Yesterday Is Another World. Tanka by Yosano Akiko

Roger Pulvers, Yosano Akiko

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From “Disheveled Hair”

Translations and Text by Roger Pulvers

Yosano Akiko (1878-1942), poet, educator, and anti-war and social critic. “Disheveled Hair” was her first published collection of tanka (1901).

Two stars deep into heaven
Whispering love
Behind the nighttime curtain
While down below, now, people lie
Their hair in gentle disarray...

Made to punish men for their sins
The smoothest skin
The longest black hair...
All that
Is me!

Droplets fall from a young girl’s hair
Congealing on grass
Giving birth to a butterfly
In the country
Of spring

The girl in a springtime window
Calls to awaken a young priest
Barely a man
His sutras toppled
By her dangling sleeve
うらわかき僧よびます春の窓ふり袖ふれて経くづれきぬ

Akiko wrote many poems about the restrained passions that overwhelm a young girl. After she met the man who was to become her husband, the poet Yosano Tekkan, these passions became more mature in expression, deeper, more concretely erotic. They naturally began as adolescent fantasies. But there is no question as to the power of these young fantasies: They are able to make the defenses of an acolyte crumble.

The day lengthens...
I snap off wild roses
Grasp them, put them in my hair...
I am weary of waiting in the field
For you!

And this poem too, about a girl waiting impatiently for her lover, exposes her restless ardor. The day is long but she snaps off wild roses. The coincidence of nobara being “wild rose” in English is a lucky one, considering the nuances of “wild.”

Her loose hair entwined
Around a young branch
By the east wind...
And in the west a rainbow
So small, yet radiant!

And this poem too, about a girl waiting impatiently for her lover, exposes her restless ardor. The day is long but she snaps off wild roses. The coincidence of nobara being “wild rose” in English is a lucky one, considering the nuances of “wild.”

Akiko and Tekkan
Another poem about a young girl, her hair now taken by the wind and entwined around a young branch (a very erotic image). This is the spring wind that blows from east to west. It is almost telling her--commanding her--to look to the west, where she sees a tiny but beautiful rainbow. (Ni-shaku is the length of the sleeve of a kimono...the sleeve that hangs through the window of a room in which a young man is sleeping, perhaps dreaming of her....)

A great deal has been written about Yosano Akiko’s life and poetry. In going through the myriad details of her dramatic life that spanned the late-Meiji, Taisho and early-Showa eras, one most amazing fact stands out, to my mind, above all others: Yosano Akiko had 13 children (11 of whom survived childhood). This means that she was pregnant for about a decade of her adult life. Think alone of the amount of bleached cotton cloth (sarashi) under her kimono that she would have had to wash! Can you imagine her having the time to produce her vast output of poems and prose and letters, give birth to and look after her children--admittedly with help from relatives and helpers--and cater to the many and complex whims of her husband, whose fame as a poet was eclipsed by hers?

I whisper to you, “Stay in bed”

As I tenderly shake you awake

My dishevelled hair now

Up in a Butterfly...

Kyoto morning!

My thick thick black hair

My wild hair

Its thousand strands my heart

Dishevelled, torn apart

くろ髪の千すぢの髪のみだれ髪かつおもひみだれおもひみだるる

Here her hair is a metaphor of her dishevelled state. This poem, like so many others, contains a most beautiful flow of sounds. It is almost as if the last 15 hiragana letters, virtually half the poem, are also flowing.

My blood burns

To give you one night

In the shelter of heightened dreams

God, do not look down on one

Who passes through spring

血ぞもゆるかさむひと夜の夢のやど春を行く入神おとしめな

The words in the middle of this poem are among the most beautiful of any that she created. They make one feel as if one were reading Heian poetry in a more modern form. In fact, for me this is one of the greatest modern tanka ever written. And what other modern female poet, in any country, expressed her passions so openly? Not even Anna Akhmatova, her Russian contemporary, who is credited with giving a voice to women, is as frank or as bold or as starkly erotic.

