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Stories by Fujino Kaori

Fujino Kaori: Fear in the Form

Kendall Heitzman

Fujino Kaori was awarded the Akutagawa Prize in 2013 for her novella *Nails and Eyes* (*Tsume to me*), and in the publicity and press that followed, she was frequently referred to as a writer of literary horror. In the judges' remarks in the September 2013 issue of the journal *Bungei shunjū*, Ogawa Yōko refers to *Nails and Eyes* as “frightening” (398), while Miyamoto Teru and Yamada Eimi both used the word “horror” in discussing the work (402, 405). Fujino (2017d) has claimed not to understand where this impression of her work as horror fiction could possibly have come from, but with tongue firmly in cheek. Her previous works had been of a kind: In her Kafkaesque novella *The Greedy Bird* (*Iyashii tori*, 2008), a pet cockatiel grows to gargantuan size. In *Negative Space* (*Patorone*, literally named for the cartridge that holds a spool of 35mm photography film, 2012), the protagonist finds herself in a mental fog that isolates her from her sister, her friends, and reality itself. Many of Fujino's stories are bloody; people are killed by various creatures and contraptions, and commit random acts of violence without themselves knowing why they are doing it. Her knowledge of horror cinema is encyclopedic; she draws from a deep well of images and devices.

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And yet, the horror of *Nails and Eyes* for many readers is located not in the plot but in the form. Much of what readers have found unnerving about the novella has had to do with its second-person narrative, a rarity in Japanese literature, and discussion of the work immediately following publication largely centered on the implications of this narratological gambit (Matsumoto [2018, 187-213] gives an overview of this discourse and participates in it). It isn't a true second-person; the "I" of the narrative clearly identifies herself as a separate character, delivering to her stepmother her version of their relationship, which began when "I" was a toddler, after her mother had died under mysterious circumstances while at home alone with her, and the stepmother subsequently joined the household in the mother's place. The disembodied nature of the narrative—where is the narrator now, in time and space, how does she know so much about what her stepmother was doing and thinking at the time, and what exactly has happened to this family in the interim?—is considered to be a large part of what makes the work so unnerving. In a three-way conversation published in the May 2013 issue of *Gunzō*, when the writer Shimada Masahiko posited that the second-person really wasn't essential to the work, the others resisted: the critic and professor Ōsawa Nobuaki argued that the usage of "you" implicates readers themselves, while writer and translator Tanizaki Yui felt that it served to merge the subject and object of the narrative into a single consciousness (Shimada et al. 2013, 395-96).

Fujino writes unsettling stories, to be sure, but no two stories unsettle in quite the same way, and this formal experimentation is the true hallmark of Fujino's early career. To call her a genre writer of any sort would be to mistake the surface topography of her stories for the deeper, crisscrossing striations of their narratives, which I will attempt to begin to pull apart here. Although Fujino often invokes the tropes of horror, for example, her instincts are generally to undermine its narrative logic. In "Final Girl" (Fainaru gāru, in Fujino 2017a), the title story of her 2014 collection of short stories, the protagonist is indeed the last standing survivor of a serial killer as indicated by the title, a reference to the "final girl" trope first described by Carol J. Clover (1992). And yet, the serial killers keep coming after her throughout her life, to the point that fear nearly gives way to weary resignation; the narrative arc that she had imagined for herself as hero of her own story is obliterated by life as it actually transpires.

Fujino also draws from a wide range of other literary sources to create her stories, including American and European literary fiction, science fiction, and, in particular, Western and Japanese tale literature. The story "April Fool" (Eipuriru Fūru, in Fujino 2017b) seems to be a response to variations on Pinocchio and "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." April Fool is a young woman who will die if she does not tell exactly one lie each day, which her mother decides to systematize as "I love to eat butterflies." April is to say this obvious lie

each day and attempt to monitor her every utterance thereafter. April does not spend her time trying to find the source of the curse, as she would in a traditional narrative, but rather questions the nature of lies themselves. If April said something was delicious, she wonders, how delicious did it have to be not to count as a lie? (Fujino 2017b, 123). It seems clear by the end of the story that in their obsession to not have her *tell* a lie, April's family would have her *live* a lie. In "Wolves" (Ōkami, in Fujino 2017a), a boy lives in fear that a wolf will come to his door to devour him just as wolves do in "Little Red Riding Hood," "The Three Little Pigs," and other stories, all mentioned by name. Those are all foreign stories, his mother reassures him, going on to explain that the wolf is probably just a metaphor for weirdos who prey on children (Fujino 2017a, 106). So much for the uses of enchantment.

