
AUTUMN(HYMN)AL

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Na Santi Sutta

The silver-paneled Subaru, its cabin a sun radiating fast food wrappers and mosquito-marked ankles and necks, turned to a wayside on the outer rim of the Umpqua forest, and there crunched to rest. A group of sisters and their father had spent seven days car-camping. The oldest daughter thought the rectangular scene presented her from the passenger side, that is, the trees, was recommended in no special way versus the forest (and fed herself a salty fry); she grunted, meaning forget it, as the father got out of the car with his new Nikon. “It says there’s a waterfall in here,” he explained to the others.

The pair of younger girls got out, following him. To their backs came the sound of the oldest girl tuning in a new station to a song she had missed for seven days and would miss again soon after it was over, but for now she adored it and sang along. Her voice faded as the rest of the family walked further in faith toward the waterfall. Then the father stopped, hoping to hear if they were on the right path. “Let’s listen,” he said. From the dark path they strained to hear the sound of water.

"It's super quiet."

"There's not even the buzzing."

"You're right," the father said. He had come to enjoy the buzzing because it sounded like golf course sprinklers; in his mind's eye he saw an iridescent flume of water shooting across the fairway whenever he heard a cicada. Then he thought of his wife. His youngest felt the buzzing inextricable with heat; the other with leafy branches high in the light: hidden heights. "Maybe cicada season is done," the father decided. They waited a moment longer and the girls thought about what this meant. They had learned all about cicadas at the Ranger station, and were re-visited by a feeling they had earlier while packing up the car.

Then a strong sea-wind blew and the forest path was strangely illuminated from above, "Silence is always an ending," droned a cicada with its dying breath, from the juniper.

One already gone agreed, "And it's always silent again before it begins."

A chorus of voices of the dead filled the path to the waterfall. "They have no permanent pleasures, but only beginnings and endings. Only separations and abandoning."

"For them silence is the marker of dissatisfaction, of dissolution," hummed a memory in the birch.

The Teacher agreed, from that high hidden place, the heart of a flare of wind. "You are liminal things, never achieving a fixed state."

"One who would attach himself to such a thing is thus bound to suffering," said an absence of the murmuring of the falls. "Here they come again. Endlessly receding into and re-appearing from the shadows."

"They are like us, after all," the juniper called.

"Now you're getting it wrong again," the Teacher said, gusting past.



Sanamana Sutta

When a certain number of devas heard the Teacher was spending time in that pocket of glare in the Umpqua forest, they vanished from the Yama heaven and re-appeared amid the shadows and leaves of the state park. “It seems we’ve caught him in deep meditation,” one of them said. Another sighed, as he manifested a wolf beneath him. “I guess it’s best we follow suit,” he said, “or wait him out. Though it could last an eon.” He coughed. They looked at each other, then one by one fell into concentration. A deva flickering in and out of time spoke up, fidgeting, “My leg is already asleep.”

One particularly inexperienced deva shuddered at the booming hush of the forest. “Do you hear how quiet it is?” he asked. “The quieter it gets, the louder my thoughts are, until it makes both my heads want to split.”

“Because you must confront your anxious mind,” the Teacher said, startling them.

An eagle-headed deva agreed. “Let’s get down to business then. I have thirty minutes tops. I’m watching an auction.”

“And I have to meet some friends at the botanic garden,” A beautiful, cow-bodied deva remarked, “The corpse flower is dropping its blossom today.”

“I too am pressed for time,” admitted the wolf-riding deva, not eager to be alone with his thoughts. “If you’re correct about the corpse flower…”

One deva looked serenely back at the others. She was calling a square dance that afternoon and went over the routine in her head. She planned on calling the Mill Wheel and the others took inspiration from her placid face as she thought to herself: Up the river, down the bend, join your hands, we’re gone again…but soon the visions of dancing were replaced in her head by the petals of the corpse flower, rotating like a wheel, as she walked into a rot-smelling greenhouse. So beautiful, she thought, as the rotation slowed. She realized then that a line began forming behind her, and a few of the devas were passing by, admiring her color and fragrance. “I’m not a flower,” she tried to protest, but had to admit to herself that, like a cat who had inadvertently chased some prey into the confines of a zoo, she was now ‘exhibited’ in one way or another as she stood still and felt the fetid air circulating about her raised arms. They felt like they might drop at any moment. Suddenly she snored and the others burst out laughing.

