

A SLOW AIR : HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER VACATION

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FOREWARD

The experiences and thoughts described in this article come out of a summer spent in Kyoto, where I took part in a course in the study of Noh: Traditional Theater Training.

Leaving for Kyoto: the quality of light is amazing. It is the original light of the air, generated from within, the vibration of molecules. It feels propitious, a blessing for a journey. The train runs through rice fields deep in their summer green, the light growing up through the roots. The hills are layers of greens, growing darker deeper into the coolness of the hollows, rainbows of greens, lit up from within.

I'm coming to Kyoto from Kobe, a "modern" city, an "international" city, everyone says. Kobe is a din of construction: fifteen-year-old buildings being torn down for new "mansions." Old houses don't last long; they occupy too much precious horizontal space. Kobe is building into the vertical, piling people on top of one another. The old buildings, too close to the ground, are left in the dark, in the shadow of "Lion's Mansions."

Kyoto has its own shape: an arrangement of horizontal perpendiculars. Built on the ancient Chinese plan, straight lines for the dragons to travel. These clear paths feel more deeply etched into the earth than ordinary streets, more deeply than the streets of Kobe or Osaka. Those cities have been thrown together in such a hurry of reconstruction, after being flattened by bombs, another kind of dragon. Those streets curve around, end abruptly, angle into each other. A dragon could never get home from Osaka.

I'm staying in a little apartment down near Tofukuji, southeast of Kyoto Station. Two dim *tatami* rooms looking out over receding waves of grey tile roofs. The Noh classes will be held up in Iwakura, almost directly north of here, a long scooter ride

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in the morning.

Each morning, I zoom up to Udaka *sensei's* studio, from the flatlands near Kyoto station up along the eastern edge of the city to the northern hills. My route goes through places mentioned in Noh plays:

大悲 擁護 の 薄 霞 熊野 権 現
Daihi o-ogo no usu-gasumi Yuya Gongen
の 移ります 御名 も 同じ 今
no utsurimasu Mi-na mo onaji Ima-
熊 野
Gumano

Great mercy embracing all in the gauze of mist, Yuya Gongen's detached shrine, named alike, Ima-Gumano₁

"Imagumano" says a sign suspended from a traffic light, motorcycles gunning their engines below, ready to jump for the green.

花 や あらん 初 桜 の
Hana ya aranu hatsu-zakurano
祇 園 林
Gionbayashi...

Flowers are they not? The first cherry blossoms at Gionbayashi₂

Gion at rush hour: taxis negotiating for left turns, down-shifting for the zoom up Shijo-dori, a clear path for *kojin* dragons. Up Higashiyama-dori, leaning to the right past the Kanze Noh stage, leaning to the left over an old red bridge, on straight, a Honda dragon, under the huge *torii* of Heian Shrine, a deep sacred red against the deep blue morning sky. Passing through an arch of blessing, a consecration of entrance, a curtain is lifted, opening into a wider inner space: a stage. Every morning I'll make this passing-through, this blessing of entrance. Moving from sleep to waking, from the ordinary, reflected world to the internally illuminated, into a concentrated, consecrated space.

Our lessons start with watching: the *kihon no kata*, school figures, basic shapes and movements. *Kamae*, the bent-kneed basic stance, centered downward into the earth, the center of gravity low and solid in the solar plexus, the spine straight as a lightning rod. *Inyo no kamae*, the waiting posture, the fan held parallel to the ground between the two hands: a closed circuit of energy flowing through the body.

We watch the teachers dance, a column of stillness at the center of their bodies, feeling the silence beneath their movements, starting slowly and then curving inward

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like waves, a deeper silence as they pause and turn at the corner of the stage: the quiet between the sound of waves, with an even deeper undercurrent of silence constant below it, the sound of the sea. These are movements our teachers have run through a thousand times, yet they seem to be using intense concentration, as if they were pulling the energy from somewhere deep inside, where it must be drawn up slowly and carefully, as if from a deep well. Careful not to let go of the rope, careful not to let the water spill out.

