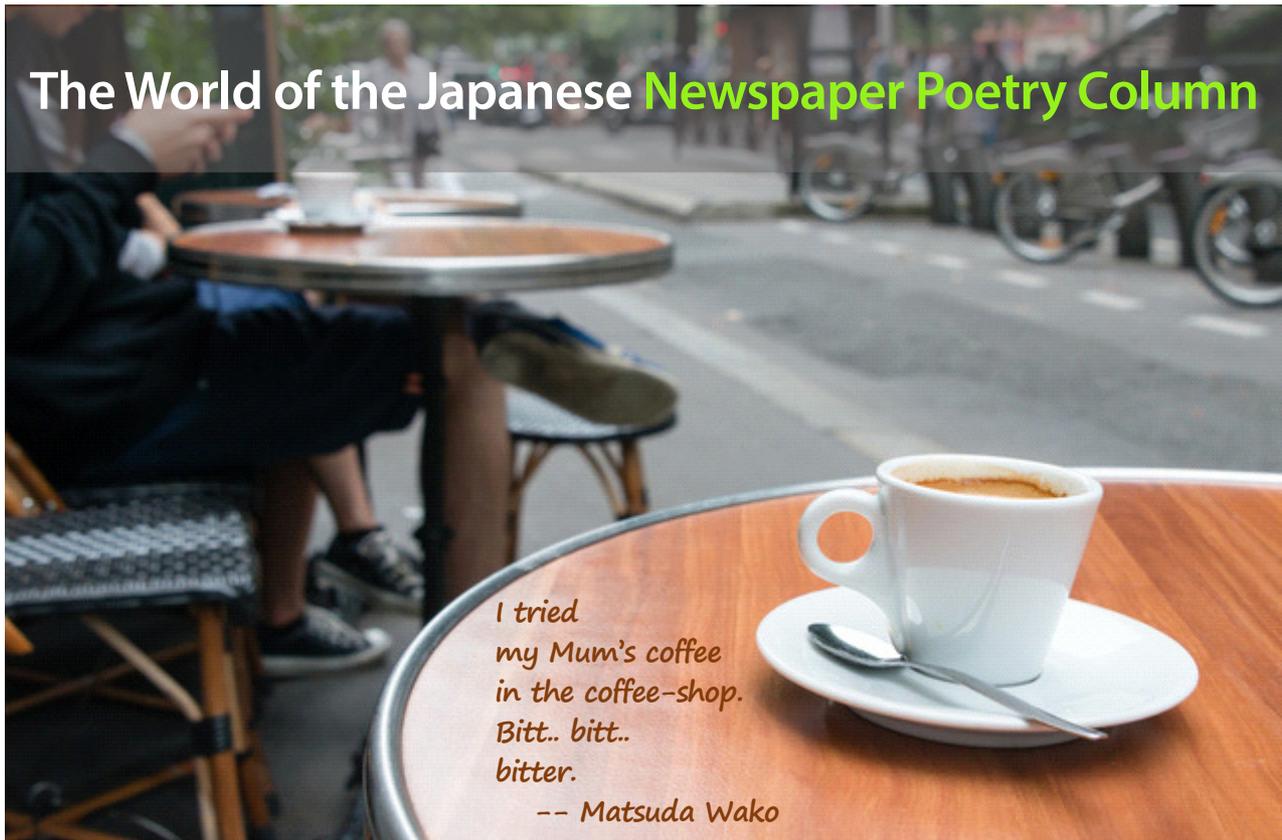




The World of the Japanese Newspaper Poetry Column



*I tried
my Mum's coffee
in the coffee-shop.
Bitt.. bitt..
bitter.*

-- Matsuda Wako

Newspaper poetry columns called *shimbun kadan* have given numerous popular poets their start. They publish verse that is erotic and that is cute, that is about love, and that is about everyday life. Just don't say that only the people who submit poems read them. The poetry in question is *tanka*, a short form of poetry having 31 (5-7-5-7-7) syllabets which dates from the Meiji period (1868–1912) and differs from the traditional form of poetry called *waka* as showcased in the eighth-century *Man'yōshū* and other such poetry anthologies commissioned by the Emperor.

