Cherries桜桃

Roger Pulvers, Dazai Osamu

Cherries

By Dazai Osamu

Translated and Introduced by Roger Pulvers

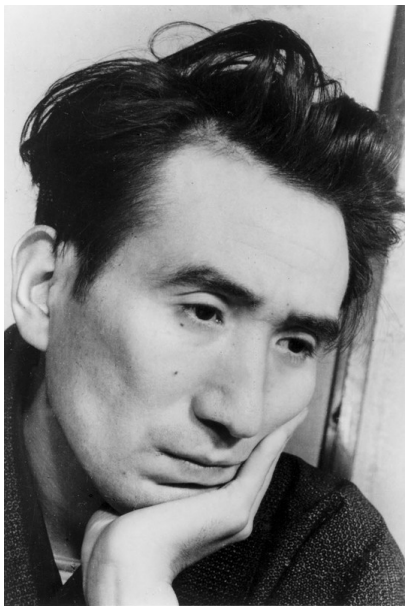
"It's not that I'm weak, it's that the suffering weighs down on me too heavily."

This was said, in 1938, by a writer whose life and death are noted with public attention every year in June. The popularity of this author has not waned in Japan. Crowds gather on June 19 around the country in rituals of celebration and mourning. Given the personality of this man, it is not easy to separate the two.

He is Dazai Osamu, author of such postwar classics as Ningen Shikkaku ("No Longer Human") and Shayō ("The Setting Sun"). The leading publishing house Shinchosha ranks the former its second most popular novel, while the latter is its tenth most popular. In fact, Dazai is extensively published by numerous major publishers, including Chikuma, Kadokawa and Iwanami. His novels and stories are continually being made into feature films.

Young people today are particularly drawn to his works, and it is easy to see why. Dazai is the King of Dysfunctionality. His heroes are—as he fancied himself—deliberately behind the eight ball, having put themselves there in a diffident stance, as if waiting, with perverse anticipation, to be knocked down a hole and out of the game.

The themes in his novels, short stories and essays are those of dejection, illicit love, drug dependency and a morose, aimless alienation; his method, confessional. He puts the reader in the confession box as priest, then, on the other side of the little window, opens up his heart—and his veins.



Dazai

There is much in common here, in a more contemporary context, with the themes and characters in the fiction of Murakami Haruki. People are having relationships, but they are like a box with two sides only. It is only habit and the magnet of social decorum that keeps them parallel.

"I'm the joker in the family. Let me put it this way. All I can do is put a jolly face on the huge amount of anxiety and mental anguish I feel. And no, it's not only at home that I do this. Whenever I come into contact with people, no matter how depressed I am, no matter how much physical pain I am in, I do my frantic best to create a pleasant mood all around. Then, after parting, I reel with fatigue and think only of

money, morality and suicide."

This is what Dazai wrote in what is arguably his most pathetic look into his own heart and his family, the short story titled Ōtō ("Cherries"). He portrays himself in a hopeless and self-piteous light. It may be this brutal honesty, coupled with a kind of self-centered sadsack coyness, that appeals to young people, especially a generation of young people today who seek both to lose and identify themselves in doses of cyber-disclosure.

Dazai was born on June 19, 1909, into a very well-to-do family in Aomori Prefecture, at the very top of Honshu. By the time he was a teenager he was feeling intense guilt over his wealthy background, while Japan was experiencing the worst effects of the worldwide Depression. A number of suicide attempts (there were three between 1930 and 1937) followed, one in which a young female companion died.

Left-leaning intellectuals like Dazai were persecuted in the 1930s, as fascism became the norm throughout Japanese society. Dazai recanted. But was it, too, a pose, just like his self-styled Marxism? His charm, even today, lies in the fact that you cannot tell pose from reality. Was his honesty merely a ruse to engender sympathy in the reader? It doesn't matter to us anymore. We are engaged by his lovable helplessness and his always-say-die decadence.

One of his most enduring and attractive books is Otogizōshi, soon to be published by Kurodahan Press in a very fine translation by Ralph F. McCarthy under the title "Otogizōshi: The Fairy Tale Book of Dazai Osamu." This book consists of four well-known ancient Japanese tales retold by Dazai as he awaited the end of the war in 1945, spending some time on the run from the bombing and other time in a dugout shelter with paper and pen in hand.

Otogizōshi: The Fairy Tale Book of Dazai Osamu

The retelling of ancient tales has been a common genre of Japanese literature for centuries. The most famous story retelling of the modern period is that of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927), an author who Dazai worshipped and, to a certain extent, fashioned himself after. Even more so than Akutagawa, Dazai spins the old stories around his ego.

In the first story of the upcoming collection, "The Stolen Wen," Dazai writes of the hero who is inordinately fond of drink…

"Drinkers tend to say inane and obnoxious things when they're drunk, but most of them are in fact harmless, innocent souls."

