

Mutshito is thirty-seven years old according to the traditional counting system of the Land of the Gods. Concubines have born him a son and a daughter; the empress is barren. He has no quarrel with the verdicts of the gods, with the verdicts of fate.

After dusk, surrounded by dozens of policemen, he descends from the road, climbs the mountain passes and hills, and in the silence drenched by sounds of nocturnal bird wings and the croaking of frogs, he marvels at the beauty and cruelty of the mortal world. Composes poetry that none shall ever read.

A journey without end – empty is the mind of the wanderer – a pitcher for the stones of longing.

The court teachers of Rangaku and Rigaku have shown him that there is no war between the principles of Darwin's world and the principles of Confucius's world. Also, Nihon occupies only the place it deserves, and it deserves it because it has fought for it.

In Mutshito's dreams, the empire of his son is the most powerful country in the world; his fleets rule the waves, his coin buys up the treasures of European capital cities, his subjects tread firmly the pavements of the white man's empires.

Did Amaterasu not promise that imperial power would reach wherever the Sun's rays reach?

Meanwhile Mutshito must complete part of his rokadai junkō on foot, for the roads of his country are rivers of mud, along which travel is dangerous even in a palanquin.

By the light of the Moon, he reads the Chinese characters of the waka and kanshi poetry received from his spouse; the empress is also a poet. He comes down from the hill. They are already waiting for him.

An emissary from the cabal of the Blessed Proposal has arrived from Europe, from the Land That Does Not Exist, and here, under cover of night, on the fifth day of the eleventh month, not far from the village of Sogaoawa, in the court and government tents placed at intervals in an apricot grove, he has struck a deal with the Minister for Education and Reforms, Mori Arinori.

The emperor takes no part in deals. The emperor does not say anything. No one says anything. No gesture of protocol confirms the emperor's presence.

For years, foreigners have striven unsuccessfully for an audience in Tōkyō. Mutshito is the first ruler to have seen a Western barbarian. To have been seen by a Western barbarian.

Like a flame writhing in the wind – the red glow of the Sun goddess in the eyes of tired warriors – the hundred and twenty-second spark in eternity – the face of the tennō in the gloom.

From the purple hands of the emissary, via the hands of the policeman, minister and kinjū courtiers, the massive gift makes its way to the hands of the emperor. It is a metal crane outstretched for flight, two shaku in length, wing to wing. In the light of the torches and lanterns, it gleams with the rough skin of impure steel.

Excerpt translated by Ursula Phillips



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Selected works

Starość Aksalotta, 2019

Po piśmie, 2019

Wroniec, 2009

Lód, 2007

Perfekcyjna niedoskonłość, 2004

Inne pieśni, 2003

Extensa, 2002

Czarne oceany, 2001

Aguerre w świecie, 2001

Xavras Wyzryn, 1997

Selected awards

Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2008, 2012, 2019)

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2000, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2010)

European Union Prize for Literature (2009)

Polityka's Passport Award (2002, 2004, 2008, 2009) – nominations

Nike Literary Award (2008) – nomination

Kościelski Foundation Award (2008)

Foreign language translations

Other works by Dukaj have been published in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Macedonia, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine. The UK and Bosnian editions of *Lód* are in progress.