Fujino claims that the driving source of her writing is her training in aesthetics and art, in which she holds a master's degree from Dōshisha University. She has said that her stories generally start not with characters or a plot, but with a setting, and then with imagining what might happen in such a place.¹ Her short stories, in particular, can feel like close viewings of individual works of art; in each, she observes a scenario from multiple angles, teasing out antecedents and references, and the narrative simply exists in the space. In "Pfeiffenberger" (Pufaifenberugā, in Fujino 2017a), a young couple slip out a secret exit from a movie theater and find themselves locked on the roof of the building. The story is a meditation on Hollywood action films, on watching and being watched, but nothing happens in a strict sense, other than a gradual description of their delimited space. In "A Mind Toward Beauty" (Bijin wa kiai, in Fujino 2017b), the stasis is even more extreme: a sentient spaceship hurtling through empty space in a posthuman future is able to change matter into an approximation of what humans would have considered beautiful, and experiments by creating a spider lily, a self-portrait by Albrecht Dürer, and a lovely plate of bacon and eggs.

Museums and the peculiar forms of control they exert—over space, over narrative, over canon and archive—are at the heart of much of Fujino's writing. Her stories' dark humor often comes from the juxtaposition of a contemplative, placid narrative and a dramatic one, a dissonance anyone who has ever looked at a dynamic work of art in a quiet gallery will recognize. In "The Trials of the Hyperrealist Pointillists" (Haipāriarizumu tenbyō gaha no chōsen, in Fujino 2017b), set at a museum in 2045, this usual tension in the space of the museum is reversed: patrons wear masks so as not to get blood on the photorealist still-life artwork when fistfights break out among them. In "Pieta and Transi," (Pieta to Toranji, in Fujino 2017b) these two forms of Christian iconography—images of Mary cradling the body of Jesus and tomb covers depicting the body of the dead within as rotting physical flesh, respectively—lend their names to two teenage girls in contemporary Japan dealing with a rash of deaths in their lives.

According to the writer Murata Sayaka (2017), Fujino's stories reject objective reality in pursuit of an emotional truth. Museumgoers, filmgoers, and readers absorbed in a work of art exist in two realities at once, Murata writes, and Fujino's work calls attention to the haptic nature of art: "When we read stories, we feel on an emotional level that we have actually experienced these things ourselves" (Fujino 2017a, 181). The narrator of Fujino's story "War" (Sensō, in Fujino 2017a) would agree—she weeps for a character in a novel but cannot bring herself to cry for the people around her who have died. The narrator of "Message from a Slow Reader" (Aru chidokushō kanja no shuki, in Fujino 2017b) lives in a world in which books are living creatures and addresses himself to an imaginary world that looks much like ours, in which the books are dead and do not mind a reader who never quite gets to the end of the story.

This blurring of diegetic spaces is not a means toward creating allegories to teach us about our own world. If anything, the stories appear to tell us we are never only in a single world at once; even when we aren't reading, we are *always* in a world constructed by narratives, and our existence is always somewhere between "reality" and its alternatives. Fujino (2017e) has pointed to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* ([1985] 1998) as one of her touchstone texts, claiming that the novel is about two dystopias. One is rather obvious: from our perspective, the Republic of Gilead is a repressive, fundamentalist takeover of the United States. But Fujino notes that from the perspective of the main male character, the Commander, our own imperfect, messy world is (was) also a dystopia for women.

