

Essays

The Poetry of Pain and Its Meaning in the Age of COVID-19

by Michael Freiling and Shelley Baker-Gard

In late 2017, Shelley Baker-Gard was presented with a manuscript of poems, all in Japanese. They were brought to her by Duane Watari, a *sansei* (third-generation) Japanese American. Mr. Watari had discovered them among his mother's keepsakes and believed the poems were written by his grandfather, Masaki Kinoshita, who wrote under the pen name of Jonan.¹ Shelley brought the manuscript to Michael Freiling and together we examined its contents.

As we opened the manuscript and began to study it, we were surprised to discover that these poems had been written in an unexpected context: the Wartime Civilian Control Administration's (WCCA) North Portland Assembly Center, where Japanese Americans were incarcerated in the months after Pearl Harbor while they waited for their transport to camps farther inland, such as Heart Mountain in Wyoming and Minidoka in Idaho. The manuscript was, in fact, a journal of senryu poems composed by multiple senryu poets at the Assembly Center in August 1942.

Senryu poems are different from haiku. Although both Japanese poetic forms follow the traditional 5-7-5 structure, their focuses of attention are different. Haiku tend to be meditative observations springing from the contemplation of nature. Senryu, by contrast, tend to be earthier, occasionally acerbic commentaries on human life, relationships, and behavior (including misbehavior). Life in the WCCA Assembly Center, with its attendant uncertainties and anxieties, was naturally the focus of attention for the senryu recorded in this journal.

The poems were composed at a series of *senryu-kai* held regularly at the Assembly Center. *Senryu-kai* and *haiku-kai* are social gatherings where the members each contribute their own poems. The poems are sometimes composed independently and sometimes in a sequence. Quite often, contests are held where winning haiku or *senryu* are selected by a designated master or judge, or sometimes by a vote of the present attendees.

Gatherings at the WCCA Assembly Center were organized by the internees themselves. Their purpose appears to have been twofold: (1) to maintain morale by holding social events that would provide both enjoyment and shared experience, and (2) to give the internees an outlet for expressing their feelings.

Jonan, who was already an experienced poet in 1942, served as one of the key organizers, as well as the secretary who recorded the poems in the journal. This must have entailed a certain amount of risk because the possession of documents written in Japanese was generally forbidden. One internee was not even allowed to bring with her a copy of the *Man'yōshū*, a classic anthology of poems from the earliest period in Japanese literature.

Many of the poems in this clandestine manuscript were written by Jonan himself. We have also been able to identify several other prominent poets who had published independently or organized local Japanese-language poetry groups in the decades prior to WWII and after. Poets we identified include: Shinjiru Honda, Kaoru Kurokawa, Kyokuo Iko (Yakima, WA), Toyoko Tamura (Powell Valley, OR), Katsuhiko Shimizu (Yakima, WA), and Hisako Saito (Portland, OR).

The poignancy of uncertainty and anxiety was quite palpable, even in the very first poem we looked at, which turned out to be one of Kurokawa's:

汽車が出る迄を淋しく笑ひ合ひ
kisha ga deru made wo sabishiku warai ai

melancholy laughter
 helps us pass the time
 until the train departs

We were touched by these poems from our very first encounter. The writers of these poems are ordinary people trying to make the best of the unbearable. Instead of the delicate themes typically associated with Japanese haiku, feelings are often expressed directly in senryu, with a raw and sometimes caustic intensity. But this very intensity is what makes them so relevant today and presents the opportunity for us to share deeply in the emotions experienced by those Japanese Americans nearly 80 years ago.

Our experience working with these poems evolved against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the emotions expressed in these poems take on a new urgency during this unprecedented time in history. The most apparent parallel with 1942 and today has been the unfortunate tendency to blame ordinary Asian Americans for the catastrophes caused by COVID-19.

Beyond this sad parallel, however, the poems also highlight some of the shared, universal human experiences, though it is important to note that last spring's pandemic lockdown in no way compares with the injustices and discomforts experienced by the incarcerated Japanese Americans during WWII. We offer the following brief excerpts from the journal in hopes of better understanding the life that Japanese Americans led during their incarceration, as well offering us guidance on how to navigate our own set of challenging circumstances as we battle the pandemic—be it in the form of isolation, confinement, or even outright prejudice.

Looking Back

In this collection of senryu poems, there is a sense of loss and nostalgia for what the poets were forced to leave behind during their incarceration. Occasionally, this nostalgia relates to specific places, as when two internees from the same hometown in Japan encounter each other:

your neighborhood?
from the same hometown –
memories

Hisataro

Even sight of the world beyond the Assembly Center is enough to produce nostalgia for their former freedom:

beyond the barbed wire
a glow of neon lights –
tears in my eyes

Jonan

More often, however, the nostalgia relates to friends and family whom the internees fear they will never see again, often with good reason:

no longer heard
their so happy sounds –
dad's drunken songs

Jonan

Nearly all Japanese Americans treasured photographs of loved ones as a way of keeping their memories alive. Some would express their heartbreak through reference to these photos:

my husband left
and now I talk to him
in his picture

Jonan, quoting another resident

Perhaps most poignant is the loss of contact with children and grandchildren:

only this photo can hold
the child we talk about –
until peacetime comes

Goichi

Life in the Center

Life in the Wartime Civilian Control Administration's North Portland Assembly Center was unpleasant. The Center itself was a re-purposed livestock exhibition facility, and internees were herded into small stalls originally designed for horses and livestock—not for human beings.

Preparation of the facility by the military was a haphazard affair at best, which compounded the discomfort. In one infamous episode, the residents were forced to endure an infestation of flies attracted to the manure-laced dirt under the Center's hastily-assembled plywood floor.