This is no doubt how Dazai wished to view himself, "harmless and innocent"; although, from the point of view of the ladies who accompanied him on his suicide missions, this innocence might well seem disingenuous. Perhaps the old adage hige mo jiman no uchi (too much self-deprecation is a kind of boasting) applies to the characters in Dazai's works who are fun-house mirror images of himself. No one relished personal insipidity—and relished apologizing for it—like Dazai.

He cruised from one personal crisis to another, frequently being bailed out, financially and morally, by a member of his family. He suffered

depression and despaired of living, troubled by thoughts of death his entire life, virtually everything else—love, family, literature—an excuse to hurry it along.

"It's a hell of a thing to stay alive in this world," he wrote in the not-very-veiled autobiographical story, "Cherries." "Wherever you go you get tangled up in chains; and if you so much as budge, blood spurts out."

Dazai may very well have suffered from one or another form of clinical depression. Combined with this is his seeming lack of ability to commit to anything, be it a cause or a woman. He flirted with both, vacillating, plunging into one after another, then slithering away, leaving his former skin behind. I am in no way passing moral judgment on him for this, though I risk sounding so. It is this very anguished flight instinct in him that links him to a certain strain of behavior today … and by no means only in Japan.

He always seems to be in need of guidance and help. I am not being facetious when I say that this is one thing that engenders in female readers the instinct to mother him back to normality or in male readers the itch to identify with his brazen independence and couldn't-care-less egoism. But, poor little rich boy, all the world was definitely not okay with him.

Even his most precious personal relationship outside family, that with the author Ibuse Masuji (1898-1993), could not be sustained for his inability to extricate himself from his self-obsessiveness. Ibuse was like a father to him, and wrote about the relationship himself in any number of works. Ibuse was his life support. He was there for many serious breakdowns.

But in his suicide note, Dazai called Ibuse akunin (a wicked, evil man). It was so shocking to Ibuse and to the public that even today many people think the note was written by the woman who died with Dazai. There is no doubt in my mind, however, that Dazai himself wrote this note. Perhaps he resented Ibuse for being such a kind mentor and, as such, keeping him alive as long as he did.

Dazai jumped into the waters of the Tamagawa Canal in Tokyo on June 13, 1948, together with Yamazaki Tomie, a woman for whom he abandoned his wife and children. Their bodies were recovered six days later.

The Bodies Discovered

The fact that the discovery of Dazai's body coincided with his birthday was not lost on the public of the time. That birth and the acknowledgement of death occur on the same day is an immaculate irony, considering the world that Dazai created. This is why the celebration and the mourning that take place every year on June 19 are displays of perfectly matched sentiments.

For Dazai himself, wallowing in self-pity was a way of life; for young people today, a luxury that, unwittingly for some, has turned into a way of life.

To the extent that Japanese family life in our day is pitifully dysfunctional, this luxury has become a part of his legacy.

Cherries

I lift up mine eyes to the hills.

Parents, I would like to think, are more precious than children. You may sanctimoniously believe, as did the moralizers of old, that you live for the children, but let me tell you, children are much stronger than their parents. At least that's true for my family. Don't get me wrong. I'm certainly not harbouring any secret and shameless desire to have my children look after me when I'm old. Yet, you wouldn't know it, because the parents in this household are at the constant beck and call of their children.

Now, my children are far from grown up. The elder daughter's seven; our son is four; and the younger daughter's just one. Even so, each in their own way has got it all over their parents, who have every appearance of being their hand servants.

We cram ourselves into a three-mat room in the summer for our raucous, chaotic dinners, as daddy … that's me … wipes the sweat streaming down his face and grouches under his breath, 'There's an old ditty about how gross it is to sweat your way through a meal, but what can a father who's so refined do but drip with sweat when his kids are such pains in the bum'.

Their mother, who's running about like a madwoman with the one-year-old on her breast, waiting on them hand and foot, picking up after them, blowing noses, and wiping them and picking up the spilled food, says, 'Father's the one with the wettest nosey … he spends all his time wiping his nosey'.

Father forces a smile.

'So where are you all wet? Between your legs?'

'Oh, such an elegant father'.

'Huh? Nothing of the sort, my dear. Just medical talk. Nothing to do with elegance at all'.

At that, mother turns all serious.

' My … my breasts. This place between them … is the vale of tears….'

The vale of tears.

That one shut me up, so I just went on eating.

I'm the joker in the family. Let me put it this way. All I can do is put a jolly face on the huge amount of anxiety and mental anguish I feel. And no, it's not only at home that I do this. Whenever I come into contact with people, no matter how depressed I am, no matter how much physical pain I am in, I do my frantic best to create a pleasant mood all around. Then, after parting, I reel with fatigue and think only of money, morality and suicide. And no, it's not only when I have met with people. This happens when I write as well. It's when I'm sad that I strive to create stories with a light, jolly air. I mean, here I am trying to give people exactly what they want, and they just don't see it, coming out with contemptuous things like, 'Dazai's lost his edge … he's lightened up too much … he's trying to attract readers with facile humour'.

