

# WORLD LITERATURE TODAY

A LITERARY QUARTERLY  
OF THE UNIVERSITY  
OF OKLAHOMA  
NORMAN, OKLAHOMA  
73019-0375 USA

FROM THE WINTER 1996 ISSUE

*A Long Rainy Season: Haiku & Tanka. Contemporary Japanese Women's Poetry.* Vol. 1. Leza Lowitz, Miyuki Aoyama, Akemi Tomioka, eds. & trs., Robert Kushner, ill. Berkeley, Ca. Stone Bridge. 1994. 198 pages, ill. \$12. ISBN 1-880656-15-9.

*Other Side River: Free Verse. Contemporary Japanese Women's Poetry.* Vol. 2. Leza Lowitz, Miyuki Aoyama, eds. & trs. Berkeley, Ca. Stone Bridge. 1995. 244 pages. \$14. ISBN 1-880656-16-7.

"Because those who make the words rule the world . . ." This quotation is from the poem "Sprout" by Rumiko Kōra (b. 1932), included here in volume 2, page 127; the "words" in these handsome companion volumes have been translated with the goal of making works by a wide range of contemporary Japanese women poets available to readers of English. Both volumes contain bibliographies to enable readers to find additional readings. The translations are minimally annotated, only to explain references in the poems which do not translate culturally.

The introductions by Leza Lowitz are well written and furnish enough information about poetic form and literary and social history to provide a context within which to read; the introduction to volume 2, which is more ambitious, includes "The Emergence of Free Verse Poetry in Japan," "Toward a New Literature for Women," "Women's Free Verse Poetry Today," "Experimentation and Community," "Language, Fragmentation and Intellectualism," and "The 'Outsiders' Within."

Neither volume provides the Japanese texts, except for three poems given in both romanization and Japanese script in volume 2, and there is no explanation for either the selection of poems represented or the placement of the original texts. This lack is not uncommon in translations intended for a broad readership, but the fact that many readers may not benefit from them has never seemed a strong enough reason to deny the texts to those readers who will. I missed them especially in volume 1: haiku and tanka are by their natures suggestive and often ambiguous ("All our selections and translations necessarily reflect our interpretation of the individual works," the editors note in volume 1); it is not a challenge to the validity of one interpretation to request the means for readers to make their own if they can. The first volume, although nicely illustrated, also seems a little sparse, with the translations in large type; the original text would have enriched the volume.

Nevertheless, some of the range of the traditional forms is demonstrated, as in these two tanka by Ei Aikitsu (b. 1950):

Now,  
well into the afternoon:  
how strange  
to smell shit  
in the palm of my right hand.

If you give birth  
give birth to the world—  
buds bursting  
in the fresh green  
woods.

The two volumes illustrate different choices in organization: volume 1 is organized by poetic form, with haiku first (seven poets arranged more or less chronologically), followed by tanka (eight poets). Brief biographical information is provided as an introduction to each poet. Volume 2 offers thirty-six poets arranged alphabetically, with biographical information in the back of the book; it is somewhat less convenient.

The translations in the second volume are particularly impressive, although some of the compilers' decisions raise interesting questions. For example, "Among others, Yuri Kageyama, Fumiko Tachibana, and Kiyoko Ogawa have all lived and traveled outside Japan and write a great deal of their poetry in English (including the poems that appear in this book)." What, then, makes a Japanese poet?

However, without careful checking for which poems were originally written in English, there is no way to know by the translations; the high quality of the poetic language is seamless throughout the volume. One of my favorites, for example, is a poem by Kiyoko Nagase (1906–95), "Is Getting Old Romantic?": "This morning when I tried to pick leeks for morning soup / my fingers felt chilled, I felt the frost. / Still, the sun's blue rays spread / and I couldn't open my eyes / in spite of myself / I fell / towards spring."

One other difficulty I have with the selection of poets and poems is that while the effort to include the "outsiders' within" is commendable, there is a subtle condescension in including only those poems by the "outsiders" that deal with being "outsiders," and then only one poem per author. Both the poems by Iro Kitadai (1904–83) and Misao Fujimoto, members of the *burakumin*, the old pariah class, are on learning in old age how to write, for example. It would have been interesting to see more than one representative poem.

However, these are minor problems given the wealth of wonderful material presented. A poem by Keiko Matsui Gibson concerning another kind of "outsider"—"How do you like America?"—is quite wonderful and perceptive: "How do I like America? / These cheerful Americans / much better at talking than listening / throw balls persistently without catching any." Other poems connect the work of these writers to the contemporary literary world elsewhere; an example is "Three Fish" by Rin Ishigaki (b. 1920), which recalls A. R. Ammons in its relation to the natural world.

A tropical fish died.  
It sank  
on its little white belly.

A fish came up  
and poked the tip of its mouth  
but its expression didn't change.

Another came up and poked it  
for a very long time  
only to eat it in the end.

This is justice.  
If there's anything more right than this  
said the fish,  
rising to the water's surface,  
name it.

These anthologies, especially the second volume, are a rich resource, opening new poetic worlds with excellent translations.

Amy Vladeck Heinrich  
Columbia University