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Poems from the Sickbed by Takashi Nagatsuka

translated by Alan Farr and Yasuhiro Kawamura

Note: After finishing his long novel *Tsuchi* (Earth) in November, 1910. (Meiji 43). Takashi Nagatsuka devoted himself to bamboo growing. In his letter to his brother Junjiro Kobuse dated June 8, 1911 (M. 44), he enthusiastically talked about the bright financial prospects of bamboo cultivation.

In the autumn of the same year he was engaged to Teruko Kuroda, the 22-year-old daughter of a doctor on Sanno-mura. Yuki-gun through the offices of Kando Matsuyama, Takashi's father's politician friend. She was a graduate of Nihon Women's University, staying at that time with her brother in Tokyo, who was also a doctor and a friend of Junjiro.

Takashi had been bothered by an irritating pain in his throat since August of the same year. He visited a local doctor, but for a thorough examination he went to Tokyo and on November 21 consulted Dr. Kimura, accompanied by his friend Fumoto Oka. The doctor diagnosed his case as laryngeal tuberculosis then considered fatal. On December 5 he was hospitalized in the Yojoin run by Dr. Okada in Negishi.

He had composed no poems being engrossed in prose writing during the previous two years, 1909-10, but now he felt inspired to write poetry. He vented his agonized feelings in his twelve tanka, which were carried in the February issue of *the Araragi* in 1912 (M. 45).

Takashi seems to have offered to cancel the engagement, writing to her brother Dr. Kuroda when he learned of his fatal disease. On Dec. 24, during his stay in the hospital he happened to go out to see a play. (He was not bedridden.) While he was out his fiancée Teruko Kuroda came to inquire after him and left a gift and a letter for him, in which she said she had come on behalf of her brother. Takashi was moved by her action and that night wrote letters to Dr. Kuroda and Teruko asking her to come to see him again. Her brother called on Dec. 26, but perhaps he prevented her from further contact: she did not call. Takashi left the hospital on Feb. 20 and returned home hoping to go to Kyushu to receive treatment from Dr. Kubo. Dr. Kubo was a professor at Kyushu University and the leading authority on the treatment of the disease. Takashi composed 51 additional

tanka, which were carried in the April issue of *the Araragi*. So in the four months from the time of learning of his disease to the time when he returned home before starting for Kyushu, he wrote a total of 63 tanka, which we have translated here.

Takashi made three trips to Kyushu for treatment by Dr. Kubo, the first in March, 1912 (M. 45), the second in March, 1913 (Taisho 2), and the third in June, 1914 (T. 3), which proved to be his last one. He died on Feb. 8, 1915 (T. 4) in the University hospital of Kyushu University.

Let it be added that Takashi sent Teruko a gift of a ball and that they did meet again. She sent him some letters (recorded in the collected works) before he started on his third trip.

We have numbered the 63 tanka for convenience of reference. Takashi wrote explanatory notes, sometimes short and sometimes long, before each group of tanka on the same theme. They, together with the background information above, will help the reader to understand the poems. The 63 tanka are about his suffering, Teruko, his mother, dayflowers which are said to have a tenacious life force, sasanqua flowers which comforted him during his stay in the dreary hospital life and finally about his home.

A word about the translation: the first draft was made by Yasuhiro Kawamura and Alan Farr rewrote it.

The short essay "On Translating Tanka" that comes after the translation is by Alan Farr.

Poems from the Sickbed, Part 1.

I was stricken by a dreadful disease, laryngeal tuberculosis. Were I unaware of it my mind would be free of worry. But the doctor says I will have no more than a year to live should I go without treatment, and so my mind is greatly disturbed.

1.

Life and Death were questions
Best left to Heaven, I blithely thought.
But that was when I boasted health
And took my life for granted.

1. 生きも死にも天のまにまにと平ら
けく思ひたりしは常の時なりき

(Iki mo shini mo ame no mani mani to tairakeku omoitarishi wa tsune no toki nariki)

2.

Clinging to Life
And mourning my Death,

2. 我が命惜しと悲しといはまくを恥
ぢて思ひしはみな昔なり

These very thoughts would cause me shame,
But that was all in the past.

(Waga inochi oshi to kanashi to iwamaku o hajite moishi wa mina mukashi nari)

3.

