



Jerome Rothenberg

THE JIGOKU ZOSHI HELLS  
A BOOK OF VARIATIONS

*Argotist Ebooks*

Cover image from a twelfth-century Japanese painted scroll

Copyright © Jerome Rothenberg 2010  
All rights reserved  
Argotist Ebooks

THE JIGOKU ZOSHI HELLS  
A BOOK OF VARIATIONS

*One should be able to rework an old work at least once – to make sure that one has not fallen victim – to one's nerves or to fate.*

– Henri Matisse to Gino Severini

And again:

*When you have achieved what you want in a certain area, when you have exploited the possibilities that lie in one direction, you must, when the time comes, change course, search for something new.*

## VARIATIONS ON THE HELL OF MEASURES

*How can any of you know what it feels like  
to count coins in Hell?*

Hell has windows as the skin has numbers, & the sun flashing on the sidewalk blinds the little customers who bathe in it.

In my head as on my flesh the poems appear, responding to my call.

My palms turn violet & blue, smoother than Chinese silk.

My room is filled with rain, as Hell with fire, while an eyebrow slightly raised signals deceit.

The other Hells are kept in store.

A Hell of numbers follows one with rhymings.

Ribs grow heavy.

The night is meant for grief no lotions over legs or fingers can assuage.

Lost in the smoke we wait for day to come, for coins to burn the swindlers who demand them – like a brand.

Crates pile up.

Windows break.

Death makes the mind turn white.

Hands open Hell for others.

Let its fires trap the birds who fly through them.

Let disaster make them all turn black.

Let them cry out with pain, the counters filling up with cloth in boxes, broken open in the night, unmeasured, boxes smelling of the sea, the intellect imprisoned in their darkness, knowing the right questions but afraid to ask.

Make it pliable like wax & let it drip over the outlaw's cashbox.

Words have their birth in it, & metals drawn out of the earth & melted give us  
coins.

The years ahead are green.

The bedposts where we rest are iron.

Our eyes are iron too & blind us.

Call it Hell.

## VARIATIONS ON THE HELL OF THIEVES

*The thieves, the thieves, the lovely thieves are no more.*

When a wind blows  
in from the sea, a door  
swings open & light  
white as Hell  
nearly blinds us.

Night begins later,  
the skin on my fingers  
flakes off. A rank wind  
shakes the ladders  
we climb on,  
the earth more distant,  
for which we still  
hunger, the sea  
filling up with our tears,  
our voices lost  
in the wind.

Thieves who scour  
our shores at evening,  
whose voices sound under  
our windows, whose tears  
hide our pain,  
cry out with one voice,  
past shadows & windows.



one voice for  
earth & one voice  
for water,  
& thieves dressed  
like thieves,  
a Hell like  
no other, a house  
overlooking the sea,  
on a night  
when coins  
ring & death  
has a voice,  
like a thief's voice,  
earth returning  
to earth,  
then to water,  
a voice  
thieves dissemble  
in dreams.  
Thieves & a sea  
& a chimney  
down which thieves  
clamber. More  
thieves in the snow,  
skin & hair  
growing white.  
A shadow that thieves

spill like blood,  
like the voice  
from a stone,  
the voice  
of the dying.  
Thieves & voices,  
shore, wind, & sea,  
tears & eyes,  
fingers spinning  
a thread,  
in fear of the sky  
& the earth,  
of thieves  
lost at sea,  
a grave  
& a stone  
left for thieves  
where thieves  
vanish.

## VARIATIONS ON THE HELL OF EXCREMENT

*Do you see them*

*Do you see the pederasts in that yellow wetness*

1

Urine defiles us & voices are distorted, broken, perjured, while remaining voices. Hands are what we claw with when we claw or horns are & are either maimed or twisted. Hell is never far away, to which we cling as managers may cling to satchels, jealous of whatever's crammed inside them. There the songs that priests sing rattle through its empty halls. Faces take strange shapes, more visible at dawn, & straws through which we suck are only a delusion. In that nether kingdom, all creatures seem deformed.

