

Dream of a Carp¹

Priest

To be dreaming of fish heads at dusk,
the wonderful corners of light scattered
in the shadow-bone beads of prayer:
the fish become eyes under bald brows
and his nose curved down like a sneer.
The delicate floss of the wall swims back,
light drowns the gardens and makes seaweed of trees.

The Carp

Three blind fish fall and multiply.
They slither in tadpole ponds puffing gills,
making wind of the water, flying and dipping
like kites in a Japanese documentary.
They spiral to molecules of water streaming
through their cells, evaporating to lead-lined
clouds and raining grey rain on towns.

Mansion of the Vice-Governor

Despite canopies woven in post-card provincial towns,
the silver is Sheffield, the flowers are real
and the Chippendale furniture dulls light into respect.
Columns of pure black glisten through ornamental grape,
bitter fruit bunched above rain-nippled ponds.
Frogs ko-ax, ko-ax; their sound as
distant and dark as curling carp.

¹After the set of woodcuts with the same title executed by the Japanese artist Munakata Shik in 1940.

Wet Clothes

O merciful feet, straining toes underwater!
Bathing women bless the trees, their toes,
underwear and perfectly tied hair.
One woman's clothes cling and bubble cotton
veins of water, her thigh hairs calligraphic
underneath. And she performs the benediction
of toes, a barely breasted outline above her knees.

Screaming Out

Hunger-born evil, moustache twirling men,
baring teeth and the fish designs on their
clothes and, with almost tender concern, slicing
live carp that dance on their tails and plead;
they kneel together and cook, emptying pails
of bilge water into an open pool of muck,
kitchen steam gyrating over fish heads and guts, fish heads
and guts.

Sleep Walking

To be dreaming of priests in the bald night,
hunched backs cleaving walls of jasmine
with furtive cloaks and clenched fists.
A wrinkled pate and a bud of ear
shine in the hidden light of the sleepwalker,
as he heads for the forests of death,
As the carp turns in its sleep.

David Musgrave