In bustling crowds,
On busy streets
People look like winter trees
Passing by in my sad eyes.

3. 往きかひのしげき^{ちまた}街の人みなを冬
木のごともさびしらに見つ

(Yukikai no shigeki chimata no hito mina o fuyuki no goto ni sabishira ni miyu)

4.

With failing spirits
And this withered heart of mine,
Of all the people on the street
Not even one looks sick to me.

4. 我がこころ萎えてあれや街行く人
のひとりも病めりともなし

(Waga kokoro shinaete areya chimata yuku hito no hitori mo yameru tomo nashi)

5.

If only I hadn't known...
But after the passing of a night
I know never again will my heart
Be the same as the day before.

5. 知らなくてありなむものを一夜ゆ
ゑ心はいまは昨日にも似ず

(Shiranakute arinamu mono o hitoyo yue kokoro wa imawa kinoo ni mo nizu)

6.

I see how troubled
And burdened my mind must be.
When waking from sleep,
I find my body bathed in sweat.

6. かくのみに心はいたく思へれや目
さめて見れば汗あえにけり

(Kaku nomi ni kokoro wa itaku omoere ya mesamete mireba ase aeni keru.)

7.

I feared to tell all
Lest mother should grieve to hear.
But despite my doubts I did so
So she might also know all.

7. しかといはば母歎かむと思ひつ
ただにいひやりぬ母に知るべく

(Shika to iwaba haha nagekan to omoitsutsu tadani iiyarinu haha ni shiru beku.)

8.

If any ask me
Why I grieve for my life so
What answer can I give them?

8. なにしかも命悲しといはまくに答
ふることは我は知らぬに

I myself hardly know why.

(Nani shika mo inochi kanashi to iwamaku ni kotauru koto wa ware wa shiranuni.)

9.

“Don’t worry yourself”

People say to cheer me up,

And were I well I wouldn’t,

But since I’m not, I just do.

(Na ureiso to hito wa iedomo matakekute araba ka aramu ware urei zare ya.)

10.

Vain, are men, me, too.

Endlessly sad we claim to be.

But all the sorrow and the grief

Is meant only for ourselves.

(Hito wa ware wa hakanaki mono ka hitasurani kanashi to iu mo waga tame ni nomi.)

9. なうれひそと人はいへどもまたけ
くてあらばかあらむ我愁^{うれ}ひざれや

10. 人は我ははかなきものかひたすら
に悲しといふもわがためにのみ

Celebrating the New Year in the hospital ward,

11.

My life, I do pray

May it be long as the ivy

Festively adorning

To welcome in the New Year.

(Waga inochi toshihogi-gusa no sachi-kusa no hikage no kazura nagaku to onoru.)

12.

So sad is my face

Just wasting away like this.

To brighten it up I stick

Some red paper on the wall.

(Otorouru waga kao sabishi kokoni dani ake ni haeyo to ake no kami haru.)

11. 我が命としほぎ草のさち草の日陰
の葛ながくとをのる

12. 衰ふる我が顔さびしここにだにあ
けに映えよとあけの紙貼る

Poems from the Sickbed, Part II

On December 24th of the 44th year of Meiji (*1911) I had to leave the hospital on account of some business. Contrary to my custom I returned late in the evening, to find, under the table, a bundle wrapped in a bright-colored crepe cloth.

Puzzled, I untied it to find a gift together with a note in red ink that some thoughtful person had left for me. It said she had come to the hospital four times but had not dared to enter the gate and that this day on her fifth visit she finally came to see me. Since her visit was not expected, I had gone out, a fact that I regretted, but it was too late. For the first time in my thirty-three years of life I felt the tenderness of a woman. My heart is full of gratitude. She was the woman who was to share my life, but since I fell a victim to a malignant disease I decided I had no right to detain her and cancelled the engagement. This means we will have no chance to see each other again. That night I took a pen and poured out my feelings into a long letter, writing until late at night, asking her to call once again for my sake. All night my thoughts were in a whirl and, at dawn, holding my aching head in my hands, and casting a glance at the garden where the treetops were shivering in the cold,

13.

Little bird, why hurry?
Please don't leave and fly away.

Stay here just a while

On my pine-tree branch, I pray.

(Shujukara nani sa wa isogu koko ni aru matsu ga eda ni wa shibashi dani iyo.)

