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THE JIGOKU ZOSHI HELLS
A BOOK OF VARIATIONS

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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

25.viii.10

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.