



the hell screen

[a review/essay]

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ART BY VENANTIUS PINTO

Early in the progress of the coronavirus most of the public spaces in Tokyo closed, including the museums and libraries. I was living then across the street from the main library, which is docked like a tall white cruise ship among the green hills of Arisugawa Park. The library had been a refuge for me, a place I could sit for hours, surrounded by the vast collection of books in many languages, sharing with other anonymous readers the intimacy of a perpetual, impenetrable silence. Its closing was a new kind of isolation.

Silence is a welcoming realm, a place where we are all held in the same field of vibration regardless of the languages we know or don't know. Quiet erases categories: it is of one piece, and in the seamless field beyond language all images are in equal relation to the audible horizon, equally close to revelation. In Tokyo the language barrier often kept me on the outside, in observation, except in the interior of the warm library where I felt inside all languages, inside of words, where the living is kept.



Having returned recently to the forests of Appalachia I've been spending time on the trails; it's springtime. I often simply stand on the path and listen. The forest is not silent: there is bird song, the swelling inhalation of wind coming up the mountain, the sound of running water, or the ghostly clanking of the treetops rubbing against each other as they sway. There is sound but no speaking, and in this way the forest and the library are, for me, very much the same. Books are made of trees: further evidence of the way living material transfers itself across time and place by countless metamorphosis into what is completely other, but made of essentially the same stuff. Samenesses found in differences interest me.

In the library's Art section I'd found a series of old volumes of Buddhist temple art from Nara and Kyoto, bound in green leather. There were twenty or thirty of them, oversized, filled with black line drawings, woodblock prints, in some cases rubbings, of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; I couldn't read the captions but they were so beautiful, so

delicate, so different from the Tibetan or Indian styles I knew from the monasteries of Darjeeling and Nepal. I spent much of my twenties in Buddhist centers here and abroad, and although I never abandoned Buddhism exactly, I fell away from the institutions. The promise of the Hell Realms and vows, the implied danger of doing the wrong thing seemed too much like barriers to the freedom I'd been searching for. Still, I felt a sense of recognition in the images of these books, as if they held the promise of rediscovering something I'd been missing. In Japan, far from everyone I knew, these Bodhisattvas seemed like distant family members, and Kannon, and Guru Rimpoche, my living relatives. So, like a prodigal daughter returning to the fold, I started to visit this shelf each afternoon. I was like a curious medieval peasant, illiterate but able to study the pictures. I've often been drawn to images in a pagan sort of way, finding instruction in the auguries of whatever appears.

During a visit to the Tokyo National Museum in Ueno Park some months

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before, I had an encounter with a tenth century statue of an *arhat* (Buddhist teacher) that is still haunting me. It was among a group of wooden Kamakura-era statues that stood in a dimly lit gallery. There were several dozen scattered about and I felt as if I were walking through a grove in the depths of a forest, where the trees are sparsely placed due to the paucity of light. And yet the statues' faces, patient and kind, felt no shortage of light. This period is famous for the inspired realism of its wooden sculptures, but one was altogether different. This arhat, standing slightly apart, pulled me into his gaze as if we were actually meeting. The figure radiated a quality I can only describe as being conscious of my awareness of it. I tried walking away to dispel the illusion but when I neared the arhat again, it was still present. I had a shocking sense of this statue being eternally, essentially alive—an experience so tangible that I remember looking around the gallery to see if other viewers had noticed. It seemed clear that this statue was breathing,

not in some spooky way, but in the sense that all living things respire: taking in, breathing out. It was sentient. Was the source of this “livingness” derived from the truth of Buddhist teachings, or from the ancient forest of which it was made, or from the pure devotion of the man who carved it, or the model who inspired it, or all of the above? It is impossible to say. I've never seen anything like it before or since. Later, when the museum closed, I tried to find it in the catalogue, but couldn't identify it among similar statues. Its difference was in its presence, not its appearance. There is a difference.

II.

Ryunosuke Akutagawa is a central figure in modern Japanese literature. His work, which was first published in 1914, embraced formal experimentation and brought the short story into new prominence in Japan. The Akutagawa Prize, Japan's top literary award, attests to his influence. Shortly before his death he complained of “feeling a vague insecurity about the future.” Then he



killed himself. He was thirty-five. Why suicide figures so prominently among Japanese novelists, and among their characters, is an interesting question. Suicide is always a convenient ending, yet somehow always a false ending. While suggesting on the surface the finality of death, suicide also leaves us with the sense that something else might have, could have, or would have happened. We are brought to consider a vast array of narratives that didn't occur, because the suicide occurred instead. In this way suicide as a literary device is actually an opening disguised as a closing. It is perhaps the least final of any ending.

