セメント樽の中の手紙

葉山嘉樹

LETTER FOUND IN A CEMENT-BARREL

BY Hayama Yoshiki

TRANSLATED BY Ivan Morris

Hayama Yoshiki was representative, both in his life and in his writing, of the so-called proletarian school. He was born in 1894 in Kyūshū. His father was a petty government official and his childhood was spent in genteel poverty. Hayama managed to enter Waseda University, but he was dismissed for irregular attendance. Thereafter he worked as a seaman on a cargo boat and later on a coal-carrier. The appalling labor conditions aboard these boats are graphically described in "Men Who Live on the Sea" (1928), his best-known novel.

Having abandoned the seafaring life, Hayama shifted from one occupation to another. He worked, among other things, as a printer's canvasser, a clerk in a school office, a cement-factory laborer and an operator in a hydroelectric power station. Much of the material in his novels and stories (including "Letter Found in a Cement-Barrel") was suggested by these experiences.

In 1919, Hayama began to take an active part in the incipient and pre-

carious labor movement; in the same year he was thrown into prison for an infraction of the police regulation governing the maintenance of public peace. From then on he was almost constantly in and out of prison. His novels and stories were usually written while in custody. In between his terms of imprisonment he was busy fighting in the abortive labor movement of the 1920's and early 1930's. He died in 1945 in great poverty.

Given the inherent limitations of the proletarian school of writing, Hayama's work is often remarkably effective. On the whole he avoids sentimentalizing his workmen-martyrs, and by his sparse, compact prose he manages to keep the reader's interest in the story even when the plot is obviously contrived to convey a message. It is inevitable, however, that his work should rapidly have dated; much of what he wrote, like the story translated here, is likely to strike the reader as a downright parody on "proletarian" literature.

"Letter Found in a Cement-Barrel" (Semento-daru no Naka no Tegami) *was first published in 1926, when Hayama was thirty-two.*

MATSUDO YOSHIZŌ was emptying cement-barrels. He managed to keep the cement off most of his body, but his hair and upper lip were covered by a thick gray coating. He desperately wanted to pick his nose and remove the hardened cement which was making the hairs in his nostrils stand stiff like reinforced concrete; but the cement-mixer was spewing forth ten loads every minute and he could not afford to fall behind in its feeding.

His working day lasted for eleven hours and not once did he have time to pick his nose properly. During his brief lunch break he was hungry and had to concentrate on gulping down food. He had hoped to use the afternoon break for cleaning out his nostrils, but when the time came he found that he had to unclog the cement-mixer instead. By late afternoon his nose felt as if it were made of plaster of Paris.

The day drew to an end. His arms had become limp with exhaustion and he had to exert all his strength to move the barrels. As he started to lift one of them, he noticed a small wooden box lying in the cement.

"What's this?" he wondered vaguely, but he could not let curiosity slow down the pace of his work. Hurriedly he shoveled cement onto the measuring frame, emptied it into the mixing boat, and then began shoveling out more cement again.

"Wait a minute!" he muttered to himself. "Why the hell should there be a box inside a cement-barrel?"

He picked up the box and dropped it into the front pocket of his overalls.

"Doesn't weigh much, damn it! Can't be much money in it, whatever else there is."

Even this slight pause had made him fall behind in his work and now he had to shovel furiously to catch up with the cement-mixer. Like a wild automaton, he emptied the next barrel and loaded the contents onto a new measuring frame.

Presently the mixer began to slow down and eventually it came to a stop. It was time for Matsudo Yoshizō to knock off for the day. He picked up the rubber hose that was attached to the mixer and made a preliminary attempt at washing his face and hands. Then he hung his lunch box round his neck and trudged back toward his tenement. His mind was absorbed with the idea of getting some food into his stomach and, even more important, a powerful cup of rice brandy.

He passed the power plant. The construction work was almost finished: soon they would be having electricity. In the distance Mt. Keira towered in the evening darkness with its coat of pure-white snow. The man's sweaty body was suddenly gripped by the cold and he began to shiver. Next to where he walked the rough waters of the Kiso River bit into the milky foam with a barking roar.

"Damn it all!" thought Matsudo Yoshizō. "It's too much. Yes, it's too damned much! The old woman's pregnant again."

He thought of the six children who already squirmed about their tenement room, and of the new child who was going to be born just as the cold season was coming on, and of his wife who seemed to give birth pell-mell to one baby after another; and he was sick at heart.

"Let's see now," he muttered. "They pay me one yen ninety sen a day, and out of that we have to buy two measures of rice at fifty sen each, and then we have to pay out another ninety sen for clothing and a place to live. Damn it all! How do they expect me to have enough left over for a drink?"

Abruptly he remembered the little box in his pocket. He took it out and rubbed it against the seat of his trousers to clean off the cement. Nothing was written on the box. It was securely sealed.

