

Women rediscover their poetic voices

By Joe LaPenta

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A LONG RAINY SEASON Haiku and Tanka—Contemporary Japanese Women's Poetry, Vol. 1

OTHER SIDE RIVER Vol. 2

Both edited and translated by Leza
Lowitz, Miyuki Aoyama and
Akemi Tomioka
Stone Bridge Press. 200 pp. \$12

Haiku and tanka have long been the most popular poetic forms in Japan, where works by thousands of amateurs and professionals appear regularly in hundreds of books and magazines. For readers with an image of these forms as precious or sentimental, the following tanka by Motoko Michiura, well known for poems drawn from her experiences as a student activist at Waseda University in the 1960s and 1970s, should be instructive:

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

This is one of many arresting examples from **A Long Rainy Season**, an anthology that is bound to alter preconceptions about contemporary Japanese poetry and about Japanese women as well.

Those familiar with the literary history of Japan will already know that Japanese women enjoyed reputations as major writers and innovators long before their counterparts in the West. They contributed substantially to the "Manyoshu" and other classic collections of verse. Works such as Sei Shonagon's "Pillow Book" and Lady Murasaki's 11th-century masterpiece, "Tale of Genji," regarded as the first great novel in world literature, have had a decisive impact on the development of Japan's literary and aesthetic traditions.

Yet this past prominence has tended to mask the serious decline in the social status of women during the intervening centuries. By the time of Japan's modernization during the Meiji era (1868-1912), women's status as "good wives and wise mothers" was official government policy and the burgeoning feminist movement of the 1920s and '30s was actively repressed by the militarists who came to power at the time.

While there were always courageous exceptions, a rebirth of women's literature had to wait until the postwar period, particularly the '60s and '70s. "A Long Rainy Season," the first of two volumes devoted to translations of contemporary Japanese women's poetry, is a long overdue sampling of haiku and tanka from 15 poets all born in this century. Editor Leza Lowitz provides an informative introduction, historical overview and capsule biographies of the poets for this volume and its sequel.

The range of imagery and sensibility found in these poems is startling. Conventional subjects such as the seasons, loneliness and transience are treated in fresh ways, as in this tanka by Machi Tawara:

*Fireworks, fireworks
watching them together—
one sees only the flash
the other,
the darkness.*

Some are reminiscent of the poems of unrequited love by Heian era poets such as Princess Shikishi.

Meiko Matsudaira writes:

*Passion unspoken
congeals,
growing into a black pearl
deep
in my body.*

Others, such as the following tanka by Yuko Kawano, are strongly sensual:

*You, approaching me
with the smell
of freshly cut grass—
my nipples turn hard.*

There are frankly erotic, eccentrically humorous and even radically political poems replete with sharply focused observations in language that ranges from the subtly elegant to the bluntest imaginable.

Other Side River, the second volume, has just been released and includes the work of 36 poets, all of whom write in free verse. The rich variety of styles will be familiar to readers of modern English poetry, a major influence on poets writing free verse in Japanese. In addition to generous selections from such famous poets as Kazuko Shiraishi, there are works by Chuwol Chong, a second-generation resident of Korean nationality, and poems by other members of minority groups.

There are also examples by expatriates such as Fumiko Tachibana, who writes in English. Fortunately this volume includes a few poems in their original Japanese script, but this practice should have been followed throughout.

Lowitz admits that some contemporary Japanese poets "just cannot be translated successfully into English." That is an understatement. Poetry, unlike prose, cannot be translated at all. Even when the English versions are as fine as they are in this anthology, they remain distant echoes.

Radical and even shocking as many of these poems are, in one sense they offer proof of the "traditional" role Japanese women writers have played. Just as the Heian court ladies created a literature of great vitality by writing in the colloquial language while most of their menfolk were stuck endlessly imitating ancient Chinese models, contemporary Japanese women poets, with the keen political and social awareness of outsiders in Japan's male-dominated society, have managed to breathe new life into conventional poetic forms and use modern forms in unexpected ways.

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