INTERVIEW

Varying On Points, Skirting All Canons: Hideko Sueoka on Poetry-as-Sound and the Japanese Anglophone Poet

by Sam Dapanas

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Hideko Sueoka is the author of *Untouched Landscape* (Clare Songbirds Publishing House, 2018) and translator of *Shigeichi Nagano: Magazine Work 60s* (Heibonsha, 2009). A Japanese poet and translator based in Tokyo, she was the winner of the 2013 Troubadour International Poetry Prize and her winning poem was highly commended in the 2014 Forward Prize. Her works can be found in *Anmly*, *harana poetry*, *Anthropocene*, *Long Con Magazine*, *Porridge*, *amberflora*, *White Enso*, *Stand Magazine*, *Visual Verse*, *Lincoln Review*, *Poetry Kanto*, *Perverse*, and in anthologies such as *The Forward Book of Poetry 2015* (Faber & Faber), *Arrival at Elsewhere* (Against the Grain Press), *stay home diary* (Bitter Melon Press), *A Personal History of Home* (The Oxford Centre for Research in the Humanities), and *The Best Asian Poetry* (Kitaab Publishing). She has attended workshops organised by the ARVON Foundation and elsewhere in the United Kingdom, Portugal, and the United States. Her blog is Joyous Noise.

Alton Melvar "Sam" M Dapanas: English is an extremely minoritarian language in Japan because the Japanese love their languages and their culture — and the world admires you for that. What made you decide to write in English? Being a translator — has that been a gateway to this artistic choice?

Hideko Sueoka: Thank you for your warm words. Yes, my experience in business translation cracked open the door to a new world — writing poetry in English. As a business translator, I was always invisible behind the writers of the source texts in the Japanese original and English translation. But as a writer in English, I wanted to make myself visible. So, I studied translation via my poems in Japanese into English with Peter MacMillan. Soon though, I quitted literary translation, realising that there was a huge gap between my Japanese and my English, which was beyond my ability at the time — also intuitively feeling that I could not render my poems without adequate knowledge of verse. In hindsight, I am thankful to Peter MacMillan for introducing me to the ARVON workshops in the UK where I met many poets who were very supportive of my writing. What's more crucial is that, although I had often traveled abroad — Australia, the UK, elsewhere during holidays — my ability to communicate in English with others had not improved. It saddened me, and I gradually thought, what was English language for me? — what was the language for me? To such a deep-rooted question, my response was to write poetry in that language, as I wrote poetry in Japanese my 20s but then eventually decided to quit. Hence, the decision to write poems in English this time. To try writing again in English — that is the language for me.

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Dapanas: Let's talk about your debut poetry chapbook, *Untouched Landscape*, which was published by New York-based Clare Songbirds Publishing House.

Sueoka: I tried to write pieces in the traditional poetic forms. Understanding the various forms of poetry in English was the most basic thing to do as a non-native English speaker. Beyond that, there are contemporary poets who have innovated the classical forms of poetry in interesting ways. When I was working for this chapbook, I read Sarah Howe's first collection *Loop of Jade* (Chatto & Windus, 2015) again and again. It offered me a sort of encyclopedia of poetic forms. The sonnet "Sucking Pigs" in the collection is unique and original. Another favourite at that time was *Lotus Gatherers* (Bloodaxe Books, 2016) by Amali Rodrigo (now Amali Gunasekera) whom I first met at the ARVON workshop in the UK. I wanted to revolve my writings around my daily life in Japan, but I felt that very few readers at the time could understand or imagine it. And so, I changed my perspective to something global and outside of Japan. I believe readers also need to have knowledge and imagination to be able to understand what they read, but with our online culture now, I think there are more readers who understand what I write about Japan than 10 years ago.



'Untouched Landscape' by Hideko Sueoka

Being published in the West was totally unknown to me. First off, my chapbook was not self-published. As a writer, it was valuable for me to undergo the process from submission to publication. In particular, the search for poetry publishers was like looking for a needle in a haystack. The editing process was additionally a precious experience. It was unforgettable to see how the market of small presses existed visibly and how my collection spread after the publication.

Dapanas: The esteemed poet and translator William I Elliott describes your poetry as "utterly unpredictable sound bytes." In *Perverse*, you spoke about your poetry as something that "sings my feelings at the time." Your blog is, curiously enough, titled *joyous noise*. This all points to the tonal, sonic, and aural quality of poetry. Is there a story behind this?

