

When the sadness of the world exceeds personal pain

A review of two tanka books:

Natsubane (Feathers in Summer) by Mikako UMENAI and

Tomodachi ni deau no wa yoi koto (It's so good to see friends) by Masayuki YABE

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Abstract

Two tanka anthologies, Natsubane (Feathers in Summer) by UMENAI Mikako and Tomodachi ni deau no wa yoi koto ("It's so good to see friends") by YABE Masayuki, with a very modern perspective on our society, are reviewed here. From cameo observations of solitude and nature to war and daily life, both anthologies portray poignant themes of contemporary life through the medium of classical Japanese poetry.

Keywords: poetry, tanka, personal pain, helpless reality

要旨

ここで論評されている 2 冊の歌集、梅内美華子著『夏羽』と矢部雅之著『友達ニ出会フノハ良イ事』は、現代社会に対する非常に近代的なまなざしを有しています。孤独と自然への一瞥から戦争や日常生活に至るまで、両歌集は日本の古典的定型詩を通じて、現代社会の通念をありありと描き出しています。

Poetry expresses common feelings which every individual possesses - love, joy, sadness, pain and so on - and it has the power to arouse sympathy in everyone. And then too, we should not forget that poetry can also express situations of our modern society and modern world.

In Japan, we are lucky in that we have many peaceful and happy poems. But in fact we do also have excellent poetry that expresses social problems. Many of these poems reflect events reported in the media. Such poems are valuable not only as information but also as expressions of something emotional which goes beyond daily life or society.

I would like to review two tanka books, *Natsubane* (Feathers in Summer¹) by Mikako UMENAI (2007) and *Tomodachi ni deau no wa yoi koto* (It's so good to see friends) by Masayuki YABE (2003). We can see the problems of our modern world in some of these poems.

Mikako UMENAI is a young Japanese tanka poet, highly active in the field of poetry. She has been writing tanka, many of which were inspired by her student life at Doshisha University, since she was twenty years old. UMENAI's early themes were love songs and her encounter with Japanese traditional culture, which opened up a completely different world to her. She studies under Akiko BABA and is well familiar with Japanese traditional arts, such as Noh theatre and so on. Although she is a modern young woman and often writes about issues of her daily life, UMENAI's tanka are characterized by a steady 5-7-5-7-7, the Japanese tanka's fixed form of verse. In her poems, UMENAI invariably combines archaic Japanese poetic words and old forms of Chinese characters with modern Japanese spoken language. *Natsubane*, which literally means feathers (of birds) in summer, is her fourth tanka anthology.

To quote from some of UMENAI's tanka poems:

みぎはにて脚洗はれてゐる鳥はひと休みする祖父の魂かも

Migiwa nite ashi arawarete iru tori wa hitoyasumi suru sofū no tama kamo

The waterfowl whose legs are soaked in water is just like my grandfather's soul taking a rest.

UMENAI (2007: 35)

¹ All translations by Hiroko OZAKI.

途切れたる橋のからだを洗ひつつローヌ川青き光を返す

Togiretaru hashi no karada wo araitsutsu Rohne gawa aoki hikari wo kaesu

The Rhône River is shimmering blue. And the water splashes to the bridge which is so sharp.

UMENAI (2007: 91)

ガスマスクはエレファントマンを想起させ戦は異形のもの生みおとす

Gasumasuku wa elefantoman wo souki sase ikusa wa igyou no mono umiotosu

Gasmasks make us think of elephant men; how the war gives birth to strange appearances!

UMENAI (2007: 16)

Through the mass-media UMENAI can see war and war casts shadows on the scenes of her daily life. The author says in her postscript to the book that the sadness of the world exceeds personal pain. The book's title, *Natsubane*, refers to the waterfowl's young feathers and such metaphors of birds, feathers and flowers are reflected in the author's perception of herself.

海猫の右の目に海、左には餌の尽きたるわれ映りをり

Umineko no mi ni me ni umi, hidari niwa esa no tsukitaru ware utsuriori

Black-tailed gull! Your right eye reflects the ocean but your left eye mirrors me. Though I'm starving so.

UMENAI (2007: 126)

Masayuki YABE's book is a very unique kind of tanka anthology. YABE is a journalist and he is also a television news cameraman. There are some beautiful pictures in his book and there are some quite shocking ones too. The photographs are almost all of people going about their daily lives. We can see the situation of ordinary people in war-torn Afghanistan through the lens of his camera and through his words.

Yukitsuna SASAKI, one of the most famous tanka poets in Japan and the leader of the tanka group *Kokoro-no-hana* (Flowers of the Heart), says in his introduction to the book that YABE "opened up a new field in tanka expression".

異土にしてもの恋ほしきに山すその羊の群れよ山の高みへ

Ido ni shite monokohoshiki ni yamasuso no hitsuji no mure yo yama no takami he

I am so melancholic in such a strange land, watching a host of sheep climbing on the mountain high.

YABE (2003: 189)

Tanka poems are sometimes as effective as snapshots.

真鍮の薬莖一つ拾ひあげ掌に揺らすこの平和の軽さ

Shinchu no yakkyo hitotsu hiroiage te ni yurasu kono heiwa no karusa

I picked up a gun cartridge and rolled it in the palm of my hand. Peace is as light as this cartridge.

YABE (2003: 140)

どうしようもない現実が人とわれに桜の向かうまでを歩ます

Doushiyoumo nai genjitsu ga hito to ware ni sakura no mukau made wo ayumasu

Helpless reality makes us walk on and on over the fallen cherry blossoms.

YABE (2003: 35)

The presence of helpless reality is terrible indeed but it is also a reality that we modern people must recognize.

Bibliography

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