TRANSLATION

Sange
FALLEN FLOWERS

by DAZAI OSAMU

Translated by T. E. SWANN

I was intending to use the title ‘Heroic Death’,¹ I wrote it down on my copy paper, but it’s such a very beautiful expression I began to feel that it would be too good for the title of my poor story. I erased the characters for ‘Heroic Death’ and changed the title to ‘Fallen Flowers’.²

I parted with two friends this year. In early spring Mr. Mitsui died. After that, in May, Mr. Mita died, with honor, on a solitary island in the north. Both Mr. Mitsui and Mr. Mita were only about 26 or 27 years of age.

Mr. Mitsui had been writing novels. Every time he finished one he would take it up and hurry over to my place. He would open the entranceway door loudly with a harsh clattering sound and come in. He only entered my house this way when he brought some of his work with him. When he was not bringing his work to me he would open the door softly and come in. Therefore, when Mitsui opened my door with a loud crash, I would immediately know: Ah, Mitsui has finished a novel again. Mitsui’s novels were clear and beautiful in places, but as a whole they rambled along and did not come off at all. They were novels which lacked any backbone. Nevertheless, they gradually became better, although they were always criticized by me. Till the day he died, not once did they receive praise from me.

It seemed he had a lung disease. But he never said much to me about his ailment. One day he suddenly said, ‘Don’t you smell it? Don’t I smell?’

Ever since he had come into my room that day, Mitsui had smelled. ‘No, not at all.’
‘Is that so? I don’t stink?’
I couldn’t say: Yes, you stink.

¹ 至上 ² 散華
'For two or three days I have been eating garlic. If the odor is too strong, I will come back later.'

'No, not at all.' It was obvious to me then that his body was deteriorating considerably.

I asked one of his friends how it would be if Mitsui were to be given some strong advice by him, such as: 'Mitsui, you must take care of your body. Right now you certainly can't write anything good. After you get healthy you can start whatever you like—novels or anything else.' It appears that Mitsui's friend reported my words to him. After that, Mitsui quit coming to my place.

One day, three or four months after he quit coming to my place, Mitsui died. I received the news of Mitsui's death by postcard from one of his friends. How pathetic, in times like these, are those young people who suffer from bad health, fail to become soldiers, and finally die in sickbeds. Later, I heard from Mitsui's friend that it seemed as if Mitsui had no interest in curing his sickness. The wretched household consisted only of Mitsui and his mother. But after the disease reached an advanced stage, Mitsui would often slip out of his mother's sight and sneak away from his sickbed. He would walk downtown, treat himself to some red-bean soup, and return home late at night. His mother, although nervous, put her faith in Mitsui's vigor, which calmly took him on such outings, and in the depths of her heart thought that he was still all right. Mitsui seems to have attempted such lighthearted strolls until two or three days before he died.

The beauty of Mitsui's dying hour has no parallel. I do not want to overuse fine words like 'beauty' and the like that seem to have become irresponsible stereotypes, but, anyway, because of its true beauty, I cannot help using the word. Mitsui had been quietly lying in bed chatting with his mother who was sewing beside the bed. Suddenly, he closed his mouth. It was no more than that. Even on a peaceful, clear spring day without any wind at all, cherry blossoms, unable to bear their own weight, fall spontaneously as if they had overflowed—looking like a small snow-storm of blossoms. A large rose that has been placed in a cup on top of a desk will fall suddenly in the middle of the night as if it had been broken. It is not due to the wind. It falls of its own accord. It falls with a sigh of nature. Brushed by the hem of the white silk garment of some spirit flying through the air, it falls. I wondered if Mitsui was a very favorite child of the gods. I wondered if he was a person who had possessed such a noble character that it could not be understood by people like me. The noblest crown of humanity, I thought, was nothing other than a beautiful dying hour. The skills, defects, and so forth of Mitsui's novels were entirely beside the question.
The other person, Mita Junji, also a young friend of mine, died a beautiful, heroic death without equal in May of this year. In Mita’s case, even the expression ‘fallen flower’ struck me as too lackluster. Dying an admirably heroic death on a solitary island in the north, he became one of the spirits who watch over our country.