Is it a bad thing for one human to give people what they want? Is it a good thing to be a pompous sourpuss?

The fact is, I just can't stand it when someone's a killjoy, when people get all humourless and out of sorts. So, at home I keep coming out with one jokey comment after another, some of the jokes treading on pretty thin ice. I might be betraying one portion of my readers or critics by doing this, but let me assure you that the mats on the floor of my room are new, my desk is neat and tidy, my wife and I treat each other with consideration and respect, and furthermore, it goes without saying that I have never struck her, nor have we ever had violent quarrels where one or the other of us screams 'Get out of this house!' and one or the other of us leaves, because this daddy and mummy adore their children to pieces and the children, for their part, are attached to their

parents in a most cheery fashion.

But, it's not that way on the inside. Mummy bares her breasts and we get the vale of tears … and as for daddy, he sweats like a stuck pig at night. They are well aware of the other's anguish, but they both take pains not to aggravate it, with daddy telling his jokes and mummy laughing at them.

And yet, when mummy came out with her vale of tears this time, it shut daddy right up, and, with the best will in the world, he couldn't think of a single clever thing to say. Daddy's clamming up just sent things from bad to worse, and, though unaccustomed as a 'man about town' to get all heavy, he muttered, with his heart in his mouth, 'Get some help in. What's stopping you?' He was doing his damnedest not to hurt her feelings.

As I said, three children. When it comes to housework, daddy is a write-off. He can't even lift a futon into the closet. He makes do with his stupid jokes. He doesn't know the first thing about rationing, registering and stuff like that. It's almost as if he's living in an inn or something. When a guest comes, he treats him like a king. And there are times when he leaves the house with a packed lunch to go to work at his private little office and doesn't come back for a week. He calls it 'work', but if he manages two or three pages a day it's a lot. The rest of the time, he drinks. When he drinks too much, he looks like death warmed over and just tries to sleep it off. Beside that, it appears as if he's got young 'lady friends' scattered about.

Now, the kids. The seven-year-old and the little one born this spring are a trifle prone to colds, but, well, they're no worse than anybody else's kids. But the four-year-old boy is as skinny as a scarecrow, and he can't even stand up yet. He's unable to speak. All he does is make a funny noise or two. He doesn't understand what people say to him. He just crawls about the place and won't be toilet trained. Even so, he eats like a horse. And yet, he doesn't put on weight, is really small, has thin hair and refuses to grow.

Mummy and daddy avoid getting into deep discussions about their son. The reason is that it's all too distressing to admit to each other that they've given birth, in a word, to a boy who's severely handicapped. Sometimes mummy grabs him and holds him tight. And daddy often thinks of getting hold of him and, in a fit, jumping into the river with him and ending it all.

'Man Murders Mute Son. In the afternoon of such-and-such a day, Mr. So-and-so, age 53, dealer in x at number y, z street, split open the skull of his 18-year-old son with an axe, then shoved scissors into his own throat but was transported to a nearby hospital where he is in critical condition, and recently his 22-year-old daughter was married to a live-in husband, and his motive was to get rid of the son, who was not only unable to speak or hear but was also not very clever, out of love for the daughter'.

It's newspaper articles like this that plunge me in a drunken stupor.

Oh, if only it were a simple case of retarded development! If only the boy would suddenly shoot up and resentfully ridicule his mummy and daddy for all their needless worry! We've hidden everything from relatives and friends, hoping in secret that this will come about, teasing our son playfully and putting a good face on it.

Mummy tries her best to keep her head above water, and daddy's no different. It wasn't as if he was the most prolific novelist in the world from the outset. He's a timid little coward to the core of his being, and his words stutter onto the page, making this as plain as day to the public. It pains him so much to write things down that the only thing that saves him is drowning his sorrows in drink. When you drown your sorrows in drink, you can't remember what it is you were trying to say. You drink because things

are tedious and annoying. The people who are always able to express clearly what's on their mind never get dead drunk like that. (This explains why women don't drink much.)

I've never known an instance when I've won an argument. I'm always the loser. I'm overpowered by the strength of my opponents' conviction, by the scale of their self-assurance. I just clam up. It does dawn on me on reflection that my opponents might be arguing totally out of selfishness and that I may not always be the one in the wrong, but the thought of insisting on a reopening of the verbal hostilities once I've given in is pretty dismal, and, besides, these arguments leave a grudge as horrible as a fist fight, so I just laugh it off even though I'm shaking with rage, shut my mouth and, with my head full of all sorts of things, drown myself in drink.

