There had been once an old pine tree near my parents’ house. People had called it oikakematsu. It means “a pine tree following behind”. It was cut down more than 40 years ago in course to some street widening project. Nobody in our village was against it. Neither was my family against this change. But the night oikakematsu was cut we had a mourning ceremony with sake. We thanked it for a lot for many years of coexistences with us.

My mother believed that kids must go home before sunset because of this tree. It had enough presence to scare kids. (I remember that I looked back a couple time in order to make sure the tree wasn’t following behind me.) My father wrote a haiku for this pine tree. Though its literary value is low I like it very much.

* old pine tree
he’s not just following me
he wants to talk
(oikakete hontowa matsu wa kataritashi)

A pine tree is (or perhaps used to be) a kami (god) in Japan. The sun, the moon, stars, wind, thunder, soil, mountains and mountain passes, bushes, forests, rocks, stones, the sea, the rivers, lakes, ponds, marshes, island, water, fire... All these are kami of nature. We make animals divine, such as a snake (a messenger of water kami). We also give a godlike status to a shark, a deer, a boar, a wolf, a bear, a monkey, a fox, a rabbit, a crow, a pigeon, etc.

In our daily existence and social life we address house, family, village, birth, disease, love, death, grain, rice field, hunting, fishing, sailing, water well, toilet, storeroom as kami.

When I was a child, I saw a certain rock on the ground. I used to sit on it or to stand on it singing. Later I learned it was kami that protected our village from disasters and bad luck.

To be truthful, oikakematsu wanted to talk and express feelings, not just following me behind. As I had a moment of imagining and photographing, there was a frightening and beating creation opening up and spreading... In that way, how good it would be if I could describe nature that the kami is in. I always think along the direction of this idea.

I shouldn’t embellish nature. Somehow nature comes to me... by itself and informs me about its powerful, dynamical and mysterious existence and its moments. I really expect and want this way.
a wild boar comes
and feasts on air-
spring mountain pass

Tohta Kaneko
(shishi ga kite kuki wo taberu haru no tohge)

stepping on a vine
the dew on the whole mountain
stirred all at once

Sekitei Hara
(tsuru funde ichizan no tsuyu ugokikeri)

the leaves will never
cease to fall- do not make haste
don't ever hasten!

Syuson Katoh
(konoha furiyamazu isogunayo isogunayo)

a wolf
with a single firefly
clinging to it

Tohta Kaneko
(ohkamini hotaru ga hitotsu tsuite ita)

with a piece of stone
the burning red dragonfly
has fallen in love

Hakusen Watanabe
(aru ishini akakku horetaru tombo kana)

one day
a nameless spring mountain
began to smile

Nobuko Katsura
(aruhi yori warai hajimeshi nanakiyama)

cutting
the white leeks
like shafts of light

Momoko Kuroda
(shironegi no hikari no boh wo ima kizamu)
to a youth
a spring bird
comes and introduces itself

Nana Naruto
(seinen ni haru no tori kite na tsugerikeri)

blowing from behind
the autumn wind tells me
to get on board

Matsuo Takano
(ushiro yori kite akikaze noreto iu)

god of the toilet
with a round face
autumn persimmon

Shizuo Miyasaka
(secchin no kami wa marugao kaki no aki)

My father already followed oikakematsu in his own human passing. His photo is on the Buddhist altar now. My mother never forgets offering a glass of water and meal for him every day. She prays with palms put together. Fresh flowers always sit near his photo. Many people in Japan believe that they become kami (or hotoke) after their deaths. Ichiro Hori, an ethnologist, explained this in his book “Japanese Shamanism” by quoting Charles Eliot’s words “Most of the Japanese who almost never had interest in Buddhism and rarely visited temples in their lifetime are buried according to the funeral customs of Buddhism and most of the families”. Buddhist altars are not intended for the Buddhist images to be enshrined. They are no more than shelves for a memorial tablet of the deceased. People call dead people “hotoke sama” without any doubt and use such expressions as “hotoke’s curse” which means “consolation for hotoke” commonly. Generally, this fearless expression hotoke” instead of dead person is used only in Japan among Buddhist countries as far as I (and Charles Eliot) know. It is nothing but imitation of Shinto. Dead person becomes kami in Shinto. So Buddhist people couldn’t put dead people in the lower status than shinto’s dead people. kami and hotoke is completely the same for the Japanese people.”

* newly picked tea leaves
first cup
offered on the Buddhist altar

Tokiko Hirata
(shincha kumu mazu issen wa mihotokeni)
on the waste land
both stones and dead
rise in the wind

Sosyu Takaya
(arechinite ishi mo shinin mo kaze hassu)

moonrise-
together with the dead
awaiting a train

Murio Suzuki
(tsukinode ya shindamonora to kisha wo matsu)

another one
of the deceased coming by
and dancin

Kazuko Nishimura
(matahitori mohja kitarite odorukana)

the dead sprit
entered into me is healthy-
blue sky as always

Kohji Takahara
(bokuni noru yurei sukoyaka itsumono sora)

butterflies flutter
while talk
with the dead

Hakkoh Yokoyama
(cho hirahira kojin to katari orutokini)

in the offing
the father lives
once a day
in the offing the sun sets

Shigenobu Takayanagi
(okini chichi ari hini ichido okini hiwa ochi)

"kagemusha" vanished,
"kurosawa" has vanished
into the lightning-flash

Aiko Kumagai
(inazuma e kagemusha kie kurosawa kie)
a firefly comes-
carrying the sorrow
of my brother

Momoko Kuroda
(hotaru kuru anino kanashimi sagete kuru)

after I have gone
at the foot of the mountains
cherry trees in bloom

Sumio Mori
(warenakute yamabenno sakura sakinikeri)

It is my long-cherished desire to describe my feelings in my words via nature. And I know nothing better for that than haiku.

a snail
dreams a blue dream
on the back of a leaf

R.H. Blyth

All haiku, except the marked (*) ones, are from the books

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