We choose our practice fans. The fan is an appendage; in Noh one is never without it. Students and teachers lay their fans on the floor before them, dividing the space, and bow their mutual promises of earnestness; the chorus enters with fans stuck in their *obi*, pulling them out and laying them down to wait, picking them up to sing. In plays, fans are shape-changers: they become swords, loveletters, water-dippers, scrolls, offering-dishes. There is a special fan for the main role of each particular play. Before the performance, the teacher presents it to the actor like the bestowing of a ceremonial name on an initiate.

We choose our fans from the Kongoh school's variety of designs. Some have large circles in green, gold, bright orange or blue. Some have streaks of gold and blue or orange, like cirrus sunsets. Others are plain silver or gold. At first, I want the one with bright orange stripes, a brilliant outward push of color. But I choose the light green fadey clouds, which I don't really like much. It's a color like the hills around Kyoto on a grey day, or in evening mist or morning mist. The color fades in and out of obscurity: *yugen*. It requires time to perceive, imagination to comprehend. It's a promise of slow but eventual approach, of time to let the clouds move into clarity at the speed of the prevailing wind. It's my attempt at humility, my invitation to the spirits of the place, a sitting-down-to-wait-and-see.

We make a trip to Uji to see *takigi* Noh. Arriving in the late afternoon, we walk

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along the river. Deep Shinto colors: the clear afternoon sky, bamboo and pine-green hills, the red lacquer of the ancient bridge. These are resonant, unequivocal colors, like *taiko* beats, like *kakegoe*.

Takigi Noh is like Shakespeare-in-the-Park, a social event, a neighborhood festival. We hear speeches from town officials as innumerable fans flutter like butterflies and the wrappers crackle off of box lunches. Gossip and polite words, summer's traditional greetings. Meanwhile, on stage, *Okina*, a chant that we're told is the spirit of Noh, a shaman song. In the old days, the performers used to fast and stay celibate for weeks in preparation. It was a real invocation, a calling-down of spirits, a ritual of blessing. *Udaka sensei* says they don't fast or pray anymore, though he can remember it from when he was a boy.

Then, *Matsukaze*. Here, with my English translation and romanized Japanese script, I begin to fall in love with the words, the music of Noh. There are really only three notes in these songs. One might not even call it music, but it is music of the deepest kind emotion soaring in a cage of restraint. The words are a perfect brush-painting of sadness:

暇 申して
Itoma mo-oshite

帰る 波 の 音 の
Kaeru nami no oto no

須磨 の 浦 かけて
Suma no Ura kakete

吹く や うしろ の 山 風
Fuku ya ushiro no yama-oroshi

関路 の 鳥 も 声 ごとくに
Seki-ji no tori mo koe-goe ni

夢 も 跡 なく 夜 も 明けて
Yume mo ato naku yo mo akete

村 雨 と 聞きし も けさ 見れば
Murasame to kikishi mo kesa mireba

松 風 ばかり や 残るらん
Matsu-kaze bakari ya nokoruran

松 風 ばかり や 残るらん
Matsu-kaze bakari ya nokoruran

Now I bid farewell and

Return the waves high-sounding over
Suma no Ura, where

Blows down the back mountain
the stormy wind

At the barrier the cocks begin
crowing,

Dream is gone without a trace,
night fades into daylight;

Like passing rains it sounded at
night, but in the morning

The pine wind is all that remains
there

The pine wind is all that remains
there.,

I walk off into the summer night feeling the cold wind of autumn, trying to sing what I now recognize as a true song for which I must find a voice.

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Friends from Kobe come for a visit. We sit in a smoky coffee-shop talking about Noh. I try to explain the experience, and pull out a word-for-word translation of *Hagoromo* to show them what the language is like, my explanation having failed.