Let me put it straight. I could beat around the bush like this till the cows come home, but the fact is that this story is about an argument between a married couple.

'The vale of tears'.

That's what lit the fuse. This married couple, as I have already noted, are an exceedingly civilized pair of people who do not indulge in violence or swearing at each other. And yet, this very thing is what courts danger and leads to an explosive situation, the danger when neither says a word because they are both gathering evidence of the other's faults, the danger that each is playing their cards close to their chest, stealing a look at one card then another, preparing to get the jump on the other and to lay all their cards triumphantly on the table. That's what's behind the coy reserve with which they treat each other, if you must know. I'm not sure about the wife, but I do know that this husband is so full of bulldust that you couldn't beat it all out of him even if you wanted to.

'The vale of tears'.

The husband takes a very jaundiced view of that. But, he doesn't want to start an argument either. So he shuts his mouth.

'You're saying that to spite me, aren't you, eh? But, you're not the only one crying, you know. I'm just as focused on the kids as you are. I care a lot about my family. When the kids so much as cough once in the middle of the night, I wake up and I can't stand it. I want nothing more than to move to a nicer place so that I can make you and the kids happy, but I'm up to my neck and I just can't manage it. I'm doing all I can to keep my head above water. I'm not some mad devil, you know. I don't have what passes for "nerve" to sit back and watch my wife and children wither away before my eyes. It's not that I'm oblivious to things like rationing and registering. It's just that I don't have the time to learn about them'.

That's what daddy muttered inside to himself, not having the self-confidence to say it out loud. He realized, too, that if he had said it, mummy would have come back with something that threw him for a loop and he'd be left totally speechless again, so he just mumbled, barely able to offer an opinion, 'Get some help in.'

Mummy doesn't say much either, but when she does, she does it with a cold confidence. (This trait is by no means limited to this mother. All women generally display it.)

'But, it's not so easy to get someone who'll take the job'.

'You'll find someone if you look. It's not so hard to get someone to come. What's hard is to get someone who'll stay'.

'Are you inferring that I don't know how to handle people?'

'Why would I…?'

Daddy clammed up again. Actually, I did think that. But I wasn't about to spell it out.

Oh, if only she'd hire someone to help us out! Daddy has to look after the two eldest when mummy puts the baby on her back and goes out to run her errands. And I've got about ten guests coming to see me every single day to boot.

'I'd like to go to my office'.

'Now?'

'Yes. I've got something I have to get written down before tomorrow, come hell or high water'.

That wasn't a lie. But the main reason was that I had to escape the gloom of the house.

'I was planning on visiting my sister tonight'.

I knew that. Her sister was seriously ill. But if she went, then I'd be left with the children.

'That's why I'm tellin' you to hire someone…' is what I started to say, but I stopped myself. If I even broached the subject of a member of her family, the mood between the two of us would go sour.

It's a hell of a thing to stay alive in this world. Wherever you go you get tangled up in chains; and if you so much as budge, blood spurts out.

I stood up without saying another word, took the envelope with my manuscript fee from the desk drawer in the six-mat room and slipped it into the sleeve of my kimono. Then I wrapped some blank paper and a dictionary in a big black cloth and blew out of the house like a gust of wind.

Writing was the farthest thing from my mind. What I wanted to do was kill myself. I made a beeline for a bar.

'Oh, Mr. Dazai!'

'I wanna drink. Ah, you've got on that striped kimono I like so much….'

'Suits me, doesn't it. I put it on to please you….'

'Had it out with the missus again today. I've got so much pent-up emotion in me I can't take it any longer. Get me something to drink. I'm stayin' the night here. Yep, nothin's gonna stop me from stayin' right here'.

Parents, I would like to think, are more precious than children. Children are much stronger than their parents.

Cherries have appeared before me.

The children in my home are not given the luxury of eating such things. My kids have probably never seen a cherry. They'd be thrilled to eat one, though. They'd be overjoyed if I brought home some cherries for them. If you strung them together with thread and put them around your neck, it'd look like you had a coral necklace on.

But daddy gets through a whole plate of them, eating them as if they tasted awful, spitting out the pits, eating and spitting out, eating and spitting out … all the while muttering to himself, putting up a bold front, 'Parents are more precious than children'.

The translator would like to thank Kyoko Selden for invaluable suggestions for this translation.

Roger Pulvers is an American-born Australian author, playwright, theatre director and translator living in Japan. He has published 40 books in Japanese and English and, in 2008, was the recipient of the Miyazawa Kenji Prize. In 2009 he was awarded Best Script Prize at the Teheran International Film Festival for "Ashita e no Yuigon." He is the translator of Kenji Miyazawa, Strong in the Rain: Selected Poems (http://www.amazon.com/dp/1852247819/?tag=theasipacjo0b-20). The Dream of Lafcadio Hearn (http://www.amazon.com/dp/4902075415/?tag

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