

東海道

Tokaido Road

Nancy Gaffield

Beditions

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for Erin

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These poems respond to Hiroshige's series of woodblock prints *Fifty-three Stages of the Tōkaidō*. (The prints may be viewed online at www.hiroshige.org.uk/hiroshige/tokaido_hoeido/tokaido_hoeido.htm.) The Tokaido linked the eastern and western capitals, and thus the print series begins at Nihonbashi in Edo (Tokyo) and terminates at Kyoto's Sanjo Bridge. All sorts of people travelled the Tokaido – feudal lords, shoguns, pilgrims, actors, entertainers and tourists. While figures appear in most of the prints, they are never foregrounded, but part of the landscape. The poems foster imaginative links between painting and poetry, capturing the many personae, experiences and memories encountered in the journey.

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1 Nihonbashi

All places exist in relation to Nihonbashi. Everything begins here. Soft caps of the bay glimmer in phosphorescent light. The men's breath disappears into a grove of bamboo. Beneath their feet stones awaken while overhead the vermilion bird schooners south. Cursing and grumbling, sandaled carriers regret the maiden chorus of farewell, their silken scarves flushed with desire.

Inside, the edo-jin stir ashes to a dogged glow. A pair of curs sniff the bridgehead and the rat that passed there, now wallowing unreachable in river silt. They turn their backsides to our Hiro as he slips out of sight. The old town droops into silence and the rains begin.

2 Shinagawa

The bridge shivers with our passing.
Cheek by jowl houses ascend. Light seeps
through the gap between clouds and sea
reminding us that now the fishing's over.
I know I've been here before, know
without looking seven ships bob
on the surface, four trim their sails
before they slip out to sea, unobserved.
Someone reveals his hand: it's the ten of swords.
Nowhere to go but up.

Everything's happening on the roadside:
someone's boiling oden; vendors peddle souvenirs
of Shinagawa. Tea houses rub shoulders with
whore houses. A Tokyo drifter sits in a window
holding a fan, her face painted white with a pair
of heart-shaped lips. I want to tarry
but it is the fullness of time –
someone is waiting.

3 Kawasaki

Hunkering, Hiro abides by the rules,
waits to board at the recess of the river.
Tide hangs back with the ashes
of those who drowned at sea.

He shuffles out of sight. A ferryboat lures
the eye across the Tama, passengers wait
on the opposite bank before a cluster of houses
and a mule laden with barrels of sake.

Close to the distant shore a man on a raft searches
for a hole to cast his line. Hiro boards to cross
the border between this world and under. *If I plunge
into the river here will I quicken?*

Gulls and kingfishers sweep the surface clean of insects,
to the west clouds note the place the sun has pitched up.
All around the muddy marsh twisted pines grasp
for light, one by one rooftops clarify.

Change comes. First the earthquake,
then B29s. These hills
lopped for landfill. He tips the boatman
and wishes he'd stayed home.

4 Kanagawa

Late evening clouds
are stained with indigo.
Minding the eaves
at the roofs' rim,
we heft up the hill.
A ribbon of blue
loops through the sky

TIME IS A CHANGER.

Through a carcass of trees the moon
looms. The seasons seize me too.
Old leaves thrown to earth
blame the tree, but new shoots
return from leavings.
Turn to the sun.

5 Hodogaya

A stream at Hodogaya.
At the bridgehead a toothless fishwife
beckons the travellers
with sweetness. Operatic *irasshaimases*
from soba chefs in clouds
of broth, and then to cap it all
a chorus of slurps.

Satisfied customers.

Kikuyo opens her carriage and steps
out. Monks approach
from the execution grounds,
lure her in to amuse themselves.
A sign pointing to Kamakura reads:

Cultivate the joy of being rather than having.

6 Totsuka

These prints I first saw in Eugene in the spring of 1977. Observe the two-dimensional quality, the flatness of the picture-plane. What is seen is a mirror image. The text or image is drawn onto paper fixed to a piece of cherry wood, and then cut away according to the outline drawing. The carved woodblock is inked, and with the application of paper and pressure, a scene appears. The first of these are indigo but gradually monochrome evolves into brocade. I linger in the picture. Not the scenes of the demi-monde but the landscapes, where 'the individuality of nature is seen isolated from the entire', as Noguchi explained it in 1921. No longer valued after the war, they were borne overseas as wadding. Like them, I am always crossing the water.

Totsuka's neon defeats the stars.
I do not recognise the road
in the print lined with shapely pines,
today concrete stilts
for the railway to DreamLand.

She's there to receive me. *We waited
for you*, she says, guides me in to the alcove,
hands me a stick of incense
to place before his photograph.
We clap hands to summon his soul. She pours
the spring sake, arranges fresh peonies,
his cup overflows.

*Remember – all existence is cyclical.
See that we do not lose you.*

7 Fujisawa

After Ashbery's 'What Is Poetry'

As Hiroshige views it, a medieval temple with torii, mist settles
over the valley obscuring the houses, no place for blind men.

Tour groups with loudspeakers at the Order of the Wayfarer,
trying to recite *Namu Amida Butsu* for salvation.

The priest of the abandoned says to forsake family, desist
from lust. We are allowed only twelve personal items: rice bowl,

case for chopsticks, winter clothes, surplice, summer clothes
made of flax, handkerchief, sash, washi, string of beads, straw
sandals,

cowl. Simply repeat the phrase: *Namu Amida Butsu*. The gate
marks transition from the sacred to the profane world, sign-
posted

Enoshima Shrine where a milk-white nude with eight arms sits
half-lotus,
female genitals exposed, playing a lute. And to the west a cave

called the womb where the holy one abides. The rare individual
nature reveals in isolation, Hiroshige in us all.