

Fuyuko:
A life in Poetry

by

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The beginning

I was born in Tokyo in 1943 at the end of Second World War. We had moved to the countryside just before Tokyo was bombed into ashes. Our countryside town was also bombed, but we survived. I grew up, poor but peacefully, surrounded by yellow colza fields. My father was a high school teacher of English. After I studied English at a college in Nagoya, I left for America to study English. I was 22 years old.

Not writing a novel
but living one -
Drifting on the waves
I crossed the ocean

小説を書くより
小説を生きなむと
波に揺られて
超えし海はも

I followed a summer course at the Georgetown University in Washington DC. I studied English further in a language school and a secretarial school and worked part-time. I got a job as a Japanese language trainer in the Foreign Service Institute at the U.S. State Department under the well-known Dr. Eleanor Jordan. During that year I wrote a short story and sent it to Prof. Paul Engle's Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa.

Paul Engle invited me to join the program for a year, not as a writer but as a graduate student with an assistantship. It was a gift from heaven for me who had no money nor future. Paul Engle never knew that his one message '*you may join us*' changed someone's life in such a dramatic way.

Memory of Poet Tamura in the Writer's Workshop.

Iowa city was in the middle of nowhere in vast corn fields. I settled down in a small room that I shared with an American girl, Alice, who wanted to write a novel. Soon Engle asked me to assist a Japanese poet, Ryuichi Tamura, who had just arrived from Tokyo. I did not know Ryuichi Tamura. I was just a country girl.

Mr. Tamura shocked me. He was a typical Japanese man. When the program organized a trip to Chicago by bus, Tamura ordered me to sit beside

him. I was disappointed because I wanted to sit next to a young novelist from Europe. At that time, I was allergic to ‘a typical Japanese man.’ I remember that I was complaining to Alice.

Then I got a next assignment: read Tamura’s poems and try to translate them. I will never forget that afternoon. In the dark library, I read his few poems, *Fourthousand days and nights, Far Country* (translated by Christopher Drake), *Dry leaves....* They blew my mind. I sat there motionless for a long time as if I had had an injection of anesthetics.

Faraway land by Ryuichi Tamura

Translated by Fuyuko

遠い国

**My pain
is simple
like feeding an animal from a faraway land
there’s no need for caring**

ぼくの苦しみは
単純なものだ
遠い国からきた動物を飼うように
べつに工夫がいるわけじゃない

**My poems
are simple
like reading letters from a faraway land
there’s no need for tears**

ぼくの詩は
単純なものだ
遠い国からきた手紙を読むように
べつに涙がいるわけじゃない

**My joy and sorrow
are even simpler
like killing a man from a faraway land
there’s no need for words**

ぼくの歓びや悲しみは
もっと単純なものだ
遠い国からきた人を殺すように
べつに言葉がいるわけじゃない

I stopped complaining. I helped him with shopping in a supermarket. I listened to him whenever he wanted to talk. With his whiskey, of course. One day he offered me poetry lessons. He gave me assignments, for instance, ‘Use only worn-out words,’ etc. At that time, I was following the course ‘fiction writing’, where I got assignments like ‘use an unreliable first-person narrator,’ or ‘describe heat, making readers feel hot without using the word *hot*.’ So, Tamura’s intention was clear.

Tamura listened to my homework lying on the sofa. Each time he said, “oh, good.” I believed it was good and was delighted. But one day, I recited an old poem from my student days, thinking it was not good enough. Well, Tamura got up from the sofa and said, “Hey, this IS good!” I realized then that all the poems that had not made him jump up from the sofa were not good. The first poem that I had written at an early age was the best. So ended our lessons.

With nostalgia, I remember our chats. He was humorous in criticizing. I was laughing at many of his remarks like “You are uncouth. Don’t you know *uncouth* writes as *living in the field* in kanji (Chinese character 野暮)?” I thought: ‘what’s wrong with living in the field’, not at all realizing I was an ignorant and unrefined country girl.

But Tamura also shared with me his wisdom about poetry and life. For instance, he said: “A poem is like a house. It has to have pillars and a roof.” Or “Do you know how an antique dealer trains a pupil? He only shows the real ones. Then the pupil recognizes a false one right away. If he shows them both at the same time, the pupil would not be able to distinguish between real and fake.” Living in a foreign country I had this privilege. I had only a few textbooks: anthologies of masterpieces. I was reading only good ones.

In those days I cried often in my dark room when Alice was not there. My older sister got a brain tumor. I did not go home. She survived 50 years after the surgery, but at that time there was no way of knowing how long she would live.