13. 四十雀しじゅうかづなにさはいそぐここにある
松が枝にはしばしだに居よ

The crepe wrapper was the color of a dayflower (*tsuyukusa*). Since her home and mine lie to the west of the Kinu River, my thoughts went back to the autumn scene of my home. People around here say that even after passing through a horse's stomach seven times, the roots of the willowy dayflower will not die. The wrapper brings back these fond memories.

14.

Among the bamboo
Growing by the Kinu's shore

The dayflowers wither

With no one to pick them up, they say.

(Kinugawa no shino ni majireru tsuyukusa wa karu hito nashi ni oyu to iwazu ya mo.)

15.

I hear whispering

Along the banks and shores:

The sound of dayflowers

Lapped by the Kinu's waters.

(Kinugawa no kishi no tsuyukusa uchihitari sasayaku koto wa ware wa kike

14. 鬼怒川の篠しのに交れる鴨跖草つゆくさは刈る
人なしに老ゆといはずやも

15. 鬼怒川の岸のつゆ草打ち浸りささ
やくことは我はきけども

domo.)

16.

If along the shore
I see dayflowers once again
I'll think they've taken root there,
Borne by the river from her home.

(Tsuyukusa o kishi ni mata miba waga omou hito no atari yu moteri to o mimu.)

17.

As vain it is now
To yearn for her with longing
As search for dayflowers
Blooming in the evening.

(Ima ni shite hito wa sube nashi tsuyukusa no yusaku hana o motomuru ga goto.)

18.

The drooping dayflowers
Bring to mind her memory.

I can see her now:

Sadly stooped and lowered head.

(Tsuyukusa no hana o omoeba unakabushi ware ni wa mieshi sono hito omohoyu.)

19.

How can I reject
A person clinging to me?
Let a dayflower
Twine around the lonely me.

(Karamaru o ina to tare ka iu tsuyukusa no tsuru da ni karame ware wa sabishie.)

20.

In my sickness, Ah!
How I envy the dayflowers
Half-eaten by a horse
Yet still surviving, roots alive.

(Yamite areba tomoshiki mono ka tsuyukusa wa uma ga hame domo kare naku to iu ni.)

21.

Dayflower seeds in plenty
Lie scattered round to sprout.
But what use are they to me?

16. 鴨跖草を岸に復た見ば我が思ふ人の
あたりゆ持てりとを見む

17. いまにして人はすべなし鴨跖草の
夕さく花を求むるが如

18. つゆ草の花を思へばうなかぶし我
には見えし其の人おもほゆ

19. からまるを否とたれかいふ鴨跖草
の蔓だに絡め我はさびしゑ

20. 病みてあればともしきものかつゆ
草は馬がはめども枯れなくといふに

21. 鴨跖草の種はあまたもこぼれども
我がには生えずなにかはせむ

They can never bring me life.

(Tsuyukusa no tane wa amata mo kobore domo waga ni wa haezu nani ni ka wa semu.)

Fifty days have passed since I was hospitalized and my hospital life is half over. Yet the person I have been waiting for has not come and all I do is pine for her. I am not sure how things will unfold after I have done everything possible for my treatment. Very late at night on Jan. 23rd, I took up my pen.

22.

Ah what happiness
Were I only well once more
And if I were cured
where would I wait for her?

(Waga yamai iena ba ureshi iete ina ba izube no kata ni aga hito o matamu.)

23.

Many times she passed
The gate, not daring to go in.
And when she did, I was out.
Now I can't stop thinking if only ...

(Amata tabi munashiku kado wa sugiki tou hito wa kaeshinu waga omoi yamaz.)

24.

Sick and not knowing
How to recover my lost health.
Sad, she came to see me
But I was out and missed her.

(Ienu beki tadoki mo shirazu yami tare ba kanashi to koshi ni ware wa awanu ni.)

25.

If ever she comes
She will surely come here,
So here I have waited, in vain.
When shall I ever see her again?

(Koko ni shite ki naba kinamu to matsu hito no koko ni mo ko neba itsu tote ka mimu.)

26.

