

Selected Haiku

Mitsubishi Toshio

Translated by Kyoko Selden

Introduced by Hiroaki Sato



Portrait of Mitsuhashi Toshio

Mitsuhashi Toshio (1920-2001) joined a haiku group at age fifteen, and his haiku began to be accepted by magazines the following year. He was drawn to the Shinkō Haiku (Newly Rising Haiku) movement, particularly its advocacy of rejecting the required inclusion of seasonal words.

In 1937, when Japan expanded its war in China and war fever gripped the country, some trying

to distance themselves from “traditional haiku” started writing what they called senka sōbō haiku—haiku “imagining and watching the fire of war from afar.” Mitsuhashi wrote many haiku in this genre.

But the Japanese government deemed the Newly Rising Haiku movement inimical to kokutai, the “national polity,” for its liberalism. The police arrested its leaders beginning in 1940. That stopped Mitsuhashi in his tracks, according to his own account. Silenced, he kept writing, at times turning back to explore “classicism” in haiku. But it was not until 1966 that he published his first book of haiku—a selection of 321 pieces titled *Phantom Shark* (Maboroshi no fuka). None of the poems included here and written between the 1920s and 1945 were published prior to the end of the war.

From the start, Mitsuhashi tended to stray from the classical haiku requisite of describing what is observed at hand, even as he stuck to the 17-syllable format, prewar orthography, and premodern grammar. For example, he explained that he wrote the first haiku selected here not because he watched an actual May Day parade celebrating the importance of labor, but because he realized he was born in the year the first May Day was celebrated and that thought stayed with him. He wrote this poem in 1937, two years after the government banned May Day altogether.

Likewise, he explained that he wrote the second poem evoking the capital in flames in 1945, not because he witnessed any of the air raids in Tokyo—he was a soldier overseas when those raids occurred—but because when he was demobilized and returned to Japan to find his house gone, he wanted to “retrospectively experience” (tsuitaiken) the burning of his house.

Takahashi Mutsuo, the distinguished free-verse poet who also won major prizes in traditional tanka (short poems usually of five unrhymed lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables) and haiku, characterized Mitsuhashi’s work as “pure haiku”—results of an attempt to figure out what might be accomplished within the confines of 5-7-5 syllables. The poems included here date from the 1930s through 1993.



Tokyo Firebombing, May 26, 1945.
[Wikicommons.](#)

メーデーの赤旗巻かれ棒赤し
Mēdē no akahata makare bō akashi
A May Day rally—
a flagpole becomes red, furred

by the red flag.

いつせいに柱の燃ゆる都かな
Issei ni hashira no moyuru miyako kana
All at the same time
wooden pillars are aflame
in the capital—

Note: Major air raids on Tokyo began on the night of March 9, 1945.

こがらしや壁の中から藁がとぶ
Kogarashi ya kabe no naka kara wara ga tobu
A tree-blighting wind—
out of the mud and straw wall
pieces of straw fly.

こがらしや壁の中から藁がとぶ
Kogarashi ya kabe no naka kara wara ga tobu
A tree-blighting wind—
out of the mud and straw wall
pieces of straw fly.

草焼けば兵のかたちの遺骨現る
Kusa yakeba hei no katachi no ikotsu aru
As we burn grass,
the bones emerge from the field
in a soldier’s shape.

凍る夜へ没しゆく貨車引張られ
Kōru yo e bosshi yuku kasha hipparare
Into frozen night
freight cars vanish out of sight,
tugged by an engine.
Note: The allusion is to soldiers heading to the
battlefront.

初日いま楕円核爆発あるな
Hatsuhi ima daen kakubakuhatsu aruna
The first rising sun
Elliptical—may there be
no nuclear blasts.

Note: The elliptical shape of the sun evokes the image of the sun during the 1945 nuclear explosions and the postwar nuclear tests. “Aruna” can be read in the classical Japanese as meaning “there must not be any more.”

真綿ぐるみのほぞの緒や燃えてなし
Mawatagurumi no hozo no wo ya moetenashi
Umbilical cord
and the silk floss wrapping it
burned up and was gone.

産みどめの母より赤く流れ出む
Umidome no haha yori akaku nagare demu
This is the last birth—
mother had resolved, and yet,
life still flows on, red.

戦没の友のみ若し霜柱
Senbotsu no tomo nomi wakashi shimobashira
Our comrades who died
in action alone are still
young—frost columns.

