

BULLFIGHT

Yasushi Inoue
 Michael Emmerich, trans.
 Pushkin Press
[www.pushkinpress.com/
 book/bullfight/](http://www.pushkinpress.com/book/bullfight/)
 128 Pages; Print, \$18

THE HUNTING GUN

Yasushi Inoue
 Michael Emmerich, trans.
 Pushkin Press
[www.pushkinpress.com/
 book/the-hunting-gun/](http://www.pushkinpress.com/book/the-hunting-gun/)
 112 Pages; Print, \$16

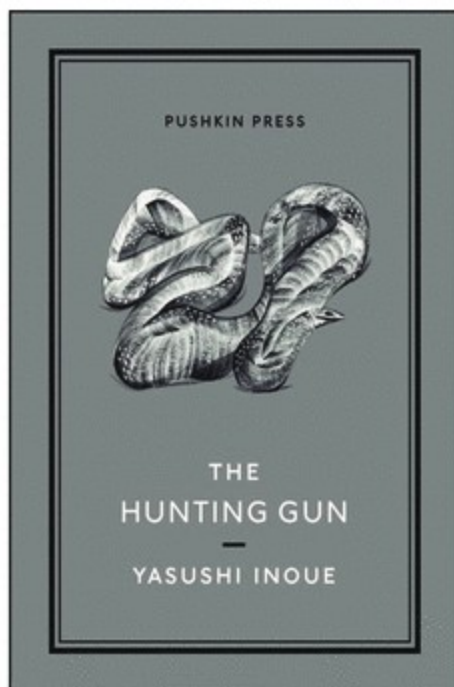
LIFE OF A COUNTERFEITER

Yasushi Inoue
 Michael Emmerich, trans.
 Pushkin Press
[www.pushkinpress.com/
 book/life-of-a-counterfeiter/](http://www.pushkinpress.com/book/life-of-a-counterfeiter/)
 144 Pages; Print, \$18

For a nation of immigrants, our literary preferences surely seem to lean toward xenophobic. Among American presses, translated titles make up a mere 3% of published titles. The statistics aren't too different in the United Kingdom: "Some call it the two percent problem, others the three percent problem," according to a September 2014 BBC article; "Why won't English speakers read books in translation?" Whatever the exact paltry number, the bottom line is this:

English-language publishers have a lamentable track record when it comes to translating great stories from elsewhere in the world.

Sometimes, it takes an international village to put noteworthy titles onto Stateside shelves. In the



case of the late Yasushi Inoue, one of Japan's literary national treasures, London's indie house Pushkin Press leads the charge. Founded in 1997, some 90% of Pushkin's titles originated in languages other than English. Since 2013, Pushkin has introduced a new Inoue title each year, an annual event that will hopefully continue for decades. Inoue, whose first book debuted at 42, passed away in 1991 at 83 after publishing some fifty novels and 150 short stories. Although a few Inoue titles-in-English have previously been published, Pushkin's latest releases are a result of quite the laudable team, including Michael Emmerich—scholar and translator of such diverse Japanese icons as Yasunari Kawabata and Banana Yoshimoto—and illustrator/designer Ping Zhu whose crisply detailed black-and-white drawings capture just the right complementary images. The three Inoue titles (thus far) sport distinctive covers in saturated, solid colors on subtly textured stock, invitingly sized to fit both pockets and hands.

Beyond impeccable aesthetics, the stories prove even more exceptional. Inoue, a former journalist, became a published author in 1949 with two novellas, *The Hunting Gun* and *Bullfight*. The latter won the Akutagawa Prize, one of Japan's top honors; his many subsequent awards included the Order of Cultural Merit, the highest artistic recognition bestowed by the Japanese government.

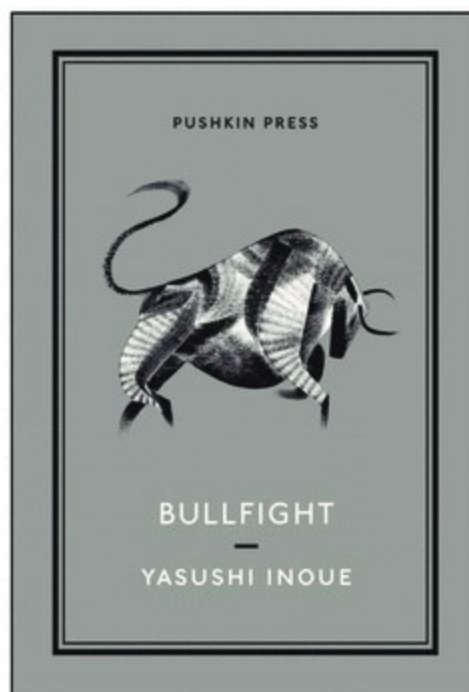
Pushkin rightfully chose *Bullfight* to introduce their Inoue titles Stateside in December 2013. Like Inoue, the protagonist here is a newspaper man. Tsugami is the editor-in-chief of the Osaka New Evening Post, founded in December 1945, mere months after Japan's spectacular defeat in World War II. One year later, Tsugami lives separated from

Sometimes it takes an international village to put noteworthy titles onto stateside shelves.

his wife and children, having sent them to the safety of his hometown to escape the too-recent war bombs; he has, instead, a mistress, the widow of a college friend "whose bones had not yet come home" from war. As 1946 draws to a close, Tsugami's relationships, as well as his paper, are struggling—as is the rest of the devastated country.

