



The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse

Anthony Thwaite (editor) , Geoffrey Bownas (Introduction)

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Poetry remains a living part of the culture of Japan today. The clichés of everyday speech are often to be traced to famous ancient poems, and the traditional forms of poetry are widely known and loved. The congenial attitude comes from a poetical history of about a millennium and a half. This classic collection of verse therefore contains poetry from the earliest, primitive period, through the Nara, Heian, Kamakura, Muromachi and Edo periods, ending with modern poetry from 1868 onwards, including the rising poets Tamura Ryuichi and Tanikawa Shuntaro.

The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse Details

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From Reader Review The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse for online ebook

Eadweard says

An excellent book to pick up if you haven't any experience with japanese poetry. I've read quite a few of the poets and poems that are featured but it was still nice to read them again. The New Style Poetry section was specially enjoyable.

Some I liked:

PRINCE ?TSU

Poem exchanged with Lady Ishikawa

In the dew dripping
On the broad-flanked hill,
Waiting for you
I stood dampened
By the dew on the hill.

LADY ISHIKAWA

Poem exchanged with Prince ?tsu

Waiting for me
You were dampened.
O that I could
Be the dew dripping
On that broad-flanked hill.

My tangled hair
I shall not cut:
Your hand, my dearest,
Touched it as a pillow

--

Like the few ears salvaged
After deer and boar have plundered
Rice fields newly opened up,
My love is all shrivelled

--

The autumn moon

We saw last year
Shines again: but she
Who was with me then
The years separate for ever.

--

'Heaven and earth' –
Only when their names
Become extinct
Would you and I
Meet no more.

--

As flowing water
Does not return,
As the wind that blows
Is never seen,
So, without a trace,
Being of this world,
My wife has left in death.
Spreading the lonely sleeves
Of the tattered clothes
She made for me to wear,
I must lie alone.

--

PRINCESS HIROKAWA

The grass of love would load
Seven high harvest carts.
Such grass grows tall, and grows
Heavy on my heart.

LADY HEGURI

A thousand years, you said,
As our hearts melted.
I look at the hand you held,
And the ache is hard to bear.

--

?TOMO YAKAMOCHI

Presented to Lady ?tomo of Sakanoue's elder daughter

To the pit of my heart I pine,
Not knowing what to say,
Not knowing what to do.
You and I, hands clasped,
That morning stood in the garden:
That night making our bed,
White sleeves intertwined, we slept.
O that it be so always.

--

Heian Period (794–1185)

MIBU TADAMINE

Since that parting
When she seemed as unfeeling
As the moon at morning,
Nothing so cruel
As the light of dawn.

When the wind blows,
The white clouds are cleft
By the peak. Is your heart,
Like them, so cold?

--

Kamakura and Muromachi Periods (1185–1603)

TAIRA TADANORI

The capital at Shiga –
Shiga of the rippling waves –
Lies now in ruins:
The mountain cherries
Stay as before.

-

Overtaken by the dark,
The shade beneath a tree
I make my inn;
And tonight my host
Shall be a flower.

--

PRIEST SAIGY?

Is it a shower of rain?
I thought as I listened
From my bed, just awake.
But it was falling leaves
Which could not stand the wind.

-

Every single thing
Changes and is changing
Always in this world.
Yet with the same light
The moon goes on shining.

--

FUJIWARA SHUNZEI (TOSHINARI)

In autumn, lodging at a temple near his wife's grave

Even at midnight,
When I come so rarely,
The sad wind through the pines:
Must she hear it always
Beneath the moss?

-

Oh, this world of ours –
There is no way out!
With my heart in torment
I sought the mountain depths,
But even there the stag cries.

--

LADY SANUKI

The sleeve of my dress,
Like a rock in the open sea,
Unseen, unknown to man,
Even when the tide ebbs,
Is never for a moment dry.

--

MUROMACHI BALLADS

Rain beating down
On top of snow.
Add any more and my heart
Melts, melts, melts.

--

ARAKIDA MORITAKE
Fallen flower I see
Returning to its branch –
Ah! a butterfly.

--

Edo Period (1603–1868)

YASUHARA TEISHITSU

Oh! oh! is all I can say
For the cherries that grow
On Mount Yoshino

--

ENOMOTO KIKAKU

Harvest moon:
On the bamboo mat
Pine-tree shadows.

--

UEJIMA ONITSURA

They bloom and then
We look and then they
Fall and then...

--

MIURA CHORA

You watch – it's clouded;
You don't watch, and it's clear –
When you view the moon.

--

?TOMO ?EMARU

Fall on, frost!
After the chrysanthemum
No more flowers.

--

Senry?