Akutagawa's stories reach into the past, where they gather what he considered "universal themes," and bring them into the present. Kurosawa's movie *Rashomon* is based partly on Akutagawa's story, "In a Grove," which itself was drawn from a cache of thirteenth-century court stories, the "Uji Shui Monogatari." Many stories from the "Uji" are incorporated into Kabuki or Noh dramas, and have

become part of Japan's traditional literature.

Japanese artists are well known as masters of the remake, recombining elements from one story or picture into another. They mine the country's history, not so much searching for what has been lost, but to find what's still alive. The ancient trappings of Akutagawa's stories give the narratives a strange uncertainty that allows us to accept certain premises we would doubt if they were nearer in time. The past is felt as a sort of vertical depth we have to read through, and yet the psychology of the narrative is ours, and modern at that. There is a sort of high contrast tone in the stories that reminds me of American noir movies: over-heated, intense.

III.

Of all Akutagawa's stories, "Hell Screen" (*Jigokuhen*, 1918) is one of the most extraordinary. It is a tale so packed with image and import that it seems like a new element, denser than any substance I've ever encountered on the

page. When I finished reading the story in Tokyo, I had to throw the book off my bed. It felt so heavy, so potent; a living thing I didn't yet know how to deal with. Shaken, I fled my tiny studio in Hiroo and went to Starbucks, where I could sit among the crowd of well-dressed people conversing in bright light.

"Hell Screen" is about many things: love, religious devotion, and ambition. It is about honor, the intersection of life and death, and as with the statue of the arhat, the mystery of what makes art alive. But most of all it is about being an artist.

The outline of the story is basically this: a powerful provincial ruler, Lord Horikawa, hires a well-known artist, Yoshihide, to paint a series of screens illustrating the Buddhist circles of hell. The artist is in many ways like the lord who hires him—both men go to ruthless extremes to pursue their glory, and the ensuing suffering that they inflict on other beings just points to their power and importance: "At a certain banquet he (*Horikawa*) made a presentation of thirty white horses, at another he gave



a favorite boy to be the human pillar of Nagara Bridge.”

Yoshihide is known as a painter of unparalleled talent, though it was thought he employed dark magic in his art: “... he painted the Five Aspects of Life and Death at Ryugai Temple gate, and they say if you pass the gate at night you can hear the sighing and sobbing of the divinities he depicted there. Others say you can smell rotting corpses.”

Yoshihide, a widower, has a daughter named Yuzuki who is both beautiful and full of grace. Through a series of kind acts and demonstrations of filial piety, she becomes one of Horikawa’s favorite attendants at court, where she goes to live.

Separated, Yoshihide pines for his daughter, to whom he is whole-heartedly devoted despite his perversities.

When Yoshihide does a special favor for the Lord, Horikawa asks what he would like in return. The artist asks that his daughter be allowed to leave court and return to him. It’s an unheard-of demand—any other father of the time would want only for his daughter to be

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part of the court. So Horikawa refuses to release her. He writes the ridiculous request off to the artist’s well-known willfulness.

Yoshihide continues to work on the hell screens. In order to render hell in the most lifelike, visceral ways possible, he makes a habit of subjecting his studio assistants to unspeakable torture, tossing them into cages with snakes and tigers, so that he might better record their expressions of horror, their writhing muscles, their shattered psyches. He sets an owl to peck at the eyes of one stunned apprentice who, through the onslaught of wings, watches Yoshihide unroll his paper and record the scene.

The whole story is told by an anonymous narrator at court; whether male or female, we don’t really know. The narrator seems to be an accidental eyewitness stumbling on fragments of scenes, piecing together the story just as the reader must; court intrigues and mysteries accumulate. Akutagawa masterfully erodes our incredulity, and helps us grow accustomed to the



random cruelties of court so that in the end we are ripe psychologically to accept the final scene. But are we really? Even in this he plays with us. Can anything prepare us for a horror deeper than the horror we have imagined thus far, and is that the ultimate horror, that it can always get worse?

