
ESSAYS

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF TOMITA MOPPO WITH SELECTED HAIKU

Masaya Saito

Tomita Hajime was born into poverty on April 14, 1897 in Mukōjima, an ordinary peoples' quarter on the Sumida River in Tokyo. His father, who was fond of gambling, ran a humble eel cuisine restaurant. His mother, who was inclined to drinking, had very little education. At the age of one, Hajime suffered a high fever, which paralyzed his legs. Consequently, he remained bereft of the ability to walk for the rest of his lifetime. 'Moppo,' which literally means 'wooden steps,' is a pen name Hajime gave himself after he tried in vain to make a pair of wooden leg braces. This physical handicap, as well as poverty, kept him from receiving education in elementary school and beyond. Nevertheless, he developed literacy by himself. It was when Moppo was in his middle teens that he began to write haiku.

At the age of nineteen, Moppo began to subscribe regularly to a haiku magazine, *Shakunage* (Rhododendron), founded by Usuda Arō (1879–1951). Arō was a haiku poet who stressed the importance of the integration of emotions and observations of nature in the composition of haiku.

In 1917, Moppo got acquainted with Arai Seifū, one of Arō's haiku pupils who was then an economics student of Keio University. Seifū frequently called on Moppo, bringing a variety of literary magazines, including haiku periodicals, which he presented to Moppo, who was then running a mom-and-pop candy shop, still in poverty.

In fact, the destitution was so extreme that not only Moppo but also his sisters and brothers had to struggle with it all the time. Two of his elder sisters worked in licensed quarters and, later, lived as kept mistresses. After his father's death in 1912, the eldest brother took over the family business. However, the family still wasn't well off. In 1913, Moppo went

into apprenticeship at a kimono pattern craft shop. After half a year, he left the shop, being unable to endure long hours of hard work and the severity of ill-treatment from his colleagues. His younger brother, who was a deaf-mute, worked at home making paper toys as a subcontractor. His younger sisters, Makiko and Shizuko, both became apprentice geishas.

The January 1918 issue of *Akane*, a haiku periodical founded by Seifū, featured a collection of Moppo's haiku. This helped Moppo to be recognized as a unique haiku poet struggling with his hardships. Some haiku poets, including Arō, admired his haiku which were printed in the periodical. Furthermore, Nishimura Yōkichi (1892-1959), a tanka poet, wrote a review that identified Moppo as 'the Ishikawa Takuboku of the haiku world,' calling him a haiku poet of *jinsei-ha* (the life school).

In February, 1918, his younger brother, Risuke, drowned while swimming in the Sumida River. In July, his youngest sister, Makiko, died of tuberculosis. Moppo closed down his candy shop and started working as a subcontractor, making hats. In June, he had the rare occasion of going out of his house to enjoy an excursion, visiting his elder sister's house in a rickshaw, where he stayed for two nights. He wrote a travelogue on this trip and published it in the June issue of the periodical, *Haiku Sekai* (Haiku World). It was his first prose work that appeared in print. In December, Moppo coughed up blood for the first time. He had been infected with tuberculosis.

In 1920, Seifū asked Watanabe Suiha (1882-1946), a renowned haiku poet, to print a collection of Moppo's works in his haiku periodical *Kyokusui* (Winding Stream). Suiha gave a ready consent and serialized it in four successive issues, calling Moppo 'an outstanding author' in the periodical. Because of this, Moppo came to be widely known as an ill-fated genius to the haiku world in general.

In spite of his fame as a promising young haiku poet, he remained poor. In 1921, he began a tiny rental bookshop. It was located in Tamanoi, which had used to be covered only with fields and pastures but was then about to become a red-light district with many new buildings. His customers were mostly prostitutes who borrowed books for easy reading.

In January, 1922, a daughter of Moppo's eldest brother died at the age of one. In summer of the same year, Karajo, a factory worker who had

been learning haiku from him, died of tuberculosis. In September, his mother died of a stroke. In October, Seifū held a fundraiser for Moppo by means of selling haiku handwritten in calligraphy by famous haiku poets such as Suiha and Arō, among others. The profit was to be used for injections and other medical expenses of which Moppo was in desperate need.