Wasn’t it in the late fall of 1940 that Mita first came to my place? One night he and Toishi3 came calling at my poor place in Mitaka—I believe that was the first time. I would ask Toishi again to make sure, but he too has already become a fine soldier. There is no need to ask him right away because the other day he sent me a letter that said:

When I heard about Mita at the campgrounds I felt a sensation I cannot describe. As the fields were blooming all over with kikyō4 and ominae-shi5 flowers, I felt especially lonely. The way he died was so much like Mita. Pretty soon, I too intend to show you that I can perform some deed worthy of a friend of Mita.

About the time they first came to my place both of them were students in the Japanese Literature department of Tokyo Imperial University. Mita was born in Hanamaki6 township in Iwate Prefecture, Toishi was from Sendai, and both were graduates of the Second High School. Since it was four years ago, my memory is not clear, but one night in late fall (it may possibly have been at the start of winter) they came calling together at my home in Mitaka.

I remember that Toishi wore a serge hakama7 over a kimono with a splash pattern and that Mita had on his school uniform. We gathered around the table. Toishi sat with his back to the alcove and Mita sat on my left.

What was the topic of conversation that night? I believe that Toishi innocently asked about such things as romanticism and the New Order. For the most part, it took the form of a discussion between Toishi and me, while Mita smilingly listened at the side. But now and then Mita nodded vaguely. Because his way of nodding sensitively occurred at only the most important parts of my talk, I paid more attention to Mita on my left while talking in the direction of Toishi.

I cannot say which one was better. Among people, there are two such types. When these two come to my place, one of them, for the most part, will rapidly fire foolish questions in a cheerful way and will keep up a pleasant attitude even

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3 戸石
4 桔梗 (Platycodon grandiflorum; broad bell-flower) 5 女郎花 (Patricia wallichiana) 6 花巻 7 Loose, pleated trousers worn by men.
though mocked by me. He will pay no attention to my replies, but will earnestly do his best to make the gathering pleasant. The other one, sitting in a spot slightly to one side, will silently strain his ears for my words. I don’t mean to say the first type acts as he does because he is a foolish person. For his part, he knows quite well that his questions are usually destined to be foolish questions. Moreover, a fellow who would go uninvited to the homes of his superiors and be enthusiastic about trying to ask sharp, witty questions such as would make his superiors blush in confusion, is indeed a real fool or a lunatic. I can’t stand such pretension. A person who utters foolish questions is prepared to become the group’s jester and by so doing he himself will be obviously rather self-pleased. This is a manifestation of a noble, self-sacrificing heart.

When the two arrive at my place, one usually becomes the group’s jester of his own accord. And then the jester, strange to say, always sits in the seat of honor. Without exception, he is sure to be a handsome man. He is always a smart dresser and will come with a folding fan stuck in the back of his bakama. Although Toishi never carried a fan in the back of his bakama when he came, he still could not be excluded from the example of the gay, handsome man. Toishi once gravely expressed his thoughts on this matter to me.

‘A handsome face is a drawback, isn’t it?’

I burst out laughing. I thought he was an extraordinary person. Toishi held the third rank in fencing and was a man close to six feet tall. I had secretly sympathized with Toishi’s oversized body. If he didn’t have a well-fitting uniform when he became a soldier, I worried that he would probably be very conspicuous, be teased, and suffer unusual hardships. But, according to a letter from Toishi: ‘There are two or three people in the unit taller than I. However, I discovered that in order to look smart, one’s height should be about six feet.’

He seemed to believe strongly that a height of six feet was really smart-looking. I must say that he certainly is as genial as a spring breeze.

He even said, ‘My face, too, has some defects, but maybe no one has noticed them.’ Anyway, he used to make our group laugh gaily.

Whether or not Toishi is really full of conceit, I don’t know. Perhaps he is not conceited at all, but only exhibited a self-sacrificing heart and acted the part of a clown in order to make the party gay. The humor of a person from the northeastern part of Japan is usually puzzling anyway.

Looked at in this way, Mita was conservative when compared with Toishi, who was jovial and charming. Most of the students in the Literature department around that time had grown long hair, but from the start Mita had his hair cut
short. He wore glasses, and I think they were steel-rimmed. His head was large, with a protruding forehead, and the light in his eyes was strong. To put it tritely, he had a ‘philosopher’s’ features. By nature he didn’t talk about things very much, but he was quick to understand what people said. He sometimes came along with Toishi and he sometimes came alone, dripping wet in the rain. He also came with other Imperial University students who were graduates of the Second High School. We often drank sake at the odenn and sushi shops in front of Mitaka station. Even in drinking sake Mita was conservative. Toishi raised the gayest commotions at our drinking parties.