Asaba Michiaki, writer

Newspaper tanka are the avant-garde

"That's a funny place for a mole," so you said. And so it started."

Yagimoto Motomoto, Tokyo

Is the above really a tanka too? Many people these days might say, "Yes. So what?" It uses colloquial speech and quotation marks; and it ignores the 5-7-5-7-7 syllable formula of tanka composition. Compared to traditional tanka, it breaks the rules. Yet, it is now over thirty years since the release of Tawara Machi's "Salad Anniversary," a work that popularized modern tanka, and for those accustomed to the various forms of avant-garde tanka, this verse may not seem particularly strange.

And as you can see, it is rather an erotic poem; but not shockingly so. By today's standards, at least.

Still, would you be surprised that this poem was selected for the Sunday-morning edition of a major Japanese newspaper; and in the reader-submitted poetry column of that major newspaper, no less? How do you imagine a newspaper poetry column? Contributors who are all well into old age? Thirty-one syllabet verses submitted from all over Japan and which sincerely convey the profound emotions of everyday life or the rigors of life during and after WW2? Poems selected by elderly and respected poetry experts? Is that your impression of a newspaper poetry column?

In fact, the poem above was taken from the June 19, 2016 morning edition of the *Nikkei* (*Nihon keizai shimbun*). And it seems that the poet was in their 20s.

The pages of the *Nikkei* and Japan's other austere broadsheets may be packed with endless formulaic everyday expressions, but in fact they are also a place to encounter avant-garde literature; namely their columns containing reader-submitted tanka and haiku.

Here's another example.

*Ten minutes at big [poetry] meeting spent discussing how to read two tiny characters [々々].
Mizuno Takeshi, Sagamihara (Mainichi shimbun morning edition, May 11, 2015)*

At first glance, most Japanese people would have no idea what this is about. In Japanese, the poem contains two characters “々々” that it's not obvious how to read.

Take a look at the first tanka in this article. That poet's given name is the same two characters. Mizuno Takeshi's poem seems to be about that author. Despite the fact that newspaper poetry columns receive a huge number of entries from all over Japan, and only a tiny handful are published, a number of poets appear regularly, and of those that appear regularly, Yagimoto is one of the most prolific. Recently, it has been unusual for a day to go by without one of her poems appearing in the *Nikkei*, *Tokyo shimbun*, *Mainichi shimbun* or other newspaper. Sometimes, several are even selected on the same day.

To many of those who submit poems, these regular contributors are both an object of admiration and rivalry, as well as being stars of the field. “Big meeting” is probably a shorthand for a tanka seminar in the local culture center, or maybe a poetry writing lesson, or maybe a lecture on the poetry of Saito Mokichi or Kawano Yuko. It wouldn't be surprising if the discussion there turned to the pronunciation of Yagimoto's given name—her pseudonym.

In fact, the pronunciation of her name can be quickly confirmed. Yagimoto has a blog called “Apartment.” Right at the top she introduces herself saying: “My name is Yagimoto Motomoto. Yagimoto Motomotomoto is OK too. I'll even respond to Yagimototototo. Moto! is fine too.” In another of her blogs, “Atogaki Zenshu” (“Postscript Complete Works”), Yagimoto features Mizuno's poem and suggests that the use of her given name is coincidental. But I think she is just being modest.

Playing with pen-names like this is quite typical of modern poets. Traditionally, there was often an element of humor to the pen names of haiku poets, but the avant-garde poets Terayama Shuji and Tsukamoto Kunio used their real names, as did the popular poet Tawara Machi. The poets popular more recently, however, include Saito, Shinkuwa, and Torii (although Saito claims that is his real name). Rather than going

through the once customary route of publication in poetry circle magazines, many poets now make their debut on the Internet. One reason for the increasing prevalence of these names may be that they are an extension of pseudonyms poets use when contacting a radio program, or posting on the Internet.

