

## Takako ARAI

### “Writing the Not-Self” and Me

I’m probably like a lot of other poets because my first book was a collection of love poems, with some about heartbreak too. I could say that this work was a product of my romantic period. Back then, I focused on describing the “Self.” However, after turning thirty, I was no longer capable of all that romance. I began trying to write poems whose speaker was a “Not-Self,” but at first I just produced a pile of junk. I finally succeeded by writing as if I had taken on the identity of my mother.

One possible difference between poetry and fiction is that, in poetry, it’s important for the “I” in the work to grow extremely close to the author’s “I.” Otherwise, the poem’s language will end up lacking a strong rhythm. I found a way to bring those two “I”s together, but the “I” in the work became a mysterious blend of the mother “Yoshie” and the daughter “Takako.”

My mother was born into the main branch of the Arai family, which had been a presence in the city of Kiryu for over twenty generations. The family business was textiles, and she lived through both its glory and ruin in the modern era. My mother’s spirit was fierce. When I saw *Gone with the Wind*, I thought that she resembled Scarlett O’Hara, despite looking nothing like Vivian Leigh. By entering into and taking on the self of another—in this case, my mother—I started using my work to reexamine Japan’s modern history and the sharp decline of regional Japan. In this way, “Writing the Not-Self” is not limited to lyric poetry; in fact, I would say that it has taught me an approach to epic poetry.

From that emerged my interest in the female shamans known as *miko*. There are even a few blind *miko* throughout the islands of Japan who perform activities such as serving as mediums and maintaining oral folklore traditions. I myself don’t go into a trance when I write. However, the origin of “Writing the Not-Self” was surely stories conveyed by those shamans from long before what we know as modern literature.

While playing the role of my mother, I was free not to worry about my responsibility as a writer. She’s family, so she didn’t complain about my poems. However, another aspect of “Writing the Not-Self” came to my attention when my interest in collapse as a poetic theme drew me to the Tōhoku region of northeastern Japan after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. I saw how “Writing the Not-Self” involves taking information that belongs to others for a writer’s own use.

I’ve repeatedly gone to the city of Ōfunato in Iwate Prefecture, an area impacted by the disaster, but I haven’t written any poems in which the “I” assumes the persona of those who died there or their loved ones. The only poem about the 2011 tsunami that I managed to write was about a shoe that washed up on the shore—in other words, a requiem from the perspective of a physical object.

Did I hold back because I wasn’t directly affected by the tragedy? Was it because I felt an ethical responsibility toward the victims? What really happened is that I reached my “limit.” Poetry is truly a

mysterious form of literature. You write it yourself, and yet you also feel that something greater is writing through you. In this case, I was not “chosen” by that greater thing to write realistic poetry about people’s experiences.

I continue to have a strong interest in the Tōhoku area. At its core, the “Not-Self” I cultivated there isn’t a tangible person. Instead, as I’ve been exploring traditional tales and folk culture, I’ve been calling out to the various spirits present throughout the region. Perhaps my interest in *miko* was my point of entry into the area. The work written from all of this has a stronger scent of death and blood than my earlier writing. On the day of the earthquake and tsunami, around twenty thousand people suddenly lost their lives, and I believe that has had an indirect influence on me. It seems that what the earthquake taught me was a form of spiritual epic poetry.

In addition, as part of an ongoing project in the affected area, I’ve done things such as putting a book together with the older women of Ōfunato, as well as working on a documentary about those women. I think that the ethics of “Writing the Not-Self” lie in building an intimate and enduring relationship with the people tied to that region.

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