However, to Toishi, Mita seemed to be something of a tough customer. Mita would point out the shortcomings of Toishi’s character in a staccato tone when alone with him. I heard that Mita had charged: ‘Can’t you be more serious?’ Even Toishi, who held the third rank in fencing, was greatly dumbfounded and complained of the matter to me.

‘Because Mita is such a serious person, I am no match for him. I think that everything Mita said is reasonable, but I don’t know what I should do.’

This big fellow, who was close to six feet tall, was just about to cry. Whatever the reason, I have a compelling inclination to support the underdog. One day I spoke about this with Mita.

‘People must be serious, but it is a mistake to label a person not serious just because he smiles.’

Sensitive Mita guessed everything. After that he didn’t come to my place very much. Meanwhile, Mita ran down his health and entered a hospital.

I often received postcards which said something like: ‘It is very painful. Please send some words of encouragement.’

However, when there is a request for ‘encouraging words’ or the like in front of me, I am the type who feels awkward and becomes confused. At that time I could not send him any ‘fine words’ and I wrote back only very indifferent replies.

After he got well, Mita went to Mr. Yamagishi’s place, which was near his boarding house, and began to study poetry in earnest. Yamagishi, much older than us, is a serious man of letters. He conscientiously guided not only Mita but four or five other students in their studies of novels and poetry. Two or three young poets who were taught by Yamagishi have produced fine collections of

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8 Vegetables, fried bean curd, seaweed, etc., cooked in a sauce made of sweet sake and soy sauce and served on skewers.
9 Small vinegared rice-balls wrapped in seaweed or topped with raw fish, etc.
poetry and have already earned the commendation of farsighted men of our times.

About that time I asked Yamagishi, ‘How is Mita?’
After thinking a bit, Yamagishi said: ‘He is good. He may be the best.’
‘Really?’ I thought. Then I blushed. I lacked discrimination in viewing Mita.
I felt embarrassed that because I was just an ordinary person I didn’t understand
the world of poetry very well. I thought that Mita’s parting from me and going
to Yamagishi’s place was very good for his sake.

Even when Mita had been coming to my place he had shown me two or three
of his works, but I had not admired them that much. Toishi had been very impres-
sed and had made as much fuss as if he himself had produced a masterpiece:
‘This time, Mita’s poems are masterpieces. Please try reading some carefully.’
But I could not believe that they were masterpieces of that degree. They were
not in any way coarse poems. They did not smack of vulgarity at all, but to me
they were unsatisfactory. I did not praise them.

But perhaps I don’t understand poetry. Hearing Yamagishi’s judgement—
‘He is good’—I thought I would try reading some of Mita’s later poems at times.
I felt that Mita might have steadily progressed, under the tutelage of Yamagishi.
Yet, before I had encountered Mita’s latest work, he graduated from the university
and departed immediately for the front.

I now have with me four letters from Mita after he left for the front. I think I
received two or three more, but as it is my habit not to keep the letters I have
received from people lying around, it is even stranger that these four letters were
in my desk drawer. I must resign myself to the fact that I have lost forever the
other two or three letters.

Dazai-san, are you in good health? Nothing much occurs to me. I am
drifting along absentmindedly, and such is my first year as a soldier.

No poetry seems to be stirring inside my head. How is the Tokyo
weather?

This was more or less what the first of the four letters said. At this time Mita
was still attached to his home unit and had been undergoing training. This was
a faltering, fawning letter. Because the uniquely honest, tender feelings were
put forth too openly, I felt uneasy. Wasn’t he the same person who had been
judged ‘the best’ by Yamagishi? I was dissatisfied—couldn’t he somehow do a
little better? I had associated with my younger friends without any considera-
tion at all for such things as their age. It was not possible for me to sympathize
with or favor those friends just because they were young. Within me there was no room to indulge in favoritism. I wanted to esteem all of my friends without distinctions of youth or age. I wanted to associate through a sense of respect. Therefore, even to my younger friends I had expressed dissatisfaction over things openly. Perhaps this is the narrow-mindedness of an unrefined rustic. I just could not appreciate such naïve letters from Mita. Then there was another letter after some time. This one was also a letter from the home unit.

