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D'âmes et d'ailes/ of souls and wings, Janick Belleau (**review – short version – by Patricia Prime, NZ**)

With the publication of *D'âmes et d'ailes / of soul and wings*, this is the first time in nearly half a century that a French speaking woman poet has offered a collection of tanka (in French and also) in English. The book is introduced by the author with a HERstory of tanka since its creation. Claudia Coutu Radmore revised the tanka in English and Maxianne Berger translated Janick Belleau's essay into English.

Janick Belleau's essay "Tanka by Women Since the 9th Century," translated from French by Maxianne Berger, is a useful introduction to the background of women tanka poets both geographically and poetically. Belleau begins her essay with an overview of tanka as it first appeared in 8th century Japan, and then discusses modern Japanese and French tanka by women poets.

Although tanka was at its peak during the Heian-kyo era (794-1185), it is still considered the jewel of Japanese poetry. For purposes of this brief historical overview, we will look at two principal periods for tanka.

The first period is that of ancient Japan, specifically the eras of Heian-kyo and Kamakura (1185-1335). In considering this period, we will acquaint ourselves with five Heian-kyo poetesses (Ono no Komachi, Michitsuna's Mother, Sei Shonagon, Murasaki Shikibu, and Izumi Shikibu), and greet a single Kamakura poetess (Abutsu-ni).

The second period will propel us into the 20th century, starting with modern Japan, and then France.

After reading Belleau's wonderful essay, the next striking aspect of this book for me is the cover with its photograph of a Japanese figurine and headless winged sculpture together with the title in Japanese calligraphy in a side column.

Belleau's 91 tanka are beautifully presented two per page, with the English translation on the left-hand page and the French original on the facing page. The collection is divided into six sections entitled "Between Culture and Nature," "Burning Fire – for A. F.," "Walking toward Winter," "Roots – for my father," "Solitary" and "The Last Sleep." Each section is divided by a black and white photo.

The focus of the tanka is on the poet's personal experiences and the accompanying joys and sorrows; a life's journey similar to that of many women poets. At a wider cultural level, she depicts the society and its traditions in which she lives.

The poet's intense clarity of images and events and fluidity of pace pull readers away from their external daily existence into a new, illuminated world. Here we witness the beauty of shared joys; of anguish, of insight and perception. The influence of music, birdsong and nature on the poet is one of the topics of the first section "Between Culture and Nature":

fresh morning
winged seeds flutter about
stabat mater
the voice of Emmy Kirby rises
time suspended

Love, part of the cycle of life, is a feature of the tanka in the second section “Burning Fire – for A. F.”:

champagne and
breakfast in bed –
like a laser beam
your tongue on my body
music to my ears

It would be easy to sentimentalize such events, but the frankness of the poet’s voice brings the beauty of her memories to the surface. And there is much that provokes happiness in this section: memories of a pedal boat, rain on an attic roof, a bike ride, the crescent moon, but Belleau also brings sadness into her poems:

after weeping
the sky and I reach composure –
a long-stemmed flower
like your hair
bends in the wind

There are mixed emotions in several of the tanka in the section “Walking toward Winter,” where the poet contemplates the time she now has to herself in retirement:

hazy first light of April
mixed feelings –
in retirement
more or less free time
bicycles going by slowly

The shorter section, “Roots – for my father,” concerns Belleau’s response to her father’s illness:

a goldfinch
shreds a bagel –
her tubercular father
how he ruined his health
on the docks

and her participation in the lives of others” the virgin couple, the woman crying over her baby abandoned “half a century ago,” tears for her father, and seeing the likeness of herself to her mother in a mirror:

end of fall
the maple defoliating
I too –
if I could see my mother again
my mirror in twenty years

Memorable for me are the tanka in “Solitary”: succinct poems about the pleasures of being alone:

pedal boat
on the water lily lake
a ballet of insects
I let myself be carried
into their silent world

These tanka employ a lyrical and semantic structure as they consider the nature and purpose of the solitary life.

In the section entitled “The Beyond” the tanka return to the cycle of life in a more generalized fashion. Certainly Belleau maintains her ability to amaze with her unique vision of life’s journey. The simplicity of this vision is seen in such tanka as

cicadas song –
seated cross-legged
reflective: should she
bury herself in a convent
or die quietly

The final tanka in this section demonstrate the depth of Belleau’s writing ability – her progression into the images of famous Japanese women tanka poets is extraordinary:

mist on the mountain –
Ono no Komachi
her well of beauty
I feel tears flowing
despite myself

Lady Izumi
close beside a weeping tree
her tomb –
quietly giant ants
busy under my feet

Belleau’s tanka are of a consistent quality encompassing, beauty, strength, sensuality and wisdom.

Review posted on Australian poet Graham Nunn’s website, Another Lost Shark (United Kingdom).