At the end of the year, I saw Tamura off to the train which was to take him across America for the West coast. Soon after I also left Iowa for the East Coast. Seton Hall University in New Jersey had sent me a last-minute message: ‘Considering that you had the experience working under Dr. Eleanor Jordan, *you may join us*’ for a 3 week seminar for Japanese and Chinese language teachers. It was a gift from heaven for me who had no money nor future.

The year in Iowa I call it 'my youth.' I met many poets and writers. People with whom I shared my youth, and their words have kept me going in life.

The news of Tamura's death was brought to me by Empress Michiko. Later she told me that she had met him at the annual prize winner's ceremony at the palace and she wished to talk to him at the reception. But he was not there. He got ill and left, and he died two months later. Ryuichi Tamura never knew that Empress Michiko liked the poems of 'the country girl of Iowa.'

New York, New York

After I finished the seminar at Seton Hall University, I went to the United Nations in New York and took the English test. I barely passed it. It was a gift from heaven. I worked for two years at the United Nations as a secretary. I had a full-time job with health insurance. How happy I was in the beginning.

But the world city which I had once dreamed of, was not for me. I became ill and had surgery. I longed for the clean air of a mountain and the clear water of a streaming river. I remember I put a big poster of Switzerland on the wall. I recovered and realized I should get out of Manhattan.

Dawn

**Dawn is the time of fear
when suddenly I find**

**no voice in my throat
ceiling of betrayed miracles**

**birds that sing
I belong elsewhere**

夜明け

夜明けは恐怖の時
突然

声の出なくなった喉
奇跡の起こらなかった天井

ここはお前の居場所じゃないと
歌い続ける鳥たち

Four tanka (this is not one poem)

Once in the subway
in snowy Manhattan
I met a black man
totally mad

*

The madman
with his eyes wide open
scooped water in his hands
and cooled his forehead with a sigh

*

Our train ran roaring
Our train with a madman

*

In the darkness underground
an old madman left the train
From this very station
I shall begin my journey

雪の降るマンハッタンの地下鉄に黒人ひとり狂い居いたり
狂人は目を見開きて幻の水をすくいっ額冷やし居り
爆音を轟かせつつ突っ走る我らの電車は狂人乗せて
地下鉄の闇に老いたる狂い人降りし駅より我行かむとす

I went to Switzerland for a vacation, at the same time trying to get a job there at the UN in Geneva. The mountains and rivers in Switzerland revived me. But I could not get transferred because I did not speak a word of French.

Poem without words

On the way to your old house
I've lost my language

Under the ripe grapes
I'll write you a poem

My poem is simple
no passives or subjunctives

Just about a stone
that rolls down the road

言葉のない詩

あなたの山の家に行く途中
だいじな言葉をなくしてしまった

熟れた葡萄の木の下で
言葉のない詩がふくらむばかり

私の詩は単純なもの
受身形も仮定形もない

ただころころと転がった
ひとくれの石のこと

Family life in Holland (at 28)

I moved to Holland, a country of flowers, and got a job at the Shell Head Office in The Hague. At the same time, I started going to an art academy. There I met my first husband. We got married and raised 2 children. My dream of a warm family life finally came true.

Four tanka

Diving into the golden sea
of dandelions
I embrace the blue sky
How dear life is!

*

My children pull my hand
my leg, my heart
“sit down” they say
in the field of dandelions

*

Drifting on the waves
in the golden sea
of dandelions -
longing for homeland
sways to and fro

*

My children are making
their own spring at home
by plucking as I did
the short-lived dandelions

たんぽぽの黄金の海に身を投げて空を抱けば命いとおし
我が子らが手を引き足引き心引くたんぽぽ野原に腰をおろせと
たんぽぽの黄金の海にたゆたえば打ち寄せ返す故郷の波
子らもまた命短きたんぽぽを摘みては創る故郷の春

But I forgot all about writing. Just before the age 40, I had a crisis. A big crisis. I was not able to visit Japan, I was homesick, my health was failing me. I had tried to become Dutch, a crazy idea. I was afraid of the Japanese language, the language unknown to my family. I could not teach Japanese to my children. I had lost my identity, in short, I was at the end of the rope.

Old and gray
I slide the door open
and shout: *I'm home!*
There is never
an answer in my dreams

我老いて
開ける格子戸
ただいまと
呼べど叫べど
答えなき夢

Turning Point (at 40)

At the age of 40, I remembered Tamura's words: 'When you are young, you are a poet. But if you are still writing at the age of 40, you are a real poet.' I wrote a few tanka and sent them to the Asahi Newspaper. When I saw my name in the newspaper, I knew: no matter where I live in the world, I am me. I soon regained my health in body and mind.