満月や水兵永く立泳
Mangetsu ya suihei nagaku tachioyogi
A full moon tonight—
sailors tread water for long,
waiting and waiting.
Note: The poem suggests sailors after their
ship was sunk.



Signed Hinomaru flag of Eihachi Yamaguchi.
[Wikicommons.](#)

風呂敷と国旗といづれ形見かな
Furoshiki to kokki to izure katami kana
The furoshiki

or the national flag, which
will be my keepsake?
Note: Before a soldier went to fight in the war,
people in his town would sign their names on
his flag, praying for his success in battle.
Furoshiki is a cloth used to wrap around
belongings during transport.

手をあげて此世の友は来たりけり
Te o agete kono yo no tomo wa kitarikeri
Raising his hand,
our friend in this world has come
to his companions.
Note: “Friends in the other world” denotes
deceased comrades.

泣寝入る幼な児強し春の星
Nakineiru osanago tsuyoshi haru no hoshi
A baby crying
himself to sleep lustily—
stars in springtime.

天も地も米軍基地化のばつた飛ぶ
Ten mo chi mo beigun kichika no batta tobu
Both heaven and earth
turn into a U.S. base
big grasshoppers fly.
Note: The large grasshopper shōryō batta
(Acrida cinerea) makes a distinct sound as it
flies.

十七字みな伏字なれ暮の春
Jūshichi moji mina fuseji nare kure no haru
Let all seventeen
syllables be turned blank
spring as it darkens.
Note: The author alludes to wartime
censorship.

戦争にたかる無数の蠅しづか
Sensō ni takaru musū no hae shizuka
Swarming and feeding
on war the numerous flies
all hushed and quiet.

押黙る海山や来む核の冬
Oshidamaru umiyama ya komu kaku no fuyu

Mountains and oceans
keep deadly silent—winter
of the nuclear age.

昭和出征惨たり銃に巻く繃帯
Shōwa shussei santari jū ni maku hōtai
Going to the front
in Shōwa was wretched—guns
wrapt in bandages..

被爆者忌脱ぐ汗のシャツ裏返る
Hibakushaki nugu ase no shatsu uragaeru
A-bomb victims' day—
I take off my sweaty shirt.
It turns inside out.

Note: The poet perhaps hints at skin peeling off.

戦車の音と犬の動悸を抱きゐたり
Sensha no oto to inu no dōki o daki'itari

The noise of a tank
and a dog's pulsating heart
I remain hugging.

満月の裏はくらやみ魂祭
Mangetsu no ura wa kurayami tamamatsuri
Festival of souls—
the back side of the full moon
is utterly dark.

Note: The festival of souls takes place from the thirteenth to fifteenth day of the seventh month (lunar calendar) when ancestral souls are welcomed home and prayers said for their repose.

For these and other poems, please see Mitsunashi Toshio zenkushū (Collected Haiku of Mitsunashi Toshio) (Tokyo: Rippūshobō, 1990).

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Poet **Mitsuhashi Toshio** (1920-2001) was a primary member of the Shinkō Haiku (Newly Rising Haiku) movement. His book collections include *Phantom Shark* (Maboroshi no fula).

Kyoko Selden (1936-2013) taught Japanese language and literature as a senior lecturer at Cornell University until her retirement in 2008. Author, translator, artist and calligrapher, she was the translation coordinator of the Asia-Pacific Journal. Her major works as translator centered on Japanese women writers, the atomic bomb, the Ainu and the Okinawans. Her major translations included [Japanese Women Writers: Twentieth Century Short Fiction](#), [More Stories By Japanese Women Writers, An Anthology](#), Kayano Shigeru's [Our Land Was a Forest](#), Honda Katsuichi's [Harukor: Ainu Woman's Tale](#), [The Atomic Bomb: Voices From Hiroshima and Nagasaki](#), Shin'ichi Suzuki's [Nurtured by Love](#), and Cho Kyo's [The Search for the Beautiful Woman, A Cultural History of Japanese and Chinese Beauty](#).

Hiroaki Sato has published three dozen books of translations into English including *Japanese women poets: an anthology*, *Miyazawa Kenji: selections*, and *One Hundred frogs: from renga to haiku*. He is the winner of the PEN American Translation prize and is a former president of the Haiku Society of America.