

MATTHEW LITTLE  
TRANSLATING ISSA

Translating Issa #8

I can sleep anywhere. On this ferryboat, say, in the East China Sea, my body across five blue-white-blue-white-blue chairs. A taut tarp and sun above. Waves under the boat flickered fluid mountains and valleys and more valleys where mountains fell. I slept.

When I woke, five people whom I'd never seen had taken seats away from each other and around me. They were smiling toward green islands capped with clouds.

It's always a mystery that we might say things during sleep. I must have sung creation and five people appeared, or I'd been asleep before falling asleep. I'm a Ryukyu Swallow spinning away from land, or I'm just now shifting awake on that blue and white spine.

Shadowless midday  
even the river warblers  
try singing silence.

Translating Issa #28

S. traced her hand on a paper plate and taped it to her back. Every other fifth grader did the same. Silhouette fingers and thumbs followed children, hands waving when laughing.

It's a part of my job to ask questions like "How many birds do you see?" and "What happens on a happy face?" Answers to them become beams sent across deep gorges, bridges for our hermit minds.

Body bowed, S. raised her plated hand so another student could pen descriptions of her in a blank finger pointing at her head. She felt with her spine and wing bones. *Am I kind? Quiet?* she wondered staring not absently at the air before her face, not knowing until she saw.

Shadows at sunset  
stretched across busy streets  
quiver with dragonflies.

### Translating Issa #56

On a cold January day, student J. laughed pattering all over the soccer field, wholly unconcerned with where the ball traveled.

His mind has the gift of a gate through which all things that enter must pass and in passing are given costumes. He always gathers a great show: some people become wind-blown cane stalks bouncing sweetly from one to the next. Others become wagtails jumping to flight after having their noses in dirt.

Right now, J. is wandering the wide ocean as a dolphin that gets tickled by water.

Still gripping chopsticks  
my sleeping boy dreams of eating  
big gusts of spring.

### Translating Issa #61

Celebrating the beginning of fall harvest, I closed my eyes and A. painted my face moon white. Eyelids prodded as learning what's beneath, ears occasionally brushed by shirt or butterfly, something in this dark deftly crossing the fin of my nose.

In a clearing at the foot of a hill, my neighborhood gathered to perform war and romance, the seduction of ghosts. Before my moon face, my eyes' creased corners and my bare feet, a laughing child stood with a drum in one hand. I gave her an opened fan which she put rhythmically to the drum's head. And when I bent because I couldn't hear, she smiling said it *sounds like a flying bird*.

From the street my house  
seems so small by a full moon  
and I am happy.