THE SINGING HEART

compiled and annotated by
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Translated by
William I. Elliott
and
Nishihara Katsumasa
in the village and town
when water weeds rise beneath reflected clouds.

Sakutarō’s “Song of a Wanderer” can be heard in this poem. The crucial
difference is, however, Junzaburō’s cool-headedness throughout and his wit,
including humor. By contrast, Sakutarō’s voice is loud with anger. “These
poems,” Sakutarō writes, “are for oral presentation and are written with that in
mind. They should only be read aloud. They are for singing.” (Preface to Ice
Island). Junzaburō’s poem, on the other hand, demands to be read in private
and in silence.

In the Preface to No Traveller Returns Junzaburō writes:

...Various characters are hidden inside me. First a modern
man and an ancient man are both present, the former
represented by modern science, philosophy, theology and
literature, and the latter by primitive culture, psychology and
folklore.

Still one other man remains who is unsure whether he
represents the mystery of life or that of eternity in space. This
man whom I call the “Phantom Figure” I regard as an eternal
traveller. He comes and goes at will; it may be the remnants
in our subconsciousness of primeval experience which causes
him thus to appear.

The word “eternal” means to me the unavoidable
acceptance of nothingness (extinction) rather than its denial.
Looking at a blade of grass in the process of sprouting arouses
in me something like ‘eternal memories’, which mischief I
attribute to the ‘Phantom Figure’.

Unlike the eternal wanderer, who is Sakutarō himself, the Phantom Figure
serves as the author’s alter ego. It appears in other sections of No Traveller
Returns in such phrases as “The Phantom Figure exudes sadness”, “The
Phantom Figure is lonely” and “The Phantom Figure departs.” In his poems
Junzaburō sets the Phantom Figure walking along in some place such as the
Musashino Plain and has him stooping to touch the red bud of a spear flower,
an acorn and the dead leaves of the zelkova tree. He reminds us of the “eternal
memory” which is “the radical loneliness of being” carried even in trifling
objects.

Junzaburō himself, while in reality strolling along the Musashino Plain, is in
continual quest of something, because in his mind the “Phantom Figure” really
exists. What he keenly feels is nothing less than profound human loneliness.
His idea of poetry is clearly reflected in the following poem (No. 39) from No Traveller Returns:

I can no longer write a poem.
Where no poem is, a poem is.
Only bits of reality can constitute poems.
Reality is a loneliness.
I am; therefore, I feel lonely.
Loneliness is the essence of existence and beauty basically tends toward loneliness.
Beauty is the symbol of eternity.

The “Phantom Figure” or the “Eternal Traveller” is loneliness proper, this being the core of Junzaburo’s poetics. “Loneliness” in No Traveller Returns abounds:

A dim light
shines through the window.
The human world is loneliness.

A man puts his head out the window.
Gentians grow in his garden.
His wife frowns in thought.
This man who lives
in a corner of the lane
where zelkova leaves are falling—
this man is loneliness itself.

Loneliness is an open window.

When autumn comes
I recall those early years
strolling the Musashino Plain:
I heard my own tomorrow in the crackling
rustic yellow leaves I trod on.
I gathered a few oak leaves
and set them on my desk
and for quite a while
regarded the plain.
The reddish buds on the bare branches
seemed to be shrivelling.
Spring had gone down deep into winter
and loneliness was the buds on those branches.

I sit in the light of a paper lantern
in an inn. It is autumn
and valerian is blooming.
Cricket song is steeped in stillness.
I begin to read a letter.
Loneliness is the field.

Having read in a priest’s book
great praise of the laurel tree
I went looking for it
on the Musashino Plains
but found nothing.
Then next to the outdoor toilet of a school
I ran into a single ragged, crooked laurel.
Loneliness is in oddity.
At summer's end, at Koma Station
I bought a pear from an old peasant.
She gestured oddly,
to make me laugh
and to express her thanks.
And I wished a folklorist had seen that.
Loneliness is in remnants of myth.