Frost columns have formed
All over the garden,
So I told her to come

22. 我が病いえなばうれし癒えて去^いな
ばいづべの方にあが人を待たむ

23. あまたたび空しく門は過ぎきとふ
人はかへしぬ我が思止まず

24. 癒えぬべきたどきも知らず病みた
れば悲しと来しに我は逢はぬに

25. ここにして来なば来なむと待つ人
のここにも来ねばいつとてか見む

26. 霜ばしら庭に立てれば石踏みて来^こ
とさへいひてやりける人を

Walking on the stepping stones.

(Shimobashira niwa ni tatere ba ishi fumite ko to sae iite yarikeru hito o.)

27.

Believing she'll come

I have waited, but in vain.

Ice lay then upon the ground,

And now it has quite melted.

(Itazurani omoitanomete hito matsuto koori wa tojite toke ni kera zuya.)

28.

May she be happy,

Once more be happy, I pray.

Yet as I say the words

My heart sorrows endlessly.

(Sakihai o hito wa mata eyo samoaraba are waga naku kokoro nugui-aenaku ni.)

29.

Of my troubled mind

I usually do not speak.

Now unable to refrain

I cannot help but say it.

(Ooyoso wa kokoro wa katsute iwanakuni omoi taeneba iini keru kamo)

Somehow consoling myself by some sasanquas still lingering on the trees in the garden.

30.

There is no one here

To see the sasanquas.

All frozen and withered ...

Somehow they look just like me.

(Uchi-shinae ware ni mo nitaru sazanka no kooreru hana wa miru hito mo nashi.)

31.

Oh, my sasanquas

You are faded and forlorn.

Now like you all withered

I'll just grieve while breath remains.

(Sazanka no wabishiki hana yo hito ware mo iki no kagiri wa omoi-nagekan.)

32.

Frozen and withered

Though the sasanquas are,

27. いたづらに思ひたのめて人待つと
氷は閉ぢて解けにけらずや

28. さきはひを人は復た獲よさもあら
ばあれ我が泣く心拭ひあへなくに

29. おほよそは心は曾^{かつ}ていはなくに思
ひ堪へねばいひにけるかも

30. 打ち萎えわれにも似たる山茶花の
凍れる花は見る人もなし

31. 山茶花のわびしき花よ人われも生
きの限りは思ひ嘆かむ

32. 山茶花は萎^{しな}えていまは凍れども命
なる間は豈散らめやも

As long as life remains
They surely will not fall.

(Sazanka wa shinaete ima wa kooredomo inochi naru ma wa ani chirame ya mo.)

And other thoughts also came to mind.

33.

Thinking of mother
How she worries about me
I wonder about the woman
Somewhere who will care for me.

(Ware o omou haha o omoeba izube ni ka hagukumoru beki hito sae omohoyu.)

34.

Because I am sick
Mother sorrows and grieves.
Oh let not my woman
Grieve for me and weep like her.

(Ware yameba haha wa nagekinu waga haha no nageki wa hito ni arikosu na yume.)

35.

If ever I live
I may see her again
But if she bears another's child
I will then accept my fate.

(Inochi araba miru yoshi mo aramu shikasugani hito ya mo haha to iwaba sube nashi.)

36.

My love, may you find
Happiness as a mother,
Though in this world, I know
For children many a mother grieves.

(Waga omou hito wa sakihae yononaka no nabete no haha wa mina nageke domo.)

37.

Mother's face I see
And thinking of *her* one day
Married and mother
Only pains and saddens me.

(Omokage ni haha omoi mireba hito tsuini haha tari namu to omoi kanashi mo.)

33. 我を思ふ母をおもへばいづべにか
はぐくもるべき人さへ思ほゆ

34. 我病めば母は嘆きぬ我が母のなげ
きは人にありこすなゆめ

35. 生命あらば見るよしもあらむしか
すがに人やも母といはばすべなし

36. 我がおもふ人はさきはへ世の中の
なべての母は皆嘆けども

37. おもかげに母おもひ見れば人遂に
母たりなむと思ひ悲しも

38.

Mother's flesh hangs loose,
Thinner with worry and grief.
Though she bemoans my fate
There is so little I can do.

(Waga haha no shishi no yurubi wa nageki yue a o omou yue ni ware sube mo nashi.)

38. 我が母の肉のゆるびは嘆き故あを
思ふゆゑにわれすべもなし

On the 25th of January I happened to pick that crepe wrapper, and seeing spools dyed on the field, ...

39.

Dyed on the wrapper
So many spools of hemp thread!
How can I unravel
The threads of what I can't grasp.