"Now, why the hell should anyone want to seal a box like this? He likes to act mysterious, whoever he is."

He hit the box against a stone, but the lid still would not open. Thoroughly exasperated, he threw it down and stepped on it furiously. The box broke and on the ground lay a scrap of paper wrapped in a rag. He picked it up and read:

"I am a factory girl working for the Nomura Cement Company. I sew cement-bags. My boyfriend used to work for the same company. His job was to put stones into the crusher. Then on the morning of October 7th, just as he was going to put in a big rock, he slipped on the mud and fell into the crusher underneath the rock.

"The other men tried to pull him out, but it was no use. He sank down under the rock, just as if he was being drowned. Then the rock and his body were broken to pieces and came out together from the ejector looking like a big flat pink stone. They fell onto the conveyor belt and were carried into the pulverizer. There they were pounded by the huge steel cylinder. I could hear them screaming out some sort of a spell as they were finally crushed to bits. Then they were put into the burner and baked into a fine slab of cement.

"His bones, his flesh, his mind had all turned into powder. Yes, my boyfriend ended up entirely as cement. All that was left was a scrap of material from his overalls. Today I've been busy sewing the bags into which they'll put him.

"I'm writing this letter the day after he became cement, and when I've finished I'm going to stick it into the bag in this barrel.

"Are you a workman, too? If you are, have a heart and send me an answer. What is the cement in this barrel used for? I very much want to know.

"How much cement did he become? And is it all used in the same place or in different places? Are you a plasterer or a builder?

"I couldn't bear to see him become the corridor of a theater or the wall of some large mansion. But what on earth can I do to stop it? If you are a workman, please don't use the cement in such a place. . . .

"On second thought, though, it doesn't matter. Use it wherever you want. Wherever he's buried, he'll make a good job of it. He's a good solid fellow and he'll do the right thing wherever he happens to end up.

"He had a very gentle nature, you know. But at the same time he was a brave, husky fellow. He was still young. He'd only just turned twenty-five. I never had time to find out how much he really loved me. And here I am sewing a shroud for him—or rather, a cement-bag. Instead of going into a crematorium, he ended up in a rotation kiln. But how shall I find his grave to say goodbye to him? I haven't the faintest idea where he's going to be buried, you see. East or west, far or near—there's no way of telling. That's why I want you to send me an answer. If you're a workman, you will answer me, won't you? And in return I'll give you a piece of cloth from his overalls—yes, the piece of cloth this letter's wrapped in. The dust from that rock, the sweat from his body—it's all gone into this cloth. The cloth is all that's left of those overalls he used to wear when he embraced me—oh, how hard he used to embrace me!

"Please do this for me, won't you? I know it's a lot of trouble, but please let me know the date when this cement was used, and the sort of place it was used in and the exact address—and also your own name. And you'll be careful too, won't you? Goodbye."

* * *

The din of the children once more surged about Matsudo Yoshizō. He glanced at the name and address at the end of the letter and gulped down the rice brandy that he had poured into a teacup.

"I'm going to drink myself silly!" he shouted. "And I'm going to break every damned thing I can lay my hands on."

"I see," said his wife. "So you can afford to get drunk, can you? And what about the children?"

He looked at his wife's bloated stomach and remembered his seventh child.

木炭自動車

井伏鱒二

THE CHARCOAL BUS

BY Ibusé Masuji

TRANSLATED BY Ivan Morris

Ibusé Masuji, who was born in 1898, started his literary career as a poet. Although he soon switched to fiction and essays, the strength, restraint, and economy of his prose style reveals the poetic influence. His first published prose work, "The Giant Salamander" (Sanshōuo), *appeared in 1932; like "The Charcoal Bus," it is a sustained satire, and it is marked by a dry form of humor that characterizes much of Ibusé's writing. In the early 1930's Ibusé joined a group of authors who aimed both to free literature from the dominance of the proletarian writers, and at the same time to avoid retiring into an ivory tower by concentrating exclusively on stylistic perfection. This no doubt worthy movement was short lived, and it was in fact not until after the war that Ibusé's position in the world of letters was confirmed.*

Ibusé is known, on the one hand, for his historical works, which reveal the influence of the great Meiji writer Mori Ōgai, and on the other, for his realistic stories and novels of contemporary life. His writing is outstanding for its fine style and for its characteristic form of humor. He is not a humorous writer in the conventional sense: but an indirect and subtle humor pervades his novels and short stories and, among other things, serves to prevent his warm, often moving, accounts of the hardships of poor people's lives from lapsing into sentimentality. Ibusé's short stories are marked by a very special type of irony, sharp without being bitter, subtle without being pretentious, and also by a distinctive manner of conveying the savor of real life through the slightly distorted words and actions of the characters.

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