2

Sun draws mud out of the earth & leaves it there to dry. A river flushes sand out & goes on its way. Men watching from above know only turmoil. They are patting themselves dry with towels. I am hiding vases where no one can find them. Something dreamy on a phonograph drifts in & out around us. What I take between my teeth will likely choke me. Everyone we know's afraid of bats. The river teems with reeds like eyes beneath the water. There is neither love nor kindness where you lurk. There are only worms.

3

A whirlpool miles from shore. Hands raised to block it until it's lost from sight. Something also about pederasts. A city long forgotten where we used to live. Should we turn our backs on it? Or linger in their rooms? Or look for migrant

birds through broken glasses? *Fall down on your knees, we're told, & pray. When it's morning paddle out with oars & watch the sun rise. See the sunlight mask the earth.* There's a kind of love beyond your knowing. A kind of country you can never reach.

4

A wetness over everything, the moon awash with colors, boys who wade through marshes, night that leaves no quarter when it's full. Always on call the bellhops come with whips & perfumes. Those who throw off cassocks stand with bellies like fat frogs. The boys slip into broken boats & soon draw nigh. The kingdom straight ahead is Hell; the one behind them is a different kingdom.

5

To speak of pederasts no longer. To speak of lights as well as shadows, shining on your lips, reflected on your sheets. In hotels guests are moving back & forth. They dust themselves with powders, sleep between moist sheets, clutch at their testicles while racing down the stairs. *Open the windows and you'll see the rushes floating by. You'll hear the voices calling as they fade away. Your elbows ache the more you try to free them.* It is too sad to name a kingdom & to call it Hell. The fatal difference between love & love.

## VARIATIONS ON THE HELL OF CRUELTY

*They wait forever at those windows  
watching me*

1

time breaks apart for them  
& Hell does too  
stuck in their mouths  
who run from here to broadway  
skin drawn tight around them  
& in the darkened doorways  
colors rise & fade  
spin cockeyed on its sidewalks  
tissues sucking it all up  
from here to herald square  
until the light becomes so strong  
it flares like anger  
Hell is nowhere different  
once the fire dies away  
& with it pity  
& the keys to all you love  
all murdered by that light

2

if god is nowhere  
he is also now here

where he displays his many faces  
& with his thousand golden hands  
he feels the flesh of others  
burning in his fires  
their voices calling out to him  
with cheeks aglow  
& sockets that no one can heal  
the wounds forever festering  
whatever covenant was theirs  
annulled, whatever sky  
between them torn apart  
their bellies split open, written on  
with tiny letters no one there  
can read there is a cock  
that cries out in the wind

a harbinger from Hell  
god's cruelty alive inside them  
nowhere to hide

3

out of those empty lots who follows?  
who beneath his lids is watching  
with what beaks is tearing loose  
all that escapes the fire?  
looking from their windows  
where his hands grow hot & wet

the sweat exuding from them  
strings of men who drop down  
from on high who turn to pulp  
before him where the sun  
turns black, the faces  
vanish, & the cry of sex  
is only felt as pain  
a flower never more than that  
the key to what he gives them  
dead & hidden in his shadow

4

beaks are only beaks  
& night is only night  
the streets run into other streets  
on which boys fight with boys  
their life the only life they know  
flesh beating against flesh  
the mind forgetting what the mind has lost  
links leading them to other links  
to pain they seek for pain's sake  
eyes wide open or eyes blind  
from acid & what acid leaves behind  
they stumble running past from curb to curb  
where 23rd street is still 23rd street  
backs stripped bare are backs stripped bare  
& bred as gamecocks they are gamecocks

shirtsleeves torn & shirtsleeves red with blood  
& stepping over eggshells crack them  
shatter them like eggshells

5

disfiguration first  
in words  
then faces,  
frenzied with hatred,  
fair enough & yet  
no point to it,  
the cock crows where it rises,  
and the ones with knives  
at ready, stare at you  
from windows high above,  
on times square  
or wherever else  
they wait their teeth  
leave scars behind them  
like a hungry pack  
decked out in furs,  
then drop down raging,  
in a Hell where time  
is absent  
& is only Hell