But even putting aside her name, there is plenty to catch the attention in Yagimoto's poetry.

School. Twelve years sitting on four legs.

(April 6, 2015. Mainichi shimbun)

Caught stars. You told me never to catch everything. I said yes anyway.

(April 28, 2015. Mainichi shimbun)

How many more times in my life, must I see people I don't know kissing?

(May 2, 2015. Nikkei)

Some of her recent poems however, are a little difficult for an amateur like me to understand.

Softly. One then two people disappear. Summer meals like a ray of light.

(August 15, 2016. Mainichi shimbun)

Can you understand it? I can't at all. The Mizuno Takeshi mentioned above is another regular in the newspaper poetry columns. Originally, he was a famous *senryu* poet, and apparently his main occupation is as a copywriter.

If I had to be spurned, would Sawajiri Erica or Yoshitaka Yuriko be better?

(September 21, 2015. Mainichi shimbun)

Note: Sawajiri and Yoshitaka are female actors popular among young people.

When you really know about professional wrestling, you know it is based on love.

(August 3, 2008. Mainichi shimbun)

Tokyo Station. What do you want to be, mate? You are always under construction somewhere.

(September 25, 2011. Mainichi shimbun)

These poems refer to the figures and events of the entertainment and subculture worlds. With a sense of humor, Mizuno seems to try to share his personal feelings about real situations. There's an air of the 1980s to

the ideas. This was a time when copywriters were heroes. A so-called New Wave of tanka poets gave their poems this kind of feel when making their debuts in the 1980s. Then, about a decade ago, they started to get involved with newspaper poetry columns: poets such as Kato Jiro and Yonekawa Chikako for the *Mainichi*, Homura Hiroshi for the *Nikkei*, Higashi Naoko for the *Tokyo shimbun* and Tawara Machi in the *Yomiuri shimbun*. It was always these judges who selected colloquial and surreal verse by poets with whimsical and strange names (when poets send in their works, they can request which judge will read them). This also applied to the poems of Yagimoto Motomoto and, as far as I know, her work has never been selected for the *Asahi shimbun* poetry column by its council system with four judges.

Having said that, erotic poems like the one at the beginning of this article are understandably rare in newspaper columns. Although there are so-called sexual love poems in the tanka world, these are written by women placing emphasis on sex and the body. Still, the following poem was published in one column.

Good evening. This breeding is illegal. Please withdraw immediately.

Kinoshita Tatsuya, Shunan. (February 17, 2014. Mainichi shimbun)

This poet is another regular contributor: a poetry talent who started out as a copywriter and made his name on the Internet. It's a humorous poem in the vein of Murata Sayaka's science fiction works.

"Moe" affection in the newspaper poetry column—Phenomena like otaku culture can be seen

I braid your hair, without asking who you are going to meet.

Matsuda Yukiko, Toyama

When this poem was published on January 19, 2015 in the *Asahi shimbun* morning edition, a frisson must have run through fans of the poetry column across the country. It was about a mother's hesitation as her daughter is about to go on a first date; but not just that. In fact, the daughter in the poem was a young star known to all the column's readers.

On Sundays, I go to The Word-Playground to meet Riko and Wako

Kai Midori, Iizuka. (November 7, 2011. Asahi shimbun)

The "Word-Playground" is the name for the *Asahi shimbun*'s Sunday poetry column, while Riko and Wako are Matsuda Yukiko's two daughters. In 2007, eight-year-old Riko and five-year-old Wako were already skilled poets. By 2010, their work had been selected for the prestigious *Asahi shimbun* column and they were becoming well-known.

The train goes through lots of tunnels, I heard. So, I invited Natsume Soseki too.

Matsuda Riko, Toyama. (December 6, 2010. Asahi shimbun)

I tried my Mum's coffee in the coffee-shop. Bitt.. bitt.. bitter.

Matsuda Wako, Toyama. (January 10, 2011. Asahi shimbun)

My sister wants to be an adult now. I'll stay in my chrysalis.

