TRAVELING SONGS, WAITING SONGS

Janet Heyneman

"These weary feet that found the World
too sad to walk in, whither
Oh whither shall wandering lead them?....
I have never seen the East country
And am now minded to go there on pilgrimage."

from Kumasaka
Translation by Arthur Waley

I'm sitting in the Kongoh Noh Theater in Kyoto, crying into the zabuton. Why? Not much at all is happening on stage. Kagekiyo has just sent his long-lost daughter away, after she came to find him here in exile. She's leaving him, and has turned back for a last look at her father before going off down the hashigakari. Her left hand is lifted in the stylized gesture of weeping. She turns to go, her hand still raised, and slowly, slowly walks off stage.

The actor behind the woman's mask is a man. He plays golf and likes to wear Italian clothes. How can he make me cry?

I'm walking down a long, empty beach on the coast of Massachusetts with an old friend I haven't seen for a long time. She grew up here; she knows very little about Japan. The beach is empty in the clear March wind. The sky is unobstructedly blue as the wind bulldozes unobstructedly across the water. My friend hums an Irish air for me, appropriate as a song of praise for this day, considering the history of this place, but my song for her is utai:

tsuki mo nokori no
ama no hara
kokoro sora naru
keshiki ka na

the moon still up there
in the meadow of sky:
a sight to clear the heart

from Hagoromo
Translation by J. Heyneman

If aesthetics are congenital, I should be whistling Wagner or Beethoven, but somehow the music that comes to mind on that beach is Noh, and now I find myself back here in Japan, on the worn zabuton of the Kongoh Noh Theater, sitting for five hours at a stretch listening to music of which I understand almost nothing, watching the actors sit for an hour at a time without moving at all. But sometimes, for a flash at a time, these songs and dances find a direct channel to some part of me that my brain can't reach, and I know (though I don't understand), that I'm hearing my own language.

What is the attraction of this obscure, ancient theater? Most Japanese, even, find it boring. It's a dying art. Young people associate it with their grandfathers singing utai in the morning: an ominous, repressive sound. Noh masks frightened them as children. Their feeling makes me think of the dark, mildewing innermost rooms of old Japanese houses. To these young people, Noh means formality, constriction, tradition: no lightness, no fun, no connection to their own lives. It's history homework, an obligation to the ancestors, a ritual at a dusty butsudan. If one studies Noh, one studies it as something precious, antique, an ancient treasure to be preserved because it's ancient. It's something for a museum or for high society: my landlady's daughter will have a short course in the "ladylike arts" just before her graduation from her all-girls' high school: table manners and Noh.

Even with Noh's "exotic" appeal, not many Westerners like it, either. It's not like Kabuki, with its razzle-dazzle. Some Westerners, in Japan in search of a "path", take a few Noh lessons. Some are disappointed with the lack of "spirituality" in the methods of teaching. O-keiko seems like a superficial treatment of this esoteric art: just memorize the lines, learn the movements. Where is all the spirtituality, the transcendence there is supposed to be in Noh? We're appalled at the description of a child's apprenticeship in a Noh theater: long years of chopping wood, sweeping floors, no lessons, just years of watching.

I had been in Japan for three years before I started studying Noh. I attended a lot of performances during that time, leaving most of them early. The last one I left in tears, my knees hurt so much from sitting and my pride from repeated failure to see what all of the noise and quiet was about. I had heard that this stuff was supposed to be magic, some kind of spiritual experience, but I just felt sleepy. Even armed with an English translation, I still felt left out, a million miles away from that

ground the characters were walking in their huge brocade trousers.

I didn't start feeling differently until I started trying to learn the dance and music myself, waddling around in my tabi, grinding my larynx with utai. Then, Noh became something entirely different: until then I had been sitting at the mouth of the cave, staring into the dark, looking for some sort of intellectual understanding. But now I'm a spelunker myself, feeling out the dark with my own hands, with my own viscera feeling the shock of stumbling into those unexpected holes of ignorance and illumination. There is something very physical about my feeling for Noh, beyond and beneath my love of its words and stories. I still understand very little of what goes on in the plays, but I know now how the boards feel under my feet; there have been times when I've sensed a great depth of space at a certain corner of the stage. I'm not sure why, but I keep going back to that place.