A horse farts:
Four or five suffer
On the ferry-boat
-
The ladder-seller
Hears the cry 'Swords drawn!'
And scrambles to the roof.

-

Judging from the pictures,
Hell looks the more
Interesting place.

-

Letting rip a fart –
It doesn't make you laugh
When you live alone.

Modern Period (from 1868)

EMPEROR MEIJI

In my garden
Side by side
Native plants, foreign plants,
Growing together.

--

YOSANO AKIKO

You never touch
This soft skin

Surging with hot blood.
Are you not bored,
Expounding the Way?

-

Spring is short:
Why ever should it
Be thought immortal?
I grope for
My full breasts with my hands.

--

ISHIKAWA TAKUBOKU

Working, working.
Yet no joy in life,
Still staring emptily
At empty hands.

-

Today, my friends seemed
More a success than I.
So I bought flowers
And took them to
My wife, to make her happy.

--

TAKAHAMA KYOSHI

Autumn wind:
Everything I see
Is haiku

--

IIDA DAKOTSU

In the winter lamp,
Dead face not far
From the living face.

--

KAWABATA B?SHA

Bright moonlight:
The wounds in the deep snow
Will not be hidden.

--

Modern Senryu?

In the child's homework
A word he doesn't know –
Father's face.

-

Found while spring-cleaning
But too precious to throw out,
The first love's letters.

-

A famous horse,
Now, in the zoo,
Forgotten.

Shintaishi ('New-Style Poetry')

HAGIWARA SAKUTARU?

Sick face at the base of the earth

At the base of the earth, a face:
A sick and lonely face.
In the gloom at the base of the earth
Grass stalks slowly starting to shoot,
A rat's nest beginning to sprout;
Tangled in the nest
Countless hairs quivering.
At the winter solstice,
From the sick, desolate earth
Slender bamboo roots sprouting green,
Starting to sprout.
So full of sadness,
So tender, so weak,
So full, full of sadness.
In the gloom at the base of the earth
A sick and lonely face.

--

MIKI ROFU?

After the kiss

'Are you asleep?'
'No,' you say.
Flowers in May

Flowering at noon.
In the lakeside grass
Under the sun,
'I could close my eyes
And die here,' you say.

--

HORIGUCHI DAIGAKU

Landscape

Curves of a woman's body,
Swelling, undulating, tangled:
The triangle of a sun-baked island floating
In a beautiful soft sea of milk.
Lacklustre ferns growing luxuriantly:
Gentle curves flowing plumply in three undulations Across the heart of the island.
At the nub,
In the shadows of the trees grown rank in the valley,
The tapered roof of the headman's house, now here, now out of sight;
Peach-pink tapering house, now here, now out of sight.

--

SAIJ? YASO

The crow's letter

I opened and read
The small red envelope
The mountain crow had brought:
'On the night of the moon
The hills will blaze
Savage and red.'
I was going to reply,
When my eyes opened.
Ah yes, there it was:
A single red leaf.

--

MURANO SHIR?

Black song

From eyes, from ears,
Blackness pours;
Melted in the night,
Flesh gushing from my mouth.
What can it be,
This black song?

Here no dawn reaches:
A vacuum In the earth's shade,
No tree, house, dog.
And here, a heart
That will not die,
That will not sleep,
Singing, singing.
Friends of the world,
Listen to its song,
Black song of peace.

--

TAKENAKA IKU

Stars

Over Japan there are stars.
Stars that stink like petrol
Stars that speak with foreign accents
Stars that rattle like old Fords
Stars the colour of Coca-Cola
Stars that hum like a fridge
Stars as coarse as tinned food
Stars cleaned with cotton wool and tweezers
And sterilized with formalin
Stars charged with radioactivity.
Among them, stars too swift for the eye
And stars circling on an eccentric orbit.
Deep down
They plunge to the base of the universe.
Over Japan there are stars.
On wintry nights –
Every night –
They stretch like a heavy chain.

--

KURODA SABUR?

I've changed completely

I've changed completely
Yes I'm wearing the same tie as yesterday
I'm as poor as yesterday
As useless as yesterday
Even so I've changed completely.
Yes I'm wearing the same clothes as yesterday
I'm as blind drunk as yesterday
As clumsy as yesterday
Even so I've changed completely.