(Tokoshieni tokamu sube nashi odamaki no amata wa aredo te ni mo torene ba.)

39. とこしへに解かむすべなし苧環の
あまたはあれど手にもとれねば

The spools (*odamaki*) somehow remind me of the columbines (also *odamaki*) planted in the garden of my home.

40.

Many a winter
Have the columbines weathered;
May they in my garden
Remain and never wither.

(Amata tabi fuyu ni wa aedo kare zari shi niwa no odamaki kare nakute are na.)

40. あまたたび冬には逢へど枯れざり
し庭の躑躅菜かれなくてあれな

Today it has rained all day. My thought goes back to my mother at home.

41.

Lonely in the rain
Falling on this dreary day,
My thoughts go out to you,
Mother sitting home alone.

(Ware sae ni kono furu ame no wabishiki ni ikanika imasu haha wa hitori shite.)

41. 我さへにこのふる雨のわびしきに
いかにかいます母は一人して

42.

By opened shoji
Slightly warped, now she sits;
What does she see? I wonder,
As I picture her in my mind.

42. いささかのゆがめる障子引き立て
てなに見ておはす母が目に見ゆ

(Isasakano yugameru shoji hiki-tatete nani mite owasu haha ga me ni miyu.)

43.

Unattended I have left
The shoji to be papered.
So sombre must it be

For mother with her weak eyes.

(Harikaemu shoji mo harazu kini kereba kuraku zo aramu haha wa me yowaki ni.)

44.

In this place thinking
Of the soot-stained shoji screens
I feel the urge to cry:
"Mother."

(Kokoni shite susubishi shoji omoereba haha yo to ware wa yobu beku narinu.)

45.

All white still and new
Were those paper shoji screens
When both mother and I
Stood looking at the columbines.

(Odamaki o haha to futari ga mite shi hi wa shoji wa imada shiro karishi kado.)

I spent the whole day in the sickroom listening to the rain. When it dawned the next day, I was already thinking of the sasanquas again.

46.

Sasanqua flowers
Blooming on the lower branches
Had hung on, lingering
And now, alas, have disappeared.

(Karaku shite hikuki ga eda ni nokore ri shi sazanka no hana chiri ni keru kamo.)

47.

My poor sasanquas!
Quite beaten by all the rain
And fallen to the ground,
Have now been all washed away.

(Sazanka no hakanaki hana wa ame yue ni tsuchi ni wa chirite nagasare ni keru.)

48.

Red sasanquas!
Have fallen and lie lifeless.

43. 張り換えむ障子もはらず来にければくらくぞあらむ母は目よわきに

44. ここにしてすすびし障子懐へれば母よと我は喚ぶべくなりぬ

45. 繻斗菜を母と二人が見てし日は障子はいまだ白かりしかど

46. からくして低きが枝にのこれりし山茶花の花散りにけるかも

47. 山茶花のはかなき花は雨ゆゑに土には散りて流されにけり

48. 山茶花のあけの空しく散る花を血にかも散ると思ひ我が見る

In my mind I wonder

Have they fallen stained with blood?

(Sazanka no ake no munashiku chiru hana o chi ni kamo chiru to omoi wa ga miru.)

49.

Fallen sasanquas

Lying lifeless on the ground,

And me hearing no word

That I shall ever get well.

(Sazanka wa munashiku narinu waga yamai iemu to tsuguru koto mo kikanu ni.)

49. 山茶花はむなしくなりぬ我が病癒
えむと告ぐる言も聞かぬに

Looking closely I found one half-open flower clinging between leaves. Pitying it,

50.

Lonely sasanqua!

You are my only solace.

Don't fall and leave me yet.

Not until I leave this place.

(Sazanka yo soodani mimu to omoeru ni chiranaku arena waga inuru made ni.)

50. 山茶花よそをだに見むと思へるに
散らなくあれな我が去ぬるまでに

I finally left the hospital on February 20th. During my seventy-eight days here my sole comfort was the sasanqua flowers. I stood looking at them, thinking today would be the last time. Two flowers had unexpectedly come out, in different places, but other than these, there were no swollen buds to be seen. Realizing that these two flowers had bloomed for me:

51.

Just like me and her,

The sasanqua flowers bloom

On the same tree and yet

Facing each other, apart.