In spite of potentially dire straits, Tsugami decides the paper will sponsor an unprecedented three-day bullfight requiring the transport of twenty-two bulls from Shikoku Island to Osaka. The bulls fight one another instead of a matador; spectators are invited to place bets on the winning beast. "This was a gamble on whose success the future of the company depended." Inoue's spare, tense novella tracks Tsugami during the weeks before the showdown, as he relies on Tashiro—"a showman"—to work out the event's logistics. Bombed-out streets and cities, curtailed transportation, limited access to feed, fuel Tsugami's desperation, but he recklessly moves forward with his bullfight plans.

After *Bullfight*, Pushkin reversed the original order of Inoue's first two novellas, and released *The Hunting Gun* Stateside in September 2014. Inoue opens *Gun* with a narrative frame—as if to create distance from difficult topics and experiences. Inoue repeats this story-within-a-story device in each of the remaining titles discussed here. *Gun*'s narrator is a sometime poet who reluctantly submits one of his "somewhat idiosyncratic poems" to a high school friend who edits a hunting magazine. Two months after publication of the titular poem, "The Hunting Gun," the poet receives a letter from a stranger, Misugi Jōsuke, in which the stranger muses he might be the poem's subject and that he



felt the need to explain why the poet might have recognized the "'desolate, dried-up riverbed'" that plagues the stranger. Included with Misugi's letter are three additional letters which divulge the many reasons why Misugi is now "utterly alone." Shōko authors the first letter, written to "Uncle Jōsuke," and reveals herself to be a young woman who lost her mother three weeks before. Ignoring her mother's dying request to burn her diary, Shōko reads the private musings to discover her mother's 13-year affair with Misugi. The second letter comes from Misugi's wife who confesses she realized her husband's deception as a 20-year-old new bride with the woman she always called "elder sister." In the final letter, the dead lover exposes secrets of her own that no one—including the reader—could have guessed. This slim, controlled title is testimony to the power of words on the page—to assuage, to enlighten, to devastate.

The latest Inoue title—hitting US shelves in March—is a trio unto itself, featuring three short stories from the 1950s. The titular story "Life of a Counterfeiter" again uses a framing narrative of an arts reporter who is commissioned by a late painter's family to write a posthumous biography. Almost ten years have passed since the original request—with a war in between during which the writer was in "frantic straits." Finally resuming his research, the writer uncovers a far more intriguing story about the painter's colleague who turns out to be an accomplished counterfeiter.

In "Reeds," a writer comes across an article about the possible reunion between a father and his missing son; although, the son has "no recollection of his childhood." The writer remarks that he himself retains only "a few small, fragmentary recollections," and shares three "broken-off memories" that involve his great-grandfather's mistress, a former geisha, who raised him as a child; his parents at a forgotten train station; and an unrecognizable young couple who might or might not have something to do with a distant relative who died young. Autobiographical undertones linger here, as Inoue was raised by his grandmother who was indeed a former geisha.

More about "Grandma Kano"—with additional corresponding details from Inoue's own life—emerges in the final story titled "Mr. Goodall's Gloves," in which the narrator reveals how he was sent by his parents to live with Kano from ages 6 to 13. Framed, yet again, by the narrator's unexpected discovery of

— Hong continued on next page

a certain doctor's calligraphy work while traveling on a business trip, the story quickly turns inward to reveal the artistic doctor's relationship to the narrator's ancestors. The calligraphy serves as a roundabout means to explain a poignant story of how Grandma Kano treasured a certain pair of gloves because of what they represented: an unexpected act of kindness bestowed on Grandma Kano who, as a mistress, was never recognized as an equal member of her lover's household.

While Inoue's titles-via-Pushkin are presented as three separate texts, to read them as a single collection—a feat made easily possible given their brevity and portability—creates a sharp, concise overview of a country in difficult transition. Reminders of devastation haunt every story. Evidence of foreign occupation is never far, from a Boston bag—"the sort of thing that had become valuable of late"—in *Bullfight*, to western-made Richards and Churchill guns in *The Hunting Gun*, to the graves of early foreigners who died in Japan

after the country was opened to outsiders after the Meiji Restoration in "Mr. Goodall's Gloves." Solitude and loneliness are recognizable consequences with the inevitable post-war breakdown of families, communities, and societies.

That a half-century-plus has passed since these stories were initially published has not diminished the universality of the experiences and themes within: humanity seems trapped in a never-ending cycle of war, occupation, survival, reinvention. Today it's Central Asia, Middle East, and Africa; what will it be tomorrow? Sharing our stories remains tantamount to retaining that humanity...and all the more reason to discover writers from distant shores and be grateful for independent rogue presses like Pushkin for erasing borders one book at a time.

Terry Hong writes BookDragon, a book review blog for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center.