Had Yosano Akiko been writing in English or French or German, for instance, her influence on 20th-century poetry around the world would have been immense.
How beautiful they are
The people brushing past me
As I stroll through Gion
To the Temple of Kiyomizu
On this cherry blossom moonlit night!
清水へ祇園をよぎる桜月夜こよひ逢ふ人みなうつくしき

We leaned against the railing
That runs along the bright bank
Of the wide Oi River at night
Dressed in light blue
In our very own summer!
明くる夜の河はばひろき嵯峨の欄きぬ水色の二人の夏よ

Having lived myself in Kyoto for 15 years, I have a particular fondness for her poems that are located there. Akiko, of course, was born in Sakai. She is a Kansai poet with a Kansai sensibility. What does this mean? A sensitivity and sentimentality that are very focused, pointed, clearly defined...not like Kafu’s, that is often wet, vaguely whining and reeking of trumped-up nostalgia...or Kawabata’s sensibility that is often artificially heightened. (Kawabata, of course, was not a Kyoto native. And his novel set in Kyoto, Koto (古都), is touristic; a kind of modern fairytale. Its portrait of both the Kitayama district and of Gion may just as well have been written by a foreigner.) By contrast, Akiko’s sentimentality is photographic. It captures a reality that we can recognize even today, especially in the few parts of Kyoto that have remained largely unchanged in the last 100 years.

Tomorrow this time tomorrow
You will not be with me...
I lean against the inn door, faint
As the plum blossoms darken
Before my eyes
明日を思ひ明日の今おもひ宿の戸に倚る子やよわけ梅暮れぞめぬ

Let me wind my slender arm
Around your neck
Let me suck the fever
From your parched lips
Let me....
病みませるうなじに繊かひな捲きて熱にかはける御口を吸む

You lured me to you, then
Brushing my hand aside
Left...
Your holy robe’s scent
Caught in a gentle good night
さそひ入れてさらばと我手はらひます御衣のにはひ間はらかき

You spout your words of wisdom
While the current of my blood runs
I press my breasts
Gently parting
The shroud of mystery
Revealing the flower
Redder than red

“My press breasts” is one of her most famous, and most erotic tanka. With Akiko’s poetry the associations are complex and varied: Heian poetry; haiku (particularly Buson and other classical haiku poets); tanka written by Tekkan and other contemporaries; the elements, such as the wind, the sun; and parts of the clothing or body. It is astounding how so many of these elements are integrated in so few words. I know of no other poet in Japanese who does this so naturally.

My skin is so soft
Fresh from my bath
It pains me to see it touched
Covered by the fabric
Of an everyday world

“Your love for me” was actually written to her best friend, the poet Yamakawa Tomiko, who, like Akiko, was in love with Tekkan and had hoped to marry him. Their love for the same man and their poetic aspirations created a unique bond between them, intensely erotic without being sexual.

“Spring doesn’t last,” I said to him...
“Don’t you believe in permanence, do you?”

And I took his hands in mine
Leading them
To my young full breasts

春みじかし何に不滅の命ぞとちからある乳を手
にさぐらせぬ

Yesterday is another world
A thousand years away...
Yet it rushes to me

This minute!
With your hand on my shoulder...

きのふをば千とせの前の世とも思ひ御手なほ
に有りとも思ふ

Finally, a poem in answer to one by Tekkan,
who wanted her to apply his blood to her lips as lipstick.

What will come into my burning lips?
You answer...

“The blood from my little finger.”

But that blood is too dry now
For my mouth

もゆる口になにを含むぬれといひし人のをゆ
びの血は濡れはてぬ

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Roger Pulvers, author, playwright and director, is a Japan Focus associate. In February 2009, he was awarded the Crystal Simorgh Prize for Best Script for "Ashita e no Yuigon (Best Wishes for Tomorrow)" at the Teheran International Film Festival. He is the author and translator of Miyazawa Kenji, Strong in the Rain: selected poems among many other books. He wrote this article for The Asia-Pacific Journal.

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