

DENNIS KEENE

The Modern Japanese Prose Poem

An Anthology of Six Poets



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**AN ANTHOLOGY
OF SIX POETS**

Miyoshi Tatsuji

Anzai Fuyue

Tamura Ryūichi

Yoshioka Minoru

Tanikawa Shuntarō

Inoue Yasushi

**TRANSLATED AND
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
DENNIS KEENE**

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Preface

The term "prose poem" is one which can be endlessly argued about. What is being referred to here is the literary genre which came into existence in French literature in the nineteenth century, and which the twentieth-century Japanese poets represented in this book certainly had in mind when writing their own prose poems, or *san-bunshi*. Poems in prose have been written in the English language, but there are hardly enough of any real quality to permit the making of an anthology, whereas the modernist movement in French literature (assuming that to begin with Baudelaire) has produced a number of such writings, and the same can be said of Japanese modernism. Almost any French poet with modernist leanings over the past one hundred years will have written something in this form (although there are exceptions, such as Apollinaire), as will also their Japanese counterparts, although over a shorter period. The fact that this cannot be said of poets writing in the English language seems to indicate, not simply a resistance of the language to that form, but rather how little the literatures in English have been truly affected by modernist poetics.

Given the number of Japanese poets who have written such poems it would have been possible to represent certainly thirty, perhaps as many as fifty, with one or two poems each. This idea was rejected since in translation it is quite impossible to achieve an individual voice for any poet in the two or three pages consequently available to each, and also because there are many poets whose work seemed unresponsive to English translation. I had originally planned to include the work of twelve poets, but dissatisfaction with the translations produced obliged me to reduce the number to six. Of these six the first two represent the "New Prose Poem Movement" of the late 1920's; the next two the postwar modernism of the 1950's; and

the final two show aspects of the poetic scene of the present day. Except in the case of the last poet, I have translated poems from one volume only in order to give a fairly complete representation of a writer at a particular stage in his poetic career. In the cases of Tamura and Yoshioka, for example, I have given all the prose poems in one book (in both cases volumes containing prose and free-verse poems). I have done this in the belief that the reader should not be a complete victim of the translator's own taste in these matters.

The exception to this is the case of the final poet given, where I have chosen work from all five of his published books of poetry, since his poetic style shows almost no change throughout his career. In this case the decisive factor was whether the poems would "go" or not, and I rejected some poems which seem to me superior to certain of those translated because I could not manage them so as to produce even that small satisfaction which translation provides. The fact that this poet has been given more space than the others indicates not any value judgement, but rather a feeling that he represents something old, something non-modernist which is not found so readily in modern Japanese writing, and which required space to make clear.

NOTE: Japanese names have been given in the Japanese order with surname first. Long vowels have been marked with a macron, e.g., Tamura Ryūichi, except in the cases of certain place names, such as Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, Kyushu etc., which have been assimilated into the English language. In the case of less well-known place names, e.g. Ōtsuka, it has been used.

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