All my life I have been trying to learn with my brain, working on the assumption that the brain, if it just thought long and hard enough, would suddenly see everything clearly. It would understand the way things work, and so free me of the emotional confusion that comes from lack of mental order and clarity. I've been plugging away at this job for years. It has never worked. My brain is a bird that thinks its cage is the universe; it's like in that dream so many people have of being in a car without knowing how to drive, or having legs too short to reach the brakes; or like an incompetent boss who doesn't know and won't admit that he doesn't know the business. It's like a monkey riding an elephant. The elephant knows the path, but the monkey is making so much noise that the elephant has given up its own instincts, lets the idiot hold the reins.

I have always had trouble with balance: I fall off my feet, can't walk a straight line. As a child, my profound fear of falling kept me from being a "real kid". I couldn't climb trees or jump over fences, didn't learn to ride a bicycle until I was twenty-five. The body was unsteady, so I hid out up in my head, drawing maps from the aerial view, trying to figure things out from a distance.

Noh was really the first "physical" art I had ever tried to enter. I was so unaccustomed to learning movements that it was like pulling an old jalopy out of the garage and trying to drive it, a standard shift, manual choke, crank starter. I had a dream during this time that someone had given me a motor scooter, one of those big, clunky, trucklike ones that look as big as a car. In the dream, I had always wanted a scooter like that: they had such a sense of solidity and power, but I didn't

think I could ride one. It would be too big for me to hold up, and I couldn't operate the manual transmission. I looked at the bike for a while from a distance, then went over and took hold of the handlebars, leaned it to one side. I saw that it had an automatic shift. It would go by itself.

As I persisted in trying to dance Noh, my feeling about my body was like the feeling about that dream-scooter. I had been afraid that I couldn't control it. It would fall. But then I found that it had a sense of balance of its own, something I couldn't have envisioned in my head beforehand. Thinking it knew everything, and possessed by fear, the brain wouldn't give the body a chance. Given a little time, though, the old machine could move. It was very clumsy at first, of course, for lack of use, but it could learn. It was full of surprises, really.

The first dance I learned was Tamura, a song about spiritual spring. At that time of starting-out, with its wonderful feeling of discovery and possibility, Tamura was full of meaning for me. It was really my own dance. I made a lot of mistakes, but my teacher didn't correct many of them because the feeling of my movement was so right, so much in tune with the song. A difficult period followed, where I just could not find any feeling in Noh. I learned Tsurukame and the kiri from Hagoromo. In Tsurukame I was supposed to be the Emperor. I couldn't find much imperial feeling to inspire me. For Hagoromo, the dancer is an angel, a moon goddess. I felt distinctly un-angelic. I was unbearably stupid in class, being shown a movement again and again, but still failing to take it in. I couldn't find a place for those movements in my understanding. I never practiced because I didn't want to face that horrible empty space that was my lack of comprenension. I projected my fear of failure out into that unknown territory. In the recitals where I performed Tsurukame and Hagoromo, I felt nothing until I walked on stage, and then felt like the earth had disappeared from under me. I had no center; my body was shaking, boneless. I didn't know the dance. All my attention was gripped on what-next. I felt no shape to the dance at all: I was just moving my body from the outside, marionette-like, dragging it through the motions.

I felt like a failure. I had lost touch with the spirit of Tamura, the spirit of my own hopefulness. I had lost my balance again. I expressed this to my dai-senpai, an American woman who has been studying Noh for fifteen years. She seemed to think there was no problem. This was just a phase, a step along the way. "Just keep doing it," she told me. "Practice the basic movements. Something is happening

inside when you move, even if you can't feel it on the surface."

This was asking a kind of patience I had rarely practiced in any kind of task: to go on with the dance even when it didn't feel like a dance; it was an empty ritual, a robot-ballet. But it occurred to me that maybe this was something like "patterning", the form of physical therapy where the limbs of a paralyzed person are manipulated in the pattern of walking. The body has no power of its own, so it is "walked" by the therapist, with the assumption that the shape of walking is somehow remembered, imprinted on that body's internal sense of pattern, its physical memory. It is the assumption that the body remembers what the mind can't even understand. It's a trust in the integrity of the unknown, a leap of faith. My brain didn't like the idea, but I had nowhere else to go.

The next dance my teacher gave me to learn was *Katsuragi.* It is the story of the goddess of Katsuragi mountain, who is given the task of building a stone bridge from her mountain to Mt. Yoshino, in order to make an easier journey for pilgrims. She agrees to build the bridge, but she feels so ashamed of her appearance that she will only come out to work at night, and so cannot complete the bridge by the deadline. As punishment, she is imprisoned in a stone, overgrown with *katsuragi* vines. A priest comes along, prays for her, and she comes out of the stone, marvels at the pure beauty of the white snow, the white moon. But as the dawn comes and threatens to illuminate her own face, the goddess retreats back through the stone door.

