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Science Fiction

Death Sentences
Kawamata Chiaki
Thomas Lamarre, translator
Kazuko Y. Behrens, translator
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Death Sentences, originally published in 1984 as *Genshi-gari* (Hunting the magic poems), is the first translation of Kawamata Chiaki's novel into English, and it's about time—meaning not just that it's been too long of a wait, but that the story itself concerns time, space, and transcending those barriers through "magic poems."

The plot jumps from the 1940s to the 1980s and beyond, as characters who come into contact with three poems by a mysterious young man named Who May become catatonic and die. The "media virus" element might seem familiar to Americans who've seen the film *The Ring* , or its Japanese predecessor *Ring*; but where these movies offer straight-up horror, *Death Sentences* might be considered the intellectual's version, featuring the twentieth-century surrealism movement of André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, and others as a convincing backdrop. Breton once described surrealism as "psychic automatism in its pure state," which is as good a description as any for what happens to people as they read Who May's poems.

The word *dobaded*, coined by Kawamata, infiltrates the thoughts of characters until they fall into a kind of trance state, transporting their consciousness elsewhere. *Death Sentences* won the Japanese Science Fiction Grand Prize in the year of its release, and it proves to be well deserved. Kawamata Chiaki, known in Japan for his writings in both science fiction and manga, has stretched the science fiction genre.

There's a lot going on in *Death Sentences*. The literary settings in Paris and Japan help to raise provocative questions about the nature, purpose, and usefulness of literature. Readers who are literally transported while their bodies decay could be seen as an endorsement of the power of words, or a stern warning against it.

Kawamata's writing style is unique, as he chooses to end most paragraphs after one

sentence:
“And then she started walking again.
Sakamoto tailed her.
Since people had not yet begun to leave work, the streets weren’t so jammed.
Most of the passersby were students and housewives.”

The resulting staccato at first seems like the product of a problematic translation but soon creates a steady, propulsive rhythm. American writing, science fiction or otherwise, often reserves such one-sentence paragraphs for dramatic, turning point-type revelations, but as the excellent afterward by translator Thomas Lamarre explains, Kawamata showed flashes of the technique in earlier novels and uses it throughout *Death Sentences*. The author is displaying his own “magical” influence, with the effect of keeping an American reader in a constant state of tension, on the edge of his seat the entire time.

Death Sentences is a noteworthy amalgam of hard-boiled science fiction and experimental literature, which makes it essential reading for followers of both. Here’s hoping there are more translations of Kawamata’s work to come.

Peter Dabbene