Classic Poetry Series

Akiko Yosano

- poems -

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Akiko Yosano (7 December 1878 - 29 May 1942)

Akiko Yosano was the pen-name of a Japanese author, poet, pioneering feminist, pacifist, and social reformer, active in late Meiji period, Taisho period and early Showa period Japan. Her real name was Yosano Shiyo. She is one of the most famous, and most controversial, post-classical woman poets of Japan.

Early life

Yosano was born into a prosperous merchant family in Sakai, near Osaka. From the age of 11, she was the family member most responsible for running the family business, which produced and sold yokan, or bean candy. From early childhood, she was fond of reading literary works, and read widely in her father's extensive library. When she was a high school student, she began to subscribe to the poetry magazine Myojo (Bright Star), and she became one of its most important contributors. Myojo’s editor, Yosano Tekkan, taught her tanka poetry. They met when he came to Osaka and Sakai to deliver lectures and teach workshops.

Although Tekkan had a common-law wife, Tekkan and Akiko fell in love. Tekkan eventually separated from his common-law wife, and the two poets started a new life together in the suburb of Tokyo. Tekkan and Akiko married in 1901.

Literary Career

In 1901, Yosano brought out her first volume of tanka, Midaregami (Tangled Hair), which contained 400 poems and was very well received by literary critics. Her first book, which overshadows everything else she wrote, brought a passionate individualism to traditional tanka poetry, unlike any other work of the late Meiji period. She followed this with twenty more waka anthologies over the course of her career, including Koigoromo (Robe of Love) and Maihime (Dancer). Her husband Tekkan was also a poet, but he soon realized that Yosano's abilities were far greater than his, and he decided to concentrate his energies on helping her.

Yosano's poem Kimi Shinitamou koto nakare , addressed to her brother, was published in Myojo during the height of the Russo-Japanese War and was tremendously popular. Made into a song, it was used as a mild form of anti-war protest, as the number of Japanese casualties from the bloody Siege of Port Arthur became public.

During the Taisho period, Yosano turned her attention to social commentary, with Hito obyobi Onna to shite (As a Human and as a Woman), Gekido no

Naka o Iku? (Going through Turbulent Times) and her autobiography Akarumi e (To the Light). Her commentaries tended to criticize Japan's growing militarism, and also promoted her feminist viewpoints.

Yosano founded a coeducational school, the Bunka Gakuin (Institute of Culture), together with Nishimura Isaku, Kawasaki Natsu and others, and became its first dean and chief lecturer. She helped many aspiring writers gain a foothold into the literary world. She was a strong advocate of women's education all of her life. She also translated the Japanese classics into the modern Japanese language, including the Shinyaku Genji Monogatari (Newly Translated Tale of Genji) and Shinyaku Eiga Monogatari (Newly Translated Tale of Flowering Fortunes).

Her final work, Shin Man'yoshu (New Man'yoshu, 1937-1939) was a compilation of 26,783 poems by 6,675 contributors over a 60-year period.

Yosano died of a stroke in 1942, at the age of 63. As her death occurred in the middle of the Pacific War, it went largely unnoticed in the press, and after the end of the war, her works were largely forgotten by critics and the general public. However, in recent years, her romantic, sensual style has come back into popularity and she has an ever increasing following. Her grave is at the Tama Reien in the outskirts of Tokyo.

The Japanese politician Kaoru Yosano (Yosano Kaoru) is one of her grandsons.

Eserleri:

Midaregami "Tangled Hair" (1901)
Koigoromo "Robe of Love"
Maihime "Dancer"
Hito oyobi Onna to shite "As a Human and as a Woman"
Shin Man'yoshu "New Man'yoshu"

Auguste's Single Strike

My lovely two-year-old Auguste,
I write this down for you:
Today, for the first time,
you struck your mother on the cheek.
It was the power of your life
that wanted to win —
the genuine power for conquest
took on the form of anger
and a spastic fit
and flashed like lightning.
You must have been conscious of nothing,
must have forgotten it at once.
But your mother was shocked,
was also deeply happy.
You can, some day, as a man,
be on your own defiantly,
you can be on your own purely, resolutely,
also can love man and nature decisively
(The core of conquest is love),
also you can conquer suspicion, pain, death,
jealousy, cowardice, derision,
oppression, crooked learning, conventions,
filthy wealth, and social ranks.
Yes, that genuine strike,
that’s the totality of your life.
Such were the premonitions I felt that made me happy
under the pain of the sharp blow
you struck with your palm
as a lion cub might.
At the same time I felt the same power
lurking in myself
and even the cheek you didn’t strike
became hot like the cheek you did.
You must have been conscious of nothing.
must have forgotten it at once.
But when you’ve become an adult,
take this out and read it,
when you think, when you work,
when you love someone, when you fight.
My lovely two-year-old Auguste,
I write this down for you:
Today, for the first time,
you struck your mother on the cheek.
My still more lovely Auguste,
You, in my womb,
walked through Europe, sightseeing.
As you grow up,
your wisdom will remember
the memories of those travels with your mother.
What Michelangelo and Rodin did,
what Napoleon and Pasteur did,
yes, it was that genuine strike,

that ferocious, blissful strike.

