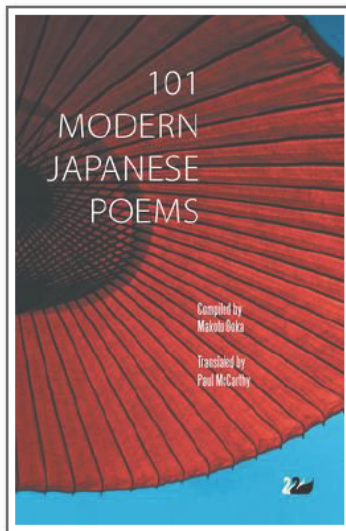


Readings in translated Japanese Literature

Tuesday, January 22, 2013

101 Modern Japanese Poems



Another title selected from the lists of the JLPP from Thames River Press is this welcome and wide ranging anthology of modern Japanese poems originally compiled and prefaced by Makoto Ōoka back in 1998 under the title *Gendaishi no kansho 101*, translated by Paul McCarthy, it features the poetry of 55 different poets all born within the last century, the selection is introduced by Chuei Yagi, which traces the beginnings of modern Japanese poetry. These poems are all in the form of prose poetry, and are selected from over a period of six decades, the earliest being Toyochirō Miyoshi's, *Prisoner*, from 1949 and the most recent is Shuntaro Tanikawa's, *Mt Yokai*, from 1993. The decades that are the most well represented here are poems from the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's, within these periods there are selections from poets you would expect to see re-presented; Shuntarō Tanikawa, Ryūichi Tamura, Minoru Yoshioka, Gōzō Yoshimasu, to name a few amongst the many, some of these poems are familiar landmarks; Minoru Yoshioka's *Monks*, and Shuntarō Tanikawa's *Sorrow* from his seminal collection, *Two Billion Light Years of Loneliness*, Tamura's *Sinking Temple* from *Four Thousand Days and Nights*, some of these poems have appeared in English translation in previous anthologies and by various translators but this goes some way to show how integral these poems and poets are in the landscape of post war and latter half twentieth century Japanese poetry. There are many poems and poets appearing here for the first time in translation and on an initial reading they could number in being too numerous to list individually here.

The anthology comes with an informing source section at the back, and the poems are presented along with the date in which they appeared in the original which goes some way in assisting to visualize the poems, although this it could be said, depending on the poems subject or concerns, is more relevant in some of the poems than in others, and it brings the added opportunity of an extended contextualization of the poems. In Hitoshi Anzai's *Elevator Mornings*, (1961), the internal and external are juxtaposed, the narrator's inner observations of a love affair meeting with that of the external world, the office building he works at, his political allegiances, but as the poem ends, he seems to escape from us - *And then go shooting up by elevator, To an awfully busy place, without women*. Reading these lines we can't help but picture to ourselves the place he is exiting into. The quote by Taka'aki Yoshimoto, (two of his poems are featured in this anthology), in Chuei Yagi's introduction contrasting the shifting types of rhetoric in poetry is something fully displayed and can be read across these fascinating poems. Themes and subject matters are as varied as there are poets and forms of expression, from the darkly exploratory and psychologically taut portrait of *A Crystal Madness* by Takasuke Shibusawa, (which reminded me

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of the fictions of Yutaka Haniya, has won many awards including - the Hagiwara Sakutarō Prize, Takami Jun Prize), to the more subtle and playful but provoking quickness of, *Shimiji Clams*, of Rin Ishigaki, which will remain to catch the sharpest of reader out. When reading anthologies it's tempting to look for glimpses of any unifying elements but the array of different and varied voices that can be heard here refreshingly defy this approach.

It's interesting to note the lower number of selections of poems from the eighties and the nineties, whether this illustrates a decline in published poetry at the end of the last century I'm not too sure. Amongst the poems featured from this period is Tada Chimako's, *First Dream of the New Year*, where a dream is described of peeling a tangerine and of being pulled inside by the hand of an elderly man, once inside the narrator describes the cosy interior, and picks another tangerine only to find another hand emerge pulling her inside, the narrator awakes observing ~ *My body was steeped in the scent of dazzling gold*, this poem is a perfect allegorical portrait of being pulled through the years and illustrates the brevity of memory and the parting observation of the rejuvenative power of a new year, the poem is from Tada's collection from 1986 *Bonfire Festival*. This expansive anthology is essential and rewarding reading to all those interested in modern Japanese poetry.

101 Modern Japanese Poems at Thames River Press