

A compelling entry point for discovering Japanese poets from the postwar era

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FEB 24, 2013

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101 MODERN JAPANESE POEMS, compiled by Makoto Ooka, translated by Paul McCarthy, edited by Janine Beichman. Thames River Press, 2012, 144pp., \$45.00 (hardcover)

When a new anthology of American poetry appears — The Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry edited by Rita Dove is just one of the recent examples — voices are inevitably raised over the editor’s selections and rejections, and sometimes over whether a new anthology of poetry from a period already well-surveyed is necessary at all. These arguments inspire some fiery polemics, and one can see why. Such questions — whether poet A is deserving of space when poet B gets none; whether the collection as a whole tells a story about the work surveyed that is compelling and new — are eminently worth debating, and one imagines that such discussions took place when Makoto Ooka edited the Japanese version of this anthology in the late 1990s.

These questions, though, seem largely irrelevant to the English version that came out last year. Despite the admirable and sustained efforts of the journal Poetry Kanto, and the tireless work of translators such as Jeffrey Angles, Hiroaki Sato and, with this collection, Paul McCarthy, modern Japanese poetry remains little known outside the archipelago. There’s no question, therefore, that this book is necessary, and for readers who would be hard-pressed to name a Japanese poet other than Matsuo Basho, the question of whether poet A is more worthy than poet B won’t be an issue.

What should be an issue is whether the work included in “101 Modern Japanese Poems” is rich in the aesthetic adventure and delight that make poetry worth the trouble. The answer, as it must be with any anthology, is yes and no. Part of the job of an anthology is to represent the range of poetry written in the time and place it takes as its subject, and if that range is wide, not all of that poetry will appeal. That is the case with the postwar poems collected in this volume. The concerns and obsessions of the poets, and the styles in which they write, are simply too different from each other for each poem to please everyone. Even those poems, however, that we are unable to love, we appreciate: they teach us something about a poetic culture that, for most of us, is too little known.

The poems written at the close of Japan’s military debacle are, unsurprisingly, dark. Even the least militaristic of poets could find little joy in the country’s defeat, though the best of them manage to steer clear of maudlin whimpering. Nobuo Ayukawa, for example, writes, in “A Morning Song at the Moored Boat Hotel,” of the hope that had once seemed all but identical with the modern, and the absence of that hope from what the modern had become:

In our dawn

A speeding ship of steel

Was to have borne our destinies amid the blue sea waters

And yet we

Never went anywhere.

Other poets, as time passed, were less concerned with the existential angst to which modernity had given rise than with the banality of life in postwar Japan. Some of this work captures and parodies the life of those times effectively; some of it, however, seems almost adolescent.

In “Personnel Affairs,” for example, Masao Nakagiri, concludes his evisceration of office politics with: “Yet they had dreams when they were young / And certain small ideals, until they joined the company,” lines that might have been penned by a cynical teenager hoping to die before he gets old.

Shuntaro Tanikawa came on the scene in 1952 with an exuberant and never cynical simplicity that made his debut, in critic Kiwao Nomura’s words, “the first real change in direction for modern poetry in Japan.” The three poems included reveal Tanikawa’s multifaceted gift. “Sorrow,” is a short, nostalgic lyric that even those who normally avoid the stuff would recognize instantly as poetry, while “An Elaboration of the Way to My House,” looks like — and is — just what its title promises. Out of the directions and descriptions, though, something wonderful emerges. In “Mt. Yokei,” Tanikawa reminds us that the source of that wonder, and all poetry’s wonder, is words, and that even “simple” words are, for a poet, anything but. Tanikawa writes:

Our vanity powders over words

I want to see words’ faces as they are

Their archaic smiles.

Words’ archaic smiles shine in several of these 101 poems. That many of the 55 poets responsible for the grins will be new to most readers is one reason — perhaps the most compelling — to explore “101 Modern Japanese Poems.”

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