

CHOW Hon Fai

A Meteor that Shines Again and Again: The Poetry of Misuzu Kaneko

The life of a writer is a saga—I know, because I am finally living it.

When I was listening to my favorite radio program about poetry sometime last year, the presenter (also a great poet) introduced a frequently overlooked poet from Japan. The first poem read in the program was “Snow Pile” (in Chinese translation of course):

*Snow on top
Must feel chilly,
The cold moonlight piercing it.*

*Snow on the bottom
Must feel burdened
By the hundreds who tread on it.*

*Snow in the middle
Must feel lonely
With neither earth nor sky to look at.*

Can you hear the voice of loneliness? Since the poem is written for children, the words, images and subject matter is simple. However, the meaning beneath the childlike surface is mature, so I felt the deeper impact of the poem in my mind. At that moment, I told myself I must commit to memory this poet’s name: Misuzu Kaneko.

I searched for information about Misuzu’s life on the Internet, and then I bought a complete collection of her poetry—Misuzu had written 512 poems in three pocket diaries until she committed suicide in 1930, when she was only twenty-seven years old. Before that tragedy, her poems were published in several famous magazines. She became a star of children’s poetry. Soon, she was married, and then was pregnant. Unfortunately, her husband was unfaithful, prohibited her writing, used violence against her, and gave her gonorrhea. Moreover, when she decided to get divorced, her

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husband took their four-year-old daughter away. All this sent Misuzu into deep despair. In her poem “Cocoon and Grave,” I can empathize with her as she thinks about death, disheartened by life:

A silkworm enters its cocoon -

That tight, uncomfortable cocoon.

But the silkworm must be happy;

It will become a butterfly

And fly away.

A person enters a grave -

That dark, lonely grave.

But the good person

Will grow wings, become an angel

And fly away.

I apologize for my pessimism. I’m always sensitive to sadness. Despair is like my old friend. I remember how it felt when I needed to give up writing because no one had interest in my short stories fifteen years ago—I made a decision then to be an anonymous Hong Kong person, living without dreams for the rest of my life. If I hadn’t gotten a job in a bookstore, I might have become a zombie. I discovered poetry in the bookstore and tried writing poems; Misuzu met a clerk who married her in her family bookstore. Fate is a riddle.

Years after Misuzu was gone, a Japanese poet named Setsuo Yazaki discovered Misuzu’s poem “Big Catch” and most admired how Misuzu could transcend her perspective as a human being to sympathize with the fishes in her poem:

At sunrise, glorious sunrise

It’s a big catch!

A big catch of sardines!

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*On the beach, it's like a festival
But in the sea, they will hold funerals
For the tens of thousands dead.*

Setsuo spent sixteen years searching for Misuzu's poetry and life stories. Setsuo uncovered that Misuzu was born in 1903. She grew up in a fishing village, and the natural environment there became one of the major themes of her poetry. She and her close younger brother Masasuke always shared ideas about literature and life together before Misuzu got married. When Setsuo located Masasuke in 1982, Masasuke showed him three pocket diaries belonging to Misuzu. Masasuke cherished and kept these diaries for over fifty years. Two years after this meeting, the complete collection of Misuzu's poetry was published—her poetry shone again in the minds of her readers.

March 11, 2011. A major earthquake and tsunami struck northern Japan. Many victims lost their families, homes and hopes. Gradually, some people recalled Misuzu's poetry. They read "Are You an Echo?" to victims, to encourage them and comfort their minds:

*If I say, "Let's play?"
You say, "Let's play!"*

*If I say, "Stupid!"
You say, "Stupid!"*

*If I say, "I don't want to play anymore,"
You say, "I don't want to play anymore."*

*And then, after a while,
Becoming lonely*

*I say, "Sorry."
You say, "Sorry."*

Are you just an echo?

No, you are everyone.

This poem also encourages me and comforts my mind. Does it do the same for you?

*Reference book—*Are You an Echo?: The Lost Poetry of Misuzu Kaneko*, poems by Misuzu Kaneko; narrative and translation by David Jacobson, Sally Ito and Michiko Tsuboi; illustrated by Toshikado Hajiri; published by Chin Music Press, 2016.

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