Matsuda Riko, Toyama. (September 26, 2011. Asahi shimbun)

"She looked just like you," said the boys. Chances it was my sister: 100 out of 100."

Matsuda Wako, Toyama. (July 21, 2014. Asahi shimbun)

In 2011, Riko was in the sixth year of elementary school and Wako in the third. As time went when on, readers of the "Word-Playground" column got a dazzling and real-time view of their lives: their new sailor-uniforms and love for their soft toys; their anguish at giving up desserts for a diet; devoting themselves to test study, piano lessons, and choir; going hoarse cheering school sports clubs; being spellbound by the surface of Lake Biwa and the fresh new leaves in Kyoto on a family holiday; traveling to Tokyo and Oregon in the United States; and then, before readers knew it, entering adolescence with secrets from both each other and their mother.

My name alongside Matsuda Wako's. But her poem as fresh as a newly laid egg.

Seki Tatsuo, Nagano. (October 17, 2011. Asahi shimbun)

"Wako has started middle school." This morning, here and there, middle-aged ladies smile.

Tamura Aya, Nasushiobara. (March 10, 2014. Asahi shimbun)

There were poems like this:

A white handout from the suntanned hand of a boy. Back to school.

Matsudo Riko (September 19, 2011. Asahi shimbun)

But eventually, also like this:

Aroma of rice cake wrapped in an oak leaf. Unrequited love yet sweeter.

Matsudo Riko (May 28, 2012. Asahi shimbun)

Her poems became so candid and subtle. No wonder her fans were captivated as they watched her grow up:

Will Wako soon be writing poems of love? Another fluttering heart.

Tanabe Yoshiki, Fujiyoshida. (July 22, 2013. Asahi Shimbun)

What a poem to be selected! Riko had reached the age when one writes poems of unrequited love, and so too soon would Wako. Their watching fans experienced a melancholy happiness. Other hearts were fluttering too. And their mother Matsuda Yukiko wrote her poem about braiding her daughter's hair.

My sister eating chocolates (not from him) on Valentine's Day. No questions allowed.

Matsuda Wako (March 16, 2015. Asahi shimbun)

Mum, Dad and I, gently watch my noisy sister's clumsy attempts at love.

Matsuda Wako (June 14, 2015. Asahi shimbun)

Once I can properly hit that high b-flat... then I'll tell him.

Matsuda Wako (June 22, 2015. Asahi shimbun)

Sister's special friend coming to our house. Cleaning, shopping, nerves, and smiles.

Matsuda Wako (October 26, 2015. Asahi shimbun)

Tests are coming. But we got to share a whole sunset walking home.

Matsuda Wako (November 2, 2015. Asahi shimbun)

"Boyfriends are all sorts of trouble." Listening, and eating hot apple pie.

Matsuda Wako (January 18, 2016. Asahi shimbun)

Scuff-marks on my shoes. Memories of spring and love.

Matsuda Riko (May 16, 2016. Asahi shimbun)

First dates and first boyfriends. The column's many readers shared the "first" experiences of these sensitive and quick-witted young girls. It was exceptional as literature, and maybe as media too.

Wondering whether this emotion is a crush or love? Then I heard of "moe" and understood.

Nakano Michio, Kobe. (March 11, 2016. Mainichi shimbun)

These last ten years or so, adolescent and adult men in Japan have been captivated by so-called “moe anime” and “kuki-kei”: genres that feature in Japanese anime, manga, video games and light-novels. The multiple heroines of these stories are infantile girls of middle and high-school age, but the plots have few dramatic incidents (including romance) and the stories instead offer an unending supply of everyday tomfoolery (please note that this author is not an expert). Lucky Star and K-ON were two of the first, but many have followed (again: I do not know the details). It would be hard to completely rule out the possibility that the *Asahi shimbun* poetry column readers following Wako and Riko’s adolescence with such avid attention are not part of this “moe” trend, which is itself part of today’s distinctive “otaku” culture. I hear that beautiful young sisters with contrasting personalities are a standard trope of these anime and other media (again: I do not know the details!)