Dear Sir, I have neglected to write for a long time. How is your health? I have no poetry at all in me. I get to the point of wanting to cry, but I have faith and am persevering.

Compared with the previous letter, I had the feeling that his distress was settling down and becoming somewhat solid. I sent encouragement to Mita. But I still did not think that he was a first-rate Japanese youth. Before long I received a letter from Hakodate.

Dazai-san, are you well? I am well. One must strive harder and harder. Take care of yourself. I pray for your efforts. There is nothing else.

When transcribing it this way, I give a deep, spontaneous sigh in spite of myself. It is a pitiful letter. The expression ‘must strive harder and harder’ probably refers to Mita himself, but it makes me feel as if it also refers to my situation and I feel ill at ease. He had written ‘There is nothing else’ about himself. He probably didn’t want to say anything more than ‘Are you well? I am well.’ The so-called poetic temperament, such that one will not write a single line of poetry if there is not a genuine impulse, vividly appears here.

But I didn’t start this story called ‘Fallen Flowers’ just because I wanted to present the three letters above. I had only one intention from the beginning. I wanted to write down my impressions at the time I received the last letter. It was a letter that had to be sent from the XX unit stationed in the North Sea. At the time I received it, I had no way of knowing that the XX unit was the noble unit defending Attu Island. I knew of Attu Island, but since I could not have any premonition of Mita’s heroic death, I was not especially startled upon encountering the name of the XX unit. I was moved by the lines on Mita’s postcard.

Are you well? I am inquiring from over the distant horizon. I arrived at my post safely. Please lay down your life for the sake of great literature. I too will die, for the sake of this war.
Mita’s expression, ‘please lay down your life’, was indescribably precious to me and I was extremely grateful and happy. I thought that this was indeed an expression that could only be uttered by a true son of Japan. When I received this, I said frankly to Yamagishi: ‘Mita is a fine fellow after all, isn’t he? He really has good points.’ I then felt like wanting to apologize from the bottom of my heart to Yamagishi for my ignorance. Having changed my mind, I felt I wanted to shake hands with Yamagishi.

Although I say that I do not understand poetry, I am the sort who spends day and night searching for true composition. This is different from the case of a complete illiterate—I believe I partially understand. Even at the time Yamagishi had said ‘He is good. He may be the best’, I had felt embarrassed at my ignorance and yet in the bottom of my heart I had stubbornly hesitated and wondered, ‘Is that so?’ I seem to have a provincial stubbornness and I have a tendency not to believe people until they unfold clear proof before my eyes. There’s a side to my character similar to Thomas’s—who to the end kept on doubting Christ’s resurrection. It is a bad trait. A stubbornness which leads one to say such things as ‘Except I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into His side, I will not believe,’\(^{10}\) is quite hopeless. I am also a good-natured person and have a streak of naivety. By no means am I a completely stubborn person like Thomas was, but still I have something of the temperament that will, if I am careless, probably turn me into an old old crank after I grow old. Frankly, I could not believe Yamagishi’s judgement altogether. The misgiving ‘Is that so?’ had remained in my heart.

Nevertheless, upon encountering the letter which said, ‘Please lay down your life’, the barrier in my heart was suddenly demolished completely and I felt a gust of cool wind suddenly sweep through.

I was delighted. I thought he had expressed it excellently. It was a brilliant expression. I received many fine letters from many of my friends who had gone to the battlefield, but Mita alone had spontaneously and unhesitatingly said to me ‘please lay down your life.’ It was an expression that could not be uttered easily. Seeing that he could say it in such a natural tone, I believed that Mita too had finally acquired the qualifications of a first-rate poet. I esteem poets. If they are genuine poets I believe that they are above humanity and that they are surely heavenly beings. Therefore, I expect a great deal from the poets of the world, and this is why I am usually disappointed. Many are odd characters who assume airs.

