異にする
reed flutes
try to play in harmony
but each sounds different

露万朶幼きピアノの音が飛ぶ飛ぶ
branches covered in scattered dew
the sound of a child at the piano
playing notes at random

指さえぎえ笛の高音の色かへて
my fingers
can so clearly change the tone
of the flute's high notes

をどりの輪つよし男みて女みて
such a strong ring of dancers
all of the men
and all of the women!

かの老婆まためぐりくるをどりくる
that old woman
has come around dancing
and around and around again

尽きぬをどりおきて帰るや来た道を
the dance is seemingly never-ending
so I leave them to it
and head back home

伏眼の下笛一文字に冴え高音
under downcast eyes
the flutist plays a single note
high and clear

雪の駅ピアノ木箱を地膚の上
snowy train station
wooden piano crate
lying on the bare earth

What role, if any, does music play in your translation process? Remarks from nine translators



You would think that music could aid translation in so many ways.

Translators might even develop a playlist for each author or for specific works. On the other hand, would it not be better to set music aside, so that its rhythms don't conflict with the rhythms fermenting in the translator's mind? Is that even possible, given that so many of us are afflicted by nagging earworms of one invasive species or another?

In the following pages, nine translators respond to the question.

Their answers might surprise you!



MONKEY is full of deep, funny, wild, scary, fabulous, moving, surprising, brilliant work. There is no literary magazine, no magazine period, that I get more excited about reading.

—LAIRD HUNT, AUTHOR OF *ZORRIE*



Japanese writers are exploring the surreal world that we live in, the fantastical world of our existence today.

—ROLAND KELTS, AUTHOR OF *JAPANAMERICA*



The Japanese sense of story is very different from the American or Western sense of story, and it always opens up possibilities for me.

—MATTHEW SHARPE, AUTHOR OF *JAMESTOWN*



MONKEY is the coolest magazine in the world. It has the coolest new and classic Japanese writers, and some extremely cool English-language writers too."

—REBECCA BROWN, AUTHOR OF *THE GIFTS OF THE BODY*

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TRANSLATORS IN THIS ISSUE

Jeffrey Angles, Polly Barton, David Boyd, Andrew Campana, Chris Corker, Michael Emmerich, Ted Goossen, Kendall Heitzman, Lisa Hofmann-Kuroda, Sam Malissa, Margaret Mitsutani, Jay Rubin, Laurel Taylor, Asa Yoneda, Hitomi Yoshio

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