

Judith Woolf,
'Sodzu-Baba'.



Three Roads River

Judith Woolf

On the way my guide tells me this:

‘When one dies the body is washed and shaven, and attired in white, in the garments of a pilgrim. And a wallet, like the wallet of a Buddhist pilgrim, is hung about the neck of the dead; and in this wallet are placed three rin. And these coins are buried with the dead.

‘For all who die must, except children, pay three rin at the Sanzu-no-Kawa, “The River of the Three Roads”. When souls have reached that river, they find there the Old Woman of the Three Roads, Sodzu-Baba, waiting for them ... And if the Old Woman is not paid the sum of three rin, she takes away the clothes of the dead, and hangs them upon the trees.’¹

Lafcadio Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*.

Picture a place of stones,
the dry bed of a dry river,
on the far side of the sunless, shadowless mountains
where the *hototogisu* sings, the bird of sorrow
whose song is his own name.²

A dry bed, yet something endlessly flowing
over the pebbles, sharp and never wave-worn,
something impalpable, flowing like water,
hard to make out in the brown light.

And imagine too, for in dreams you have seen it already,
a dark grove by the arid shore,
trees neither budding nor leafing, but something hanging
like a row of corpses from the naked boughs,
and among the trees a mist-wraith winding,
ravelling out like a hank of hair.

*Three rin to cross the river,
Three round coins of brown copper.
Three rin to buy your passage
From Sodzu-Baba.*³

It was the owl that shrieked, the fatal bellman.
Tototo, the man dies.
Kotokokko, the boy dies.⁴
In a time of cholera many are taken.
(Forty-four sen is the price for burning a child.)⁵

Ghostly women, their arms empty,
call to the hag of the Three Roads River,
'Grandmother, where is the child?'⁶

Her face is whiter than crumpled paper,
Her eyes are sharp as a polished blade.
Her arms and her withered dugs are hung with metal,
garlands of coins threaded on ropes of straw.⁷

*Ask me no questions and you'll hear no lies.
A bare pittance to cross the river.⁸
Aborted or miscarried,
untimely burned or buried,
the children pay no tribute
to Sodzu-Baba.*

On a barren shore,
which echoes with the sound of infant sighing
as if water ran whispering over the dry stones,
they pile towers of pebbles in the unending twilight.

Jizo, guardian of travellers,
Jizo, protector of children, born and unborn,
spread your wide sleeves to shield them.⁹
Merciful Kwannon,¹⁰
let the light of your countenance glimmer like a candle
in the demon-haunted dusk.

Look closer now, for have you not been here before
in dreams, and not only in dreams?
Look at the shapes that hang in the skeleton grove.

The sash of the drowned girl who leapt from the cliff top
bound breast to breast with her forbidden lover,¹¹
her silk kimono and his hanging together,
stiff with faded embroidery, stiff with salt.

The rotting shreds that once were a soldier's tunic
(the first explosion tore him to bloody strings
which the second buried),
soiled clothes of the plague-dead hastily heaped on the pyre,
(eighty sen is the cost of burning an adult),
the peasant's tattered coat, wadded with straw.

Indigo, crimson, khaki, livid green,
sea-slime and faeces and caking of dried blood,
the living lice descending to the dead land
in the folds of a beggar's garment.
The wearers of these going naked through the dark flood.

*Three round coins of brown copper.
Those who can't pay must shiver.
Tears and pleading cut no ice
with Sodzu-Baba.*

Only the wrestler, tattooed from neck to ankle,
strides down the phantom road in his coat of colours
toward the judgement hall and the soul-reflecting mirror,
the regions of fire and ice, the cauldrons of molten metal.¹²

*It is nothing to Sodzu-Baba what doom awaits you,
but had you not paid me my due
I would have had your skin.*

All is illusion, but one thing is certain:
whatever path you take through the dark kingdom,
whether your mouth shrinks to a needle-point
and your belly swells in the house of the hungry ghosts,¹³
whether the lotus rises

above the torments of the crimson lake,¹⁴
as long as the wheel turns
you will return to this place to repeat the same transaction.

From the reeking abattoir of a slaughtered city,
dank from the sea-bed with flesh eaten by fishes,
out of the plague-pit,
or washed and shaven and robed
for seemly burial,
with a lock of severed hair placed in the coffin
in sign of perpetual mourning¹⁵
and three coins in a wallet –

*three rin to buy your passage
through Three Roads River –*

as long as the wheel turns
your shade will return to the grove of Sodzu-Baba.