Translation by Hiroaki Sato

Akiko Yosano

Black Hair

Blach hair
Tangled in a thousand strands.
Tangled my hair and
Tangled my tangled memories
Of our long nights of love making.

Akiko Yosano

I Can Give Myself To Her

I can give myself to her
In her dreams
Whispering her own poems
In her ear as she sleeps beside me.

Akiko Yosano

In Praise Of May

May is a fancy month, a flower month,
The month of buds, the month of scents, the month of colors,
The month of poplars, marrons, plantanes,
Azaleas, tree peonies, wisteria, redbud,
Lilacs, tulips, poppies,
The month women's cloths turn
Light and thin, the month of love,
The festival month Kyoto residents
In twirled crowns, arrows on their backs,
Compete in horse races,
The month girls in the City of Paris
Choose for the Flower Festival
A beautiful, noble queen;
If I may speak of myself,
It's the month I crossed Siberia, crossed Germany,
Longing for my love,
And arrived in that distant Paris,
The month to celebrate our fourth son,
Auguste, born last year,
With irises, swords, and streamers,
The breezy month, the month of
The blue moon, of platinum-colored clouds,
When the bright sky and the hemp palm
Outside the window of my small study
Remind me of a Malay island,
The month of honeybees, the month of butterflies,
The month of birth when ants turn into moths
And canaries hatch their eggs,
The sensual month, the month of flesh
That somehow incites you,
The month of Vous voulez wine, of perfumes,
Of dances, of music, and of songs,
The month of the sun when
Myriad things inside me
Hold one another tight, become entangled,
Moan, kiss, and sweat, the month
Of the blue sea, of the forest, of the park, of the fountains,
Of the garden, of the terrace, of the gazebo,
So here comes May
To toss at us a giddiness
Sweet as the lemonade you suck with a straw
From a thin, skinny glass.

Translation by Hiroaki Sato

Akiko Yosano

Labor Pains

I am sick today,
sick in my body,
eyes wide open, silent,
I lie on the bed of childbirth.

Why do I, so used to the nearness of death,
to pain and blood and screaming,
now uncontrollably tremble with dread?

A nice young doctor tried to comfort me,
and talked about the joy of giving birth.
Since I know better than he about this matter,
what good purpose can his prattle serve?

Knowledge is not reality.
Experience belongs to the past.
Let those who lack immediacy be silent.
Let observers be content to observe.

I am all alone,
totally, utterly, entirely on my own,
gnawing my lips, holding my body rigid,
waiting on inexorable fate.

There is only one truth.
I shall give birth to a child,
truth driving outward from my inwardness.
Neither good nor bad; real, no sham about it.

With the first labor pains,
suddenly the sun goes pale.
The indifferent world goes strangely calm.
I am alone.
It is alone I am.

Akiko Yosano

Not Speaking Of The Way

Not speaking of the way,
Not thinking of what comes after,
Not questioning name or fame,
Here, loving love,
You and I look at each other.

Akiko Yosano

O My Brother, You Must Not Die

O my young brother, I cry for you
Don't you understand you must not die!
You who were born the last of all
Command a special store of parents' love
Would parents place a blade in children's hands
Teaching them to murder other men
Teaching them to kill and then to die?
Have you so learned and grown to twenty-four?

O my brother, you must not die!
Could it be the Emperor His Grace
Exposeth not to jeopardy of war
But urgeth men to spilling human blood
And dying in the way of wild beasts,
Calling such death the path to glory?
If His Grace possesseth noble heart
What must be the thoughts that linger there?

Akiko Yosano

Press My Breasts

Press my breasts,
Part the veil of mystery,
A flower blooms there,
Crimson and fragrant.

Akiko Yosano

River of Stars

Left on the beach
Full of water
A worn out boat
Reflects the white sky --
Of early autumn.

Swifter than hail
Lighter than a feather,
A vague sorrow
Crossed my mind.

Feeling you nearby,
how could I not come
to walk beneath
this evening moon rising
over flowering fields.

It was only
the thin thread of a cloud,
almost transparent,
leading me along the way
like an ancient sacred song.

I say his poem,
propped against this frozen wall,
in the late evening,
as bitter autumn rain
continues to fall.
What I count on
is a white birch
that stands
where no human language
is ever heard.

A bird comes
delicately as a little girl
to bathe
in the shade of my tree
in an autumn puddle.

Even at nineteen,
I had come to realize
that violets fade,
spring waters soon run dry,
this life too is transient

He stood by the door,
calling through the evening
the name of my
sister who died last year
and how I pitied him!

Translated by Sam Hamill & Keiko Matsui Gibson

Akiko Yosano

This Autumn Will End

This autumn will end.
Nothing can last forever.
Fate controls our lives.
Fondle my breasts
With your strong hands.

Akiko Yosano