Ah
Faced with all the half smiles and grins
Curled sneers and guffaws
I shut my eyes tight and stay still
And
Fluttering through me towards tomorrow
Goes a beautiful white butterfly.
--

TAMURA RYŪICHI
October poem

Crisis is part of me.
Beneath my smooth skin
Is a typhoon of savage passion.
On October's Desolate shore a fresh corpse is thrown up. October is my empire.
My gentle hands control what is lost
My small eyes keep watch on what is melting
My soft ears listen to the silence of the dying.
Terror is part of me. In my rich bloodstream
Courses all-killing time. In October's
Chilling sky a fresh famine shudders.
October is my empire.
My dead troops occupy every rain-sodden city
My dead patrol-plane circles the sky over
...aimless minds
My dead people sign their names for the dying.
--

IBARAGI NORIKO
The fruit

On a high branch
A big green fruit
A local lad slid up
Stretched his hand and fell back
What looked like fruit
Was a moss-covered skull.
Mindanao
Twenty-six years on
On a baby jungle tree branch
Caught by chance
The skull of a Japanese soldier killed in battle
Eye socket nostril
In the sturdy young tree
Grown vigorously.
In his lifetime

This face
Irreplaceable cherished
Surely some woman must have cared for it.
The fontanelles of the tiny temples
Who was the mother who had doted on them
Twining her fingers in his hair?
Who was the woman who had drawn him tenderly to her? If it had been me...
I broke off a year has passed
I took out the draft again
Unable to find a final line
More years have gone by.
If it had been me
In the end unable to produce a line to follow.
--

SHIRAISHI KAZUKO

Street

Dark street seedy town
Raining a bit too cold
We wore raincoats we had a black umbrella
However much we signalled, the taxis didn't stop
So we set off walking
Our bodies close, clinging
What kind of future did we face
As we walked, drenched to the skin?
Warm hotel
Bodies
Heated
But the words
And acts of our loving –
I cannot recall
A single one.

-

Pond

'Go home,' I said
'Tonight I don't want you, so
Go home,' I said
Sniffling and sobbing
You went off
I have no place to go back to.
Your path as you went weeping from my heart
I traced again and again
Your tear stains
Spread across my body
To become a pond
And that pond engulfed my heart

That night I went to sleep.

Sarah says

"I may be silent, but
I'm thinking.
I may not talk, but
Don't mistake me for a wall."
-Tsuboi Shigeji, "Silent, but..."

This fairly sleek little book is really a fantastic survey of Japanese poetry, starting at around 270 AD and going all the way up to modern times. As somewhat of an aficionado for Japanese literature, this is the jackpot. It's got everything I could possibly ask for: haikus, tanka, waka, kanshi, free-form poems, excerpts from novels. It's wonderful to see the evolution in a chronological way. But on a more superficial level, I find that Japanese poetry is really some of the best I've come across; it's probably even better in Japanese than it is translated into English. But since I don't speak any Japanese, I am happy with what I can get from this translation.

I don't think I have a specific favorite part of this collection, but I can safely say I wrote down a lot of poems from different time periods just for my own pleasure and entertainment. Nerdy, I know... But definitely worth the time.

Karl Hallbjörnsson says

Some of the poetry was great and some wasn't as great. But all in all the book is a good introduction to the various Japanese poets and their style.

John Pappas says

While not quite as comprehensive or informative as David Hinton's Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry from a few years back, this updated edition of Japanese poetry provides a survey of 1,500 years of Japanese verse. There are many poems here, including some new 20th century additions that did not appear in the earlier editions, representing the diverse kinds and modes of Japan's poets. The editors often include just one poem from a particular poet and favor breadth instead of depth in most cases -- we only get to know a few poets deeply, and those poets often are featured in their own collections. It would be nice to read more of the poets who we can not find so readily as Basho or Issa. The strength of this collection certainly lies the poems included from the modern era, and in the prefatory notes on language, culture and history that elucidate the major periods of poetry in the collection.

Painting says

What a delight it is...

to find a book with a this poem by Tachibana Akemi.

Paul says

Not bad, but there are better collections/translations out there; Carter's anthology for Stanford Press is far superior.

Also I'd like to have a long conversation with the editor at Penguin who chose to devote a total of three pages to Matsuo Basho, one page to Yosa no Buson . . . and 90 pages to twentieth-century Japanese poets, all of whom are terrible (they even manage to leave out Santoka Taneda, who is literally the only good haiku poet after 1910 or so).

For reference, this would be like publishing a one-volume collection of English-language poetry in Japanese translation, and devoting three pages to Milton, one page to Shakespeare . . . and 90 pages to William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, and John Berryman.

Gavin says

I feel able to say it at last: haiku is pathological, a genre absolutely limited to the engraving of flat single images. And single (or paired) verbal images of nature do nothing for me; it is relation and juxtaposition and story and reductios and original presentation that give images life. The haiku leaves almost no room for these. (This is not about length; the *senryu* retains wonderful possibilities, because they are animated by satire rather than po-faced nature-worship. Jokes can stand alone.)

This book cannot be blamed for being half haiku, because that mechanical law ruled Japanese poetry for thousands of years and this is first of all a historical selection. Lots more to see.