The Buddhist hell realms, like the Christian ones, are usually on fire. We are given a preview of part of the hell screen before it's completed with a description that goes on for several pages: *"An awful whirlpool of fire around The Forest of Swords... every conceivable sort of person was to be seen there... alluring young maidens of the court in palace robes, priests droning over their prayer beads, little girls in white shifts... all were enveloped in flame and smoke, tormented by bull- and horse-headed jailers... Young princes hung inverted like bats, their breasts pierced with javelins..."*

Before he can finish the last panel, Yoshihide falters in his work. His vision is not complete. "What is it you cannot paint?" Horikawa asks. "I cannot paint

anything for which a model is lacking..." "Then in order to paint this Hell Screen you must see hell, eh?" "Yes my lord... I want to paint a carriage falling down through the sky... in the carriage an exquisite court lady, her hair disordered in the raging fire, writhes in agony, her face is contorted with smoke..." he goes on. To burn a carriage, a rare luxury item at the time, was an outrageous request and the idea of someone in it—even the lowliest criminal—was even more objectionable.

"I'll do entirely as you wish," Horikawa promises in his perversity, "all discussion of what is possible or impossible is beside the point."

Chillingly, the madness of each man takes as its object the madness of the other; all within the madness of a system that is constantly shifting the borders of possibility.

So, on a dark moonless night at an outlying manor, (such an event was too outrageous for the public), the court gathers to witness the burning of the carriage. Torches are lit in preparation

for the fire. Yoshihide is standing some distance off, but when the light of the torches nears the carriage windows, *"He sees his beloved daughter Yuzuki, bound and gagged inside."* He runs toward the carriage, his arms outstretched, but it is too late; the carriage is engulfed in flames, and guarded anyway by two armed men. *"In his drawn distorted lips, in his twitching cheeks, the grief, dread and bewilderment that passed through his soul were clearly inscribed."*

The spectator and the narrator watch with horror as the girl is burned alive in the carriage; *"Its blinds were blown open by the winds of hell... [the woman] gorgeously attired, her long black hair fluttering in the flames, bent her neck and writhed in agony."*

Yoshihide can do nothing but watch as the fire gathers power, and becomes a pillar of flame lighting up the night. The narrator describes his expression changing from one of abject suffering to *"a sternness not human."* He folds his hands and stands *"like a lion."* The spectators *"quaked within, we held our breath, we watched him like a*



Buddha unveiled.” He crosses his arms and simply watches. After some time standing, watching, his grief gives way to wonder, and his wonder to ecstasy, as he is delivered from the temporal grief of being human by the awesome visual power of the flaming scene. He has stepped into his own screen, and he has stepped beyond the screen. Yoshihide is in hell; he is witness and he is event. He has achieved the unity of creation, embodying the emptiness of his true nature.

Yoshihide goes on to finish painting the hell screen, and when it is complete, he kills himself.

IV.

In the Japanese ceramic art of *kintsugi*, broken pottery is reassembled in a way that highlights the outline of its fragments with gold leaf. The result is a sort of map of destruction, something akin to scars on the skin of a living being. Indeed, *kintsugi* lends a feeling of aliveness to pieces, giving them a history, a tragic destruction they have triumphed over, to return again.

The metaphor of *kintsugi* kept recurring to me as I finished the story. The way the main character in the story is psychically shattered, but reaches through that process his first actual wholeness. Through the obliteration of the emotional human elements of the character, he reaches a spiritual wholeness and oneness as an artist with his art.

