

## THE PROLETARIAN SENRYŪ OF TSURU AKIRA

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### TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Proletarian poet Tsuru Akira lived a brief but full life. Born at the end of 1908, he died of dysentery in a prison hospital in 1938. Tsuru composed hundreds of senryū, short verses traditionally satirical and traditionally in the 5–7–5 pattern. He gave his poems a truly revolutionary thrust. A recent account of his life and work bears the subtitle: “Seventeen Syllables of Resistance.” The centenary of Tsuru’s birth was celebrated in 2009<sup>1</sup> and occasioned among other events a biopic, *Tsuru Akira: Traces of a Heart*.

Tsuru composed senryū from a very early age. His first verses date to 1924, when he was fifteen. One of the very first to see print—in October 1924—foreshadows his later life:

マッチマッチの棒の燃焼にも似た生命いのち

*Matchi no bō no nenshō ni mo nita inochi*

A life  
like the flaring up  
of a match.

The verse’s meaning is a bit opaque; the poet seems resigned to poverty and a brief life that does not bring about change. If he had wished to emphasize the light the flame produces, he might have substituted “fireworks” for “match.” So to paraphrase: the world is a dark place, and we shed our (limited) glow only for a moment.

Tsuru’s brief flare of a life included upbringing in Ishikawa prefecture on the Japan Sea coast, formal education through age fourteen, work at various forms of manual labor, first at home and then in Osaka and Tokyo, military service. Tsuru spent two years (1931–33) in a military prison in Osaka for having left-wing materials among his belongings in

1. As happened often, his parents registered his birth only in January 1939.

the barracks; a second arrest, this time civilian, occurred in late 1937.<sup>2</sup> The resignation that marked his earliest verses gave way to a determined and relentless push for change. In his youth, Tsuru may have felt his life had little permanent value, but one hundred years after his birth, his light still shines.

In the opening pages of his exuberant book on Tsuru, Kurumisawa Ken suggests the force that characterized Tsuru's verse:

タマ除けを産めよ殖やせよ勲章をやろう

*Tamayoke o umeyo fuyaseyo kunshō o yarō*

We'll award medals for giving birth  
to more and more ...  
cannon fodder.

—*March 1937*

This senryū Tsuru composed a scant four months before all-out war between Japan and China broke out with the incident at the Marco Polo Bridge. Tsuru's senryū are easy to remember. Easy to pass on by word of mouth. Easy to memorize. So you want to share them. Evoke fellow-feeling, share a laugh. Through laughter, build a conspiratorial connection with someone. In particular, this verse impresses its stamp easily, is easy to remember, easy to understand, easy to pass on orally. Why? Every reader of that day knew of the state mottoes and war slogans that were always visible on billboards and audible on the radio. "Have many

2. The earliest work on Tsuru comes from his friend and fellow poet Ikkōjin: Ikkōjin. *Hansen senryūjin Tsuru Akira* (Tokyo: Taimatsusha, 1978) and Ikkōjin, ed. *Tsuru Akira zenshū* (Tokyo: Taimatsusha, 1977; revised and enlarged edition, Tokyo: Hisae, 1998). The remaining treatments are more recent: Sakamoto Kōshirō. *Inoue Kenkabō, Tsuru Akira: senryū kakushi no kishutachi* (Tokyo: Riburu Pōto, 1990). Okada Itto and Yamada Fumiko. *Senryūjin kisai "Tsuru Akira" no shōgai* (Osaka: Nihon kikanshi shuppan sentā, 1997). Fukai Ichirō. *Hansen senryū sakka Tsuru Akira* (Osaka: Nihon kikanshi shuppan sentā, 1998). Bitō Issen. *Tsuru Akira no senryū to sakebi* (Osaka: Shinyōkan shuppan, 2009). Kurumisawa Ken. *Da kara Tsuru Akira: teikō-suru jūshichi moji* (Tokyo: Shunyōdo, 2011). There is a compendium of the verses printed according to contemporary usage: Kimura Tetsuya. *Tē to ashi o moida maruta ni shite kaeshi: gendai kanazukaiban Tsuru Akira zensenryū* (Saku: Yū shorin, 2007). There is a novel: Yoshihashi Michio. *Shōsetsu Tsuru Akira: akatsuki o idaite* (Tokyo: Shin nihon shuppansha, 2009). The film is Kōyama Seijirō, dir. *Tsuru Akira: kokoro no kiseki* (2009).

children—for the sake of the country” (*Umeyo fuyaseyo kuni no tame*). This was a state motto, a war slogan that since the Meiji era epitomized the policy of creating a “rich country, strong military.”