VARIATIONS ON THE HELL OF UNCLEAN FOOD

*The fattened sky  
resting at the door of this  
white butchershop  
carries the old wounds*

half of his skin is sky  
& the other half is rivers

they wrap him around  
like an apron

half a distance away  
the butcher brushing off flies

smoke & fire  
cover a jar

filled halfway with bones  
with skulls & despair

& the dawn reveals  
more bones & skulls

threats changed to flowers  
flowers to words

others alive look for meat  
steam covers their windows

women spring from the earth  
their flesh tastes of salt

marigolds, leaves  
bones of spaniards

tables half painted with words  
windows covered with shrouds

smells of food  
words showing roots

a butcher sowing salt  
rows of scales

rows of paws  
hair half risen

scales too heavy to hold  
center lost

sans commitment  
they take to the hills

the mad butcher  
in back of them

Xipe's flesh  
only meat

earth swallows  
his entrails

meat shows  
its wounds

a butchershop shakes  
food erupts

the cat who smiles  
bares her teeth

housewives shift  
flowers

blood on the register  
caught in our eyes

priests sever sinews  
from flesh

entrails & other  
foul meat

a shop window  
emptied of life

sorrow searing  
burnt into memory

lowing a bull  
treads the earth

a black sun  
over the rooftops

tiles broken  
grass showing through

reflected in glass  
like a river

breasts raw & shaken  
aisles lock them in

lives less than lives  
lie dismembered

bathed in blood

paws block the sky

VARIATIONS ON THE HELL OF GRIEVING WOMEN

*Because she breathed too wildly in the sun*

*Because the sun had risen for her because it fell into her lap*

*Because she held a bird between her legs, eyeless, but the face still  
warm, still tender*

*They have left her*

Mornings are never the same.

Some bring wounds while others bring love.

The rose in her hair is alarming.

Her shadow is too.

Under a lingering star the wind drives a boat.

It is dawn.

Dawn is never as tender as night is.

And if somebody cries when it's morning,  
forgive her.

She lives near the center,

away from the hills & the beaches.

Her gut is heavy with water.

It throbs.

Magnetos start fires,

& houses & bridges burn down.

Her face is the face of a bird,

leaves no traces

when caught in your wheels.

Between cities & suburbs eyes stare,

milk runs dry.

She knows sorrow.

A road runs down to the sea.

We change places.

In her womb a chimera waits to be born.

It is time to leave town,  
the moon halfway risen to guide her.

She has sores on her lips,  
shadows falling like rain.

The sea has turned into Ocean.

With death on her hands  
she sleeps in a room without doors.

The wind drops seeds on her lap.

Soon death will lodge in a convent;  
a highway will vanish in rain,  
its autos in darkness.

Casinos & ferries will crumble.

A river as green as a salamander  
sleeps in her spine.

Her voice flows over her teeth  
like the blood on her window.

Like comets & echoes.

Like shadows.

A flower drops from her fingers.

Her shawl soaked with rain,  
she ties it back with a hairpin.

The rain doesn't stop.

It reaches down to the roots.

Is the road to Hell strewn with bandages?

A virgin is praying in silence.  
Locked in their offices who counts the rain?  
Dawn brings hunger.  
A birth takes place in a graveyard,  
a wake in a spa.  
A submarine sun can't be seen.  
A second sun over the factories  
lights up the tiles.  
Fibers wrap around stones  
& stones shine like glass.  
Eyelids burn.  
Throats go dry.  
Rain traps horses in stalls & spiders in sand.  
Outside her room a trolley runs by.  
Night beginning, a sundial goes dark.  
Her veins fill with lymph,  
her mind with blue shadows.  
Blind as a lion, now dead,  
she knows sorrow.  
Shadows cover the shore.  
Flowers die.  
Even the sunlight won't heal them.  
Fear everywhere.  
Desperation.  
Nothing to say.



## VARIATIONS ON THE HELL OF SMOKE

*The houses of men are on fire  
Pity the dead in their graves  
& the bones of the living*

1

First he saw graves and after that saw ashes strewn around & molten metal. The man was standing at his door, his mind so steeped in blood, he seemed adrift in darkness. Children spun around him, changing places, scooping sand that burned like glass. So hot, he thought, will it not scorch the bird atop that pine tree? I'll call them fire-raisers & I'll watch them running through the smoke & how the smoke drains color from their skin, the man thought.