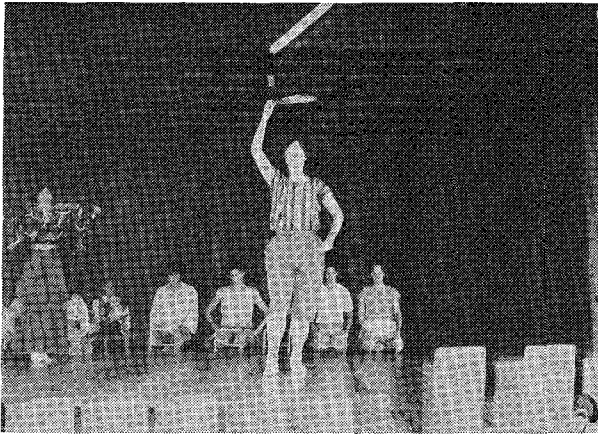
...meanwhile time passes

Heaven's feather-robe sea-breeze in trailing rising Mio's pine grove floating islands clouds' Mt. Ashitaka Fuji's high peak faintly becomes heavenly sky's mists in indistinguishable vanishes....⁴

"It's like *wisps* of meaning," my friend says. So much is left out, unstated, unnecessary. Images appear and fade, the connections between them left for the unconscious to find. This beauty is so unlike the beauty of English, which is beautiful when it is perfectly clear, the words perfectly chosen, immovable in their *rightness*, their solidity. There is such a difference in our ways of approaching art or explanation: I imagine if a Westerner wanted to tell you about a rock, he would hand you a rock. But a Japanese, perhaps, might show you the beginning of a path leading to an indentation in the ground where a rock might have been 700 years ago, or take you to a cave where mineral water is dripping, forming future rocks, or give you a handful of dust worn off the side of a granite mountain somewhere far away.... My friends and I sit on a temple veranda in Daitokuji, contemplating rocks in the garden. They are unmistakably solid, undebatably rocks, yet so mysterious, ephemeral in having been placed here in this quiet space, crystallizations of a human being's pattern of thought, words spoken with long silences breathing in between.

Back in class, we begin our first attempts at *shimai* and *utai*: the *kuse* from *Yuya* and the *utai* from *Tsurukame*. *Yuya* has all of the basic movements, so we learn it as a primer for the dances we'll eventually work on for the recital at the end of August. Our first teachers are Americans who have been studying Noh for many years as students of Udaka *sensei*, who is still in Rome with the Kongoh troupe, performing for the Pope. So we start out rather Western-style, asking a lot of questions, interrupting the teachers, talking too much. Most of the students have come from the States just for this course. They are professional performers, most of them: Broadway and off-Broadway people, street actors, original choreographers. They're not used to keeping quiet and following obediently. For me, they're refreshing. I've been

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in Japan for three years, and have taken to keeping my mouth shut (my brain, too, sometimes.)

But this Western atmosphere won't last. This is our chance to demand explanations before *sensei* comes back. He won't explain much; we'll have to be quiet and learn mainly by watching. After a week or

so, Udaka *sensei* returns. We make our *aisatsu*, look at his snapshots of Roman fountains, listen to his impressions of Italy: it's hot. Everything's always late. They spent hours just waiting. It's good to be back in Japan.

Yuuushhh... Now he'll watch each of us dance the *shimai* from *Yuya* as far as we've learned it. One by one we move around the stage of the studio, hesitating, retracing our steps, grimacing at our mistakes. *Sensei* makes some corrections, moves an arm into the proper curve, wraps the fingers more tightly around a fan. Then he says, "Well, OK. Now I can see each of your personalities from your dance. Some people are strong. Some people are not so strong. I can help you strengthen your strong points, but you'll have to work out the weak ones by your own power."

For me, Udaka *sensei*'s return is a kind of revelation, a turning point. When I dance for him, I do not hesitate or retrace my steps. I have learned the dance in a previous course. But my movements are mechanical, my heart is not connected to my body. I don't really understand what I'm doing. *Sensei* points out the forward hunch in my shoulders, a posture of weakness, of hiding. I'm surprised: I have always known that I've been trying to hide, to fold inward into myself, but I thought I could pretend otherwise. I thought I could fool everyone. I realize then how much the heart lives visibly in the body, how much of the pain the brain thinks is gone is still residual in the muscles, in the bones. This hunching-inward is a reflex of hiding from a danger that is gone now: it is an ancient, physical memory.

So my initiation is beginning. My promise is being strengthened. I have always avoided people who I thought could see through me, but now somehow I feel a great

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sense of freedom: freedom from having to pretend to be strong, to know anything. I'm a student now, really for the first time. I'm purposefully opening the door to humiliation, to awkwardness, ignorance, embarrassment. I'll go on with this study, ironically, because I'm not good at it. I've recognized something here that is deeply true; becoming "good at it" is beside the point. I'm making a vow to grow. The skill (*noh*) that grows towards goodness is internal. It can't fool anyone, and doesn't need to try. It comes out in the movement, but starts inside, lives there, is articulated by the body, can't be faked.

