

# THE PLUM RAINS

John Givens

*“The Plum Rains” is one of a group of interlocking stories by John Givens set in Japan in the last decade of the 17th century. It is a modern re-working of the medieval Japanese haibun, a literary form which evolved out of headnotes used to set the scene for a poem and later became a basic unit for Japanese poetic journals and other forms of compressed prose.*

**She came back alone after first prayers and slid open her white paper doors. Misty drizzle filled the dense cedar forest surrounding the nunnery. The inside walls of her room were tacky with the damp, the tatami mats slick with it, and a faint gray-green dusting furred the brocade mat-bindings. It was a tired season, a time of melancholy wistfulness.**

**She had prayed that morning as she did every morning for the souls of those she had betrayed.**

**The rain shutters of the Image Hall had been fastened in place, and the rows of kneeling women murmured the wondrous words of the Lotus Sutra to the gentle thrumming of rain on the roofs and verandas, the huddled shapes of them like a manifestation of the weight of the moisture in the air. It was the season for listlessness and regret, for longing for what could never be recovered.**

**But the faces of her dissatisfied dead no longer came to her. Nor did her terror flood up at their fear.**

**The nunnery for women who although unacceptable could not be killed was located at the top end of a steep valley. A dry stream of raked pebbles separated Aoi's veranda corridor from the pressure of the trees of the hillside. It flowed past upright rocks configured like miniature islands and emptied finally into the absolving sea of raked gravel in the back garden. Most of the pebbles were the size of soy bean kernels – granite, ovoid, rolled smooth by centuries of tumbling in mountain cataracts –**

but some were as large as quail eggs; and she had brought one inside soon after her arrival and kept it for solace, for the sense of the small dry stone in the palm of her hand, of its being there as a specific weight and shape and texture that would never vary, never depart from the fact of itself. The pebble had possessed her as she possessed it, and although she had long since admitted to herself the foolishness of such thoughts, the pebble still had its place on her personal Buddha-shelf beside a small sandalwood statue of the Kannon Bodhisattva and the death plaques of the Hori family, their newness worn away over the years, the incised gold words faded, the once glossy black lacquer surface now matte, and with hardly any scent remaining.

Aoi had joined her voice to the voices of the other women who would never be permitted to leave, all of them bound together under the benevolent gaze of the Jizo Bodhisattva, guardian of children and wayfarers; and when Aoi prayed for the Hori, she made no distinction between the eldest son who had died for love of her and his parents and younger brothers who had died as a result of his death, for all of them would be waiting for her like wavering shadows on the yellow sands of hell, and she would hear their cries of torment and vituperation, for their lives had been denied them and the fault was hers.



*Even throwing out wilted flowers is burdensome: the endless plum rains.*



One of the novices was standing in her doorway, a weepy little creature who smelled slightly of urine and who still hoped for a different life even though the shogunate would never allow it for the simple reason that if one woman who had been condemned

unfairly were to be released then all the unfairly condemned would begin clamoring for it. Punishing the innocent, Aoi knew, was more effective than punishing the guilty. The abbess has requested your presence, said the little novice.

Now?

If it is acceptable....

Aoi was called in to receive devotional instructions occasionally although these interviews soon evolved into friendly chats, for like Aoi herself, the abbess was from a branch of the Imperial Family and her concerns with sanctity were perfunctory. She had been only a small child when her name had been placed on a list of those to be proscribed, its inclusion as arbitrary as it was gratuitous, and she had been proclaimed abbess on her fifth birthday and carried up to this nunnery. Her nurse had accompanied her, also shaving her head, but had died of loneliness after a few years. The abbess had never been permitted to leave the compound and knew of no other life. But she had seen men at a distance and understood in a vague way that they were in possession of distinctive if improbable anatomical characteristics so that Aoi had been obliged to share her previous experiences, describing in hushed tones events that had occurred in her presence, her own participation in them, what they had meant and why they had meant it; and the older woman would ponder her depictions of these dubious encounters like someone hearing reports of a remote land where the sun shines at midnight and fires burn inside ice.

Aoi was informed that an official from the shogunate was waiting to see her; and when she reminded the abbess that she was not permitted visitors, the woman looked at her as if she were a fairy-phantom whose true incarnation had finally been revealed then told her that the summons could not be ignored.

Aoi took one of the nunnery's broad oil-paper umbrellas. The day was too humid with rain for a cloak so she draped a white gauze shawl over her bald head like a loose hood and wore high

clogs against the probability of the forecourt being muddy.

The mopey little novice trailed after her. She asked where she was going then before Aoi replied, asked if she could go with her.



*The tedium of the fifth month rains: moss blooming on the old tombs also feels it.*



After her long hair had been brutally hacked off and her head shaved, she was left like a defeated prisoner kneeling on the dirt of an enclosed courtyard-garden, her hands tied behind her back with her wrists lashed to her ankles. The weird lightness of the sense of the air on her naked scalp had astonished her. What a thing it was to feel the absence of your life's hair and accept that you were no longer any part of what you had been. She felt where the razor had nicked her, where it had scraped her skin and left it raw. There was a constellation of blood drops on the layer of white silk stretched over her thighs, and she assumed there would be blood stains on the back of her robe too. She also assumed she was waiting to be killed. She wasn't afraid of dying although she was afraid of the pain of it. And the terror she would feel as it began to happen. But they had left her there alone in the sun with no one to appeal to, not even a guard. The ropes binding her were too tight and her hands had gone numb. She tried touching her thumbs to her fingertips but felt nothing.