The *Asahi shimbun* poetry column has worked quite hard to uncover these schoolgirl poetry stars. As well as Wako and Riko there are other regular contributors such as Nakamura Momoko, a young girl with a penchant for the sciences. Some Internet commentators have even suggested that the column is favoring them too much.

Two tones of voice for two brothers. Special sister skills.

Nakamura Momoko, Nagoya. (May 30, 2016. Asahi shimbun)

Sitting formally while watching a period drama on TV. Am I weird?

Muro Ayako, Ashiya. (October 10. Asahi shimbun)

The literary critic Yasudo Yojuro criticized the adoration of women in the Western chivalry tradition as still having an impure sense of possession. Instead, he praised the selflessness of Otomo no Yakamochi who did nothing but longingly admire young girls he didn’t know as they passed by (In my springtime garden, on the path beneath the peach blossoms radiating a crimson glow, a maiden steps in view and pauses for a moment. [Translated by Haitani Kanji]). Perhaps it is the same sentiment as in this verse from the *Man’yoshu*?

Although, I think that kind of perspective is much more unpleasant. As it happens, there is also this poem from Matsuda Riko:

Sometimes the Man’yoshu and I meet by chance. Yakamochi, like a pure white lily.

Matsuda Riko (October 29, 2012. Asahi shimbun)

Ah. These days, it seems that Riko is paying attention towards Yakamochi, not us. And it’s a very grown-up kind of attention too.

Outlaws in the newspaper poetry column

Before jail, my eyes are like a dying man's. Sky, river and green. All so beautiful.

(September 5, 2016. Asahi shimbun)

Busy days getting ready for jail. A summer swallow cuts through the wind.

(June 6, 2016. Asahi shimbun)

"You'll have a healthy life in jail," assures the doctor. I smile and say thanks.

(June 6, 2016. Asahi shimbun)

I saw a baby from the van to the jail. A light I won't see again.

(July 4, 2016. Asahi shimbun)

A young prisoner helps me, when the guards aren't looking.

(September 19, 2016. Asahi shimbun)

Midday sun streams into my solitary cell. Marx's words leap off the page.

(October 17, 2016. Asahi Shimbun)

A new TV drama started in early summer 2016. The opening scene showed a man enjoying his last melancholy days of freedom, the rest of the series was to portray his life in jail. This was a fictionalized account of Sogame Hirofumi, a man arrested for the 1986 rocket attack on the State Guest House. Although he was released after a long period in initial detention, his almost three decades long trial resulted in a guilty verdict and him returning to jail.

In other words, he was a terrorist. Sogame insisted that the charges against him were false, but there is no doubt he was a member of an extreme left group. He sent his prison missives from Hitachinaka City (Ibaraki Prefecture), and not to *Zenshin* (the newspaper of the Japan Revolutionary Communist League, National Committee) either, but to the *Asahi shimbun*. And they will probably continue to be featured. Isn't that incredible?

Sogame had a forerunner. In 1985, Go Hayato started serving a life sentence in a California jail. Then in 1996, his first tanka was selected for publication in the *Asahi shimbun's* poetry column, and he has been a regular contributor ever since. More than that, Go Hayato might be described as one of the column's stars. Yet his crime was murder.

"Vicious criminals" become children. Getting all excited at the Godzilla movie tonight.

(March 11, 2001. Asahi shimbun)

An elderly blind prisoner is sentenced to death. Executions come quicker and quicker.

(February 20, 2006. Asahi shimbun)

Go's early and later works can be read in his book of poetry, *Lonesome Hayato* (Gentosha). An even earlier forerunner was Sakaguchi Hiroshi, who was sentenced to death for the United Red Army Lynching incident. His poems were published in the *Asahi shimbun* from the late Showa period to early Heisei, and can be read in *Sakaguchi Hiroshi: Tanka Collection* (*Asahi shimbun*). But here's a thought. If Sogane or Sakaguchi had been right-wing terrorists, would the *Asahi* have published their poems?

