

Thoughts on William Sibley

I'm writing from a pine forest on the Niigata coast just off the Sea of Japan. I can just make out Sado Island off in the distance, where the great Noh playwright Zeami Motokiyo was sent into exile in the 15th century. Surrounded by tall slender pine trees elegantly sloping away from the sea, I'm now reminded of the first text I translated with Bill's help--Zeami's Noh play Matsukaze. It tells the tale of two sisters, who once ladled brine as salt makers on the Bay of Suma and whose spirits linger along the coastline in grief for a courtier, Ariwara no Yukihiro, who had once kept them company during his brief exile. The eponymous heroine—Matsukaze—pines away for her lost love when she is visited by a monk asking for a night's rest in her hut.

I don't remember much about my own attempt at translating Matsukaze or any specific advice Bill offered me at the time for that matter, but I do recall the feeling of awe and sometimes trepidation I felt in Bill's schoolmasterly presence, as he performed magical rites on my sloppy prose, transforming my translations into eloquently rhythmic lines and conjuring up far more precise alternatives for the ill-suited words that I had chosen. Bill was able to draw on resources of the English language that very few people ever have the privilege of being exposed to, and his rich lexicon and literary sensibilities lent him a particular flair in translating Japanese texts written centuries ago. I learned from Bill that there almost always exists a word in English that approximates both the referent and the connotation of the Japanese word that I'm translating; if I don't have it immediately at my disposal, I force myself to look harder for it.

Had Bill been alive five hundred years ago I imagine both he and I might well have been exiled to Sado Island or the Bay of Summa. But I now find myself like Matsukaze, not Yukihiro, pining away for the eloquence of Bill's pen and for his friendship.

Samuel E. Perry
Brown University
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