An ant passed before her in asynchronous articulation. She watched it out of sight. Her eyelids were crusted with dried tears, and gnats alighted there, drawn by the salty residue. She shook them away but they came back so she stopped doing it. There were other, smaller insects on the dirt, each walking

in its own manner and following its own purpose; and she began singing softly to herself the toddler's song that she had been taught by a woman whose face she could no longer recall although every word of the silly little rhyming ditty came back to her. She thought she could remember the brief flickering of pleasure that she had brought to the rejected palace women in their desolate chambers as she marched around on her fat little pink legs fearlessly singing in her baby's voice about the wind in the trees and the deer in the hills.

Except she wasn't remembering it, she was recalling having been told it. Her nurse's face, too, was not a memory but only a configuration of words that she had always accepted, as if the shape of the actual woman's face were nothing more substantial than mist burned off a meadow by the sun. How ungrateful she felt. Yet it was also certain that this was all she would ever have so she had better learn to cherish it. My nurse loved me, she said, voicing it aloud the way a person might toss a stone into a deep pool to see if its bottom could be detected. But all she knew about herself was what she'd been told. Her whole life had been made up of stories heard and remembered and repeated.

And wasn't what she had now, the phrases she was telling herself about herself, also self-assembled? The orphan's need for narrative? The unwanted girl's hunger for memories? Yet other than these configurations, she had nothing.

And it seemed ... paltry. But was it?

An ant like the one she'd seen before passed her knees, wonderful in the similarity of its ambulation, its path also like that of the other one except following a slightly different trajectory. Had they begun at the same place? Would they end up together? Aoi knelt with her head down and felt the warmth of the sun on her naked skull and the tiny caresses of gnats in her eyelashes.

The decision to conclude matters was made late in the afternoon. The white paper doors were removed, and Aoi was

confronted by a chamber opened like a pavilion and occupied by representatives of the shogunate. A personage too eminent to be identified sat on a dais behind a screen-of-state in the back half of the chamber. He would not demean himself by addressing her directly but spoke in a quiet voice to his steward, who listened with his head bowed then transferred his words.

It is instructed that you be told what will happen to you. The family that permitted your transgression has always been a loyal vassal of the Tokugawa. It is wished that some comfort be found for them. Your adulterous lover has been chastised. But his family has asked to be allowed to atone for his crimes themselves. This has been granted.

Old Hori was brought into the courtyard with his wife and his two remaining sons. They were dressed in short white robes. Hori was calm although his wife, a plump woman with her hair configured in a provincial style, had been weeping; and the two young boys seemed frightened. None of them so much as glanced at Aoi. The handles of Hori's short sword and stabbing dagger had been replaced with simple ones of paulownia wood, and the naked blades were wrapped in pure white paper. Hori's assistant, a young warrior from his domain, came in behind him, his long sword carried still sheathed.

The Hori family knelt in front of the veranda where the steward sat. They bowed together, the younger boy mistiming it by starting too late and ending too soon.

Guards brought out the head of her lover, Hori Ushimaru, affixed to a viewing stand. They placed it like a watcher on the edge of the veranda, and the younger boy cried out but his mother silenced him.

Old Hori stated his name and his lineage. He declared that the Hori family had always supported the Tokugawa Shogunate and would always continue to do so. He acknowledged he was at fault for allowing his son to misbehave with an orphan of the palace, and he accepted that this was unforgivable. He agreed

to atone for it. His wife would accompany him. But he wished to request humbly that his remaining sons be spared. Their lives had only just begun. More should be allotted to them. Old Hori bowed again, touching his forehead to the dirt of the courtyard and held it there.

The steward had listened to this plea with displeasure. Would your sons not remember your death? And wish to avenge you? How would your loyalty to the Tokugawa appear then? And if they attempted revenge and found success, then their actions would create more disharmony. And if they failed, then the shame of that would be an added burden to them. And how much worse would that burden be if they were unable even to make an attempt?

No, Hori, your boys do not merit such an uncertain fate. The natural flow of things is the better one.

The kneeling samurai lifted his head and observed the steward then bowed again in submission. He took up his short sword. He removed the purification paper then touched the blade reverently to his brow. His middle son knelt upright with his back very straight. For the life you have given me, I thank you. His knees were spread apart and his ankles crossed properly so that he would not topple over sideways. And for preceding you, I apologize. He waited with his head up and his hands on the tops of his thighs and his eyes fixed on the steward. His father took him across the throat quickly and deeply, and the suddenness of the blood-release came as a part of his folding forward at the shock of it.

His father held him until he stopped quivering then rolled him onto his back and straightened his garments.