2

*Dead waters like the sweat that issues from his skin, like thunder that assaults him, that the man feels in his marrow, that his eyes search in the darkness.* Spaces open in his blood & fire from the sun invades his darkest places. Shadows in the morning, long & thin & hot, fall on his skin, his arms, & sear his mind.

3

And from the roofbeams fire rises skyward. Bones in the desert sands, so small & frail, are all he sees. The images of cities disappear. The places where the man walks even now are hot & glowing through the smoke. On the man's skin little teeth are biting, leaving traces, red & green. The smoke is harbinger of death, & where the smoke is thickest, he will raise a torch & set the bones on fire. When he sees them flaming, he will rest.

4

A man is what he is, not what he seems. For those we call the living clouds turn golden in the sun, black in the rain. All that is hidden from his eye still issues from his voice but leaves his eyes in darkness. With a stick he hobbles between places, feels the veins inside his right eye throbbing & his left eye blinded by the smoke. Will the fire-raisers flee on metal wings, those whom the man calls fire-raisers, & will the fires they have wrought remain? Will he then have an eye to look not one to see?

5

Houses no longer homes, how hot the clouds are that enclose them. Between his teeth a cry shakes down the clouds, the rain breaks on the house in which the man, bereft & lonely, hones his sight. More bones, more sand, & still more bones. A hot night follows and his house sinks slowly in the earth. Why do the children spin around us? They are the ones the fire sweeps away. The fire frozen in the Hell of smoke.

VARIATIONS FOR THE BODHISATTVA JIZO

*To the figures bathing at the river*

*Jizo appeared*

1

fishes in the air

like rain

from heaven,

Jizo seated

in a flower

while above him

bosses look down

from their windows,

love forgotten,

tears too much

to bear,

a Hell of men

& angels,

bathers,

under an open sky

2

under an open sky

your son or mine

wanders the earth,

how sharp the nails

that bind us,  
& the guards  
carved in stone  
who will not  
bow for him,  
the lines you write  
immaculate,  
a night in Hell  
in which a white sun  
shines, a world  
as brilliant as  
the sky at noon

3

as brilliant as  
the sky at noon,  
the double lotus,  
in which Jizo,  
seated, shows  
the marks of pain,  
words written on  
a silver platter,  
others cut into  
a stick,  
from where he sees  
a guardhouse  
hard beside a lake,

the image of their hatred  
all he knows

4

the image of their hatred  
all he knows,  
the river filled with people,  
men & women,  
holding lilies in  
their hands  
like diamonds,  
the distant hills  
where others turn  
for counsel,  
facts a poem might yield  
or Jizo,  
if he chose to speak,  
a Hell in which the gods,  
long absent,  
come alive

5

the gods,  
long absent,  
come alive  
in Hell,  
like bathers

figures rise  
& fall,  
their bodies  
struck by  
hammers  
show new wounds,  
lost in a city  
that a river runs through,  
those who feel  
a sad joy,  
little men  
& old  
abandoning  
the world  
& fishing  
mindless  
in the ponds  
of Hell

A NOTE ON THE PRECEDING. In the 1990s I composed a series of thirty-three “Lorca variations,” drawing vocabulary, principally nouns, from my previously published translation of Federico García Lorca’s early gathering of poems, *The Suites*. I later made use of this method of composition for homages to Jackson Mac Low, Octavio Paz, & others as a step beyond translation but with an idea of translation – or what Haroldo de Campos called “transcreation” & I called “othering” – as one of the defining characteristics of poetry as a whole. The obvious difference in the variations presented here is that I apply the same procedure to an earlier work of my own, *The Seven Hells of the Jigoku Zoshi*, a series of *eight* poems (not *seven*) drawing themes but not specific images from ancient Japanese painted scrolls of that name & their accompanying verbal descriptions. The first publication of that work goes back to 1962, & it has remained in print for many years now as part of the first gathering of my selected poetry, *Poems for the Game of Silence* (New Directions, 1971). As with other variations – other translations for that matter – the procedure, if it works, doesn’t so much annihilate the original version as bring it into a new dimension, where both versions can lead an independent if interlinked existence. The fifty year gap between them adds its own strangeness to the mix.