Embarking from now: *utai* circling through my head, singing as I ride through Kyoto on my scooter. Early mornings with the hot sun reflecting off the bumpers of taxi cabs, late nights with the streets almost empty, some coolness at last rolling in with the dark. Dancing *shimai* on the worn *tatami* of my dim room, running into the walls. Dancing in my head, circling through *Yuya* before sleep, falling asleep with my mind poised on the hill at Kiyomizu, looking out over hills clouded over with cherry-blossoms.

Working with Udaka *sensei* in the studio, looking with amazement at my own joyful face as he puts a wooden stake down my back to straighten my posture. Joyful humiliation! Growing pains! I turn the wrong way in the dance, and *sensei* shows me how natural it is to do it correctly: you turn in the same direction you've come in, he says. "Of course, circling inward, forever." My *kozayu* is too fast (a pivot turn with both arms raised forward, shoulder-height). It should be slow and quiet, of course, since "you're spreading light outwards in an arc into the darkness." My shoulders are weak: "*Tsuyoku omotte* (think strong)", he says. Straighten the back and shoulders, lift the head upwards, align all of the inner channels, find the body's alignment with the direct vertical of gravity.

I dance again for Udaka *sensei* a few days later. "*Bikkurishita*", he says. He is surprised at the change. It's like a different person. I know it is not a different person. It's still me, only more so, with the layers of fear and pretense beginning to peel away.

The next time *sensei* comes to class, he assigns us our *shimai* for the recital. It's clear that he has chosen the dances to suit the personality of each student, and he seems to have been able to learn an amazing amount about us in a very short time. For Karen, a dramatic actress, there is *Tsurukame*, a hymn to the long life of the Emperor. It is a slow, regal piece. For John, an intense actor and musician, there

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is *Kokaji*, in which a swordsmith calls down the fox-god to help in the forging of a sword for the protection of the nation. It is a dance full of leaps and broad gestures. For me, *sensei* has chosen *Tamura*, a song of spring at Kiyomizu temple.

The song starts out as a description of the beauties of spring: [the sky full of flowers, the white threads of the waterfall. But then, pivoting on a prayer sung by the dancer in the middle of the *shimai*, it becomes clear that it is a song of spiritual spring, a vow towards inner regeneration:

我 世の中 にあらん
Ware yononaka ni aran

限りは の 御誓 願
Kagiri wa no gosei gan

濁らじ もの を
Nigoraji mono o

清 水 の 緑
Kiyomizu no midori

も さす や
mo sasuya

Aoyagi no

げに も 枯れたる木 なりとも
Geni mo karetaruki naritomo

花 桜木
Hana sakuragi

While I am in this world

I vow to keep to only that which
is pure,

Pure as the water of

Kiyomizu,

Sprouting green willows

Indeed, even the withered tree
blooms,

Somehow, *Udaka sensei* knows this is my song, my prayer for this time of my life. When I recognize that he has recognized this, my promise is made stronger:

Ware yo no naka ni aran

Kagiri wa no gosei gan

Nigoraji mono o....

While I am in this world, I

vow to keep only to that

which is pure....

I go "home" to Kobe for a night: back to earth. I have to pay my taxes, pay my rent. There is *takigi* Noh at Nagata shrine, and I find a seat between an old man and a group of elderly ladies eating *sushi bentos*. It is a summer night, with that blue-green lower edge of the sky almost painfully beautiful because you know it's disappearing, edged by the deepening green of the trees. A crescent moon hangs up over the silhouette of a huge old oak, moves in a slow arc down under the horizon as the Noh goes on into the night. For most of the performance, the old man leafs through a porno magazine. Then, when it's time for the *shimai*, he looks

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up, closes his eyes, and sings along.

