America
& Other Poems
by Ayukawa Nobuo

selected and translated by Shogo Oketani & Leza Lowitz

Winner, Japan-US Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature
While his father published a nationalist newspaper, Ayukawa Nobuo longed for democracy. While other poets of his generation were writing political poems, Ayukawa insisted “the only way for a poet to take social responsibility is to write a good poem.” Meanwhile, he wrote some of the bleakest and most durable anti-war poems of his time.

Ayukawa Nobuo was born in Tokyo in 1920 between an influenza epidemic and a major earthquake. He died in Tokyo in 1986 while playing Super Mario Brothers. His poems, well-selected by Oketani and Lowitz, are strange, awkward, desperate, forceful, wild, and moving in these scrupulous, long-awaited English translations.

You might read Ayukawa to see what war did to him. You might read him because he’s a major poet whose work, still gathering force behind him, speaks directly to Americans in this dismal, blood-spattered moment of our own history.

— Forrest Gander, Brown University, author of Eye Against Eye

A major voice of modern Japanese poetry, beautifully brought into English for the first time by Shogo Oketani and Leza Lowitz.
— Jane Hirshfield, author of After

No other poet in Japan attempted to internalize the war experience like Ayukawa Nobuo… [He] is the only poet of his generation who continued to hold onto and ruminate over that unspeakable experience.
— Yoshimoto Takaaki, author of Common Illusions

Ayukawa’s war poems are jarring, but he’s not simply a “war” poet. No revisionist or apologist, Ayukawa believed in accepting responsibility for Japan’s actions, and rejected the trappings of traditional Japanese poetry as a camouflage for the horrors of militarized Japan. Oketani and Lowitz have produced intense, painstaking translations of a major poet virtually unknown in the U.S. and an important contribution to our abiding fascination with Japanese poetry.
— George Evans, author of Sudden Dreams

Paperback $14.95
Cover illustration: Richard Hahn
Cover design: Purple Gate Design
Man on a Bridge (1942)

Man on a bridge,
elbows resting on a high parapet,
shadow against the clear sky.
A black stream flows far beneath
the weeping trees and endless roofs
of a town made of stone.
Can you truly feel the desperate
advance of the ship's direction?
It breaks through heavy, stagnant time,
its oars hitting at vanity.

Man on a bridge
watching fireworks,
you came to this far bridge
to look down on an image of yourself,
throwing away the miserable walls
and your sighs that
flicker against useless paper.
Birds, exhausted by artifice,
turn away to their sad perches.
On the faraway bridge,
you look up at the midday fireworks.

Man on a bridge,
your spirit parched,
the faces of your mother, father,
friends, too,
sway in the quiet ebb and flow
of the sleeping waves.
Is there any deeper life
than this soft cave?
Even when beautiful green nature
calls to you from the grave
the river’s surface refuses to move.

Man dreaming on a bridge,
will the day ever come
when this mud-soiled stream will
flow into the sea with a thunderclap,
spilling out where the horizon joins the sky,
when the bridge will drift out to sea
and become a blue figure alive with motion,
when it will be possible to cry out
in a natural voice?

Man on a bridge,
with your earnest brow —
you confirm that the footsteps surrounding your life
disappear as you become the mist.
What are you thinking at sunset?
The thousand steps that come and go behind you
are descending towards the same labyrinth;
they’re walking the stairs to oblivion,
holding the wooden rail,
listening to the swell of polluted water underground.

Pick a moment when anger can be easily quelled
as if the means to cure only flesh
existed in this world.
Man on a bridge, eyes distant,
nobody believed you would lie down
trembling under the sunset sky,
smiling forever at words
blown on black water by the drifting wind.

Away from the edge of that dim abyss,
it’s possible that people flow in time,
unchanging like a narrow river.
Man on a bridge,
even if you reach an end,
the pale river’s silence
trails after the sound of the clock,
carving out your soul, making your body
a shadow in a corridor of afternoon,
preventing you from reaching your goal
like a succession of doors.

Why did it take you so long
to remember that you yourself
are one small room,
that here and there
are also just an illusion?
Man on a bridge,
at the end of beauty,
no direction existed,
no fireworks or dreams,
no blowing wind.
Sustained by the dark blue,
gazing at the other bank,
you’re still cold, aren’t you,
man on a bridge.

(1942)