On September 1, 1923, Tokyo was devastated by *Kanto Dai-Shinsai* (the Great Kanto Earthquake). Legend has it that, carried on the back of Seifū, Moppo escaped through roaring flames and, finally, got to the riverbank of the Sumida River, but no further. Seifū had no choice but to leave him there and dive into and swim across the river in order to save his own life. When Seifū finally crossed the river and looked back, he no longer saw any human figures on the other side of the river, which had already been devoured by a whirlwind of flames.

Moppo was twenty-six years old when he died.

The notes in the haiku that follow are from Moppo himself. When I translated his haiku, I referred to *Kettei-ban: Tomita Moppo Zenshū* (Definitive Edition: The Collected Works of Tomita Moppo), which was edited by Arai Seifū and published by Sekai Bunko in 1964.

1915

How pathetic those wooden legs! I tried to make them with the sole desire of walking. But, now, I have half given up. I see those remaining pieces of wood propped up sadly among the bushes of Chinese wolfberries of my elder brother's back hedge:

枸杞茂る中よ木歩の残り居る
kuko shigeru naka yo moppo no nokori iru

Among the thick
 wolfberry bushes
 my wooden legs remain

During my illness:

薬紙に句を書き溜める夜寒かな
kusurigami ni ku o kakitameru yosamu kana

On each piece
 of medicine paper, I write a haiku —
 autumn night chill

My mother, who takes care of a chicken, is out:

鶏鳴けど仕舞ふ人なき秋の暮
tori nakedo shimau hito naki aki no kure

A cock crows
 no one to cage it —
 autumn dusk

1916

嫁入りを見に出はらつて家のどか
yomeiri o mini deharatte ie nodoka

Everyone but me
 out to see a bride's arrival ...
 this house on a balmy day

火蛾の輪にランプと我とじつとあり
kaga no wa ni ranpu to ware to jitto ari

Inside the circle of
 a flying moth, a lamp and I
 remain still

裸火に壁の煤けや暮るゝ秋
hadakabi ni kabe no susuke ya kururu aki

Open flame
soot on the wall —
departing autumn

机見入れば木目波立つ夜寒かな
tsukue miireba mokume namidatsu yosamu kana

As I gaze at the desk
its wood grain rises in waves —
autumn night chill

秋風や軒につるせし糸車
akikaze ya noki ni tsuruseshi itoguruma

Autumn wind —
hanging under the eaves,
a spinning wheel

むかれたる棕櫚の木肌や秋の風
mukaretaru shuro no kihada ya aki no kaze

A windmill palm
its skin peeled bare —
autumn wind

Lodging Niōmaru in my house:

黴臭き夜着を引き合ふ蟲の宿
kabi-kusaki yogi o hikiau mushi no yado

A musty blanket
 we pull from each other ...
 insects chirping

砂利のごと蜆ときおる夕時雨
jyari no goto shijimi togioru yū-shigure

Like pebbles
 I wash clams ... early winter
 evening rain

子雀のよにまろび来る枯葉かな
kosuzume no yoni marobi kuru kareha kana

Like a baby sparrow
 a withered leaf comes
 rolling along

鶏の軒端追はるゝみぞれかな
niwatori no nokiba owaruru mizore kana

A cock
 chased away from the eaves ...
 sleet

1917

啞ん坊のいぢめられ来し凧日和
oshinbō no ijimerarekishi takobiyori

Having been bullied
a deaf boy comes home ...
kite-flying weather

蜆売に銭替へてやる夏の夕
shijimi-uri ni zeni kaete yaru natsu no yū

For a clam vendor
I break a bill ...
summer evening

風呂を出て迎ひ待たれつ夏の月
furo o dete mukai mataretsu natsu no tsuki

After taking a bath
I wait to be picked up ...
a summer moon

毛切虫捕へて啞の威張りけり
kekiri-mushi toraete oshi no ibari keri

A long-horn beetle
caught by a deaf-mute
proud of himself

夜寒さや吹けば居すくむ油虫
yasamusa ya fukeba isukumu aburamushi

Night chill —
 as I blow upon it ...
 a crouching cockroach

At the rear of the house, my aunt has awoken from a doze and is now making whistle dolls:

秋の夜や人形泣かす一つ宛
aki no yo ya ningyō nakasu hitotsuzutsu

Autumn night —
 one after another, she makes
 dolls cry

粉煙草に母むせかへる夜半の秋
kotabako ni haha musekaeru yowa no aki

Snuff
 suffocates my mother —
 autumn midnight

うそ寒や畳におどる影法師
usosamu ya tatami ni odoru kagebōshi

Autumn chill —
 on tatami
 my dancing shadow

うそ寒や障子の穴を覗く猫
usosamu ya shōji no ana o nozoku neko

Autumn chill —
 a hole in the shoji screen
 a cat peeps through

Sickbed:

我が肩に蜘蛛の糸張る秋の暮
waga kata ni kumo no ito haru aki no kure

On my shoulder
 a spider weaves a web —
 autumn evening

The pair of wooden leg braces, which I secretly kept at my aunt's house for a while, no longer give me any hope. So I told her to use them as fuel or something like that:

人に秘めて木の足焚きね暮るゝ秋
hito ni himete ki no ashi takine kururu aki

In secret
 wooden leg braces burnt —
 autumn ending

我が尻に似てしなびたる糸瓜かな
waga shiri ni nite shinabitaru hechima kana

Shriveled
 like my buttocks
 a gourd

During my illness:

ひだるさに夜明け待たるゝ虫の声
hidarusa ni yoake mataruru mushi no koe

Hungry ...
 I yearn for daybreak
 insects chirping

こほろぎや仮の枕のくされ本
kōrogi ya kari no makura no kusare-bon

A cricket —
 a decayed book I use
 as my pillow

こほろぎや追ひ焚きしたる鍋の飯
kōrogi ya oidaki shitaru nabe no meshi

A cricket —
 rice in a pot
 reheated

My sick brother:

飴なめて安らげく寝よ夜半の冬
ame namete yasuyakeku neyo yowa no fuyu

Eat candy
 then sleep a peaceful sleep ...
 winter midnight

冬の夜やいさゝか足らぬ米の銭
fuyu no yo ya isasaka taranu kome no zeni

Winter night —
 a penny short
 for rice

In order to distract myself from my exhaustion after shaving dolls
 made of glued sawdust, I sing Buddhist hymns:

母とみて和讃うたふや夜半の冬
haha to ite wasan utau ya yowa no fuyu

With my mother
 I sing Buddhist hymns —
 winter midnight

壁の穴に杉葉押し込む空つ風
kabe no ana ni sugi-ba oshikomu karakkaze

Into a cavity
 in the wall, I thrust cedar leaves —
 dry winter gale

木の如く凍てし足よな寒鴉
ki no gotoku iteshi ashi yona kangarasu

Like wood
 my legs frozen —
 winter crow

床下に入りて鳴きをる寒雀
yukashita ni irite naki-oru kansuzume

Coming under
 the floor and twittering
 a winter sparrow

In the winter my legs are frozen, so I crawl along, wrapped in a padded cotton kimono, to go relieve myself:

犬猫と同じ姿や冬座敷
inu neko to onaji sugata ya fuyu-zashiki

I, who look
 the same as dogs and cats —
 winter tatami room

1918

蟻共の尻みな光る春日かな
ari-domo no shiri mina hikaru haruhi kana

Ants
 each rear shines with
 spring sunlight

友去つて佛燈灯す遠蛙
tomo satte buttō tomosu tōgaeru

My friend leaves
 I offer a light to a Buddha...
 frogs croaking far away

My sick sister:

和讃乞ふ妹いとほしむ夜短き
wasan kou imo itooshimu yo mijikaki

Asking for
 a Buddhist hymn, my darling sister ...
 short summer night

My sister, whose condition has taken a sudden turn for the worse,
 incessantly asks her mother to chant sutra:

今宵名残りとなる祈りかも夏嵐
koyoi nagori to naru inori kamo natsu-arashi

Tonight might be
 our last night to pray for her life ...
 summer storm

寝る妹に衣うちかけぬ花あやめ
neru imo ni kinu uchikakenu hana-ayame

My sister asleep
 I cover her with a kimono ...
 an iris flower

Unaware of her approaching death, my younger sister tenderly talks:

涙湧く眼を追い移す朝顔に
namida waku me o oi-utsusu asagao ni

Tears well up
 from my eyes, which I hastily direct
 towards a morning glory

The first night of mourning:

線香の火の穂浮く蚊帳更けにけり
senkō no hi no ho uku kaya fuke ni keru

An incense stick's
 glowing tip afloat inside the mosquito net ...
 night deepening

1919

Putting down the words my sick mother uttered as they are:

体内にこの風が吹く冴返り
tainai ni kono kaze ga fuku saekaeri

In my body
 this wind blowing... chilliness
 returns in spring

August 8th:

喀血にみじろぎもせず夜蟬鳴く
kakketsu ni mijirogi mo sezu yozemi naku

I cough up blood ...
 not stirring an inch, cicadas
 screeching at night

My mother stricken with a cerebral hemorrhage:

母のみとりに仏灯忘るる宵の冬
haha no mitori ni buttō wasuru yoi no fuyu

Tending my mother
 I fail to offer a light to Buddha ...
 evening in winter

Dreaming of the dead:

夢に見れば死もなつかしや冬木風
yume ni mireba shi mo natsukashi ya fuyuki-kaze

Having dreamed
 I feel intimate even with death ...
 withering wind

行く年やわれにもひとり女弟子
iku-toshi ya ware nimo hitori onna-deshi

The departing year —
 even for me, one female
 haiku pupil

1920

水のかな雲を透く日や菖蒲咲く
mizu no yona kumo o suku hi ya shōbu saku

Through clouds
 like water, the sunlight —
 irises blooming

芦の穂に家の灯つゞる野末かな
ashi no ho ni ie no hi tsuzuru nozue kana

Beyond reed-heads
 house lights in succession, where
 the open fields end

Illness like my old friend:

死思へばわが部屋親し昼の虫
shi omoeba waga heya shitashi hiru no mushi

As I think of death
 this room seems intimate —
 noon ... insects chirp

Still finding it hard to leave my sickbed, I had Seifū take a picture of
 me for amusement:

面影の囚はれ人に似て寒し
omokage no torawarebito ni nite samushi

How I look
 resembles a prisoner ...
 so cold

窓の樅夕日に映えて北風かな
mado no shii yūhi ni haete narai kana

Out of a window
 an oak tree aglow with sunset
 in the north wind

北風あと心呆けし夕餉かな
narai ato kokoro hōkeshi yūge kana

The north wind
has dropped... my absentminded
evening meal

1921

ぬかるみのいつか青める春日かな
nukarumi no itsuka aomeru haruhi kana

Mire
already green —
a spring day

病み呆けてふと死を見たり花の昼
yami-hōkete futo shi o mitari hana no hiru

Senile with illness
I suddenly saw death — noon
full of cherry blossoms

ひとりみて壁に冴ゆるや昼の影
hitori ite kabe ni sayuru ya hiru no kage

Alone...
chilly on the wall,
my noon shadow

1922

My sick body suffers from night sweats night after night:

夜着うすくして淋しらや春浅き
yogi usuku shite sabishira ya haru asaki

My nightclothes
 so thin, I feel forlorn —
 early spring

Running a secondhand book shop, a year has already passed:

なりはひの紙魚と契りてはかなさよ
nariwai no shimi to chigirite hakanasa yo

My business ...
 how vain I feel, dealing with
 silverfish

藤の実やたそがれさそふ薄みどり
fuji-no-mi ya tasogare sasou usu-midori

Wisteria pods
 invite twilight with
 pale green