\(^{10}\) John 20:25, King James version.
and style themselves poets although they are no angels. But Mita was not that way. I believed that he was truly one of the ‘best poets’, as Yamagishi said. What was it that caused Mita to write such a beautiful letter? It was only much later that I knew clearly what it was. Anyway, I was extremely happy over the fact that I could sincerely agree with Yamagishi’s opinion. ‘Mita is good, positively excellent’, I said to Yamagishi. I alone knew that that was an offer of humble reconciliation. In this world there are not many joys that surpass reconciliation, however. Like Yamagishi, I now believed that Mita was ‘the best’. I held great hopes for Mita’s poetry thereafter. But Mita’s work had to come to a splendid conclusion in an entirely different manner—a heroic death on Attu Island.

Are you well? I am inquiring from over the distant horizon. I arrived at my post safely. Please lay down your life for the sake of great literature. I too will die, for the sake of this war.

I again transcribe Mita’s letter here. From the time he stepped ashore at his post, he already seemed resolved to die. He wasn’t dying for his own sake. He had made a resolution of noble devotion. A person who makes such a serious resolution does not spout complicated reasons and the like. He does not speak excitedly. He is always cheerful and speaks plainly. Then he writes some lines which reveal an unusually rigid determination behind them. While reading it over and over, I even began to feel as if this short letter of Mita’s actually was supreme poetry. Even if I didn’t know of his heroic death on Attu, I could sincerely esteem this young friend from this letter alone. In our esteem of genuine devotion as the most beautiful thing in the world and in our striving for it, there are no distinctions between soldiers and poets, or common writers like me.

At the end of May this year, I heard on the radio of the heroic deaths on Attu, but I did not anticipate at all that Mita would be one of those supreme heroes. We did not even know where Mita was fighting.

From about the end of August the names of the over 2,000 heroes of Attu began appearing in the newspaper. I very carefully scanned by turns the names that were listed and I soon discovered the name Mita Junji. I had not been looking for Mita’s name. But, for some reason or other I carefully scanned that page of the newspaper. I was shocked, then, to find the name Mita Junji, but at the same time I also thought it was a very natural occurrence. I even felt that I had been looking for that very name from the start. When I informed my family, their faces showed surprise and they were shocked, but, for me, there was a strong feeling of acceptance—‘So, it’s true after all?’
In spite of myself, I could not calm down that day. I sent a postcard to Yamagishi.

I remember that I wrote down something to this effect: ‘I just learned from the newspaper that Mita was one of the heroes of Attu. Please inform me if there have been any good plans made for a memorial for Mita.’

After two or three days a reply came from Yamagishi. In general it said that Yamagishi had also learned for the first time of Mita’s heroic death on Attu from the newspaper that day. He planned to collect and publish Mita’s manuscripts posthumously, and in this regard he wanted to have some discussions at a later date. In addition, he put down on the postcard that he was considering making the title of the posthumous collection of manuscripts ‘North Star’. He found himself anxious to write something about the North Star, which was the topic of a conversation of theirs one night.

Some time after that Yamagishi came to my home in Mitaka, bringing along a tall young man with strikingly large eyes.

He was introduced by Yamagishi as Mita’s younger brother. We exchanged greetings. As you may expect, he resembled Mita. I thought his timid smile was just like his elder brother’s.

I received some presents from the younger brother—a pair of geta made of paulownia wood and a basket of apples. Yamagishi added some comments: ‘My household also received some apples and geta. The apples still seem a bit green so perhaps it would be better to eat them two or three days from now. As for the geta, you and I both have a pair now. Aren’t they nice presents?’

The younger brother said that he had wanted to talk with us one night about his elder brother and also to consult about the manuscript collection, so he had come to the capital from Hanamaki the previous day. The three of us discussed the posthumous manuscript collection at my house.

I asked Yamagishi, ‘Should we publish all his poems?’

‘Well, that would probably be a good idea.’

I was still slightly opposed and said, ‘The early ones were not too good, but...’

It was my habitual provincial stubbornness. I must be the son of an old crank.

Yamagishi smiled sardonically, ‘You would say that.’ Then he suddenly seemed to understand. ‘Well, one shouldn’t die before Dazai, should he? There is no telling what would be said about him.’

I wanted to have that letter of Mita’s stuck in the front of the book on the first page in large type. It made no difference if the rest of the poems were in small type. I loved every word and every sentence of the letter that much.
Are you well? I am inquiring from over the distant horizon. I arrived at my post safely. Please lay down your life for the sake of great literature. I too will die, for the sake of this war.