I made a comment to my American *dai senpai* that *Katsuragi* seems like such a sad story: the goddess is offered freedom, but runs away from it. The story ends as it began, with her imprisoned in the stone again. My *dai senpai* said she didn't think it was sad: though the goddess goes back into the stone, she'll come out again, and go back again, and come out again. ...

During the time I was learning *Katsuragi,* the Kongoh school had its annual airing of masks and costumes. My *dai senpai* pointed out the mask that would be used for a full performance of that play. "There's your face over there", she said. The mask is called "Zo-onna", named for Zoami, who first carved it. It had been placed on display next to a "Ko-omote", the standard young woman's mask. I stood there for a long time, looking at them both. Both *Ko-omote* and *Zo-onna* have the appearance of looking downwards, just about to lift their eyes to look up at whatever is in front of them. *Ko-omote* is young. Looking up, she's ready to smile. She's optimistic. She doesn't know any better. *Zo-onna,* though, has been around longer. She has seen

some of the world. She has looked up before and been hurt. There is some fear in her face, but there are other feelings as well. She doesn't take herself so seriously as to believe she hasn't perhaps created some of that pain herself, though her expectation of pain. She's reserving judgement, harboring scepticism. She's cautious, but I think I can see she's got a deep sense of humor: she's not jumping to any conclusions. Her face, looking up, could laugh, too, but unlike *Ko-omote*, *Zo-onna* knows the meaning of irony. She knows it in her guts, where experience, with its paradoxes and surprises, possibilities and disappointments, has imprinted its pattern inside her.

Later that day, I left the *iemoto*'s theater and went up to my *sensei*'s practice stage to work on the *Katsuragi* dance. I spent hours and hours up there practicing, alone with that dance. I danced for a while, then rested, then went back to practicing, going over the dance again and again. Some parts were difficult, and I wanted to avoid them, running through and away from those movements, knowing they weren't right. I knew I didn't understand them, so I avoided them at first, but as I went over and over the dance, I began to lose some of my fear of practice, giving up the pressure to do each movement perfectly every time. I was learning a kind of humility: admitting that I didn't understand, then giving up the pride that made me afraid to just approach the place of difficulty, look at it quietly, straight on.

I had always had difficulty with a movement called *sumi-tori*, which occurs in almost every Noh *shimai*. It's very simple, just "taking the corner": an approach to the right-front corner, a slight pulling-back and shift towards the left, a pause before the large circle-walk out along the front edge of the stage. It is not a movement that draws attention to itself, just a bridge-step from one movement to another, a slight pause, a change of direction, a shift of focus. In *Katsuragi*, one *sumi-tori* occurs when the goddess sees the dawn beginning to come up behind the mountain and begins to be afraid of being seen. She turns and heads back towards the stone door. For the longest time, I couldn't get that movement right. I would twist my feet around, add steps, complicate the matter. I was thinking about it too much.

In practice, I went back to that difficult place, that black hole at the corner of the stage, and went through *sumi-tori* again and again. I practiced, sometimes with attention, sometimes mechanically.

My body moved around the floor, but at the same time the movements were being traced inside me, as if the limbs were just the hand on the compass, the physical therapist's hand, and the real pattern were being etched deep inside, in the phy-

sical memory. It is a kind of waiting, this mindless repetition of movement, waiting for the articulation of an understanding that is too physical for consciousness, too deep for words.

My mind and experience understood the image of that goddess at sunrise, ashamed of her own face, pulling back, running for shelter. And, with some other kind of understanding, the song found a deeper meaning with the movement of sumi-tori, since the movement can express something deeper than words, deeper even than images. It's something imprinted in that memory that is the common ground of mind and body: mind beyond conscious thought, body beyond the organism of flesh and fluids. It's a memory that combines all of the physical senses plus some emotional and spiritual sense of pattern. The body pulls back, and somehow there is a change in the internal pitch, a vision of things receding, an internal intake of breath with a smell of the landscape, a feeling of spiritual muscles drawing back, turning.