“Humiliating!” she muttered.

“The mind is like a mill wheel,” the Teacher said, as the deva’s cheeks flushed. “Always turning.”



Citta Suttam

As a seed pod splits, dispersing itself to the wind, a deva dissolved into the effulgent light of the Tusita heaven before appearing at once to the Teacher, who sat in concentration under the wing of a crow pecking carrion at the wayside. “I have come to ask a question, Blessed One,” he said, after bowing deeply.

“I hear you have new room-mates,” the Teacher said, anticipating his question.

“Well, I do and I don’t, Teacher. That’s what I’ve come to ask. You see, one day I came home from work and found my friend had abandoned our home in the Tusita heaven. She has gone somewhere I’m not able to follow.” The Teacher nodded gravely. “But recently,” the deva continued, “I was watching tv, minding my business, and she walked right back into the house as if nothing had happened!”

“Then you are happy.”

"But it wasn't that exactly. She wasn't alone," the deva said. "Another one was with her. It was almost exactly myself! But then, not quite, from my perspective. These two imposters ignored me altogether and went on with their day as if I didn't exist at all. They had breakfast. They walked the dog. They did all the things my friend and I used to do, yet I was not allowed to come."

"And what happened next?"

The deva explained that this went on for some time. The couple made elaborate plans together; they re-modeled the house, she had begun to visit a fertility specialist, and they took to sleeping in the queen-sized bed together, "So that I had to sleep on the couch in the living room with the dog. Can you imagine?"

"And then what happened?"

The deva explained that while his friend was gone he had suffered terribly, yet now it was somehow worse, with her astounding recurrence and this new life underway with his double. He spoke softly. "You know, I think they resent me. I think they plan to get rid of me. Instead of just ignoring me, they now give me resentful looks and furrow their brows when they leave on errands together. As if my presence reminds them of something... something they have chosen to forget. What can it mean Teacher?"

The crow hopped, shedding a feather. "When your friend was with you," the Teacher began, "you had constructed a world together. That world had a past and a future: a shared history that projected forward into dreams of what lay ahead. It is your expectations of happiness that have returned to you. Of course they are resentful."

"So do I wait for them to evict me?"

"What you see becomes recollection. What you don't see becomes commemoration. You will indeed be crowded-out by your suffering and your desires."

"Please tell me how to solve this dilemma, Teacher."

"Absence and presence are two halves, my friend. Before and after are like that, too. Suffering comes when you cling to one half of a pair."

"Teacher, you act like this is all in my head," the deva grumbled and disappeared.



Upaneyya Suttam

One day a white-fanged Asura came raging up Mount Sumeru into the Tavatimsa Realm, where the Teacher had come to recline under the shade of a holy tree. Looking around at the destruction caused by the Asura lord, the Teacher calmly asked, “Friend, why are you here causing so much trouble? You seem a little upset.”

The Asura bowed awkwardly, not knowing the Teacher would be resting under the Parijata tree this day. “Blessed One,” he began. “The end of every Great Aeon begins with a conflagration that spreads through every corner of the Asura Realm. All the land turns gold with a divine fire that leaves nothing but ashes of my home and my people.”

“That day is still a ways off,” the Teacher said.

“I speak not of time but of fairness. That fire does not reach the realms above the sense-sphere. Why must some perish while others live?

What is the fairness in a certain death, while others look on with no care in the world?"

"See, you're already calming down."

