## Jonathan Brewer

## **How Prescient the Worm**

How prescient the worm to spin its cocoon in one continuous thread wound like a mummy entombed for a kingdom-come that will surely come, unless unwound by profligate man who doesn't flinch at boiling alive thousands of larvae for a pound of fibers long enough to weave into a gown tied in the back to look like of all things

butterfly wings.

It takes a whole field of mulberry trees planted in drill-team rows to run a laboratory of milli-size molting-machines. For twenty-six days, they binge on leaves, eating and excreting and shedding their skins until they increase in weight ten-thousand fold.

Then dumping their guts one last time,

they begin to twist and turn in figure-eights, spinning miles and miles of filament from the worm-spit pushed through spinnerets, the source of all the luster and sheen that inspires cruelty and craft

on our behalf.

Now stripped bare of leaves, the renewable trunks outside our window have been radically cut down close to the ground.

Soon after we are gone, the knobby stumps will send up spindly shoots and leaf-out

in full-grown trees.

The few ghostly moths allowed to chew through the walls of their self-made wombs will never flit through the sky

nor survive on their own.

They are bred to breed, not to fly.

## If This Were Noh

On a flight of steps at the bottom of the Tachibana trail, we meet a pint-size crone in hiking gear, who has vowed to climb the mountain two thousand days in a row. By convention alone if this were Noh, she would be a *bosatsu* or a demon in disguise—perhaps, both at the same time.

Coming to a fork, we follow her down the less travelled path to see—she says—the 'father' and 'mother' of the forest trees, two dragon-like *kusunokiis*, thirty meters high, over three meters wide, and with huge talons gripping the mountainside far longer than any living-thing nearby.

Along the way, she discretely gathers fallen *tsubaki*, severed from the branch by loyal Spring's invisible blade. Piercing the backs of their crimson heads with two twigs, she makes a pair of trophy-wands to bless our path and lead us on.

But first we must place our palms on the unusually straight trunk of a 'power tree' that sheds its bark in red-orangish strips and is called *bakuchinoki* after the feverish gambler who peels away all he's got (and not got) to stay in the game for one last hand or throw.

If this were Noh, we would've heard by now what past love, what attachment and haunting compels her to climb up and down the mountain steps for the rest of her days. We would be told, too, what she sees *that we can't see* as we stand on the spot where a castle's keep overlooked the bay.

One slow turn around the top, and she exits into the woods as seamlessly as she appeared, leaving us alone to find the way back down and guess what we would have known from start if this were Noh—is it she, the mountain itself, or one of the trees that titles the play?

## **Keeping the Mourning**

The chill air slaps itself onto my face—I wear it like a thin metallic mask.

Off-shore, the breeze crinkles the bay in sheets of shook foil, its shimmer

keeping pace with my pace as I cross the bridge and circle round again.

Yet already behind my back all that tin-dazzle goes grey—the wind, slack.

\*

The land lies flat, compacted where there once were waves. Condos rise in stacks up to forty stories high.

Free on your balcony to trap the sun, particulate matter 100 x's thinner than a single hair lodges in your lungs—

more insidious than ships or yellow sand blown across the Sea of Japan.

\*

Kashii's strand is famous for a double suicide solved by a detective in a book. He connects points and lines:

the lovers were faked, but our local station, trains and time-tables are all for real—the crabs, too, scuttling in the rocks next to the bodies, neatly staged in tabby socks and polished shoes.

Of course the new park along the shore plus Toys R Us across the street make for a less desolate beach.

\*

Day and night, planes cut a tangent right to left across the sky,

one after another but only one at a time, dropping out of sight below the blinking red light on the highest tower.

The horizon resets and I am left like Chuai at his koto looking out to sea:

"Nothing but water to be seen no promised land lies on the other side."

For that half-truth, he had to die.

\*

Summer sea-jellies bloom in the bay where the empress washed her hair and tied it like a man.

At what price has conquest come? The amethyst flotilla is "a fluctuating charm"

with its many moving arms—lovely in the sun but agony for the stung.

\*

The mall lot fills up with cars all backed into their parallel slots, their snouts faced out, doors clicked-on lock/unlock.

Families glide in and out of shops inside a whale-size palace, windowless but lit for a dazzling, undersea queen—

everywhere present, nowhere seen. We forget what it takes to sail to *Ne-no-kuni* and back. In the past, it was enough to

designate a mourner to go on board in funeral dress and sit alone—bereft—unwashed and uncombed, repugnant to behold. How cruel is it—afraid of our own shadow, we offer up the ugliest to deflect our fate, and worse yet make him

forego the pleasure of eating meat, lying with a woman, even ridding himself of fleas. Sooner or later we'll pay for

our sojourn—imagine every last consumer becoming a keeper of mourning! as if abstention itself will return us to a natural

state or ever restore the links ravaged from shore to shore. When Chuai pushed away his koto and refused to play on

for "a lying god," his shaman wife channeled a curse that could double as our curse too: *Go straight in one direction*.