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| journal or publication title | Comparative culture, the journal of Miyazaki International College |
| volume | 22 |
| page range | 126-132 |
| year | 2017 |
| URL | http://id.nii.ac.jp/1106/00000707/ |

The Poems of Bokusui Wakayama, Translations

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若山 牧水, *Wakayama Bokusui*, (1885–1928) was a modern Japanese tanka poet from Miyazaki Prefecture in southern Kyushu. He was active at the beginning of the 20th century, during the tanka revival started by Yosano Tekkan (1873 -1935), who founded the the literary magazine *Myoji* (Bright Star) in Tokyo in 1900 as a means, in part, towards infusing greater energy and freshness into the traditional form. Between 1908 and 1912, Bokusui’s poems gained popularity through publication in *Myoji*. Like other members of the *Myoji* group, Bokusui’s poems, according to the Japanese translator and literary scholar Donald Keene, were “filled with romantic expressions of grief and longing” but they also possessed something quite distinctive: “a vitality and a feeling for nature that set his work apart.” Keene suspects this quality of Bokusui’s poetry may be attributed to Bokusui’s country origins – he was born and raised in rural Miyazaki Prefecture. Bokusi traveled widely throughout Japan and Korea during his lifetime, composing a great many tanka along the way. He greatly enjoyed sake and this most likely contributed to his early death at forty-three years of age of liver illness.

01: 白鳥はかなしからずや空の青海のあをにも染まずただよふ

A lone white bird stays
in the air without fading
into the blueness of sky or sea
and I can't help wondering
how profound its sorrow must be

02: とこしへに解けぬひとつの不可思議の生きてうごくと自らをおもふ

An eternally unsolved
mysterious being is still
living and moving;
I cannot help thinking so
whenever I see myself

03: 海底うみなぞこに眼まなこのなき魚ういしの棲むといふ眼まなこの無き魚ういしの恋こひしかりけり

Whenever I hear
a story about an eyeless fish
living in the deep sea,
I'm desperately sick for the sight
of it, ah, my eyeless fish

04: かたはらに秋ぐさの花かたるらくほろびしものはなつかしきかな

A tiny autumn flower
blooming right beside me
whispers quietly:
“O, whatever has perished
returns everlastingly to us!”

05: 初夏の曇りの底に桜咲き居りおとろへはてて君死ににけり

At the bottom of
a cloud-filled, early-summer day
the cherry blossoms
are at their best and you, wasted
and weakened, have met your death

6: 水無月の青く明けゆく停車場に少女にも似て動く機関車

At a train station
awakening with paleness
at dawn in June
almost like a vestal girl
a steam locomotive stirs

07: ふるさとの尾鈴^{おすず}の山のかなしさよ秋もかすみのたなびきて居り

How sorrowful it appears
the mountain of my home town,
Mount Osuzu, a haze
hovering about it even
on this clearest autumn day

08: 津の国の伊丹の里ゆはるばると白雪来るその酒来る

All the way from a brewer
in the remote Itami village
it reaches me at last
the grand brand “White Snow,”
the gem of the Tsu region

(Note: “The Itami village” in “The Tsu region” is now called the Itami city in Hyogo Prefecture)

09: やと握るその手この手のいづれみな大きからぬなき青森人よ

A surprise to me –
the large hands and strong grip
of everyone I meet
here as I finally reach
northernmost Aomori

10: それほどにうまきかと人のとひたらばなんと答へむこの酒の味

How should I
answer if someone asks
why I am so
out of my mind with it –
this sake's exquisite flavor

11: 海鳥の風にさからふ^{ひと}一ならび一羽くづれてみなくづれたり

Against the ocean wind
a straight line of birds float
until, suddenly,
one of them begins to stray
and then they all go straying

12: 茂りあふ松の葉かげにこもりたる日ざしは冬のむらさきにして

Condensed behind
the luxuriant leaves of
pine trees the winter
sunshine oozes
into a deepening purple

13: 鮎焼きて母はおはしきゆめみての後もうしろでありありと見ゆ

Even after the dream
of my dearest mother broiling
a sweetfish alone,
I still see her
from behind, so clearly