



A Long Rainy Season: Haiku & Tanka

Leza Lowitz. Stone Bridge Press, 1994. 200 pages: \$12. * The resurgence of poetry brought back into fashion by performance artists such as Jamaica's Linton Kwesi Johnson in the U.K. and in the U.S. by Laurie Anderson, Gil Scott-Heron, and the phenomenon of

Rap, lends the art a prominence throughout the world that it has not seen since the brief, heady days of Kerouac's "Beat Generation" in the Fifties, or the influential period of Britain's "Auden Gang" during the pre-war 1930s.

Like both of the latter, it is true the current poetry boom has produced few sparkling talents amid a sea of optimistic and uneven new entries. Only occasionally do poets and books of such excellence come along that immediately they find place of honor among readers, poets, and scholars of literature alike.

A *Long Rainy Season* is such a book. The first anthology of contemporary Japanese women's poetry in English translation, it is both a rock-solid tribute to the poetic strength of Japan's

anul-now, overlooked female poets, and an indispensable addition to East-West scholarship.

Translated and compiled by Leza Lowitz, an American living in Tokyo where she writes for the *Japan Times*, *A Long Rainy Season* gathers offerings variously by 15 younger, mature mid-career professional, and older, honored poets. Their creative output demonstrates the unobtrusive grasp of traditional Japanese five-line tanka and related haiku poetic forms that these women command.

The translations are rendered purposefully, graciously, and with genuine poetic spirit. While a poet in her own right, Lowitz enlists the editorial aid of Miyuki Aoyama and Akemi Tomioka in crafting such suggestive gems as the eighty year old Sonoko Nakamura's:

Land-locked bride
tempted offshore—
the open sea
Under the sea
there might be a civv,
I wash a peach.

Ei Akitsu, one of the strongest poets and a real discovery in the collection, remarks:

Sharp sickle of heaven—
off with my head!
Since I'm living my life
like a giant slug,
and again: I leave my house
preoccupied

with thoughts:

a dog with saggy balls
passes on the street.

These are poems drawn from the everyday experience of living in the world. The opportunity Lowitz affords us of exploring the interior mind of contemporary Japanese women is in itself remarkable. The tanka form, and the haiku in particular, owe much, of course, to Zen Buddhism's love of simplicity and spartan ascurgency; understandably, they can seem ambiguous to Western eyes on first viewing. These women poets, however, handle the forms with a suppleness and energy that is entirely renewing; and with a conviction that needs no magic decoder ring. Amari Hayashi, a 31-year-old Christian convert from Tokyo (for example, in but two terse sentences compresses volumes of similarly-themed fiction into lines no classical zen bard has bettered:

"That girl?" She left
here yesterday," one says.

"No, she hasn't
come yet," says another.

As statements of women's experience these poems often ring timelessly, hauntingly. Often, they reveal a sighing fondness for the fall-away line. In the title-offering haiku by Nobuko Katsura, an Osaka poet born in 1914, we read of an existential ache that is universal in its compass:

Someone else's wife—
green garden peas steamed gently
in hot water.
The nuisance
of breasts—
a long rainy season.

For an awfully long time, what we've had available in English from Japan's women poets has been chiefly the rough-legged classical translations of Kenneth Rexroth, and the modern work of his friend and Beat-era wild thing, Kazuko Shirasui, also translated by the ines-

timable Rexroth.

With this important work, however, Leza Lowitz expands the canon enormously and it is not overestimating her labor to call *A Long Rainy Season* one of the two or three most significant collections of poetry to arrive internationally in the past several years. That it is presented in a beautifully and affordably priced edition from Stone Bridge, a relatively new press dedicated to translations from the Japanese, makes this happy arrival all the better. Producing a volume such as this cannot have been a light task, and we are indebted to such cross-cultural work in service of the muse. Sufficient thanks is best offered perhaps in the words again of Amari Hayashi:

Hunting for the place
where body odor is strongest—
"Go for the woman
who smells the most!"

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