You are beginning to remember.
Listen.

Have you forgotten the song of the caged cricket,¹⁶
the rustle of leaves in the furnace of the drying sheds
(always this insistent whisper
of moving dead leaves),¹⁷
the song of the old women reeling silk
with hands spotted with age, swollen with labour?¹⁸

Have you forgotten
the taste of death in your mouth,
bitter as bile?

That shrilling in your ears,
is it still the song of the cricket?
You try to cry out but your voice creaks in your throat.

Someone is reeling silk,
pulling it steadily downwards,
winding an endless thread from a pale cocoon.

There are stones under your feet,
branches above you where something is heavily hanging,
brushing against you with a foul caress.

The grove is full of mist, grey-white and swirling,
and through the mist are hands outstretched and groping,
crooked with age,
cupped to demand the toll you cannot pay her.

*Three rin for Sodzu-Baba,
three round coins of brown copper,
three rin to buy your passage
through Three Roads River.*

There is neither future nor past.
If you are dreaming,
this is a dream from which you cannot wake.

Is it fog which fills the sockets of your eyes
and winds a spider's clammy caul around you?

*These hands that grasp your coat
are Sodzu-Baba.*

*This fear that thickens your blood
is Sodzu-Baba.*

*This hair that chokes your throat
is Sodzu-Baba.*

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Judith Woolf

Notes

1. The story comes from Patrick Lafcadio Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan: First Series* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927), 61-2. Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) was an eccentric and talented journalist, travel writer and translator who began his career in America and the West Indies, but settled in Japan in 1890, where he married the daughter of a Samurai, converted to Buddhism and became a Japanese subject. Hearn was abandoned as a child by both his Irish father and his Greek mother, and as a young man by the rest of his father's Dublin family, which helps to explain his love of the stability he found in traditional Japanese culture. The country had only become open to Western trade and influence in the mid-19th century, and the unfamiliar Japan that Hearn describes, though arguably idealised, is a valuable record of a society which was already on the cusp of change.

In Japanese mythology, the souls of children are sent after death to the Sai-no-Kawara, a Buddhist limbo in the form of a dry river bed, while adult souls must go to be judged on the far side of the underworld river Sanzu, the Japanese equivalent of the Styx, which is called the Three Roads or Three Crossings River because it has a beautiful bridge for the ghosts of the righteous and a ford for ordinary sinners, while the wicked have to make their own way through its deep, serpent and demon-infested waters. The hag Sodzu-Baba, who collects a toll from the dead on the banks of the river, is more commonly known as Datsue-Ba (Old Woman Who Strips Clothes).

A version of this poem, adapted by the composer, has been set for solo soprano by Roger Marsh under the title *Sodzu Baba*.

2. 'But rarely, very rarely, a far stranger cry is heard in those trees at night, a voice as of one crying in pain the syllables "ho-to-to-gi-su." The cry and the name of that which utters it are one and the same, *hototogisu*.
'It is a bird of which weird things are told; for they say it is not really a creature of this living world, but a night wanderer from the Land of Darkness. In the Meido its dwelling is among those sunless mountains of Shide over which all souls must pass to reach the place of judgement.' Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan: Second Series* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927), 39.
3. Sodzu-Baba's refrain is written in the *dodoitsu* form, a folk song form in which a 26-syllable verse is divided into lines of seven, seven, seven and five syllables.
4. 'The Owl is a hateful bird that sees in the dark. Little children who cry are frightened by the threat that the Owl will come to take them away ... It also cries, "*Tototo*," "The man dies," and "*Kotokokko*," "The boy dies." So people hate it.' Student essay quoted by Hearn in *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan: Second Series*, 41-2.
5. Hearn gives the cost of burning both 'an adult of my own size' and a child in 'In Cholera-Time', reprinted in *Writings from Japan: An Anthology*, ed. Francis King (London: Penguin, 1984), 147-8.
6. *Obaasan* (grandmother) is a polite form of *ba* or *baba* (old woman). The Japanese ideogram for *obaasan* combines the characters for 'woman' and 'wave', suggesting an old woman with many wrinkles or with billowing white hair. If you lengthen the final vowel of *baba* to *babaa*, the word means an ugly old hag. Cf. Kittredge Cherry, *Womansword: What Japanese Words Say About Women* (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1987), 130.
7. Rin were round copper coins with a square hole in the middle so they could be threaded on straw twine.
8. A rin was one tenth of a sen, which in turn was one hundredth of a yen. In the 1890s, when Hearn was writing, a sen was worth one British farthing.
9. '... some say the child-ghosts must build little towers of stones for penance in the Sai-no-Kawara, which is the place to which all children after death must go. And the Oni, who are demons, come to throw down the little stone-piles as fast as the children build; and these demons frighten the children, and torment them. But the little souls run to Jizo, who hides them in his great sleeves, and comforts them, and makes the demons go away.' Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan: First Series*, 54.

