

I wrote this poem in the 1990s when I was living in Japan. A 3rd Grade teacher at my current charter school shared it with her class, and one of the students responded with a poem of her own. See page 3.

Death on a Bicycle

If you train on a road bike during the boiling hot summer in Nakajo,
Your most valuable equipment, more than gloves
Helmet or spare tire,
Is sunglasses.

There are gnats.

As you breeze beside the rice paddies and through the mountain forests,
They stick to your eyes.

When you zoom down the gorge at Tainai,
So fast that spit escapes from your mouth to crawl up your cheek like a living thing,
Gnats stick to your spit and sweat
And lodge in your eyes
Where they die.

You can shower off the dirt,
Scrub clean the toothy grin tattooed on your leg by the bicycle chain,
But when you step from the bathtub, feeling pure as dawn,
You look in the mirror and see
Dead bodies still stuck in your eyes.

Little black dots,
Premonitions of death:
Someday your entire eyes will be nothing
But black.

So you buy sunglasses,
The wrap-around kind that shield on all angles,
And fool yourself that you are avoiding death
On a bicycle.

But you can't avoid death on a bicycle.
And in your race for vitality
You promote the very thing you abhor:
A frog goes *pop!* under the tire.

A beautiful butterfly
Zigzagging haphazardly
Meets the brutal blender of your spokes
Its wings crunching softly
Like a cookie in your mouth.

Well, when you die

We'll cremate your body,
Take the ashes to the bridge spanning the Tainai Gorge –
The bridge you shot over so many dawns,
The mist stretched above the river like a sleeping dragon –
And fling your ashes
Down into the water
To be examined by the fish
For a moment
Then forgotten.

Then we'll walk back to our sensible cars,
With the wrap-around

windshields

Our heads

parting

the clouds

Of gnats

Remembering

You

and your

Cycle.

- *Bruce Ballard*

response poem by 3rd Grade student on next page

Froggy

*If you ever
see a frog and
you're
on
a
bike take a
stick and move it away.
Don't just
ride
on it and pop it
like a pimple. Only if you
want to see blood all over
the place. Be a very good
person and just take it up. Do you
know frogs have to live, too?*

- J. F., 3rd Grade