(Waga omou hito ni aranaku ni sazanka wa hitoki ga eda ni ai-hedatarinu.)

51. 我がおもふ人にあらなくに山茶花
は一樹が枝に相隔りぬ

52.

The last sasanqua

Has bloomed but facing away

From where I am looking;

Both the flower and the branch.

(Sazanka no tsuinaru hana wa eda nagara somukite sakeri ware wa mukedomo.)

52. 山茶花の畢なる花は枝ながら背き
てさけり我は向けども

53.

As I leave here
I take my last look and see
The last sasanqua bloom.

Where is she now? I do not know.

(Sazanka no hana wa mihatete inu raku ni hito wa arido mo shiru yoshi mo naku.)

53. 山茶花の花は見果てて去ぬらくに
人は在^{ありど}処も知るよしもなく

54.

Those flowers that bloomed;
Always I'll remember,
Even though I will be
Gone and far away from here.

(Kakunogoto arikeru hana o yononaka ni hitori zo omou sono harukeki mo.)

54. かくのごとありける花を世の中に
一人ぞ思ふ其の遥けきも

On March 7th I returned home for a short stay. I had left home intending to return in about three days, but my stay in Tokyo was prolonged and I ended up being away for four months. In the meantime the season had progressed and my home and surroundings all seemed quite new to me, while the days passed one after another.

55.

Just casually plucked
I hold a few broad beans;
They smell of fresh green grass.
Ah! so good to be home again.

(Yukurinaku chigirite mitsuru soramame no aokusaku shite natsukashiki kamo.)

55. ゆくりなく^{ちぎ}りてみ^らみる^{そらまめ}の
青臭くして懐しきかも

The broad beans were still short. The beans were, for example, like lumps of quicklime which, having fallen on the ground and absorbed water, had become swollen. Since I was soon starting on a journey to distant Kyushu:

56.

When the broad bean stalks
Stand straight like upright pillars
Where will I myself be
Thinking of the woman I love.

(Soramame no hashira no gotoki kuki tataba izube ni ware wa hito omoioramu.)

56. そら豆の柱のごとき茎た^たばいづ
べに我は人おもひ居らむ

During my stay in the hospital and then later in the lodging house, there was no one to dry my bedding in the sun. But now that I am home, my mother hung it

on a pole in the sun for me and since then I have done it myself every day.

57.

Drying in the sun,
Bedclothes, and the smell of drying.

57. 日に干せば日向臭しと母のいひし
衾ふすまはうれし軟かにして

How good it makes me feel ...

All soft and comforting.

(Hi ni hoseba hinata kusashi to haha no iishi fusuma wa ureshi yawarakani shite.)

The garden does not let in much sunshine and because of the inferior soil which is muddy in winter, the broom is hard to use. The tall cedars surrounding the garden scatter their leaves all over the ground.

58.

Scattered all around
Lie heaps of cedar leaves;
Yet clear amid the gloom,
So white appear the plum blossoms.

58. あまたあれば杉の落葉のいぶせき
に梅の花白しそのいぶせきに

(Amata areba sugi no ochiba no ibuseki ni ume no hana shiroshi sono ibusekini.)

59.

Caught in the plum tree's
Branches rests a little cedar leaf.
I stood there watching it
All a-tremble in the winds.

59. 杉の葉の梅の木にして懸れるを見
つつ佇むそのさゆらぐを

(Sugi no ha no ume no ki ni shite kakareru o mitsutsu tatazumu so no sayuragu o.)

60.

Fallen cedar leaves
Lay long scattered on the ground.
Now they're all raked away
My mind is clear and at peace.

60. 掃かざりし杉の落葉を熊手もて搔
かしめしかば心すがしき

(Haka-zarishi sugi no ochiba o kumade mote kakashime shi kaba kokoro sugashiki.)

61.

Left all untidy,
My garden was neglected;
Now late the fallen leaves
We rake as plum flowers fall.

61. 我がさとはかくしもありき庭にし
て落葉搔き集む梅さへ散るに

(Waga sato wa kakushimo ariki niwa ni shite ochiba kaki tsumu ume sae chiru)

ni.)

On March 13th, it rained in the morning.

62.

Standing in the rain,

Scarcely wet, I listen;

I can hear the spring rain

Softly falling on the palm leaves.