When I left Japan, my teacher gave me a good-bye note. "First forget your mother tongue, learn English, and then slowly and carefully come back." When writing a story in a foreign language with limited vocabulary, I had to make short sentences with simple words giving them maximal impact. When I started to write tanka at the age of 40, I finally understood his advice.

Snowflakes

Sir,
through the hole in your pocket
these words fell
like snowflakes

I've come after you
to return them all

Look, they glisten
in my frozen hands

こな雪

もうし
外套のポケットの穴から
落ちましたよ ひらひらと
こな雪のように

拾い集めたあなたの言葉
返しに来ましたよ

ほら、光っています
凍えた手の中で

From then on, I have been writing tanka and haiku in my mother tongue. Writing opened a new life for me. I felt I could finally get in touch with my inner self. I wrote every day, hundreds of tanka and haiku. The fame of the Asahi Newspaper weekly haiku and tanka columns can be attributed to the number of poetry submissions, approximately 6000 per week for haiku alone.

In 1984 my mother died. Early in the morning, an international call woke me up to inform that she had died suddenly. Her body had been brought to the University of Tokyo for medical research. It was her will. Her bones would be returned next year. In 1985 I took my family to Japan for the first time to receive my mother's urn.

Tokyo Station
The express is pulling out
On my lap
the clicking of bones
from my mother's urn

東京駅
急行列車に
落ち着けば
ひざにことこと
母の骨鳴る

It was an unforgettable journey for all of us. That same year, I won the annual *Asahi Tanka Prize for 1985*. My rope seemed suddenly to stretch far into a bright new future.

My ashes will be scattered
over the field of sheep
but my songs – go home
to the hearts of my people

羊鳴く野辺に送られ
身は散れど
還れ我がうた
国の心に

An English anthology of my poems '*Fifteen poems*' (Sub Signo Libelli, Amsterdam, NL) appeared in 1992. It was handprinted and handbound under the supervision of Professor Ernst Braches at the University of Amsterdam, an authority on the history of books. We sent one to the Queen of The Netherlands, one to the Empress of Japan, and one to the museum of books in The Hague. Only 25 copies were made. Recently it was on sale online for 450 pounds a copy. For me, the book meant a priceless poetry lessons.

Ernst's parents were executed by the Japanese in Indonesia, in December 1943. I was born at the end of that same year.

NHK, the Japanese national broadcasting company, produced a radio drama 'The Stopped Clock – Poetry of Fuyuko Molenkamp' about my life and poetry (1987). NHK nominated the drama for the 1987 International Prix Italia. A publisher was impressed by this drama and decided to publish my first tanka book 'Tanpopo no Uta' Dandelion Songs.

Leaving my country
my clock stopped
I wind it and rewind it
It still stays
at age twenty-two

国を出でし時
止まってしまった
我が時計
巻いても巻いても
二十二歳

Divorce (at 49)

It sounds like a happy end, but life went on. What happened next was difficult to explain. I must have changed. I must have met my shadow face to face.

Lunar eclipse

The darkness in me
gouged out your full smile

In this sudden moonless night
for the first time
I see my own shadow

月食

あなたの満面の笑みをえぐったのは
私の心の闇

この突然の月食の夜に
始めてみる己の影

When my children had reached the age of 18 and 20, I divorced. I faced the walls of my tiny apartment spending the next 6 years alone, writing and teaching.

Our broken wine glass

壊れたワイングラス

After I left
deep in the kitchen closet
pasted together like a puzzle
our broken wine glass

私が去った後
台所の戸棚の奥深くに
パズルのように貼り合わされた
私達の壊れた ワイングラス

After my divorce, I faced the wall. I was free but I felt like imprisoned. One day, someone called me. She suggested me to read poems of Yoshiro Ishihara. He came back from the Siberian concentration camps and became a poet. One line in his essay *A river flowing through the sea* has been engraved in my memory. Ishihara writes: *'For me, to be human and to be free, both existed only in the Siberian concentration camp.'* *'The memory that I and my inner self touched each other with a shoulder to a shoulder, is irreplaceable to me.'*

*The angel who missed the train
by Yoshiro Ishihawa*

のりおくれた天使 石原吉郎

The angel who missed the train
was pulled back to God
for that very reason

電車にのりおくれた天使は
のりおくれたぶんだけ
神様のほうへひきもどされた
電車にのりおくれた天使は
神様のまえでだまっていた
電車にのりおくれた天使を
神様はおこらずに
電車がおこった
電車にのりおくれた天使に
つぎの電車はこなかった

The angel who missed the train
kept silent before God

God was not angry at him
but the train was furious

For the angel who missed the train
the next train never came (translated by Fuyuko & HJ)

New Life

In those days I was alone, felt alone, but it was somewhat nostalgic. I danced with myself in the middle of the night, writing and waiting for someday my longings would be fulfilled, not knowing what exactly they were.