When war started and no one knew when it would end, there weren't enough soldiers, enough males. Instantly the great brave chorus began, “Have many children.” On the street, over the radio, in the press, from newsreels, the cry could be heard, “Have many children.” There wasn't enough cannon fodder. There weren't enough slaves to use and discard. There weren't enough disposable horses who would attack on command. Have many children. Women, after all, are child-birthing machines. We'll award medals to families and women with many children, so have them, one after the other. One or two? Not enough. Five or six, a large family. If you have many children, you needn't worry if one or two are taken and made into soldiers. So long as the family has an heir, there's no pain, no complaint. If they become cannon fodder and die heroic deaths, you'll get a commendation, so don't complain, don't gripe. Have many children. There isn't enough cannon fodder.

#### MOTHER WIT: THE LIFEblood OF SENRYŪ

Together with the slogan “have more children, for the sake of the country,” this verse hit its mark at the heart of the “meritorious service” system and, pithy, excoriated it beautifully. Everyone realized vaguely, felt, understood; but the verse exposed the core without having to say it in a loud voice, without saying it. With a forceful rhetorical flourish appealing to the masses, it recruited the masses, mobilized them, eviscerated the state motto, the war slogan, and sneered at it.

But that wasn't all. In addition, this verse also excoriated and smiled wryly at the weakness, the impotence, the baseness of the masses—that in the face of this slogan's powerful appeal, we couldn't criticize or resist, of course, but couldn't do a thing, were powerless, could only be silent, perhaps smile wryly. Even if you had children and raised them, the boys would be made into cannon fodder, the girls into machines for producing cannon fodder. Yet parents couldn't resist that state of affairs or prepare or promise their children a better, brighter future than cannon fodder.

This weakness and baseness float up from this verse: telling us “There's nothing we can do” and “That's the way things are,” there's no way of course to change society, this lament for our weakness and impotence that we have to accept these commendations silently, this self-ridicule. At the same time as it criticizes authority, it spears mercilessly the weakness and inadequacies of us masses who bow to what authority says and stay pacified; the mother wit that is the most important part of senryū exists here, beyond a doubt.

## SENRYŪ ARE GRAFFITI

Senryū are an art close to graffiti. The mother wit in this verse arises from taking a familiar slogan and rewriting it into something unfamiliar. Demolishing the “for the sake of the country” of “Have more children, for the sake of the country,” placing “cannon-fodder” before and “medals” after, it transforms the intent of the slogan, hijacks it, exposes its hidden meaning.

The Ministry of Health issued this slogan formally in 1939. As the Japan-China war became prolonged, the population suddenly fell, births fell; so as a counter-policy, the Ministry of Health aped Nazi Germany’s “Ten rules for the selection of spouses” and published “Ten rules for marriage,” appealing to the people to support the country by having many children—“Choose someone with no bad genes,” “Have more children, for the sake of the country.” This pro-natalist slogan dated back to the Meiji era and supported “rich country, strong army”; it had become a household phrase. In the very midst of the Japan-China war that was turning into a quagmire, the Ministry of Health took that phrase and formalized it once more to preach to the people. When we consider that Tsuru Akira’s verse appeared all of two years earlier than the ministry’s appeal, we can understand just how deeply the slogan or state expression, “Have more children, for the sake of the country” had sunk into the nooks and crannies of society. Bit by bit, then soon on the streets, on the highways, on the radio, in newspaper ads, in newsreels, this slogan was broadcast all over, appeared all over. How to damage this slogan that blanketed city and town, how to subvert its meaning and intent, make nonsense of it? This verse gives the impression of a graffito, scribbled directly onto the posters and signs that filled the city, that then ran in its original form in magazines, newspapers, handbills. In the same way as the graffito that turned the wartime slogan “Luxury is the enemy” (贅沢は敵だ— *zeitaku wa teki da*) into “Luxury is great” (贅沢は素敵だ— *zeitaku wa suteki da*), it transformed the slogan and hijacked it.”<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the verses I published earlier in *Modern Haiku*, these senryū are not allegorical but straightforward and hard-hitting.<sup>4</sup> I have chosen two sequences that date to the poet’s last year, 1937. The first deals

3. Kurumisawa Ken. *Da kara Tsuru Akira*, front matter (unpaginated), v–viii.

4. “Proletarian Birds and Beasts: The Allegorical Short Verse of Tsuru Akira,” *Modern Haiku* 40.3 (autumn 2009), 39–52. I am preparing a book-length manuscript that includes most of the senryū Tsuru composed between 1928 and his death.

with tuberculosis. Its final verse, satirizing “TB Day,” epitomizes the impact that Kurumisawa celebrates, taking an official celebration and eviscerating it. The second traces the course of a strike.

肺

*HAI*

LUNGS

シキの底ひと息ごとの肺の煤

*Shiki no soko hitoikigoto no hai no susu*

Deep in the mineshaft  
every breath brings soot  
to the lungs.<sup>5</sup>

セメントでこわばった白い肺で血も吐けないのだ

*Semento de kowabatta shiroi hai de chi mo hakenai no da*

Lungs white and cemented  
can't cough up  
even blood.

