

Introduction

From the Meiji Period, both Tanka poets and their readers have been trying to find humans in poetry. The same is true with the poems which deal with nature, as Kazuhiko Ito has mentioned: "The descriptions and interpretations of nature and seasons reflect nothing but the self of the poet." (Kadan Oct.1987) In other words, nature has become a place or an object to which poets reflect their emotions and ideas. Yet it doesn't mean poets are interpreting nature from a human-centered viewpoint, nor making nature a mirror of their mind. Writing poems on nature means asking the meaning of the existence of oneself and nature, with a respectful mind toward the other as an equal being. Masako Tsuiji (1920-2006) has written Tanka on nature all through her career of more than 70 years as a Tanka poet. Her poems have recorded the vivid communication of her soul and nature. In this paper, I'd like to analyze its process by reading from the five poetry books she has left.

1 The encounter started from despair

Masako Tsuiji moved from Tokyo with her parents to Nagasu-cho in Tamana-gun, Kumamoto, at the age of 26 and lived there until she was 82 years old. She has called the town "a countryside town, which is far deep within a rural district." (Kadan June.1993) It might sound nice if I describe her life as working in the field in fine weather and staying at home reading when it rains. Yet still, life in the rural area was not what she hoped for. She gave up the hope of becoming a painter and the life in Tokyo. Her hope faded with the move to that small town. However, the loss of the hope and the encounter with nature have helped her to become a poet, like she herself has said, "I received a lot of blessing from Tanka."(Kasai-Retto [The islands of festoon])

She was born and brought up in Tokyo. It is probably safe to say that she first encountered nature in Kumamoto. In fact, she made a comment in a short essay with the title of "The Blessing from Nature": "Living within the same cycle of nature, if I had stayed in Tokyo and kept that lifestyle, I wouldn't have met nature. The meeting with nature has, I believe, helped me continue writing poems and gave me the power." (Tanka-kenkyu March.1984) Yet still, I don't think the nature in Kumamoto was friendly or understandable from the beginning, nor was it a consolation for her. Readers can see it in the second poem of her first poetry book, Kasai-retto: "In shyness / a bush warbler is chirping in the field / while I am discerning / a song in her voice / that I don't sing - " (Tsuiji Masako Zenkashu [The Collected Tanka Poetry of Masako Tsuiji] 19) The poet says she "doesn't sing" the naive song of the warbler, which I interpret as she knows there is a distance between herself and the bird. I also find a kind of sorrow in the poet, which derives from the rejection of something different from the state of her own mind.

The poem of the warbler doesn't have a clear ending and it suggests there is something to follow.

When it is read with the last poem in the book, the solitary mind throughout the book seems to come out keenly: "Against the sunlight / on the table / I am positioning and repositioning an egg / Don't you ever / touch me." (92) In the afterword of Tsuiji Masako Zenkashu, Yukitsuna Sasaki says Masako Tsuiji is a poet of pride and self-reliance. This poem is well-known as one of the masterpieces of her poetry work, and interpreted as the crystallization of her solitude and the spirit of self-reliance. The "egg" is often understood as a metaphor of her lost hope. And also, the image of herself, who rejects intrusion from others, seems to be kept within the shell. The bush warbler in the field and the poet in the room are close in space, yet there is nothing to connect them in the mind. At this point, it's the poet who rejects any contact and keeps herself to the overwhelming isolation.

2 The reality of life and the pride

Masako Tsuiji doesn't try to mingle with creatures, plants and natural features easily at the superficial level. In her poems, she always tries to approach the deep inner part of the object she writes about, as if she is describing the life it has. This is seen in every book of hers. When she looks at living things around her such as animals, insects and birds, she focuses on the challenging parts of their life. A life has both light and shadow, and the poet turns her eyes on the shadow. The following poems are examples.

In the woods / where snow is sharply / reflecting light and shadow / I meet the eyes of a
bird / which will never accept humans. (79)

The defeated one / in a battle / has died in the field. / That is all about a scene / from the
world of shrikes. (40)

Being almost dead / but / barely alive / a green mantis is coming out / onto the frostbitten
grass. (90)

In the first poem, she is writing about a momentary encounter with a wild bird. The sharp and wild eyes of the bird seem to pierce the weak mind of a human who is subject to solitude. The second poem clearly shows the poet's unwavering understanding of the reality of the life in nature, such as the law of the jungle and natural selection. Such a down-to-reality look focused on scenes in nature is shown in other poems as well: "Without delay / ants flock / and start attacking / the careless bagworm / to death." (101) "Finding a life / within the death / the wild weasel runs / and runs on, / then he meets another death." (168) The third poem has one of the biggest themes in the poetry of Masako Tsuiji, aging and death. "Being almost dead but barely alive" sounds relentless, but she doesn't look away from the scene, as if she thinks watching the whole stages of life is her duty.