I close the blinds
light the snow-light
within me
Whose footprints are these
in my wilderness?

帳^{とじり}おろし
心に点す雪明かり
雪の原野に
誰^{たれ}が足跡ぞ

After my divorce, I faced the wall of my small apartment. Then it started, extraordinary co-incidences began to occur. I suddenly realized that my pen was running ahead of me. Events occur orderly and synchronized as if the smallest details are planned. It took a while to learn the word *synchronicity* by Carl Jung.

Jean Shinoda Bolen writes in her book *The Tao of Psychology*:
'Synchronicity is equivalent to Tao.' 'The understanding of synchronicity is the key which unlocks the door to the Eastern apperception of totality.'

I opened the door of my heart by writing. I started seeing the connection between inside and outside of myself. After 50 years in a foreign land, the Japanese tradition helped me to find the Way.

I earned my living as a teacher. I taught at the Japanese Saturday School in Amsterdam for 23 years. I worked as a Japanese language teacher in several institutes. And finally, I worked for a program called 'Japan Prize Winners Program.' It was a program launched by The Dutch government to give a grant to 20 graduate students each year to study Japanese language and culture in order to obtain professional training in Japan. We trained them for 4 months at Leiden University. Then they went to Japan to further learn Japanese for 2 months with afterward job training for 4 months. It was a unique, intensive course to Dutch top students with various majors. It lasted

12 years, delivering 240 top executives in Dutch society who had acquired an intercultural understanding. I retired in 2008.

I made small periodicals called *Kastanje* (the Dutch word for chestnut), a collection of my favorite Japanese poems. That was the way I learned, searching for poems that would give me goose bumps. I made 100 copies of each edition in a copy shop and sent them to my friends and literary people in Japan. Someone encouraged me saying: please preserve the beautiful Japanese in a foreign land.

Second marriage (at 59)

After those lonely but amazing years, I met my husband at a tanka workshop. He liked my poems. We married in 2003. He is a pathologist and founded 2 biotech companies. He is now slowly leaving the business world and writing a book.

Love

Whether or not I say I love you
please keep listening
Birds chirp to my joy
plants die to my sorrow

I do not know
how much I love you
but please keep listening
Small coincidences echo to tell
how deeply
you are loved

愛

私があなただを
愛しているかどうかは
耳を澄まして聴いていてください
心が高鳴れば囀る鳥たち
悲しみが深まれば
枯れてゆく鉢植えの花

私があなただを
どんなに愛しているか
私にも分からない
かすかに響きあって起こる物事が
告げてくれるでしょう
あなたがどんなに深く
愛されているかを

I started to make books myself, all handmade. I liked it very much. My friends sold them to their friends and raised a contribution for an official

publication. It was successful and resulted in the publication of a tanka book: *'Kaere Waga Uta' Go home my songs*, and a haiku book: *'Furin Byakuya', Wind-bell, white summer night*.

A black iron wind-bell
in a white summer night
tinkles on and on

くろがねの風鈴
白夜を
鳴り止まず

Finding the Way

Meanwhile, I was happy to receive 3 Asahi Haiku Prizes in 1992, 2013, and 2014. I am now making a series Photo & Poem books. This is a project I would like to finish before I lose my sanity or my life. I had made Japanese versions with essays, but these were again 'private press'. Now I make English versions, so that my family and friends can read my poems and essays. I finished the first 2 books.

2 years ago, in 2017, I took all my family, - my son's and my daughter's families, my 3 grandchildren and my dear husband to Japan. I was invited by Empress Michiko for a chat at the palace. I was so excited to realize that my songs had come back home to the hearts of my people. The trip brought me the most, and I say it, most, glorious days of my life. Wherever we went, we received a warm welcome of my friends. All the hardship of my life has been forgotten.

I think Japan was once a very spiritual country. I longed for the West and left the islands. But Japanese traditional poetry has led me to the world where no West nor East matters.

Pity for a kite
tied to a string
I used to say –
Now a kite seems to hold
a string of hope

繋がれし
凧を哀れと
されど今
一条に託す
望みとぞ見ゆ

Here is the end of my life story for the time being. When I look back, I had many miracles. I was always saved in a nick of time. It is a wondrous world. The most fascinating thing I learned from writing is that a pen has led me to where to go.

51 years since I left Iowa City, I got a message from the University of Iowa: 'Please join us', for a week in Iowa, to talk about my life and poetry. It is a gift from heaven for me. Thank you very much indeed.

Not writing a novel
but living one -
Drifting on the waves
I crossed the ocean

小説を書くより
小説を生きなむと
波に揺られて
超えし海はも