The Lord of the Asuras plucked a branch from the Parijata tree and brandished it at the Teacher. "Time annihilates to its own content, fire consumes till it is gorged. I too can rage and destroy. Knowing my fate, how can you blame me? My doom gapes ever before me. How can I find happiness in this world?"

The Teacher sat up against the tree and brushed a bit of bark from his shoulder. "The fire licks at your feet already. Time pummels your body as you speak. Happiness is a tricky thing. Are you sure you haven't left it behind?"

"You just want me to leave this place!"

"You can keep climbing this mountain. You'll never get to the top."



Nandana

Etsuko swam every afternoon in a nameless tributary to the Genkai Sea, where it dug a green channel through the sand before flowing beneath black pines to the bay. It was a peaceful escape for her, since her little brother found the bugs in this spot intolerable. Typically, after taking the road back to her town, she would complain to him about the bites she received (ensuring his continued absence from the stream); yet on this day, she witnessed a sight so extraordinary that her subterfuge was entirely forgotten.

Looking up through the leaves of the trees covering the path to her house, she could still see American fighters coursing through the sky. They buzzed like cicadas. Her brother ran to her crying as she walked toward the house. Clearly she would get nowhere with him. Her father was gone, of course, and her mother spent days at the factory in Fukuoka, not

returning until long after sunset. Old second aunt was coming back with wild onions gathered from the hillside and Etsuko ran to her. She told her about the great flowers of flame that burst from the mountainsides near Fukuoka: “It looked like autumn had swept through the entire mountain,” she said, “all in an instant!” She knew how the older folks loved watching the mountain turn gold in autumn, so her metaphor would surely convey the intensity of her vision. Then one after another, more and more of the flowers opened up, “I’ve never seen anything more lovely!”

Old second aunt agreed it must have been something to see. She clasped the girl tightly to her and said she mustn’t go outside again until her mother got back. She said they could pray together until that time.

The next day Etsuko hurried back to her favorite spot in the stream to wait for more of the American bombs. Dragonflies traced erratic paths overhead; poor substitutes. Wind through the pines brushed her brown, bare shoulders. As time passed, she grew discouraged.

A pair of devas hovered resplendent over the shimmering current. “It’s true, you know,” the first said. “She may never see anything as beautiful as the bombs dropping on Fukuoka. It’s disappointing that such a pleasure occurs just once, then is gone forever. To draw that pleasure out is paradise.”

The second deva disagreed with her friend. “Foolish things, both of you. There is no duration for a thing that doesn’t exist! That distant forest was nothing but a projection of her mind. And projections are a poor pleasure!” she said with a splash.



Subrahma

Etsuko's granddaughter was called Yuriko. One autumn day, when gingko leaves filled the air and the Teacher floated in the abode of Measureless Radiance (situated in a pocket of sunlight and northerly gust), a devata named Subrahma, of unsurpassed beauty, came into his presence, bowed, and spoke in a rather hurried manner:

"Teacher, a terrible thing is about to happen," she said. "My heart is filled with apprehension!"

"What is it that terrifies you, Subrahma?"

"As I was clearing my mind just now, there was a nice cloud-patterned pillow case that I found, in the laundry basket in this garden," she pointed to a house in Fukuoka with a little garden attached to the living room, through a sliding door. "The girl, Yuriko, is inside...do you hear the tv so loud?"

"That one is practically deaf."

"That's so. There are frogs from the rice paddy searching for a warm place to spend the winter. What is it they call a bunch of frogs? Not a herd..."

"Bunch is fine."

"There are a bunch of frogs that have crawled into the laundry basket and the girl is just now on her way to sort through the basket for a warm pair of socks. I happen to know the outcome..."

"She'll be traumatized!"

"Indeed, Teacher! This mind is ever swirling, never calm, and always dismayed by things that have happened and things yet to happen. When the touch, the smell, and the sight of a frog brings fear, there is no release, Teacher."

"Let me ask you this, Subrahma. Why do you meditate in a laundry basket of all places?"

"Well, it's a bit embarrassing..."

