

# Readings in translated Japanese Literature

Wednesday, February 13, 2013

## *Death by Choice* by Masahiko Shimada



*Death by Choice* opens in the dream state of Kita Yoshio, in it a baby who appears as a judge sentences him to a death of his own choosing. Kita awakens as his plane touches down, returning to Tokyo after visiting his father's grave in Dazaifu. From early on in this well paced novel the premise is outlined quite simply that Kita has reached the decision to kill himself at the end of a week, the novel unfolds throughout chapters diaristically entitled by the passing days, when starting the novel the distant last chapter has the enigmatic title, 'someday', which casts the shadow of a question mark over how Kita's story might turn out. The novel rather than being a stickler for realism reads as a series of juxtapositions of the circumstances in the lives of the people Kita encounters who themselves by varying degrees have some relationship to death, though focusing on death the narrative inadvertently casts a turnaround glance to those living, their lives and values. The novel resembles being somewhere between bucket list and road movie, with ample space given over to moral circumspection, Kita sets out to fulfill some of his deeper desires in his last week, with his life savings to spend money is not much of a problem. After a rather spontaneous and chance meeting with the dubious Yashiro, (the owner of a film company and a man with many resourceful connections), Kita's first liaison is with a porno star, Mitsuyo, and inadvertently with a group of her friends, one of these, Zombie has attempted suicide four times. Moving onto Atami the three encounter an ageing gangster who tells him of his life and he tries to instill in them a sense of an 'enjoy life while you can' approach, this miniature narrative within a narrative has the feel of a morality tale. Another desire Kita would like to fulfill is to meet the star Shinobu Yoimachi, Yashiro begins to organize the meeting, and another is to meet with an ex from his past whom he had nearly married, whilst reading these encounters there's the anticipation that perhaps one of them will convince or jolt him into changing his mind about his death by choice, as the week progresses Kita observes a countdown, perhaps this is my sixth last ever meal, he notes.

Throughout Kita's encounters Shimada's control of the mood in the narrative is remarkable, Kita seamlessly moves between a complete range of emotions and states of mind, probably one of the most well conceived scenes of the novel is when Kita returns to visit his mother who is beginning to show signs of senility. Looking around the house he notes how things have remained the same, a set of illustrated reference books that he used as a child have been in the same place for twenty years, although Kita's father has been dead for sometime his mother sets his place at the table thinking he'll be returning at any moment, when leaving Kita imagines how he and his father will appear in his mother's imagination - 'Yoshio and his Dad would be there in a corner of her brain, remembering things with an occasional laugh together, smoking, clipping their nails, flipping through the newspaper and easing out an occasional silent fart!', despite it's irreverence the scene has a poignancy which is hard to escape. As the week passes the peripheral characters that Kita comes into contact with also have a close

proximity to death, when pursuing his ex at a hospital he encounters a couple of patients talking who have a terminal disease, and earlier in the novel he meets an elderly couple who are intending to travel until they drop in what they call their 'fall by the wayside trip', and to make the gulf between life and death increasingly thinner we learn that their son had passed away due to cancer, in these scenes we witness different attitudes and responses to death and are reminded that Kita is heading towards it and most of these characters are trying to avoid it.

Kita's meeting with Shinobu Yoimachi is arranged, a star who's soul is being slowly sucked out and body sold off by those pretending to be her management, she turns to the bible. The two begin to form a genuine empathy towards each other which leads them into feigning her kidnapping by means of escape, as Kita too is trying to evade the parasitical Yashiro, which turns into a national man hunt for them, Yashiro employs an assassin in the shape of a doctor to track them down, which leads the novel's action to Niigata. As with the changing moods of the narrative, Shimada builds the tension within the narrative to climatic degrees and manages to continue to pursue it through the pieces after it has burst, which adds to the build up of the how, when and will of Kita's exit, the novel is probing and has in places a dark satirical edge to it which dips into the sublime when needed, accompanied by an author's afterword in which he explains his motives for writing the novel. *Death By Choice* is translated by Meredith McKinney.

*Death By Choice* at Thames River Press