

## Kimiko Hahn: Luxuriant and Testing

Kimiko Hahn's latest collection of poetry, *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, comprises a collection of tanka and zuihitsu, two fragment-oriented Japanese forms (the second of which translates as "running brush"). The book is an experimental extension of her earlier writing, which, like a kaleidoscope, makes sharp, luminous use of disconnected images. In speaking about her work, Hahn's fascination with the jagged edges of sense and language becomes abundantly clear. As Hahn herself states: "There is a great deal of energy in a fragment—in suggestion. And the ambiguity that arises adds to that power. How *pine* is a noun and verb. So *pine grove* is a grove of longing." Nervy, evocative, and often rebellious, her poems reflect emotional complexity in novel ways, all the while glancing towards traditional Japanese forms. A professor at Queens College, CUNY, Kimiko Hahn has won an American Book Award, a Theodore Roethke Award, and a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Award. She is the author of seven books of poetry, including *The Artist's Daughter*, *Mosquito & Ant*, and, most recently, *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, which takes its title from the renowned seventeenth-century Japanese poet Basho's classic travelogue.

-Emily Moore

**Loggerhead Reading Series:** What are you working on these days? Tell us about your new book.

**Kimiko Hahn:** My new book is a collection of zuihitsu that I've collected from the past dozen years, and tanka, from over the last several years. Both are classical Japanese forms that I've tried to make my own. The zuihitsu—for which there is no Western equivalent!—looks like prose and sounds like poetry. Tanka are, in Japanese, thirty-one syllables; my own are basically one-line nature poems that I hope contain a Japanese sensibility. I have intertwined these two chronologies. What am I working on now? A number of little projects but mostly a series of poems based on articles from the science section of *The New York Times*—which for me presents peculiarly exotic diction.

**LRS:** What have you been reading these days, either as inspiration or as background?

**Hahn:** Well, I have been reviewing Japanese literature (unfortunately only in translation these days): Earl Miner's *Japanese Court Poetry* and *Japanese Poetic Diaries*. Also, **Issa's** *A Year of My Life*. For craft courses at both Queens College and New York University, I plan on introducing Japanese poetics because it is quite dissimilar. Feelings such as melancholy are codified; "fragrance" is a term **Basho** used to describe the synapse between poems or stanzas. These differences continue to inspire both the content and form of my own work. I am also looking at a couple old books by **Lafcadio Hearn**. This afternoon, in a quiet moment, I finally read a friend's book: Jacqueline Woodson's *The House You Pass on the Way*.

**LRS:** From the disorders catalogued by **Wilhelm Stekel**, to your sonnet series on insects, to the epigraph of *Volatile* ("What kind of beast would turn its life into words?"), many of your poems explore monstrosity. What draws you to monsters?

**Hahn:** Ah, monsters! At one point in my life I was thinking how I was—how I felt I was—the designated family monster. So, I began to consider what a monster means. **Grimm's** fairy tales. Historic monsters such as the half-bodied person, **Johnny Eck** (you can see him in the cult film, *Freaks*). Monsters in current events. I researched monsters and "wallowed" (to use a Stekel word) in them. If one fears something, eventually it is necessary to explore.

**LRS:** A poem in *Volatile* ends with the fragment "Luxuriant and testing," which to me feels like a pretty good encapsulation of much of your writing. Will you speak a bit about poetry and risk, and perhaps about risks you feel you've taken in your own writing?

**Hahn:** I think your last question has partly answered this question. Another risk (and I know it is an enormous issue for most young writers) is to write about loved ones. It never was for me until family members began to protest. Now I think of that potential conflict in terms of my daughters because, as a mother, my first task is to protect my children. As a writer, one

task is to take risks. Reveal. But there are many ways to reveal. So this is my current challenge. An urgent one.... As for that particular quote—I actually had to look it up it's been so long—it is from a modest poem that rather ambitiously tries to find spirituality in art. Consolation in words and paint. Looking back at that last phrase, I think there is a suggestion of something sacred and profane; something pagan. I hope so. Perhaps it is a risk just to think we can express such essential things to one another.

**LRS:** Another theme in your poetry seems to be language and translation. **Kanji, nu shu**, and even the way language is transferred and lost between mother and daughter ("Your oldest daughter / asks what her name *means*") all surface in your work. Will you speak a bit about this theme?