A few days later, I go to see *Ama* at the Kawamura Noh stage in Kyoto. It is the story of a woman who gives up her life to buy legitimacy for her son. She dives to the palace of the Dragon King at the bottom of the sea, and steals a sacred jewel guarded by eight arch-dragons. In order to conceal it, she cuts open her chest and hides the jewel inside, knowing the dragons will not touch a corpse. She is dragged to the surface by a rope, the jewel goes to the boy's father, and the woman receives her heart's desire: her son's freedom. But because she has loved so much as to give that jewel, her human heart, away, even in death she is cursed to wander as a ghost, tied to the world by a rope of human love. Pleading for release, she asks a passing priest that a prayer be chanted for her soul. She must cut that rope in order to be free herself. In the end, the woman becomes a dragon and dances the story of her attainment of Buddhahood: curves and swirls of kimono sleeve tracing arcs in the air, arcing along the invisible curvatures of space.

Then, after the Noh, I go to see an exhibition of calligraphy at the Kyoto City Museum. Here are the same arcs again, now in ink tracing huge black characters on white paper, wind trails lingering in the air, traced like the paths of snails, of subatomic particles. Such a sense of visual reverberation, an echoing of shapes!

And so I start to feel the shapes, the stories of Noh taking shape in my own life. I feel as if I'm moving along old paths, feeling out their worn stones for the first time. The first time for me, in this life, but the millionth time in the collective human story, as so many people before me have undertaken the journey of coming to understand what is most real, what we're here for. Lines from the *shimai* of *Tamura* flow through my head, taking on more meaning with time and repetition:

音羽の滝の	Otowa waterfall's
Otowa no taki no	
白糸を	White threads
Shiraito o	
繰り返し 返しても	Flowing and flowing,
Kurikaeshi, kaeshite mo	

I have an image of the falling water: a vertical flow of white threads. Then I look up *kurikaesu* in the dictionary, and find that its meaning is not linear but circular. In the dance, also, the closed fan traces a vertical line, the dancer spins around and traces the vertical again: what appears to be a straight line is really a circle, a cycle

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of blessedness flowing from one life to another, from one age to the next. For the millionth time, a human being makes a promise to work towards good :

Ware yo no naka ni aran...	While I am in this world...
Kagiri wa no gosei gan	I make a vow
Nigoraji mono o	To keep only to what is pure,

mountain water pulled downward along the vertical of gravity, drawn underground, then circling back upward through the roots of flowering trees:

Kiyomizu no midori mo sasu... Like Kiyomizu's sprouting green,

As the clarity of the heart's inarticulate desire sprouts understanding, and the spirit, long barren, flowers:

Geni mo karetaruki naritomo	Indeed, even the withered tree
Hanasakuragi mo	Can bloom,

O-Bon is here. The fires are being lit for the returning spirits of the dead, circling back along the spirit-paths. Maybe we light the way because it's dangerous for them to come so close to the earth, so close to the confusion of the human body. They could get lost again here, lost as we are lost in the world of the visible. I imagine the time when people really believed in the power of those guiding fires: such a sense of connection with the world of the invisible, the sense of responsibility for the feeding of the unseen, the knowledge that only the invisible makes the visible appear. As in *Kokaji*, calling down the god to help in forging a sword for the protection of the world, we call down the spirits at times of beginning, of continuing. Acknowledging that we are not all there is, we have to find and keep a sense of being part of a pattern that is much bigger than we are: the invisible curvatures of space, the currents of energy we must feel out and ride like hawks in a canyon. They don't make their paths through the air: they find the streams already in motion, balance their bodies on them, let themselves be flown. Noh dance tracing those hawk-paths, the fan curve-turning down as the dancer moves slowly in a wide circle inward, the arm riding the downward curve, the feet tracing a curving path along the smooth boards of the stage. The flight paths are already there; the energy flows along them.

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So the old spirits circle back through the world, and through us. We try, as best we can, to light an inner fire to guide their way.

I walk the streets of the Kyoto summer in the heat of the sun, the sky a deep, clear blue. Somehow I must have the air of a pilgrim: people keep giving me alms. A shopkeeper invites me inside to sit down while I drink my soda pop. Her smile has a genuineness I can't remember recognizing before. Elderly ladies shyly inquire about the strange soybean concoctions in my *o-bento* box. Gifts of kind curiosity for this passer-through, this pilgrim.