Sueoka: William I Elliott was my poetry mentor. I am surprised that his thoughts about my works are fully different from what I think about my own works, though he has lived in Japan for over forty years. Each time I read him, I always feel in awe and surprised. I find his poems constructed with authenticity. My poems, on the other hand, are shaped by Japanese sounds and structure. Sometimes, they can reach their audience with a different kind of sound from more standard forms of English. I always hope they can bring joy to

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readers. I must admit, it has been challenging. I could be wrong but I think the practice of close-reading is imperative as a poet and as a reader. My blog has been written as a rough sketch of exploration of verse with knowledge of literary works in English I have learned from Elliott and Sachiko Ohe for a long time.

Dapanas: Your poem at *Long Con Magazine* — "Sibling Stichomythia" — is a response to Diane Arbus's 1966 photograph *Identical Twins.* Other poems you wrote create dialogue with other arts such as painting (*Visual Verse*) and music (*Poetry Kanto*). Why this veering towards the ekphrastic?

Sueoka: I have been translating patents in the field of optical devices for a long time as a day job, and I have a particular interest in photography. When I travel within Japan and abroad, I love to visit art galleries. I was involved in the English translation of Japanese photographer Shigekazu Nagano's book of photography, and I was also moved when I visited and met the Japanese photographer Sh?mei T?matsu in Nagasaki City. The visual arts drive me to appreciate them in their wordless expression. In some ways, this was my introduction to writing ekphrastic verse. But the foundation of poetry is sound or prosody. Even in the case of ekphrastic poems, they should sound rhythmically and tonally rich when recited aloud. Although I allow the visual to inspire me, the essence of verse goes back to poetic meter in the end.

Dapanas: I love this line from "Spring Odyssey," your ode to Eurasian travels from the Atlantic to the Pacific: "The dawn begins between Tynda and Magocha." That's between two Russian towns. As a poet and a traveler, how has being a traveler shaped your poetry and how has being a poet influenced the way you travel?

Sueoka: It is important to walk around the world with my own feet and see it with my own eyes. When not working, I go to various places I've always wanted to visit. I think my poems reflect such travels. Even about unknown places I have not been to, I can unfold a world map — look at a topographical map and the images of landscapes via Google Maps. This helps my imagination, becoming a great source of inspiration for my creativity and craft.

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Dapanas: Can you name the Japanese poets and writers you look up to? Are there Japanese literary forms you often go back to — reading and maybe writing as well?

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Sueoka: These days, I only read works in English and those in other languages which are translated into Japanese. For example, I have loved Chinese writer Can Xue for a long time and marked the Japanese translation of her novel *Yellow Mud Street* as a favourite. Before I immersed myself in poetry in English, my interest was primarily in works by Japanese writers. Basically, I read more late authors than living ones and hardly read Japanese-language literary magazines. However, I want to read Japanese poems written by a non-native Japanese. My favorite poets are Shiro Murano and Taeko Tomioka. I also revisit the novelist S?seki Natsume from time to time, for being concerned about what he thought of Meiji-era Japan (1868-1912) as a time of dynamic historical change. I was impressed by his writings which I initially could not understand as a high school student. But now that I am older, I can understand and appreciate them. As for the contemporary literature translated into Japanese, a young friend introduced me to the Korean author Won Pyung Sohn's novel *Almond*. It's in my to-read list. And although it's prose, last June, New Directions has published an English translation of Ry?nosuke Akutagawa's *Kappa*, translated by Lisa Hofmann-Kuroda and Allison Markin Powell. I look forward to the comparison between the Japanese original and its English translation.

Dapanas: I caught a glimpse of the literary scene of Tokyo-based poets writing in English as I was a contributor to the latest *Tokyo Poetry Journal*. There were other venues for Anglophone writers as well such as the bilingual *Poetry Kanto* which has since unfortunately folded in 2016 and *Kyoto Journal*. These days, how do Japanese Anglophone poets and Japan-based immigrant/migrant poets participate in the literary community?

Sueoka: It is my impression that the literary events in English in Japan have been done mainly by the minority. However, I believe that the current multilingual situation simply pushes an increase in terms of awareness of English-language works here. There are some in-person creative writing groups, but they are scattered all over the country. Also, there are some actual venues such as poetry slam, but most of them might be online. In order to engage more readers of poetry in English, more understanding on the genre and the language is necessary. It might take a long time, because what's in trend today, in society in general, is what is quick and simple — and these are opposite to poetry. And some people think ambiguity is no longer the core of poetry these days. I hope an international poetry festival will be held in Japan, too.

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