"You're afraid of heights?"

"I'm not the biggest fan."

The Teacher then spoke these verses:

> *"Whether of frogs or vertiginous heights,*
> *the mind pulls back from detestable things;*
> *only the pleasurable it seeks,*
> *barely present, barely alive."*

Subrahma nodded. "Fancy word, 'vertiginous.' Is it French?"

"Of course!" the Teacher said. "It means 'surrounded by green things,'" and at that moment Subrahma looked down, within a cloud of swirling gingko leaves, and her heart stopped a little bit.



Nama Suttam

"It is appropriate that I find you here," said a deva from the window seat of a JAL flight hurtling toward the east, upon finding the Teacher reclined in the green flare of an aurora that pulsed like an incoming tide.

"And why is that?" the Teacher asked after opening his eyes.

"Because I've had a strange experience," she said, "I'd like to run it by you."

"First I'd like to ask why you travel coach. And why you are embodied, and go through customs, where you can't even bring a harmless tendril of fern back and forth without risking life and limb."

"Oh, but an exotic species is part of my story. If you'd let me continue," the deva explained. The Teacher nodded from the shimmering ether. "I live in the Catummaharajika Heaven, as you know."

"Of course, and as I recall, when the sunrise strikes the slopes of Mount Sumeru, you flash across the sky, a little pink, a little orange."

"Exactly so. I was the pink, my dearest friend the orange. Now, what happened was this: one morning as we coursed through the sky, we shone into the cabin of a flight to Narita. I came out the window on other side of the aisle yet my friend, to whom I had devoted my life, was no longer by my side."

"I see."

"It was a few windows in coach, to be precise."

"So you take this flight back and forth in search of your lost friend."

"A little yes, a little no. But this is what I wanted to tell you. Do you know how one strikes up conversations on a long flight? You see the man seated next to me."

"With the young woman, yes."

"Indeed. Before reaching altitude we flew through a storm. It was black and lightning flashed, so the man brought out a notebook, upon which he wrote tiny, spidery bits of nonsense, spotted with his nervous sweat. I was curious so I entered into his mind to see what the nonsense was. I found out that he had long been afraid of flying, that he had been married once, and his wife, who was Chinese, taught him a few characters, which he would practice writing in those little books you give school children for their lessons. Whenever he became nervous during a flight he would practice these characters."

"A charming diversion!" the Teacher exclaimed.

"Well, if it were only that. At one time, I found, he knew full sentences, he could compile lists of things, he could tell rudimentary stories."

"All because he was afraid to fly?"

"In no small part, Teacher. But quit interrupting. A terrible thing happened, Teacher. His wife became ill, she suffered terribly, then went to the place he couldn't follow." The Teacher solemnly shimmered. "The man quit practicing his characters. In time he only remembered the character for 'I,' which he always enjoyed drawing. It has a number of features that, when performed in sequence, created a sense of happiness,

of achievement, in him. But now they are scribbles. I was contemplating this when I realized that the man had fallen asleep. We had flown out of the turbulence and he had drifted into that state when you have begun to sleep, but would swear afterward you were still awake. In that moment he looked to his companion."

"And who was his companion?"

"She is the young woman on the aisle. They traveled together to visit her home and she brought back a cutting of a fern indigenous to that place that her mother gave as a present. The man looked at her in his sleepy daze and her face transformed in his memory and he began to fall deeper into sleep. Just for a moment then he saw his wife's face hovering in the dark of his mind. He thought then, 'Oh, this gives me the opportunity to say goodbye to her once more.'"

"But this is inaccurate," the Teacher interrupted again.

"Teacher, please, it happened just so!"

"Mind is a continuity. Goodbye implies an absence."

"But Teacher, the world is always passing away, as the character 'I' disintegrates on the page, so his memories pass from him, and his memories decay until his being is no longer recognizable even to himself."

"And then?"

"He is like the cicada's shell. He has passed on from his old life, from his old self. Every morning and every night is a goodbye. This is the problem: as time passes, he is no longer who he was."