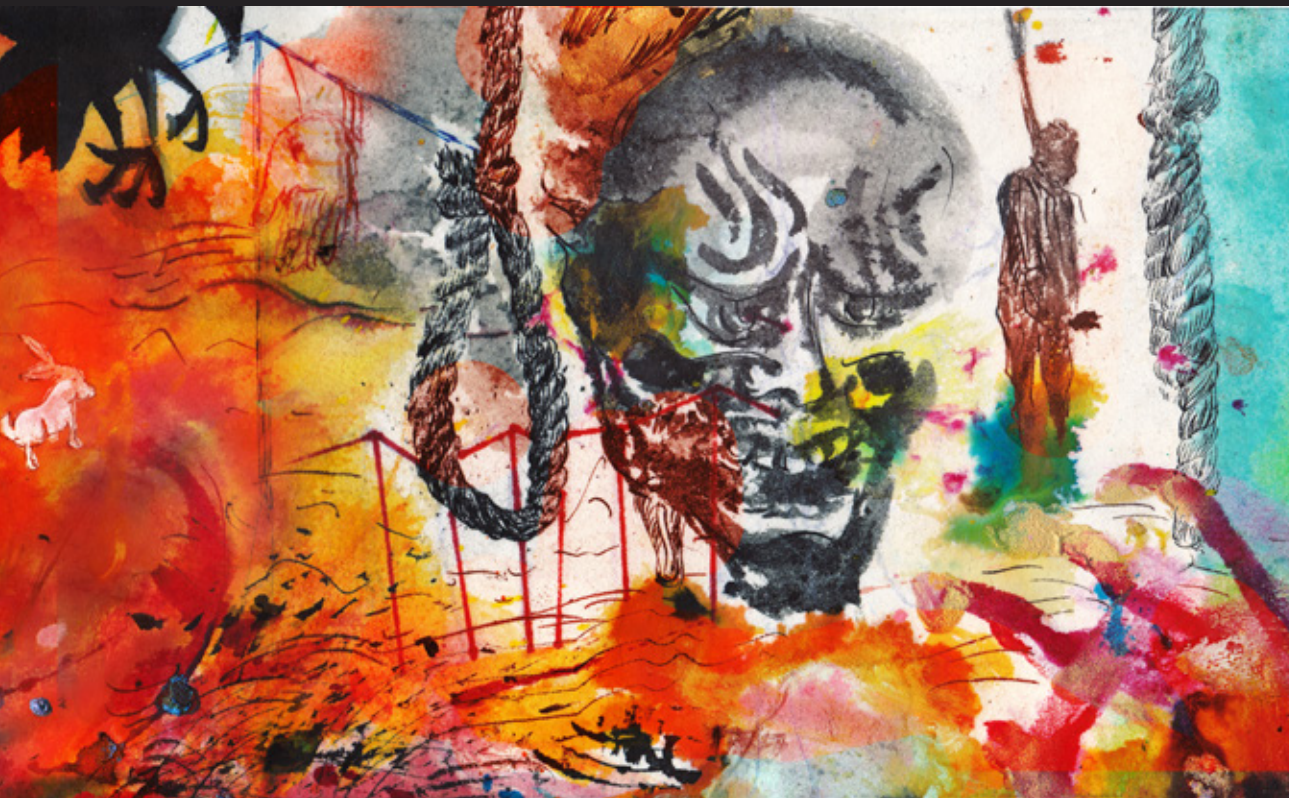
V.

I had bought *The Anthology of Modern Japanese Literature*, edited by Donald Keene, as a present to myself for my sixtieth birthday. This is where I found “Hell Screen.” Not coincidentally perhaps, it had been a hellish day. I was alone in a foreign city on a drizzling cold and grey day in late winter, and all of this felt symbolic in a bad way. I was bereft, and wept like a lost child, finding solace eventually in the Tsutaya Bookstore in Roppongi, which was miraculously open; it was warm inside. I found the English section. Could stories save me?

Maybe I should have expected turning sixty to feel significant, but it

didn’t. What’s another birthday, who cares about age? And yet suddenly my sense of time was different, deeper. I was aware of layers of seasons, like the leaves of last year that I now find under the grass in our meadow while clearing space for the garden. For the last few years, I’ve been feeling a growing density of associations, networks of memory that spark parallel networks, emerging into patterns, and the patterns reappearing in different fields. A pattern can be in a word: *Buddha*. All the instances in which I’ve encountered it, or him, or them. In dreams, where I travel to elaborate cities in the Himalayas, or the little wooden Buddha I once gave my son. Or it can be in snow. On the branches of the blooming plum trees in Arisugawa park this past March or in my Ohio childhood fifty years ago. All the snow in between. The way it falls. What is it trying to say? Shouldn’t I know by now, the essence of snow, the essence of “to know”?

My birthday seemed to press the question “What do you know now, what can you tell us about art, about



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writing?' If I were to follow the Japanese tradition of shopping in the past to feed the present, but shopping through my own past, what could I bring out? "Hell Screen" seemed to be the oracle's answer. An injunction to step more fully into the discursive patterns of my own creative work. To travel further.

Yoshihide's experience reminded me of the story of Arjuna, in the famous scene of the *Bhagavad Gita*. As a warrior, he must fight his opponents even though he loves them. Krishna, who happens to be driving the chariot, explains that he must give up the duality of self and other. He is a warrior, and warriors fight. I'm a writer, writers write. There is no other way out. Or should we say *in*.

Whatever audience my writing has found has been miniscule at best. So can I write simply as a ritual way to engage more fully with the world? A daily habit of noticing? Is that enough? Perhaps it is always the actual process of making art that we intuit and take delight from, the material in the hands (or with poetry, in the ears) of a different mortal. Perhaps it's not the content of the story at all

but its origins. If we are always reading the creation story of all the books and statues that we look at and listen to, then we are taken out of time, to enter into the always time of creation. We are not an audience then; we are witnesses, like the spectators at the burning carriage, who were carried in it to some place completely new.

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