鉄粉にこびりつかれて錆びる肺

*Teppun ni kobiritsukarete sabiru hai*

Encrusted  
with iron dust:  
rusty lungs.

5. Whereas elsewhere the poet uses Chinese characters for the word *shiki*, here he phoneticizes it and underlines it. That makes it possible to think of its homonym, “hour of death” (死期) and sets a very grim tone for the entire sequence.

もう綿くずを吸えない肺でクビになる

*Mō watakuzu o suenai hai de kubi ni naru*

Lungs no longer able to inhale  
cotton dust  
mean the axe.<sup>6</sup>

サナトリウムなど知らぬ長屋の結核菌

*Sanatoriumu nado shiranu nagaya no kekkakukin*

Tenement tuberculosis  
knows nothing like  
a sanatorium.

紡績のやまいまきちらしに帰るところにふるさどがある

*Bōseki no yamai makichirashi ni kaeru tokoro ni furusato ga aru*

Where can I go and spread  
cotton-mill disease?  
Home.

夜業の煤煙を吸えという朝々のラジオ体操か

*Yagyō no baien o sue to iu asa asa no rajio taisō ka*

Forced to do radio calisthenics each morning,  
I inhale night-shift  
soot and smoke.

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6. The first *Zenshū* has *Mō watakuzu mo...*: “even cotton dust.”

息づまる煙下の下の結核デー

*Ikizumaru enka no shita no kekkaku dē—*

Under  
suffocating smoke:  
TB Day.<sup>7</sup>

—February 15

すとらいき

*SUTORAIKI*

STRIKE

メーデーのない日本のストライキ

*Mēdē no nai Nihon no sutoraiki*

In a Japan  
that has no May Day:  
strike.<sup>8</sup>

要求を蹴りアゴヒモがたのみなり

*Yōkyū o keru agohimo ga tanomi nari*

Rejecting workers' demands,  
they rely on  
the fuzz.<sup>9</sup>

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7. The first edition of the *Zenshū* has *kemuri* for *enka* (literally, “under the smoke”), but the meaning remains the same.

8. The Japanese government outlawed May Day after 1936. Note that the Japanese transliteration of the English “strike” is five syllables long (*su-to-ra-i-ki*)—itself the final line of a *senryū*.

9. “The fuzz” is literally “chinstraps,” the straps that kept police helmets on.

歯車で噛まれた指で書く指令

*Haguruma de kamareta yubi de kaku shirei*

Fingers cogwheels chewed up  
write out  
strike orders.

翻る時を待ってる組合旗

*Hirugaeru toki o matteru kumiaiki*

Awaiting this day  
to flutter:  
union banners.

生きているな解雇通知の束がくる

*Ikite iru na kaiko tsūchi no taba ga kuru*

You're all goners:  
bundles of pink slips  
arrive.

裏切りをしろと病気の妻の顔

*Uragiri o shiro to byōki no tsuma no kao*

Sell out?  
I see  
my sick wife's face.



失業の眼にスカップの募集札

*Shitsugyō no me ni sukappu no boshūfuda*

Reflected in the eyes of the jobless:  
handbills  
recruiting scabs.

スカップが増えた工場のすすけむり

*Sukappu ga fueta kōjō no susukemuri*

From factories  
with scabs—  
black smoke.

缶詰にする暴力団を雇い入れ

*Kanzume ni suru bōryokudan o yatoiire*

To seal strikers and scabs in,  
they hire  
gangsters.

今からでもおそくないという裏切りの勧告書

*Ima kara de mo osoku nai to iu uragiri no kankokusho*

It's not too late even now:  
handbills urge  
sell-out.

送検にダラ幹だけがのこされる

*Sōken ni darakan dake ga nokosareru*

Who's left after mass arrests?  
Only the corrupt  
union bosses.

弾圧がいやならとれという歩増し

*Danatsu ga iya nara tore to iu bumashi*

You hate suppression?  
Then take this  
tiny raise.

くらしには足らぬ歩増しで売る争議

*Kurashi ni wa taranu bumashi de uru sōgi*

They sell out for a wage hike  
that's not enough  
to live on.

裏切りの甲斐なく病気の妻が死に

*Uragiri no kainaku byōki no tsuma ga shini*

He sold out in vain:  
his sick wife  
dies.

釈放を解雇通知が待っていた

*Shakuhō o kaiko tsūchi ga matte ita*

Pink slips await  
those released  
from detention.

ダラ幹が争議を売ればあがる株

*Darakan ga sōgi o ureba agaru kabu*

Corrupt union bosses sell out, and stocks rise—  
the company's  
and their own.

—*June 1*

**mb**