

# A new world of women poets

## The Asian Bookshelf

DONALD RICHIE

*A LONG RAINY SEASON: Contemporary Japanese Women's Poetry, Vol I: Haiku and Tanka, edited and translated by Leza Lowitz, Miyuki Aoyama and Akemi Tomioka, illustrations by Robert Kushner. The Rock Spring Collection of Japanese Literature. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 200 pp., \$12.*

As Leza Lowitz indicates in her excellent introduction to this extraordinary new collection, Japanese women in contradistinction to those in other cultures — have long had a literary place.

A full third of poems in the "Manyoshu" are by women, all of the imperial anthologies find women well represented, and, of course, the first novel, the "Genji Monogatari" was written by the Lady Murasaki.

The place was sequestered. It was the women of the imperial court who wrote — and they did so in the vernacular. What they created was considered of less importance than what men were doing — the serious business of versifying in Chinese — yet these women were themselves creating the literary language of Japan.

Being women of the court their styles and subjects were

circumscribed but, despite this, a number of individual voices are audible still: the idiosyncratic Sei Shonagon, the Ladies Izumi and Sagami, and of course Murasaki Shikibu herself.

As the court waned and the bakufu grew, however, women's voices were more and more stilled as new uses for females ("good wife, wise mother") were found. It has thus been only relatively recently with the gradual eroding of the bakufu legacy, that women have in any number found the freedom to again speak in their own voices.

This collection is, amazingly enough, the first anthology of contemporary Japanese women's poetry in English translation, and the results are indeed personal, individual and independent. This first volume collects classical poetic forms and a second volume, shortly to appear, covers free verse.

Though the waka has long been considered a legitimate vehicle for women, its later form, the haiku, is traditionally associated with men. Now, however, a large number of women are using this form as reflection and illumination of their own lives, as in this verse by Keiko Ito.

*Pleasant voices  
in a room —*

*summer tatami mats.*

Others are, at the same time, enlarging the possibilities of the form as in this haiku by Kimiko Itami.

*The wedding reception in  
progress:  
a fake view  
of the Pacific Ocean.*

The tanka, however, continues as the most popular of women's poetic forms. Ninety percent of the poems in the "Manyoshu" are tanka, and eight of the 15 authors represented in Lowitz's volume write in this form.

Traditionally, the tanka has allowed the greater freedom. There are fewer rules, there is a place for lyricism, and the range of subject is correspondingly greater. It is this form which now allows the greatest freedom of expression.

Ei Akitsu can question birth:

*A ball of flesh  
bobbing in a swing,  
a lead weight hanging  
from the sky —  
this we call a child?*

Motoko Michiura can give voice to images long proscribed by men:

*Dead of night  
returning home exhausted  
from the interrogation —  
my period begins to flow  
like rage.*

And Amari Hayashi speaks of very human emotions hitherto denied literary expression:

*Dark stairs  
in a strange city —  
I feel more lonely  
with your hand down my  
pants.*

With this anthology, Lowitz and her fellow translators have disclosed to the English reader a new world of poetry. Here is the evolution and continuation of one of the strongest literary traditions of women writers in the world.

Given the vagaries of book distribution in this country even in regards a volume as important as this one, the interested reader might order directly from Stone Bridge Press, Box 8208, Berkeley, California 94707. Fax 1 (510)

## BOOKS ON ASIA

THE JAPAN TIMES • TUESDAY, DECEMBER 6, 1994