She doesn't find consolation in nature and regrets the lost hope. Her helplessness seems to deepen further as she learns more about the harsh reality of the life in nature. If her agony finds any solutions, they must lie in those who live independently and single-mindedly. For example, in the poem "There is no excuse / for life / the autumn bellflower is blooming in deep purple. / There is

no tomorrow for her, / just today," (32) the poet is respecting and feeling empathy toward the flower. The flower is devoting all her energy to blooming, for that is what she is supposed to do with her life and feel proud of. In another poem, "In the posture / of someone / who has endured through / the small winter forest is now / calm and clear," (86) she personifies a forest which has seen many winters. By choosing the dramatic phrase, "has endured through," the poet successfully conveys the distinctive presence and nobility of the trees which quietly keep their untainted identity. Both in the autumn bellflower and winter trees, readers can find the philosophy of the poet who respects grace and doesn't flinch from isolation. This is seen in one of her earlier poems: "In the field / the shoots of wheat are rustling, / sometimes in the light and / other times in the shadow. / Let loneliness be like the sun." (Tanka July.1956)

3 The unrestricted view and free state of mind

As she lives longer and becomes more devoted in the life of the countryside, Masako Tsuiji realizes there are some things in nature which she doesn't see nor understand.

There might have been / a scene of the moon / which was witnessed only by water. / When the morning has come / I overturn the water from the unglazed earthenware pot. (114)

Inside / the blurred purple petals / the hydrangea is hiding her heart / and so, / I don't dare to look. (121)

The flowering fern / slowly and magically / unlaces its shooting knot / while / I'm not looking at her. (223)

The poem of the hydrangea suggests something metaphoric, which can be interpreted as human relationships, but in all the poems above, the poet talks about the spiritual distance between herself and the object. However, the distance doesn't have the connotation of cold estrangement. There seems to be a certain serenity which admits the fact that they can't thoroughly understand each other. Knowing that, they accept the solitude each must bear. Also, in another beautiful poem, she writes about the solitude of the one who is a bystander: "Do the cherry blossoms know / there are things which we can't see / regardless of how much we look? / The blossoms are bright, / bright enough to make my eyes blind." (169) In this poem, the solitude of the poet makes the innocent and indifferent cherry blossoms even brighter. The blossoms are full and at their prime, and they are devoted only to themselves. The poet doesn't feel sorry for the darkened eyes. She is filled with the pleasure at the brightness of the blossoms.

The poet has noticed that nature is something beyond the knowledge and imagination of humans, and it has a lot of mysteries. She has met some moments when nature reveals its beauty as well. As a result, her fourth book, Midori Narikeri [All is Green] shows her unrestricted view on nature and praises for life.

A wild chrysanthemum / in the barren field / has turned into a line of verse, / and she is

waving / to my eyes. (239)

The snow is also a guest, / from long away / they fall on the deep-pink plum blossoms, / on
the shoulders of a grosbeak / and on my palm. (267)

There is something / in this world / that a butterfly sees and I don't see. / Now, the butterfly
is flying / into the darkness. (250)

In the first poem above, the poet feels a wild chrysanthemum is "a line of verse." The wild chrysanthemum doesn't have the dramatic impact of the autumn bellflower which appeared in her first book, Kasai-retto. Yet in this poem, the poet finds and praises the quiet gracefulness of the innocent soul of a simple, wild chrysanthemum. She is also praising the common yet precious being of the flower. The snow in the second poem conveys the calmness and tranquility which are produced by the order in nature. It is just like a new-born life, which has come onto the earth after a long trip. The poem of the butterfly is one of the finest of the book. The key phrase is the last part, "Now, the butterfly is flying / into the darkness." At that moment, the positions of the poet and the butterfly have interchanged. It is a dramatic change between the light and the darkness. The actual view and the dreamlike scene cross each other. It is a fine and rare moment when the poet sees the world through the view of the butterfly.

Her career as a poet has reached its climax with the publication of the fourth book. In her fifth book, Jibun-sagashi [In search of myself] , there are poems which seem to reflect the free state of her mind, which has completely disentangled herself from the attachments of this world. Here is one such poem: "In winter / it is nice to have / the shining moon / which does not have a light / of its own." (306) Here, the poet looks at the moon and her selfless mind sees the moon as a gentle friend and partner. Then, she writes another poem of a bush warbler and her poems on nature reach the perpetuity and endlessness of the world of nature: "Gracefully, / the bush warbler chirps in the field / and my theory on nature / goes back / to the beginning."(353)

Conclusion

Masako Tsuiji started the process of meeting with nature when she had lost hope and was in despair. At first, they were strangers and there was remoteness between them. Yet in the course of time, the poet has developed and deepened the relationship with nature, which has borne a lot of fruits of poems. In the words of Masao Yoshino, Tsuiji "didn't lower herself nor flinch" (Subaru June.1998). She kept her pride and integrity as an independent being, and bravely accepted her solitude. She was always trying to develop her ideas and looking at the creatures and plants around her sincerely, with her soul. That is the reason why she successfully achieved the selfless and unrestricted view on nature, and nature revealed to her its beautiful and inspiring scenes.

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