The younger boy had to be soothed by his mother. He buried his face in her bosom. She shielded him and calmed him then shifted him around, still holding him in her arms but presenting his throat. The younger boy's blood soaked into the front of his mother's death robe as she drew him back into her embrace and

cradled him as he died then released him and allowed his father to place him beside his brother.

Hori's wife had worn two inner sashes, as befits a samurai's wife, and she removed the extra one now and bound her legs together across the thighs so that her skirt would not open indecorously. Her husband lifted the short stabbing dagger and removed the purification paper then touched the naked blade to his forehead in acknowledgment. He bowed to her. She returned his bow, both her palms pressing down on the hard earth that her forehead also touched. She straightened herself and regarded him. Well, then, if it must be so, she said and took the short knife in both hands. She held it reversed in front of her breast so that the blade was pointing upward. She was not a strong woman, but what strength she had would now be the gift she could extend, and she threw herself forward, diving onto the blade, driving the point of it up under her jaw for the death she would find there.

Her thrust cut off-center, and she lay shuddering on her side, the knife embedded under her jaw and her blood draining out over it but no easy death arriving. One hand had been knocked off the hilt and it grabbed at the dirt of the courtyard, scraping at it as if digging there, forming ridges the way the receding tide leaves wave-patterns in the sand, then doing that less and less then no longer doing it.

Old Hori smoothed down the hem of her robe. He let his hand rest for a moment on her ankle. Then he sat back and stripped off the top of his death robe by lifting his arms out. He tucked the sleeves under his feet to help keep his body aligned. His assistant came up behind him with his sword unsheathed. Hori wrapped a thick white hand cloth around the blade of his small sword so that he could grip it below the hilt. He instructed his assistant to permit him to finish the entire ritual. I thank the shogunate for this opportunity to redeem my son and myself, Hori said. He sat for a moment very still. Then he inhaled and with a shout stabbed

the blade into the side of his abdomen, gasping like someone plunged in cold water. Using both hands he dragged the blade across slicing deeply so that in the spill of blood slobber the first blue loops of intestines slithered out squirming onto his thighs. His face drained to white and his eyes locked. He pulled out the blade and stabbed it inwards a second time, jerking it upwards with his head pressed forward straining against the shriek of it and his attendant hit him perfectly so that his head landed between his knees and his corpse remained kneeling upright, blood draining out of his neck-stump, both hands still gripping the blade locked in his belly.

The steward leaned back to listen to the man behind the screen then turned to Aoi again. He stared at her for a long moment then signaled for her ropes to be cut. Aoi was pulled to her feet and held upright by her guards, her legs too weak to support her.

You are not to be given a buddhist name. You have no family name. You will continue to be called Aoi, but this word will be written with kana syllables only. You will stay all your life where we put you. No other activity will be allowed, no travel, no visits, no walks in the hills. You are only a thing waiting to die.

The august personage spoke again and the steward listened bowing then straightened up and said, If you violate any of these arrangements, you will be burned in a fire and twenty others living nearby will be chosen at random and burned in it with you. Men, women, children will be selected to die because of you, and their deaths will also burden your soul. Is there any part of this you do not understand?

Aoi said nothing at first then lifted her head slightly with her eyes still on the earth before her and said, I understand it.

You will travel tomorrow on your last road. You will take the Hori funerary plaques with you. And each morning and each evening you will offer prayers for the repose of the souls of the Hori. That is what you will do. And it is all you will ever do.



*An evening shower, on the veranda railing hang forgotten robes of silk gauze.*



The shogunate official stood waiting beside the trunk of an immense cedar, a tree older than the nunnery itself and girded by a sanctity rope, the sodden white paper streamers of which hung limply in the endless drizzle. The official said he had been sent by a senior steward of the Tokugawa family. He said changes had occurred which would affect her.

When Aoi seemed to have nothing to say to this, he explained that the new shogun had begun reviewing many of the policies established by his predecessor. It has been decided to rehabilitate the Hori Clan. Their death plaques would be moved to the family's mortuary temple. The official bowed his head in polite acknowledgment of the possibility of this news coming as a surprise to the incarcerated woman, rain-flow sliding off the front brim of his round hat, then he straightened up and said, Your own name will also be returned to you.

Aoi turned away. She began strolling around the edge of the forecourt, following a path that led up towards the nunnery's cemetery. A stream flowed beside the path, and the far bank was lined with irises, the deep indigo petals beaded with rain. A carved granite hand-washing basin stood at the back corner of the outer hall, and a file of flat black stones had been positioned where runoff from the eaves would drip.

I decline it, she said. I've been buried here. My body lives and breathes but my life has ended. I have no wish for a name to survive me.

Probably I have expressed myself poorly, said the official.

By granting you your name, the shogun is also restoring your access to the world....

Aoi did not respond, but her head tilted forward slightly under the amber rain-light of the umbrella, and the shadows on her face darkened so that the official hesitated then said, You can go wherever you wish. Do whatever you choose.

Aoi said nothing. But as she looked at the official, her face softened with sadness at memories of the past; and unsure as to whether or not she seemed about to reconsider her refusal, the emissary tried to encourage her, saying that she would be surprised at the changes she encountered in the world, for nothing she had known was as it had been.



*The rains of the fifth month: and within what has been lost, what remains.*