

Introduction

When we read tanka like this:

folding a triangle
and then making another
origami fold—
that's what it's like now
with my brother's widow

we intuit that Saeko Ogi, is a compassionate poet who has dovetailed multiple layers of sorrow and joy into her long life, and settle in to devour page after page of her tanka.

Born 1931 in Japan, Saeko's childhood was shrouded in war: The Manchurian Incident the year of her birth, Second Sino-Japanese war (1937), and the Pacific War (1941), hardship and grief all too familiar.

letters stop coming
from my older brother,
a worker
at a gunpowder factory
in the mountains of Sendai.

among the effects
of my deceased elder brother,
I found
my letters of condolence
written sixty-five years ago

There's poignancy about her tanka, inferred more in essence than the turn of phrase that takes us to the heart of things and although translated from Japanese to English, this tenderness stays the steady course of the journey. Trusted friends, Amelia Fielden and Saeko have worked together before and now again on Saeko's book.

Most of the tanka written for her sight impaired, granddaughter give evidence to Saeko's sensitivity.

oh, she won't be young forever—
no sounds of my granddaughter
bathing
in the bathroom
with its door tightly closed

I can hear
the voices of mother and daughter
at the beach
in the shells collected
by my weak-sighted granddaughter

...and then there is this and other tanka for their wisdom:

wind causes me
unbearable pain
to prevent that
I stop walking
and look at spring flowers

Knowing when to let go, draw strength from such a regenerative season as spring and allow natural beauty to heal is indeed extremely wise. Saeko is also an adventurous spirit --- she travelled to Australia in 1972 with her young daughter for what she thought would be a short time after her husband died, and took up residence there for forty or more years. His memory travelled with her.

a sepia photo
of my husband, younger
than my daughter --
oh, how youthful
he looked then

Saeko also brought a sense of humour with her.

I awaken
to the calls
of unfamiliar birds ---
when I follow the parrots
a kookaburra laughs at me

the winter solstice sun
is hesitant to appear
in the dimness
echoes the first ringing
of my iPhone 'rooster'

In a country not of her origin, Saeko grew close to
her daughter and what follows are touching tanka.

feeling as if
wrapped in silk floss,
I have dinner
with my daughter
by a great hearth

over the years
the paving stones have chipped
my daughter
quickly offers me a hand
and I walk on the grass

Collated to the rhythm of her life as it happens, her tanka appears in chronological order. To ensure we don't lose our way, each period is preempted with a short prose insert that enlightens us to exactly where each tanka was conceived, and what was transpiring for their conception at the time. There is the delight she took in teaching Japanese at a progressive private school (groundbreaking work), her sister-in-law's illness, her many visits home to Japan and other parts of Australia, as well as her mother's and her own illness and much more that I leave you to discover, in particular 10 sketches and still life drawings that illustrate clearly, this is a work by a multi-talented poet and visual artist who is sensitive to natural surroundings. What could be more appropriate for a collection of poetry like tanka that's more often than not inspired from nature?

Lucky is the poet who receives support from colleagues. Saeko was involved in the *CJC* (Canberra Japan Club) *Bluebells Tanka Group* from its outset in

1998, a small group of lovers of tanka and haiku who met once a month and contributed poetry to CJC bimonthly newsletter. Gradually it simply became the *Bluebells Tanka Group* (12 active members, mainly from Canberra) who workshop their poetry and publish them in CJC's quarterly newsletter, have an online meeting with a similar (Japanese) group in Lyon, France once a year, and have received kind guidance from Noriko Tanaka.

She also became a member of the *Limestone Tanka Poets* and we welcomed her as one who brought to us an authentic Japanese understanding of tanka. Two of Saeko's poems are this reader's favourites. The first is published in *Ragged Edges* ---LTPs initial anthology:

lively chatting
two old women
in the sun
under red maple trees
beside the Manuka church

The second appears in *A Temple Bell Sounds; 108 tanka from the first twenty-one issue of Eucalypt: a tanka journal*:

war time
at the factory
two school girls
search for adolescence
in a dictionary

To capture not only a vivid picture in the first tanka but infer the sense these women share a friendship as stalwart as the building they stand beside in so few words and highlight the ironic naivety of 'two school girls' during the worst state of the world at the time in the second, is quite a feat.

There is peace to be found in gardens and many tanka dotted throughout this collection illustrates how Saeko --- who is living on the banks of a lake -- is

inspired by her environment. And you might find yourself like me, returning to sit there with her again and again in her tanka, and re-experience this magic.

am I imagining
those sounds coming
from the water's edge?
are there birds chattering
with the iris and lotus?

A rock at a roadside is not one that is underfoot or continually tumbling along the path. It's settled where it is as part of the road, be it to one side. To have lived to be ninety years of age, experienced two cultures, understood the futility of war at such an early age and known firsthand the suffering this brings, recorded poetically what has been the worst and the best in this journey where she settled in another culture yet maintained her own from this position, is the gift that is offered in this collection.

Not everyone will have the opportunity to live this long. And if we are lucky enough, what is the perfect attitude to take on our journey, or to seek no matter our age? Could it be this?:

people say
it's a delaying road,
it's a detour road ---
I am simply going forward
on the road I have chosen

© Kathy Kituai is the founder and facilitator of Limestone Tanka Poets. Her latest tanka collection, *Deep in the Valley of Tea Bowls* (Interactive Press, 2015), won the 2016 ACT Publishing and Writing Award.