Yesterday Is Another World. Tanka by Yosano Akiko

Roger Pulvers, Yosano Akiko

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From “Disheveled Hair” みだれ髪

Translations and Text by Roger Pulvers

Yosano Akiko (1878-1942), poet, educator, and anti-war and social critic. “Dishevelled 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...

罪おはき男こらせと肌きよく黒髪ながくつくらせし我れ
Her hair at twenty
Flowing long and black
Through the teeth of her comb
Oh beautiful spring
Extravagant spring!

その子二十櫛にながるる黒髪のおごりの春のうつくしきかな

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

わかき子髪のしづくの草に凝りて蝶とうまれしここ春の國

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

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

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!

野茨をりて髪にもかざし手にもとり永き日野辺に君まちわびぬ

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!

とき髪を若枝にからむ風の西よ二尺に足らぬうつくしき虹

Akiko

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.

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—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!

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!

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!

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.
Hot beneath my soft skin...
Don’t you miss
Touching it!?

やは肌のあつき血汐にふれも見でさびしからず
や道を説く君

I press my breasts
Gently parting
The shroud of mystery
Revealing the flower
Redder than red

乳ぶさおさへ神秘のとばりそとけりぬここなる
花の紅ぞ濃き

“I press my 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

ゆあみして泉を出てしやはりはだにふるるはつら
さ人の世のきぬ

Akiko loved European painting, especially the
work of Titian. In “My skin is so soft” is she
picturing herself, just out of her bath, in a
Renaissance painting?

A firefly slips off
The dangling sleeve
Of my light summer kimono
Taken by the wind, drifting away
Into this blue night

うすものの二尺のたもとすべりおちて蛍ながる
る夜風の青き

Your love for me
My love for you
Love indistinguishable

Whether you are the white bush clover...
Whether I am the white lily....

おもひおもふ今のところに分ち分かず君やしら
萩われやしら百合

“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...

“You don’t 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肩に有りとも思ふ

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むぬれといひし人のをゆびの血は涸れはてぬ

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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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