

THE GOD'S FACE

Hitokoto-nushi was a god who built a bridge on the road between Yoshino and Katsugari. But he worked only at night, so that people would not be frightened by his ugly face.

1

On the way to Yoshino's
sakura blossoms, late
one night, I saw a row
of shops lining the way
to the god's bright red shrine.

2

The first stall made yuba, skimming
the skin off boiling soy milk, folding
it into sticks. I bought a sheet
wrapped round a pickle, and pulled
out of my rucksack a bean pod,
wound it up. It scuttled sideways,
twisting like a caterpillar. "Clever,"
the man said, "did you make it?" "I did.
It's yours." He shook my hand, beaming.

3

I went up the hill, though I heard
behind me the yuba maker say
"A bean fell out." On, to a stand
of sashes, kimonos, bags. I bought
a jinbei, and gave the woman
a metal cicada that leaped and
every time it landed changed color.
She clapped her hands, "It's just right
for my cloth shop! How good you are!"

4

She wound it up, the insect sprung,
I heard her giggle and then cry
"oh,oh," but I was already
looking at soraban up the hill --
their heavenly beads, their earth beads
carved and lacquered, black and red,
their rods bamboo. I took out my
best, a hula girl juggling black
and white hourglasses. "It's for you,"
Putting his glasses on, the man said
"Such work has not come this way."

“I made it; it’s the way I count.
But she’s a bit naughty behind.”

5

I gave away the troll with sparks,
the filigree-winged butterfly, and
the bus whose tires deflated, revived.
All I had. But things fell apart;
the shopkeepers ran up, cried: “Your
monkey stopped flipping.” “A gear broke.”
“The wheel came off.” I tried to fix them,
right there, but parts were missing, tools
not at hand, and I had lost my skill.

6

I ran to the shrine, to hide,
to sleep. In the morning
there stood the god, hiding
his ugly face behind a fan.
He said: “And what wind-up
toy is there for me?”
“I have no more,” I shook
my pack. “You’ve made my folk
unhappy.” “I gave them...
gifts. I bought their wares.”
“What will you give me?” he said.
“All I have left. My face,
my love.” And I took hold
of his rough bridge-builder’s
hand, and led him, to dawn.