As with *The Handmaid's Tale*, the complex references of Fujino's stories do not neatly graph onto any single moral code one wants to ascribe to them. "My Heart Is Yours" (Mai hāto izu yūāzu), from Fujino's 2017 collection *Dress (Doresu)*, is set in what at first appears to be a contemporary Japanese business office, but the story reveals piece by piece that we are somewhere other than the Japan we know: the women are physically larger than the men and hold the positions of power, while the men are valued for their looks and are encouraged to have children quickly, while they still have their youthful figures. This role-reversal would appear to set the stage for a fairly standard critique of contemporary Japan, which continues to rank low on major gender-equality indices. The story moves in an unanticipated direction, however. When the protagonist tells her husband that it is time to have children, he expresses a mixture of anticipation and regret. He bids her farewell, attaches to her stomach, and melts completely into her body, providing her with the nutrition she needs to give birth to their child. Discussing "My Heart Is Yours" shortly before *Dress's* publication, Fujino (2017e) said that the idea for the story came to her from the mating habits of the anglerfish, often considered to be the world's most hideous sea creature. On the one hand, surely the story is a revenge fantasy, commenting on the general lack of societal and family support for mothers in

Japan that makes them “disappear” from the workplace and society. At the same time, however, Fujino identifies with the husband’s fear of being erased from existence and forgotten. Fujino (2017e) is fond of children, but the story is drawn from a very personal ambivalence toward parenthood that goes beyond a political statement: “I find marriage to be delightful, but pregnancy and birth are like a kind of death to me. If it were to happen I think that part of the ‘me’ who’s existed until now would cease to be.” The disappearing spouse exists as reality in the world of Fujino’s story, and as augury in her own reality; the narrative of what actually happens in one’s life is constantly intersected by narratives of alternate possibilities.

Finally, to this list of strategies that bring together that which is here and that which is somewhere else, we must include Fujino’s oeuvre’s own intratextuality. Fujino has said that she gets many ideas for new stories from her own previous stories.² Occasionally a minor player in one work takes on a larger significance in a later work, or vice versa. The anglerfish, tragic creature of the deep, earlier made a much more benign cameo appearance in the quiet story “The Great Outdoors” (Daishizen, in Fujino 2017a). In that earlier story, it appears as a momentary image, swimming across the scene of the narrator’s mind as she looks out at the lights of the city and imagines each of them to be the shiny protrusion of an anglerfish, which the fish uses as a lure and which looks like a fishing pole, giving the species its name. Readers submersed in the two stories translated here may find themselves swimming in other Fujino stories at the same time. The monkey in “Identity” (Aidentiti, in Fujino 2017b) bears a resemblance to the eponymous monkey of “Little Miss Tell-Me-a-Story” (Ohanashi shite ko-chan, in Fujino 2017b). In that story, Little Miss Tell-Me-a-Story is preserved in a jar of formaldehyde in the science room of an elementary school. In the same way, the role of photography in “Today’s Modern Spirits” (Kyō no shinrei, in 2017b)—as a bewildering link to a forgotten past—bears similarities to the novella *Negative Space*. A mother’s innocuous blog, an important element in *Nails and Eyes*, is also key to “Today’s Modern Spirits.”

“Today’s Modern Spirits” and “Identity” were originally published together with six other Fujino stories in the August 2013 issue of *Gunzō*, and were subsequently included in Fujino’s 2013 collection *Little Miss Tell-Me-a-Story* (Ohanashi shite ko-chan). It is almost impossible to talk about a Fujino Kaori story without ruining the surprises awaiting the first-time reader (and even in the brief discussions of stories above, I have taken pains to avoid spoilers when possible), so further commentary on the two stories translated here has been saved for notes following each story, provided by their respective translators. For now, it is enough to say that together they demonstrate the range of Fujino’s work and contain all of the elements mentioned above: tropes from genre film and fiction, including horror and fairy tales, the worlds of art and art conservation, the

promise of other worlds existing in our own, and all of the normalized minor madness that we unthinkingly refer to as everyday life in the early twenty-first century.

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Notes

1. Personal conversation with Kendall Heitzman, September 12, 2017.
2. Personal conversation with Kendall Heitzman, October 10, 2017.