**Hahn:** The theme of translation is both literal and figurative. Literal because Japanese is so insanely difficult and although there are words that have emotional meanings for me, strong connotations, it is not my first language. Although it is a kind of mother tongue because my mother and grandmother spoke this language, it is not, finally, my first language. And although the English/American language is at times, compromising, it is mine. So, for me, language itself, is a tricky thing, at once necessary for clarity but also the source of ambiguity. And finally, both those elements can offer layered meanings and rich poetry. I hope I am making sense here.... As for translation as theme, my computer dictionary gives one definition: "a change in form or state, or transference to a different place, office, or sphere." That would be a part of the theme.

**LRS:** Tell me about your interest in *zuihitsu*, and perhaps about your use of fragments (and possibly journals and diaries, which you often mention in your work) in general?

**Hahn:** My interest in *zuihitsu* was actualized when Ed Friedman (then-director of the **Poetry Project** at St. Mark's Church) curated a millennium celebration of **Sei Shonagon**. Writing that first *zuihitsu*, "The Downpour," gave me so much pleasure, I began to write more. I realized then and even more now, how

much I was influenced by the Modernists such as **Williams** and his book, *Paterson*. So my aesthetics are very much shaped by classical East and modern West. I did study Japanese literature as an undergraduate and then in graduate school—so I have an academic background in East Asian studies although it is embarrassing to admit because my Japanese is fairly nonexistent at this point. The fragment, similarly, is from my interest in Japanese forms and in Modernist work (Sappho, too, for that matter). There is a great deal of energy in a fragment—in suggestion. And the ambiguity that arises adds to that power. How *pine* is a noun and verb. So *pine grove* is a grove of longing—yes? In *Mosquito & Ant* I was interested in how little I could say without losing its narrative thread.

**LRS:** Many of your poems are written as conversations—with your mother, with L., with "immortal sisters." What draws you to this format?

**Hahn:** Some have to do with point of view and need, I guess. In *Mosquito & Ant*, I was inspired by letters women wrote to one another so the format is epistolary—though not formally. Perhaps one answer is that when a quiet daughter speaks, she speaks up to someone. I don't necessarily write with someone in mind however. Other times, the **apostrophe** is just right.

**LRS:** Will you speak a bit about your writing process? For instance, how did the poem "The Artist's Daughter," the title poem of your last book, come together?

**Hahn:** In general my process is to go to a coffee shop and write and read for an hour or so. To generate raw material. Lately I've gone off my routine, which is partly how my tanka came about—an interest coupled with a need to write very short pieces.

"The Artist's Daughter"? I think I realized that this was one of the monsters and should be the title; then I worked on a poem. So it was a title before a title poem. The same thing happened with *Earshot*, actually. "The Unbearable Heart" was more typical: first, a line in the poem, then the poem, then the title of the book.

**LRS:** What role does personal experience play in your own work?

**Hahn:** Well, I guess I have an odd notion of what personal experience encompasses. Reading the newspaper and reacting to current events is for me, personal. Reading *The Tale of Genji* and feeling moved is the same. So my range of what is available as material is very wide. And why not! So the answer is that most of my work arrives from personal experience. Personal or *personalized*. I mean a good persona poem (I'm thinking of **Ai's** "The Mortician's Son") somehow arrives from one's own self, otherwise it would be very dry. That is the problem with current poems and books based on "good ideas"—sometimes they just stay good ideas with little emotional value. I try to work against the poem being just a good idea. I look back and see flawed pieces.

**LRS:** In rereading your work for this interview, I stumbled on "The Details We Fall For," an early poem that involves a fabulous **motorcycle** ride. If my own students are any indication, you are generally regarded as an extremely hip writer. How cool can a young poet hope to be?

**Hahn:** What a sweet thought for a woman now in the "older woman" category in magazines! Well—your insightful questions point to some elements that can lead a writer into being constantly engaged with currents—inside and outside the self. Risk. Range. A lot of reading. And talking back to what one reads—which is talking to other writers. Which is both fresh and respectful. After all, how much cooler could anyone be than Basho: "Parting for Futami Bay, a clam ripped from its shell, autumn comes to its end." ❖