Being so simple, so open for us to bring ourselves to them, these movements can have a meaning beyond symbolism, beyond mimesis. It's a meaning the brain can't explain, but that the body understands. Sumi-tori had found its corresponding movement inside of me, as if the hollowed-out space were already there, and the shape of that movement just had to fill the mold. It was more like a recognition than a revelation of something new, more like a remembering than a learning.

I stopped to rest, and took out a catalogue of Noh masks to take another look at Ko-omote and Zo-onna. I remembered reading something in the journal of Nathaniel Hawthorne, where he describes the human heart as a cave with several chambers, going progressively deeper inward. The first chamber is bright: it's illuminated from outside. The next chamber is dark; someone who went in only that far would think that dark place to be the final room. Going further in, there is brightness again, but it doesn't last: go one chamber deeper, and there is a terrible darkness. The next chamber is the last, and it's lit up from within. It has the final word: the final word is light.

I can see Ko-omote standing in the first cavern, in that superficial layer of light. She doesn't know the difference; she doesn't know what darkness is. She has no expectation but of light, lifting her eyes. Zo-onna has gone further in. She's in an inner room, the darkest one, standing just around the corner from the deepest chamber, the one that's lit by the fire that lights all fires. I can see her in her brocade kimono, in the kamae position, which gives the appearance of leaning just slightly

forward, feet planted solidly inert but at the same time leaning out into possibility. She hasn't decided yet whether to take the chance.

She'll take it. She'll come out of the stone door again. She's not ready to give up yet. Maybe this time it will be different. Maybe this time she will be different. Wait and see.

"You're studying Noh ? Ah, erai, naaahhh. Ware ware Nihonjin ni mo muzukashii, naahh. . . ." I've had this conversation literally fifty times when Japanese ask me what I'm up to here in their country, and each time I've felt embarassed, unable to explain why I'm interested in Noh. I'm not a scholar. I'm not interested in Noh because it's old or obscure or "difficult". I don't like it because I understand it, either. I understand very little, even less than modern Japanese who must struggle with its archaic language. And in each of these conversations, I get a sense of the Japanese being ashamed of not knowing much about Noh, as if they feel an obligation to know it as part of their heritage, regardless of whether or not they have any personal interest in it. Their embarassment embarasses me, too. I feel grateful to be a foreigner, then, to be free of the weight of associations of Noh with kokugo, history homework, ojiisan's funereal morning utai.

Of course Noh is difficult for me. I can't even read a modern children's book in Japanese, not to mention an utaibon in Muromachi-period language. But maybe that difficulty is useful. I feel almost completely in the dark, feeling my way into a cave the shape and size of which I have no way of knowing. I make guesses based on the tiny places I can feel out with my hands; I construct a whole picture from the small visible part that is my limited understanding. Of course my imagination paints a picture different than the "real" one, but somehow the act of painting, the act of running my hands along the dark walls of this cave, becomes an exploration of myself, a process of learning that is very personal. I have come to this cave alone, where a Japanese would come flagged on by the tour guide of the school-child's national aesthetic education, "heritage", "culture". These words have feelings of obligation to preserve what's old, respect for the past not for its own sake but just because it's past. Of course it is difficult to find a personal meaning in art when it is swathed in all of this. I'm reminded of the way I felt about Shakespeare when I was in high school, and we were required to read it because "This is Literature, the heritage of Western civilization. . . ." Of course, that kind of dictum made it unlikely

that we would be willing or able to read Shakespeare for its own beauty, or find in it any reflection of ourselves as individual, growing humans. And, of course, that is the value of any kind of literature.

I have wonderful teachers in Noh, but I have learned recently, especially in those long, solitary practice sessions, that the deepest things I can learn from Noh are what I learn from myself, from that inner understanding that I don't know I have until I open up a place for it to appear. Noh is a practice-ground for me, a place where I can work on life-scale issues in the scale of these stories, in a space the size of a stage.

Thinking back on the life of the apprentice, and our reaction of shock at the apparent superficiality of his training: rote memorization with no explanation of the spiritual aspects of Noh. No one leads him on the way. No one tells him the ancient secrets. But what he is given is the freedom to find the way himself. He is given the raw materials: the body, words and music, work and silence. Then there is the chance that he will arrive at an understanding according to his own individual nature, in his own language.

"The road of the leaf-small boat is a thousand miles.
And all entrusted to the wind of a single sail.
The cloud waves in the evening sky
Fade away in the moon's path. . . .
The sea coast stretches as far as the unknown fires
Of the sea of Tsukushi, stretches on and on."

from Yashima
Translation by Roy Teele