Evenings, walking back home from the *senjo*, the moon at five-eighths to fullness. The sound of trains, quiet, then windbells. Lights go out in the houses across the street, moonlight on their grey tile roofs rippling off into the darkness. Under-music of the electric fan, the slow, airy sound of a neighbor's hose on the pavement....

A Saturday in Nara with a friend from the Noh course; on the way from the station to the *Daibutsu* we pass a small shrine. It is nothing famous, just a local deity, "Frozen River" shrine, if I'm reading the *kanji* right. A rectangle of buildings, the god's house in the back, and, in the center, a stage. It's empty, with bamboo screens hanging half-rolled from the eaves. At first we just stand and look, absorbing the quiet of the place, empty of tourists, full of the sound of summer cicadas. Then I look at my friend and say, "I'd like to dance here." We look at each other nervously, mischievously, and pull our tabi and fans from our backpacks. I climb the wooden stairs and slide slowly across the worn boards, feeling out the space. The stage is warm, its wood smooth and soft. Generations of shrine maidens' dances, I wonder. Almost immediately I can feel the power of this place, the air's usual energy somehow concentrated, intensified by being outlined, defined by this raised platform and corner-pillars. I feel so small, in the center of this space of buzzing air, yet empty, light, easily blown away. Moving to the edge of the stage, I stand in the waiting position, *inyo kamae*, fan held parallel to the ground, one end in each hand: a closed circuit of energy through the body. The crying of the cicadas gives sound to the inaudible vibration of the air: we can hear the energy of the place. I hesitate, waiting to feel the right time to start. I feel a push from behind, gentle, insistent. A bamboo screen is being blown inward by the wind. I laugh and move into the dance. I'm trying to find the paths of energy, trying to move along them, but I feel

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as if I'm just off the edge, balanced for a second and then off again, tracing along the rough shoulder of a path I know is clear and smooth. It's a feeling of *almost* feeling the real spirit of the dance, but I'm trying too hard. I want it too much. I come to the last movements, the fan swept back and down, scooping forward and raised open in front of the face, then lowered to knee-level as I go down kneeling to the floor. The wind catches the open fan and knocks me over, laughing. I lie there for a minute, looking up at the underside of the roof, the ancient wooden latticework, laughing.

We have come to the end of the summer course, a recital on the Noh stage at Yasaka Shrine. Arriving at noon, we stash our *yukata* in a big *tatami* room and go out to clean the stage. We are improbable apprentices in our denim shorts and purple New-Wave T-shirts. The shrine maidens, looking at an afternoon "home drama" on TV in the kitchen, watch us with detached amusement. Down on our hands and knees, we rub down the old boards with rags, laughing and joking, singing snatches of Kyogen songs, country-and-western songs. We're noisy and irreverent, but I think we all feel the power of the place, and a rightness in bringing our summer's labor of learning to this stage. A few of us in *tabi* try some *kakete* turns, pivoting on one foot. Our bodies turn weightlessly, the wood floor is so smooth with generations of sliding *tabi*. We have a short rehearsal, and first the Kyogen group blocks out their play. Yasaka is full of its usual tourists and pilgrims. Some stroll over to watch, hearing familiar words in a strange accent. "This is Kyogen, I guess, but who's this blonde girl in shorts?" "Ahhh, itai itai...." She's inherited a pain in the leg as a legacy from her father...

Then we take our places to rehearse our Noh *shimai*. We line up in *seiza* at the back of the stage, in front of the old pine. We start with *Hagoromo*, then *Tamura*. An old man comes as close as he can, leaning on the wooden fence outside the stage. He knows these songs like nursery rhymes, like lullabies:

さる程に
...saruhodo ni
時 移って
toki utsutte
天の羽衣
Ama no hagoromo
浦風に棚引き
urakaze ni tanabiki

Meanwhile
Time passes
The heavenly feather-robe
in the sea-breeze floats

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棚引く
tanabiku

and trails,

and here they are again, after long silence, in the voices of foreigners. The look on this old man's face is my *omiyage* for the summer's journey: an expression of such gratitude, such recognition, such surprise. The *O-Bon* spirits have circled back again:

Geni mo karetaruki
Naretomo

Even the withered tree
Can bloom₁₀

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