Two Stories by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa

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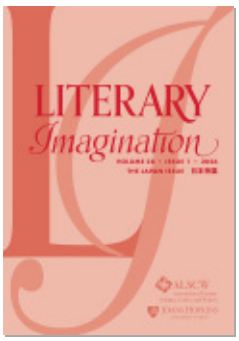

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Two Stories by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY RYAN CHOI

The Demon

It is said that the Jesuit missionary Urugan, a man of extraordinary vision, was able to perceive things hidden from the mortal eye. His followers, devout and resolute in their faith, held steadfastly to the belief that Urugan, through his piercing blue gaze, could behold the demons who ascended from the infernal depths of Hell to afflict humanity. For those who gathered to worship God at Nanban Temple, this belief was not mere superstition, but an article of ironclad faith. They regarded Urugan's revelations as divine truths, surpassed only, perhaps, by the words of scripture.

One account, written by a historian of the period whose name has been lost to history, tells of a dialogue between Urugan and Lord Oda Nobunaga in which the Jesuit dramatically described a demon he had encountered on the streets of Kyoto. The demon was of a rare and unsettling pedigree—part human, part beast—with the face of a man, the wings of a bat, and the legs of a goat. According to Urugan, this demon frequently appeared at the pagoda, where it could be seen dancing and clapping its hands atop the roof, or crouching in the shadow of the four-pillared gate, hiding from the sun's harsh rays. In one instance, Urugan saw the demon clinging to the back of a mountain monk, and, in yet another, hanging from the hair of the monk's wife. But none of these encounters was as peculiar as the one that would come to preoccupy the minds of many people for generations.

In this encounter, Urugan witnessed the demon sitting cross-legged upon the palanquin of a princess. This sighting, which occurred at dusk in spring, has sparked both wonder and scepticism amongst historians and laypeople alike. The writer of this account, rejecting all literal readings, suggests that the demon was a metaphor for the dangerous obsession of Lord Nobunaga, who, captivated by the princess, sought to claim her against the objections of her family. The demon, according to this interpretation, was speaking through Urugan's lips with the purpose of rebuking the lord for his dogged pursuit of the unattainable. Whether this encounter was real or not remains inconclusive and is of little consequence for our purpose. For the question of what happened is trivial in this case, compared to the more pressing issue of what is happening in our minds as we read these words.

Urugan, the historian writes, was standing at the gates of Nanban Temple when he first beheld the demon seated on the palanquin. The creature, like none he had seen before, had

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a face which was an exquisite blend of beauty and sorrow, and more resplendent than a jewel. Its hands, delicately folded, seemed to tremble with grief, and its head was bowed as though burdened by an infinite weight. Urugan, recognizing the gravity of such an apparition, approached the palanquin with haste, clutching his crucifix, and with a determination born of divine duty, he wrestled the demon into the temple's inner sanctum.

There, in the light cast by the flickering candles, Urugan, with the image of Christ behind him, questioned the demon, who answered thus, in a voice so soft he seemed to be praying:

"At first," it confessed, its eyes brimming with regret, "I wished to corrupt the princess. But then, as I looked upon her, I found myself unwilling to soil her purity. How could I subject such a soul to the merciless fires of Hell? And yet, this very reluctance was the seed of my torment. For the more I desired to preserve her soul, the more I wished to destroy it. It was because of the collision of these desires that I found myself bound to her, uncertain of what to do, and thus, I sat upon her palanquin, thinking. Had I not felt this conflict, I would have disappeared into the depths whence I came. But is it not always like this? The more one seeks to refrain from an act, the stronger the urge to perform it becomes. What agony is more incomprehensible than this? When I suffer, I feel as if Heaven and Hell are collapsing into each other inside me, each pressing against my soul with unbearable force."

The demon wept, its sorrow resonating through the chamber.

"Please," it whispered, "have mercy upon me. I am so alone I can hardly bear it."

Whatever became of this demon, we will never know. The historian's chronicle ends with no formal conclusion, and perhaps that is as it should be. Even if the demon's fate is lost to time, the effect of its story lingers in our minds. When we read this story, whether it is factual or not, is it not enough that we feel the urge to cry out too, as if sharing in the demon's sorrow?

Urugan, have mercy on us, as you had on the demon! For are we not, in the end, as lost and as full of anguish as the demon who sought to corrupt the soul it so loved?

June 1918

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The Piano

One rainy autumn day, I was walking through the Yamate neighbourhood in Yokohama, after visiting a friend who lived there. The area remained in the same state of devastation it had been in since the Great Kantō Earthquake. If there was any difference in the landscape from then until now, it was the preponderance of Japanese knotweeds growing among the fallen slate roofs and brick walls. As I passed a collapsed house, I noticed a piano pressed against a wall with its curved lid thrust open and its keys gleaming with dew. A variety of sopping wet music books with different coloured covers—pale pink, light blue, pale yellow—were strewn across the thickets of knotweed.

Despite this remarkable sight, my thoughts were still occupied with the person I had just visited and the complicated private matter we had discussed at length. Our meeting had ended inconclusively with me deciding to leave at nightfall—but not before arranging another meeting for the near future to settle our issue.

Fortunately, it had stopped raining. The moon sat beaming in the windy sky. I was walking at a good pace to avoid missing my train (if I was late, the National Rail lines were an option, but these were my absolute last choice since smoking in those trains was forbidden). And then, just as the collapsed house passed from view, I thought I heard someone strike the piano keys. Or rather, it was more like someone had simply touched one of the keys. I slowed my pace then turned back. I gazed around at the desolate property. The piano, half-hidden in the knotweed, was illuminated by the moon, its white and black keys glowing. There was no sign of anyone anywhere.

It was just one note that I had heard behind me—unquestionably that of a piano. Feeling a sense of unease, I hurried on towards the station but was stopped yet again by a second note sounding on the piano. This time, however, I kept going, the damp breeze blowing at my heels.

I am too much of a realist to assign supernatural significance to those sounds, even if no one was readily visible. Perhaps there had been a cat hiding in the rubble. And if not a cat—I remember thinking—perhaps a weasel or a toad. Still, it was undeniably creepy for the piano to make such sounds with no culprit in sight.

About five days later, I was passing through Yamate again on the same errand to visit my friend. The piano was still there on the dilapidated property, entrenched in the knotweeds, with the pink, blue and yellow music books strewn everywhere as before. But on this day, instead of the piano, it was the books, busted bricks and slate that were shining in the autumn sunlight.

I walked carefully up to the piano, gingerly avoiding the books. Up close, the piano had lost its lustre since our last encounter—its ivory keys no longer gleamed, the lacquer on its lid was peeling, and vines like seaweed choked its legs. I felt, more than anything, disappointed.

"I wonder if it even works," I muttered to myself, and made to leave. At that moment the piano made a sound, as if chiding me for my lack of faith. Despite this, I was not surprised or afraid; instead, I felt my lips curl into a smile, directed at the piano and its ivory keys still lounging under the sun. And then I saw it: a chestnut dropping onto the keys.

After returning to the main road, I turned once more to look at the ruins. That was when I noticed it for the first time in all its glory—a giant chestnut tree jammed beneath the remnants of the slate roof, its branches arching over the piano at jagged angles. But this discovery was neither here nor there. I was focused only on the piano in the knotweeds, the piano and the secret music it had kept since last year's catastrophic earthquake.