Jizo Bosatsu 'is the great protector of suffering humanity. [...] One of the main devotions offered to him is as the pitying protector of children.' *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, ed. Felix Guirand, tr. Richard Aldington and Delano Ames (London: Batchworth Press, 1959), 429-30.

10. Kwannon is the Japanese Buddhist goddess of mercy. Like the Virgin Mary, she is depicted holding a child. In times of religious persecution, Japanese Christians used to pray to 'Maria Kwannon', statues of Kwannon with a concealed cross.

11. Hearn discusses the various ways in which lovers commit double suicide. 'Sometimes with the girl's long crape-silk under-girdle (*koshi-obi*) they bind themselves fast together, face to face, and so embracing leap into some deep lake or stream.' *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan: First Series*, 271.
12. 'Hell, Jigoku, is underground. It is made up of eight regions of fire and eight of ice. ... The ruler of this infernal world is Emma-hoo (Yama-raja) who is also the supreme judge of Hell. ... The sinner is taken before this formidable judge, who sits between the decapitated heads of Miru-me and Kagu-hana, from whom nothing can be hidden. All his past sins are reflected into the sinner's eyes by a huge mirror. His sins are weighed, and then Emma-hoo gives judgement. The sinner must stay in such-and-such a region of Hell according to the extent of his sins, unless his soul is saved by the prayers of the living. In this case a Bodhisattva rescues him from torture, and the sinner is reborn either on earth or in a Paradise.' *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, 430.
13. Souls condemned to the *Gakido*, the Buddhist inferno of starvation, are perpetually tormented by hunger.
14. 'Floating in glory, Dai-Nichi-Nyorai, Kwannon-Sama, Amida Buddha. Far below them as hell from heaven surges a lake of blood, in which souls float. The shores of this lake are precipices studded with sword-blades thickly set as teeth in the jaws of a shark; and demons are driving naked ghosts up the frightful slopes. But out of the crimson lake something crystalline rises, like a beautiful, clear water-spout; the stem of a flower, – a miraculous lotus, bearing up a soul to the feet of a priest standing above the verge of the abyss. By virtue of his prayer was shaped the lotus which thus lifted up and saved a sufferer.' Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan: First Series*, 66.
15. 'According to ancient custom a wife bereaved sacrifices a portion of her hair to be placed in the coffin of her husband, and buried with him.' Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan: Second Series*, 95.
16. Hearn discusses the Japanese habit of keeping musical insects as pets in 'Insect-Musicians', reprinted in *Writings from Japan: An Anthology*, 227-52.
17. 'The factory floors are made slippery with the tread of bare-footed coolies, who shout as the tea whirls through its transformations. The over-note to the clamour – an uncanny thing too – is the soft rustle-down of the tea itself – stacked in heaps, carried in baskets, dumped through chutes, rising and falling in the long troughs where it is polished, and disappearing at last into the heart of the firing-machine – always this insistent whisper of moving dead leaves.' *Kipling's Japan: Collected Writings*, ed. Hugh Cortazzi and George Webb (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 229.
18. 'The thatched wayside cottages were wide open to catch any breeze that blew, and heaps of cocoons tumbled over the mats like snowdrifts. It was time for grandmothers and other elderly relatives to begin to reel the silk. They sat among the drifts, drawing the slender threads off the cocoons, along a trough of hot water and on to a hand reel.' Pat Barr, *The Deer Cry Pavilion: A Story of Westerners in Japan, 1868-1905* (London: Penguin 1988), 166.