(To ni tate do ikudamo nurenu harusame o shuro no ha ni kiku to ni tachi shikaba.)

62. 外に立てどいくだもぬれぬ春雨を
棕櫚の葉に聞く外に立ちしかば

The rain eventually turned to snow and the cold chilled us to the bones. Mother and I sit together and warm our hands over the charcoal brazier.

63.

Trouble and bother

This mulberry root charcoal!

Blow and it just sputters

So better not blow at all.

(Kuwa no ne no sumi wa ibuseshi hi o fukuto kawa ga hanetsuru fukanakute aramu.)

63. 桑の根の炭はいぶせし火を吹くと
皮がはねつる吹かなくてあらむ

ON TRANSLATING TANKA

Alan Farr

Tanka, the classic Japanese poetic form, has not enjoyed the popularity of haiku in Western translation. There has been a tendency to decry the Court tradition of tanka with its elevated diction while praising the haiku for its alleged greater spontaneity and immediacy of expression. Whatever the reason for the tanka's less popular appeal, there are signs that more foreigners are taking an interest in the tanka form.

Just as politics, translation may be defined as "the art of the possible". There are many approaches to translating but, whatever the theory, all translators would have to agree on one thing: something is lost in the translation. The process of translation may be compared to a sieve; the finer particles and elements, i.e., the allusions, nuances and subtleties of the original language disappear through the "holes", together with the ambience, flavor, the sound and music of the words (shirabe). Alliteration, rhyme, punning and word play cannot be fully reconstituted, even though remnants of the rhythm may sometimes be salvaged.

What is left then in the sieve of the translation? First and foremost remain the nuggets of meaning: the literal sense of the original words reproduced in another language. Also one would expect to find some approximation of the original author's emotion and poetic sense.

The ultimate problem facing the translator is to find an appropriate language. In the case of tanka, especially the verse of Nagatsuka Takashi redolent of the Manyōshū, where the subject matter may be a terse depiction of nature or a moment observed from everyday life, the stiff, classical diction of the tanka cannot be convincingly rendered into English using an equivalent archaic and pseudo-classical diction, say, imitating the formal language of the Elizabethan or Augustan Age. The modern English reader interested in Japanese poetry would be discouraged from the first by such a style which, to the English eye and ear, would seem inappropriate to express the spontaneity and simple lyrical sentiment of the tanka. Hence, an easy colloquial style that preserves some tone of elegance may be the best solution.

The 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic pattern of tanka is difficult to reproduce in English which lacks an abundance of mono- and bi-syllabic words. And since it has no real significance for the translation it may be abandoned without ado.

The most important element to be translated is the "meaning" itself. Granted that a translated poem is a completely new entity, the translator should aim for a poetic literalness by striving to carry across the meaning and as far as possible the "spirit" of the original into the English version. I believe the old dichotomy: poetry or literal version, the Scylla and Charybdis of translators, to be a spurious one.

In translating a selection of Nagatsuka Takashi's tanka I have used a four line format in an attempt to reproduce the conciseness of the tanka.

With such a concise form I felt it was important to create a strong, memorable opening line, whenever possible, and create a similar effect in the final line, a kind of punchline, as it were, i.e., "Life and Death were questions" / "And took my life for granted.", "Vain are men, me, too." / "Is meant only for ourselves."

Sometimes the third line acts as a kind of pivot, changing the direction of the first two lines, e.g., "But that was when I boasted health" which points away from the blithe unconcern of the past to the insecurity of the present; or "Now unable to refrain" similarly contrasts the past and present.

Whenever possible, I attempted to create a pithy phrase to start the poem, either a self-contained image, e.g., "The drooping dayflowers", "Red sasanquas", "Mother's face I see", or an incomplete phrase that would create an initial tension and lead the reader to hurry on to resolve the tension in the next line(s), e.g.,

“Sick and not knowing” (How to recover my lost health.), “Of my troubled mind” (I usually do not speak).

Ultimately the English version of Takashi’s poetry cannot preserve the specific characteristics that make the tanka instantly recognizable to the Japanese reader. However, in this translation I have attempted to render Takashi’s language into an idiomatic and, I hope, poetic form of English that would be acceptable to the English reader and make the emotions and images that Takashi felt and recorded instantly recognizable as part of our common human condition.