Of course, life for Japanese Americans did not stop simply because it was uncontrollable. Babies continued to be born. Mangers, which were still present in several of the stalls, were used by some families as cribs in a painful parallel with the events of two thousand years ago that was not lost on the internees themselves:

grandmother too
awaits the baby's first cry
all on edge

Jonan

As normal, there were the usual conflicts between parents and their teenagers. These tensions were two-sided, as the younger members of the Assembly Center were forced to adjust to the expectations of their more traditional parents in such close quarters:

my mother says
things are not so simple –
duty beckons

Jonan, quoting another resident

There is even time for a game or two. Tennis matches and baseball games were popular:

hot summer day
the pitcher wipes sweat
off his face

Jonan

Fears and Anxieties

Uncertainties are often harder to bear than clearly defined hardships. And the Japanese Americans interned at the Assembly Center were faced with countless uncertainties. The greatest uncertainty, of course, was that they did not know when the war would be over or when they would be able to return to their homes.

More immediately, they did not even know where they would be shipped off to for the remainder of the war. And for some who

were considering repatriation to Japan, decisions like this were just too difficult to make:

stay forever or return home
the day of decision never comes –
just too much to bear

Roshyou

Heightening all the internees' already-pervasive anxiety, one of the military police on guard shot and killed one of their own cooks, mistaking him for a thief. This incident may very well have been the impetus for the below poem:

my daughter –
I watch more closely now
since it happened

Jonan, quoting another resident

Friendships made in the Assembly Center might not even survive the next few weeks:

accepting that
we may not meet again –
I squeeze your hand so tight

Choubou

The accumulated anxieties caused some Japanese Americans to express their readiness even for worst-case scenarios:

ten thousand miles I've come –
to be with you, ready
to die with you

Shousui

And some of the older residents began to despair that they would never see the light of freedom again:

it doesn't matter –
father has already written
his final wishes

Mokugyo

Reactions to Their Situation

Internees found many different ways to cope with the conditions in which they found themselves. Some found distraction in everyday activities:

now I know why
she snuggles with baby –
troubles vanish

Jonan

Some attempted to express their feelings with humorous irony:

even autumn
comes on command here
at the assembly center

Jonan

While others resorted to more cutting and sarcastic commentary:

their free movie
such generosity
escapes me

Jonan

Some envied childhood when methods for coping with stress were more intuitive:

for the toddler
security from a thumb –
a peace I need

Jonan

Some sought consolation in looking beyond the internment to a time when even the internment itself would yield memories:

someday after –
Center name cards just might
become nostalgic

Jonan

It is quite common in *senryu-kai* for different personalities to take completely different approaches when considering a question. Two poets here offer different opinions on the question of why they were ordered to leave their homes in the first place. The first appears to more or less take the U.S. military's stated reasons for incarceration, looking forward to exoneration:

cleared of suspicion
for the sake of this country
a new life for me

Jonan

The second, not without good reason, takes a more cynical view of the entire affair. Unstated, but implicit in the poem, is the distinct possibility that ulterior motives were at work in the decision to round them up in internment camps:

they never asked
suspicious or not –
just put us away

Sen Taro

Resolution and Peace

Several of the most uplifting poems in this manuscript illustrate the ways in which the Japanese Americans came to terms with their circumstances and achieved a certain peace and optimism:

have come to this point –
accepting what will be but still
holding on to hope

Hikari

In some cases, we even see signs of what might be termed an interior transformation in the face of great obstacles:

peace overtakes my heart –
allowing events to follow
the course that was ordained

Goichi

In Summary

Many of these poems display cultural values that are often attributed to the Japanese people: perseverance, patient endurance, and doing what duty requires. But what also clearly stands out in the variety of individual expressions is a kaleidoscope of basic humanity. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all of us around the world. Our reactions to these new circumstances have become similar in many ways—we have good days and bad days, positive and not so positive feelings, and yet somehow, life continues. In

that light, these poems represent a tribute to the human spirit in its near infinite adaptability and its willingness to find a way to nurture and sustain life, even during the worst of circumstances.

We wish to thank Ms. Satsuki Takikawa, who assisted in producing the initial translations of these poems. Mike would especially like to thank the late William Morlock, his high school teacher, who first brought this tragedy of the treatment of Japanese Americans to his attention.

Notes:

1. The translations in this essay are excerpted from our forthcoming book, which will be *They Never Asked: WWII Senryu Poetry by Japanese Americans at the Portland Assembly Center*, an anthology of WWII Japanese American senryu poetry written at the North Portland WCCA Assembly Center. It will include a wider selection of poems from the Assembly Center, as well as many notes on the historical background and translation details required for understanding some of the poems.

Michael Freiling was born in San Francisco and earned his PhD in artificial intelligence at MIT. He studied poetry under David Ferry at Wellesley and was co-founder and contributor to the first issue of Rune, which eventually became MIT's official literary magazine. In 1977, Michael was named a Luce Scholar with an appointment to Kyoto University, where he studied Japanese and produced a translation of the Hyaku Nin Isshu, a well-known anthology of Heian Period tanka. Michael returned to Japan in 2014 for the first time in 25 years.

*Shelley Baker-Gard is the current HSA Regional Coordinator for Oregon. She has been writing haiku and senryu for many years, publishing in several anthologies including *New Bridges: A Haiku Anthology* (2018) by the Portland Haiku Group. Shelley is a Portland State University graduate with a B.S. in anthropology and an M.S. in communications. Born in Portland, OR, Shelley continues to live there with her family enjoying travels along Portland's Spring Water Corridor Trail.*