In that instant the sunrise broke from the peak of Mount Sumeru and a shaft of light pierced the windows on that JAL flight; the deva joined with it in a vibrating cord of spectra that illuminated the cabin, the color of autumn fern. The Teacher smiled. "Make unity indigenous to experience, friend."

The young woman woke with sunrise on her cheek.

"Oh!" the deva shot back, "The slopes of the mountain neither rise nor fall!"



Rohitassa

Yuriko, in her language homophonous with ‘today,’ turned to her friend in the middle seat. With her index finger she pressed a warm place on her cheek. “I had a strange dream,” she said. “I was speaking to a ray of light, like an angel. Her name was Rohitassa and she told me the saddest story.”

“Is that right?” her friend said, emerging from sleep.

“Yes, she sat right here on my cheek and we had this conversation. First she asked if I knew how to get to the end of the world, where no man is born, nor dies, nor ceases to move from one sphere of existence to another.”

“Interesting. And what did you tell her?”

“I told her it wasn’t by walking, nor flying, nor any other means that one can get to the end of the world. And she laughed. She said this was

true. She could fly at the greatest speed throughout the universe, as quick as you can blink, and she could never get to the end of the world, where no man is born, nor dies, nor ceases to move from one sphere of existence to another."

"And what did you say then?"

"I asked her why it was so important for her to find such a place. She told me that she and her friend were climbing the mountain at the center of the universe and they were chatting away until it began to grow dark. Still they climbed and climbed. At one point Rohitassa said she wanted to go back down the mountain but her friend kept climbing, though he looked back often in great fear. As she was pointing the way back toward their home, it grew darker still and even colder and when she turned around her friend had ascended into the cold black leaving her there all alone."

"So why did her friend keep climbing?"

"No one knows these kinds of answers," Yuriko said. "But Rohitassa wasn't finished with her story. She said that even worse than being left alone, she thinks of her friend walking up that cold, dark slope by himself. She thinks about how scared he must have been. She imagines how he suffered in the freezing darkness. She feels it's no longer possible to live in a world of mornings and light with the knowledge of her friend's suffering. So she searches endlessly for the place of endings."

"And where is this place?" her friend urgently asked.

Then the Teacher spoke these verses from right outside the window:

"Though an aurora may stretch across the ether
it is given meaning in this finger-high mind.
It occurs in the mind. Its cause is the mind.
In the mind it ceases."

Yuriko added a verse of her own:

"Understanding this one does not pray for another place."

The Teacher agreed. “Rohitassa must let the compassion she feels for her friend sweep away the barriers between herself and the world. Let it overflow distinctions. Let its light spread to every shadow.”

Yuriko’s friend held up a finger, “Wait, so you’re still dreaming?”

A flight attendant reached from behind their seats and brought the window shade down shutting out the dawn light.

Colophon

Autumn(Hymn)al is the third book in a series of collaborative adventures.

With *B(l)eached* underway as a summer-themed follow-up to spring's *Thaw(ing)*, it was natural to begin imagining a 4-book seasonal set of titles, each one more or less employing the same formula: Take a vacation (In other lands they call it a holiday). Send post cards to each of the collage artists who contributed to *Thawt*, and invite them to alter and return them. Ask one of the writers from *Thawt* to supply a manuscript inspired by the collages. This time it was a family trip to Oregon and the Pacific Coast. It was August, not quite autumn, and there were no rusty orange leaves on trees so symbolic of the season. But I did find a postcard to capture the mood of those colors, and matched it with a greeting card featuring trees, and there you have it. This time the call went to Bill to see if he was up to the charge. And he was. The result is another pleasant surprise for the eyes and mind; one we wouldn't have it if were not for the generous cooperation of a fun bunch of artists.

With the body set in Archer Light, and the rest in variations of Open Sans, twenty-six copies of this title have been privately published as a limited edition, hand bound and lettered A through Z.

