

Conversation with Murasaki

Also by Tom Lowenstein:

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Filibustering in Samsara — A Footnote

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Tom Lowenstein

**Conversation
with
Murasaki**

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Cover art: Toyokuni III ‘Prince Genji in a Court Room’, 1852.
Photograph by Jemimah Kuhfeld.

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For Anna

I

An Hour and Half with Hiroshige

1.

I know what you mean by this hypertrophically engorged blossom.
It's in storybook snow-clots, which bounce, on the one hand,

(ping pong) off the eyeball and proclaim ways, on the other,
in which emphasis implies concealment or (implied) withholding,

and that what appears, at first glimpse, on the surface,
to be gross, supplies situations of seclusion for the essences

which otherwise could never be arrested
or, at the least, expressed and apprehended.

2.

They can't be kept from one another's clutches,
this orang-utan orange and barefaced green screeching.

A pine that's endured transects and referees their unappetising wrangle.
Spring's juices run bitter. Autumn's shame is raw and spiteful.

3.

Ah, plums! how greedily you'll plump out fructified, in full, from these
 rude,
forced, crude, harsh unaccommodated clusters, suspended, all too soon
 and often
in fly-punctuated, mildew-sprinkled and wasp-punctured pruinescence.

4.

I used to grow that iris. But decorum forbids
the disclosure of what habit-formingly it once dictated.

Still, it's glandular already, and with heartening
apartness—autochthonously valiant—stands.

5.

(It's not the same with maple,
which keeps strictly to species,

and for this glaring interval
contrives, rudely, to blind us.)

6.

What is this waste of a good, high, full moon, fissiparously
obscured by chains of wild geese on their equinoctial voyage?

Let all of them have flocked south from the Kuril Islands, and when
they've settled, you can re-install this expatriated item to its intact hangar.

7.

The sea was a dragon, and – in its adolescent phase of
mustard kale whose fretwork was etched or splash-frozen
on the mountain – there was, all at once, arrest and impulse.

Froth granules have evolved to rock. But whether
this stone-and-water cobalt will eventually dissolve,
is the inhabiting enigma of this least chemical of deposits.

8.

No good gaping at volcanos yet. Better first
to clear the intervening landscape of all these
fussy and obfuscating by-products of custom.

9.

Too much ostentatious blue makes us
tend to forget that our day-trip to those
maples was construed as pilgrimage originally.

We set out *qua* sophisticated aestheticians
and hyper-refined, dissatisfied literati.
And see how seducingly we've been so far sated!

10.

What a burden it became to carry on
as modern. For we never could displace
ourselves from these shrunk ends

of the present, and thus, unfathomably,
fell foul of lotuses we'd blundered into.
How gorgeous, nonetheless, they kept on growing!

11.

A single full moon reflected
in ten thousand fields of paddy.

Why repine at this equalising
circulation of an institution?

12.

No, no, no. Not these transitory people.
Just water in movement and some experienced
old pine branches. Don't reflect me there either.

13.

Trees lined the beach and, hypothetically,
you strolled between them. People had this

experience *circa* 1740 (that leisure took effort),
then projected it, perfected, as a recollection.

14.

High across the gulch through autumn,
strenuous, the bridge continues.

It is the joining power of your walk.
And all, thus extended, conspires towards outcome.

15.

A low intensity containment within this slopingly
inflected frame's shallow, unemphatic bevel.

No need to go deep. It's much better on the edge,
from where you can glance at whatever travels near you.

No Pond Moment

Ancient pond.
A frog jumps in.
The sound of water.

Matsuo Basho

1.

Slicing through its own
reflection the frog silently
embraced its disappearance.

2.

In the stone of the rim, there was
jumping and splashing.
But nothing could rattle the water surface.

3.

I'd like to believe the frog was
just pursuing its genetic *dharma*.
How you are to everyone—is all they'll notice.

4.

Deep in the mountains,
unwitnessed millions

of leptodactylids
reiterate the moment.

5.

Born 1643 and died at just fifty.
A transient specimen of plantain
that underwent exposure.

6.

As he stooped to undo them,
damp blue lashings
revealed gently webbed sandals.

7.

Frog spawn: and a bulge of
pop-eyed Bodhidharma faces
glaring from behind a lotus.

8.

(Humourless as carp
that mopped up the tadpoles
inseminating this pond water.)

9.

Jump at just the right angle
and you might cancel your reflection.
Was this frog cognition?

10.

The frog cogitated and took off.
Nothing was the same and not much
changed in a gently wetted cosmos.

11.

Abandoning land and achieving deep water,
the frog had arrived in a boundaryless vicinity.
No sacred places left to visit.

12.

In the water of his mind, no pond
to jump in. The poet said this.
The frog knew no better.

13.

A good small place
for a diagram of time
before it stopped working.

14.

He too took a voyage through the labyrinth of history.
Solitary, transmogrified but still identical to all the others.
Even the Buddhas have maintained their practice.

15.

Slumbering universal water. The frog swam
to the bottom where the world's umbilical

coiled upward from its root mud to a lotus.
There were plenty of mosquitoes and he ate a number.

16.

First here and now gone. It adopted
a familiar but unfathomable medium.
The word *gone*'s implication.

17.

The frog that spawned successive
energetic generations. Which individuals
have been witnessed jumping?

18.

Everything has
a career
of some description.

19.

A remote stretch of water.
Ten thousand frog throats
lifted to extol the silence.

20.

Hard to quantify the moment when that
ounce-and-a-half landed. Followed by
three centuries of measured syllabic splashing.

21.

Afternoon garden. Downward entry.
Below the surface, one solitary venture converged
with the All in an inaccessible resolution.

22.

A hole in the water that led
twistingly to the underworld.
This small messenger connected us.

23.

‘Why not sit quietly?’ ‘Because something makes
me want to jump, if just once. Isn’t it natural
to fribble away your energy and talent?’