

## Four Poems by Yoko Isaka

translated by Eric Selland and Sawako Nakayasu

### Voice

When I've been too much awash  
In music  
I need to rest my numb ears  
A parakeet's voice around my shoulder cries  
Are you still alive

I hear your angry voice  
And late at night someone whispers  
I watch the color of the lawn rejuvenated by the rain  
As if ashes moving

The spirit has long since escaped  
From the grave of a parakeet  
I accidentally killed long ago  
When I look at or think of that grave  
It all seems so futile  
Vaguely I imagine a door  
Separating inside from outside  
And I place myself as a young girl there  
The residue of rapture has yet to collect  
Around my ears

I hold the yellow wings and the red eyes  
After a silence of over twenty years  
And covered with dried earth  
Somewhere around my shoulder  
You cry, "are you still alive"

– Translated by Eric Selland

## Night Sheep

When I shouted goodbye  
You were already walking away  
To an unfamiliar time  
Murmuring and snuggling  
With an armful of sheep  
As if sinking into sleep  
While I am left behind  
In the land of yesterday  
“Goodbye”  
I shout once more  
And I think  
If only your lukewarm breath  
Would come back to me  
Just once more  
And it would all be washed away  
With the dark shadows  
And the weight bruising my shoulders  
But even so  
You look back, wistfully

– translated by Eric Selland

## **Powdered Snow**

Take your hands out of your pockets while you walk  
It's dangerous you might fall  
I was warned when I was in elementary school  
And ever since  
I have followed that advice faithfully  
On a day when powdered snow began to fall like cake crumbs  
On my coat and scarf  
From a deep tear in the sky

I walk with my hands in my pockets  
Befriended by the tapping sound of my shoes on the street  
I've forgotten now who it was gave me such a warning  
But I walk now, hands in pockets  
Holding this little bit of wisdom  
From someone, most likely a teacher,  
Tightly in my clenched fists

– Translated by Eric Selland

## Boxed Panthers

The hallway extends to either side  
A patient headed for surgery passes by us on a stretcher  
“I left it behind. I left one behind. Don’t know where it went. I went to the dentist”  
The boy sitting on the couch leans on the old man  
His small hands are wrapped tight around the small box on his lap  
The old man sleeps  
In this place, where even the light is bandaged  
A woman single-mindedly eating a bag of candy, uninclined to talk  
Is on the edge of the couch  
– Is that me  
A painting of women crossing from thicket to thicket  
Becoming white veils and white trains  
Hangs on the wall behind

I once went to go look at the gallows near the gates of the city back when I was little  
they would hang people now the gallows still remain but only in form, to signal the  
city’s enforcement of the peace to foreigners who enter that day I stayed there all  
night the sun shone brightly on the pedestal the blue paint flying off like the gray  
color seeping out the colors of the earth well up from the lump of flesh, neither  
face nor body as the sun shone I continued to gaze up at the hung man as he slept  
everyone but the man was vaguely aware of me sitting on the ground, waiting for him  
to come back to life

I become a tongue inner ear skin in order to know the subject and learn my  
position as measured by the subject it is easy to think of myself as a long series of  
organs taking something in and out is accompanied by pleasure pain and emotion a  
spirituality it is too easy to think of the man as a long drawn-out series of organs  
rather the man is a hanging bell and wishes to be struck the man would resonate  
gently on the inside *boaubouarun boaubouarun* and the colors of the earth well up  
impeached by the light that says Agitator!

The boy looks up this way with the expression of the old man

(What is inside the box)  
Inside is a tunnel very long  
Solemnly creaking at the joints

(Is it impossible to exit)  
Well  
A black panther had babies  
The box is packed with them  
Their eyes shining, lighting the way

(Is it possible to walk)

Yes, anywhere  
However they get chewed apart  
And just the bones remain laying around  
The probably lose sight of which, among the many eyeballs,  
Is the exit

“I’ve got teeth in here. My teeth”  
The boy  
Leans on the old man  
The old man opens his eyes wide and says  
“Any act originating from an innocent place is violent”  
The woman with the candy gets up  
And enters the painting on the wall  
As a bell rings

A distant will seeps into the ears of the sleeping man  
Live, it may have whispered

Another patient headed for surgery  
Passes by us on a stretcher

– Translated by Sawako Nakayasu

**Yoko Isaka** was born in 1949 in Tokyo, and is the author of over fifteen books of poetry, fiction, essays, and criticism. Her major publications of poetry include *Chourei* (Morning Assembly), *GIGI*, which won the H-shi Award, and *Chikyūga manbennaku akarunde* (The earth lightens all over). Throughout the 1980s she was a strong figure for female poetry in Japan, and a collection of her poetry was published in the Shichosha Contemporary Poets Paperback series in 1988. In 2003 she published *Hakoirihyou* (Boxed Panthers), her first book of poetry in almost ten years.

**Eric Selland** is a poet and translator living just south of San Francisco. His translations of contemporary Japanese poets appear in a variety of anthologies, as well on the Internet. He has also published articles on Japanese Modernist poetry and translation theory. He is the author of *The Condition of Music* (Sink Press 2000), and has work in *The Poem Behind the Poem*, a Copper Canyon Press anthology of essays on translating Asian poetry (2004).

**Sawako Nakayasu** writes poetry, prose, and performance text, and translates from Japanese to English. Her first book, *So we have been given time Or*, (Verse Press) was published in 2004. Other works include *Clutch* (Tinfish chapbook, 2002), *Balconic* (Duration e-book, 2003) and *Nothing fictional but accuracy or arrangement (she* (e-Faux, 2003). She edits Factorial Press and the translation section for HOW2.