
REVIEWS

Okinawa, by Hasegawa Kai. Translations by David Burleigh and Tanaka Kimiyo (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2018). 102 pages; 5" × 7½". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-947271-22-7. Price: \$15.00 from www.redmoonpress.com.

Reviewed by Philip Rowland

In an interview published online in 2008 (*Simply Haiku*, vol. 6.3), Hasegawa Kai emphasizes the “hopeless[ness]” of translating Japanese haiku into Western languages, suggesting that “it is better to think of these translations as works separate from the originals.” Happily, this book resists that recommendation insofar as it supplies the reader with the Japanese originals, their transliteration in romaji, as well as extensive notes and an afterword by David Burleigh. The book is nonetheless aimed at a readership that will encounter the poems primarily through English. This review will therefore consider the haiku mainly in terms of their effectiveness as English poems, while taking the Japanese into account in some cases.

Hasegawa’s Preface, the Japanese version of which is addressed to “readers from English-language cultures,” voices his skepticism about translation to some extent, as he “wonder[s] how this invocation of ‘Okinawa,’ drawn from the heart of one Japanese, will be received in the unfamiliar language, land and haiku sensibility of English culture.” Putting aside the over-generalization—at least in translation—in the latter part of this statement (along with the reductive view, expressed in the above-mentioned interview with Hasegawa, of Japan as “a culture of *ma*” as opposed to Western literary culture in which “everything must be expressed by words”), the translators’ word-choice in describing *Okinawa* as an “invocation” is apt. The religious connotation is in keeping with the idea

of Okinawa as “sacred ground” (a phrase used in the preface’s title) and the poet’s concomitant hope to have made himself “a kind of ‘empty vessel’ ... to tell of [the] sorrow and regret” in which the islands, with their tragic, war-torn history, are steeped. On the other hand, the book’s epigraph, from an ancient Okinawan song to “Great Lord Sun,” is a paean to beauty: “ahh, look! how beautiful it is.” Sorrow and beauty: Hasegawa’s sequence of haiku embraces both.

There are fifty haiku in the main sequence, which was first published in Japanese in August 2015, and ten additional ones, also titled “Okinawa,” published two years later. The sequence begins with an abrupt reminder of the American military presence in Okinawa, so setting the scene for subsequent haiku that are often more explicitly concerned with suffering inflicted on the region, particularly towards the end of World War II:

球形の夏の空あり嘉手納基地
kyūkei no natsu no sora ari kadena kichi

the soaring arc
of the summer sky —
Kadena Base

It is only after reading the final line, which refers to a large American air base, that one thinks how “soaring” might just as aptly describe the “arc” of a fighter plane as a glorious summer sky (though the Japanese *kyūkei*, meaning “spherical,” does not carry the same suggestion of movement). The juxtaposition of images creates an evocative tension, not least between the perception of natural beauty and thought of the unnatural noise and violence that the base could unleash—and that was indeed unleashed by American and Japanese forces in the not-so-distant past.

The sense of strangeness, or de-familiarized sense of place, is carried over into the next haiku, which appears on the facing page:

忽然と戦闘機ある夏野かな
kotsuzen to sentōki aru natsuno kana

all of a sudden
 there sits a fighter plane —
 a field in summer

This gives a similar, somewhat disturbing sense of incongruity, of an object at odds with its environment. (Fay Aoyagi’s “intact zero fighter / at the Smithsonian — / cherry blossom rain” could make an interesting point of comparison). The translation is felicitous, particularly in its patterns of alliteration and assonance. But the Japanese text allows us to hear echoes of the first haiku more clearly: through the interplay, for instance, between the season words *natsu no sora* (summer sky) and *natsuno* (a field in summer), and the two forms of the same word, *ari / aru* (there is/are).

Turning the page, we find variation on imagery from both of the preceding haiku, as we revisit “the Base”:

光あふるる緑の芝を基地といふ
hikari afururu midori no shiba o kichi to iu

the brilliant green
 of lawns filled up with light
 that’s called a Base

Here, the amazement extends, in a kind of double take, to the strangeness of language itself, in its provisional naming of place (in this case, “a Base”). Entangled in political and historical implications, the attempt to see things “as they are” is not as straightforward as it might seem.

As I have indicated, the sequential cohesion of the haiku in *Okinawa* is distinctive and essential to its appreciation. There is, however, some unevenness in the quality of the haiku, at least as English poems. For example, I find it hard not to feel that the following haiku (which appear on facing pages) verge on the sentimental and/or didactic: “so gentle yet / devoured by people: / whales”; “devoured yet / with sympathy for men: / the whales.” The sequential links between these, the repetitions and echoes, also seem less subtle than is generally the case in this

collection. At times, the “political tinge to some of the poet’s current thinking” (noted by Burleigh) is expressed rather schematically, as in the following:

アメリカを父日本を母大夕焼
amerika o chichi nippon o haha ōyuyake

America as father
 Japan as mother —
 a blazing sunset

The “intrusion” of *katakana* (the syllabary used primarily for words of foreign origin, which Hasegawa rarely uses) with the word *amerika*, and the child-like simplicity of the poem’s statement, are arresting, but (again, for this reader) rather didactic—however self-consciously so. Perhaps a quieter adjective than “blazing,” to describe the big sunset sky (*ōyuyake*), would be preferable. Haiku from the collection that strike as powerfully, while avoiding over-generalization, include: “sorrow / like an enormous bat / comes,” and “Chinese hibiscus / just for a moment... / a rain of steel.” These succeed in catching and holding the attention, with both unexpected simplicity and specificity.

Overall, this is a short but satisfying collection, richly textured, ambitious in its choice of subject-matter. If there are lapses or moments of overreach, there are also many deeply compelling haiku that keep one returning to the sequence as a whole. With the translators’ lucid commentary, there is much of linguistic and cultural interest to dwell on, even with limited knowledge of Japanese. *Okinawa* whets the appetite for a larger bilingual selection of Hasegawa’s haiku.