Currently I am only fond of the ancient gnostic hermits and the droll postwar internationalists (no multiculturalists here). Many of the others emote at us too directly - the likes of "*Oh how // I miss my wife // out here // on the border wall*" - which brittle superficiality fails Wei Tai's test and mine. In general their ancients have dated much better than ours, perhaps because they grokked ironic minimalism a thousand years before us.

The emperors and shoguns all write poetry, are still all required to profess about the land that they perch upon. Meiji:

In newspapers, all seethe doings of the world, which lead nowhere. Better never written!

Amen. I liked Yamanoue Okura, Yakamochi, the Kokinsh?, Ki Tsurayuki, Tsuboi Shigeji, Kaneko Mitsu-hara, Takahashi Mutsuo. I absolutely do not have sufficient knowledge to stop there. Skip Bownas' enormous Preface too, you don't need it.

In one sentence: ?.

Samantha Bee says

I think, for the most part, I enjoyed the older poems to the newer ones, but this was still an enjoyable read. I liked the vast range of poetry that was presented, and it was nice to find some new poets to read in future.

Matt Morris says

To read my review of this book and others, please visit:

<http://miscmss.blogspot.com/2012/12/t...>

Akemi G. says

I guess I've read most of the poems in the original Japanese. Yes, poetry is that popular in Japan. And I like the translation I've seen in this book.

James Violand says

In general, the Oriental mind has a more sensitive talent in depicting man's life in Nature. Succinct, beautiful verse. However, unlike the Chinese talent for reflecting all of experience, the Japanese tend to be brutally pessimistic about the vicissitudes of life.

***SkliP* says**

I also picked this up for my advanced english class during our poetry analysis unit, and liked it.

A lot of the poems were about people and nature, and my favorite ones were "Stars" by Takenaka Iku and "Growing Up" by Tanikawa Shuntaro. These two were my favorites because I could sense the emotions and messages in the poem.

Laura says

This was a lovely collection of poetry that I could have found a beautiful passage to quote on any given page. A couple of my favorites:

November Third

Miyazawa Kenji

Bending neither to the rain
Nor to the wind
Nor to snow nor to summer heat,
Firm in body, yet
Without greed, without anger,
Always smiling serenely.
Eating his four cups of rough rice a day
With bean paste and a few vegetables,
Never taking himself into account
But seeing and hearing everything,
Understanding
And never forgetting.
In the shade of a pine grove
He lives in a tiny thatched hut:
If there is a sick child in the east
He goes and tends him:
If there is a tired mother in the west
He goes and shoulders her rice sheaves:
If there is a man dying in the south
He goes and soothes his fears:
If there are quarrels and litigation in the north
He tells them, 'Stop your pettiness.'
In drought he sheds tears,
In cold summers he walks through tears.

Everyone calls him a fool,
Neither praised
Nor taken to heart.

That man
Is what I wish to be.

~~~~~

*Story*

Takenaka Iku

Quietly the cloud cast its shadow,  
Passing over avenues of trees, over ponds, over fields.  
Enduring both joy and sadness, the cloud silently drifted on...

Then, above the sound of a single flute, the cloud stopped,  
Seeking the one who played: but there was no one.

And then the cloud began again its long journey  
Through the hemisphere of night, not knowing its direction.

~~~~~

Edward says

Introduction, by Anthony Thwaite

Japanese Poetry and Japan's Poets, by Geoffrey Bownas

Further Reading

--The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse: From the Earliest Times to the Present

Notes

Appendices:

1. *Glossary of Japan's Poetic Forms*

2. *Taste-words: The Japanese Aesthetic*

3. *Some Prosodic Techniques of the Japanese Poet*

4. *Glossary*

5. *Chronological Tables*

6. *Map: Japan*

Index of Poets

James says

If you are interested in Japanese poetry, then this is an ideal place to start. The first three-quarters of this poetic anthology focuses primarily on traditional Japanese poetic styles such as Choka, Haiku, Imayo, Tanka, and so forth. Separated into chronological sections, and a comprehensive introduction, this is an anthology welcoming to those new to Basho, Issa, Senryu, and so on. There's also an extensive section in regards to more contemporary Japanese poetry after the 1868 Meiji Revolution, in this "New-Style" of poetry, notably more convoluted than the precise mechanisms seen by the old poet masters. A criticism I found with the latter section of the book, was that many of the modern poems read, sounded more like nonsense, or at best came across haphazard. A highlight though of this section was Asubuki Ryoji's "I classify". In conclusion, I'd recommend this anthology to anyone with a interest in Japan, or poetic literature, as this acts as an ideal stepping stone.