While perhaps they don't have quite the same impact as prison poets, there is another group at the fringes of society making its voice heard: homeless poets. The first such poet to become well-known was Kuden Kouichi, and *The Winter of the Homeless Poet* by Miyama Takashi is a non-fiction account of attempts to track the poet down. Although in the end Miyama did not find the poet, he still managed to produce an interesting read, including fascinating interviews with poetry column contributors. Kuden Kouichi contributed poems for nine months, left 36 tanka, then disappeared. But it seems that he had an influence; between then and now several other homeless poets have made their debut in the *Asahi*.

A vast, endless sky. A rucksack on my back. Stepping out onto the street.

Udo Kenkichi, homeless. (February 24, 2014. Asahi shimbun)

A year ago, I longed to die on the road. Now, I'm mad for a warm house.

Udo Kenkichi, homeless. (December 1, 2015. Asahi shimbun)

I wonder. Will call up papers arrive even in this homeless man's post box?

Tsubouchi Masao. (June 29, 2015. Asahi shimbun)

An invitation to earn my fortune in Fukushima. It seems everyone gets a work quota now.

Tsubouchi Masao. (January 20, 2014. Asahi shimbun)

It seems that Udo also had a longing for freedom: a fierce and real freedom which he went on to live. His dilemma is an eternal issue that applies to us all in some way, especially we male intellectuals. At the end of the day, this is why convict and homeless poets are fascinating, and the place they come together.

A whore invites me for a good time before I am castrated. Nights of defeat in the Pacific War.

Furukawa Toshii, Fukushima. (February 22, 2016. Asahi shimbun morning edition)

Three thousand fireworks. If only we'd had such firepower in the war.

Kondo Akira, Numazu. (August 26, 2007. Nikkei)

Even for someone like me who doesn't much like war poems, I can't help being moved by these two. It must be that naughty child living inside every man that gets excited.

Fights and games during lessons. Boys are all babies. Too much trouble!

Muro Ayako, Nishinomiya. (November 18, 2013. *Asahi shimbun* morning edition)

True even of an old man like me. That's enough thanks, Ayako.

Old age in the newspaper poetry column

For those of us past a certain age, what awaits us just round the corner is also vividly portrayed in the newspaper poetry columns. In a famous Japanese song, Sakamoto Kyu sang: "Tomorrow will come. Tomorrow will come. I'm young and I have a dream." Even if tomorrow comes for we elderly, we are unlikely to have the same dreams.

Elderly people form the core of the tanka world, and in fact poems about old age are common. There are poems about caregiving and institutions, the pain of illness and approaching death, regrets and nostalgia and longings for home. But for me, who is steadily approaching the entrance to that stage in my life, the various down-to-earth observations in the following poems feel fresh and new. And they gradually work their effect on me.

Still looking for myself. Suddenly, I'm 70 years old.

Ando Yoshio, Ryugasaki. (October 19, 2003. *Nikkei* morning edition)

Grandmothers around me slowly disappearing. One day, it's me who's a grandma.

Kobayashi Takako, Tokyo. (February 18, 2002. *Nikkei* morning edition)

Sisters that never looked alike in youth, start to look the same as they age. How strange.

Saezaki Mitsuaki, Fukuoka. (August 6, 2006. *Nikkei* morning edition)

One day, I noticed an old man's face in the mirror. I've had the same face since.

Fujikashi Toki, Ichikawa. (October 17, 2005. *Nikkei* morning edition)

Once you get used to that old man's face, perhaps these are the yearnings that come next?

E-mail contacts disappearing one by one. I'll soon be sending e-mails up there.

Itasaka Toshikazu, Higashiyamato. (October 31, *Yomiuri shimbun*)

Maybe the poetry columns will be soon be receiving contributions from the righteous in the Buddhist Western Pure Land? Will the talented young girls be in the children's limbo, and the unruly outlaws in hell?
On that note, how about this tanka lament?

Developing a system to send e-mail from Heaven. Yours, Steve Jobs.

Suzuki Eiji, Kamakura. (December 2, 2012. Asahi shimbun)

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