

## A Brief Survey of Senryû by Women

by  
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The 5–7–5-syllable senryû, like the hokku, derives from the longer verse form of renga. Unlike the hokku, however, which normally deals with natural or seasonal phenomena, the senryû is expected to deal with matters of human and social nature, often in a playful, satirical, or knowing manner. The hokku—called haiku today—carries a seasonal reference; the senryû does not have to.

The distinction between the two genres has been tenuous, however, from early on. In recent years the blurring of the differences has become such that Ônishi Yasuyo has said, “If someone asks me how senryû differ from haiku, I tell the inquirer that the only distinction that can be made is by author’s name”—that is, if the author is known to write haiku, the pieces he or she writes are haiku; if the author is known to write senryû, the pieces she or he writes are senryû. Ônishi herself is sometimes listed as a senryû poet, sometimes as a haiku poet.

Modern senryû, which dates from about the time of the haiku reform efforts of Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902), has taken such divergent perspectives as idealism, proletarianism, social realism, and individualism.

One senryû observer has noted that if the period of 250 years since the senryû was established as a genre were to be divided into five ages, this would be the fifth, and women writers have dominated it. In the early part of the 20th century, women senryû writers were, the pioneering Inoue Nobuko said, “fewer than the stars at daybreak.”

What follows is a brief survey of senryû by women. Most of the selection is made from Taira Sôsei’s anthology, *Ryôran josei senryû* (Midori Shobô, 1997). These translations by Hiroaki Sato are excerpted from his *White Dew, Dreams, & This World*, an anthology of Japanese women poets from ancient to modern times; publication is forthcoming.

### Sakai Sobaijo (?–1952)

The mother of seven children, Sobaijo became a pioneering woman senryû writer. Her husband was Sakai Kuraki (1869–1945), a leader in the Meiji senryû revival, among whose senryû is “Kuraki has become a fool called a teacher,” which is a twist on an anonymous senryû, “He’s not such a fool

as to be called a teacher.”

At every command he gives the second lieutenant jumps up

In a sudden shower a woman covers her obi first

Unable to compose a single piece on plum flowers she comes home

She says “sheeee!” to a burglar thinking he’s a rat

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Itô Masajo (1882–?)

“A woman experiences frustrations,” Masajo said, “as an old woman, a little girl, a bride, a second wife, and a widow. She must capture such weaknesses” in her senryû. She was prolific and once turned China’s classical novel *The Water Margin* into a sequence of 285 senryû. She had disappeared from the senryû world by 1920.

Cupid often runs out of arrows and is lost

Deep deeper into the night O O atop the waves

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Shimoyama Kyôko (active in the early 1900s)

Welcomed by the Tokyo senryû world as a “genius” in 1904, Kyôko helped found a senryû association in Osaka in 1909. Later she apparently faded away.

The powder peeled off from her face the summer Fuji

Out of a wildly hairy shawl a human head

In thin rain atop a guillotine a crow caws

•

Inoue Nobuko (1869–1958)

Married to Inoue Kenkabô (1870–1934), the first “giant” in modern senryû, Nobuko established in 1929 an association of women senryû writers, the first of its kind. A nurse during the Russo-Japanese War, she protected and promoted the proletarian, antiwar senryû writer Tsuru Akira (1909–1938) at the risk of government persecution. When he was jailed in

1937, she also was arrested.

The moment it blooms with full force it's cut  
I open it I close it but my hand's still empty  
The evening primroses stack up the light of the moon  
No matter how I sit I only see myself the way I am

•

Kataoka Hiroko (1890–1975)

Admired by her fellow senryû writers as “the Venus of Okayama” (Okayama being the prefecture where she was born and spent her life), Hiroko was praised by Inoue Nobuko for the “wide range of poetic sensibilities and for lack of sentimentality” she showed in her work. The last poem in the following selection has to do with her husband, a fellow senryû writer, on his deathbed.

Days continue with my heart like a wasps' nest  
For sharing joy this mosquito net is too small  
Making not the slightest move my nerves sharpen  
In a hospital ward just the two of us the night the rain

•

Mikasa Shizuko (1882–1932)

Shizuko's work was regarded as representative of the Shinkô (“Newly Rising”) senryû movement.

Today too darkens bringing the day we'll meet closer  
The heart wanting to be loved presses on my loneliness  
In secrecy I touch something I shouldn't be touching  
I've preserved the redness of my lips today as well

•

Yoshida Shigeko (active around 1930)

Married to the adopted son of the famous patriot Yoshida Shōin (1830–1859), Shikeko was a devout Buddhist.

Deprived of all their possessions a winter stand of trees

Holding loneliness in her arms she's left behind

Keeping quiet she is inside all sorts of partitions

Taking one off taking two off like a human being

•

Ôishi Tsuruko (born 1907)

Tsuriko was the daughter of Inoue Nobuko and Kenkabô.

Walking side by side the warmth on the side where you are

I break the wall I break history

•

Miura Ikuyo (born 1912)

Ikuyo uses punctuation, including dashes and spaces. She also ignores syllabic count often enough that some call her pieces “one-line poems” rather than senryû.

Distant whistle—a hag lives alone under the River of Heaven

The moonlit night I hung my slough on your treetop

I plant a cactus in my eyes and give up

Dangling from a liar's throat an emergency exit

•

Kondô Toshiko (born 1915)

When Toshiko was fourteen, her mother was murdered by a passer-by. It was after this incident, she said, that she was drawn to senryû.

The loneliness of knowing today too I read books

You walk you run and you're still on the earth

Worm-infested the flower can't help but bloom

My life a single drop of love between heaven and earth

•

Usui Kanojo (born 1925)

Arriving at senryû at age twenty-five, she has served as a permanent judge at the Tokyo Senryû Association since 1988. She often ignores syllabic count and employs punctuation.

I'll trust this man for now I take off my tabi

His lies were his only truth eternal sleep

The nails, feeling the autumn white

I keep hugging my self that's different from my age

•

Kuwano Akiko (born 1925)

From 1973 to 1980 Akiko was the senryû judge for the Hokkaidô edition of the Daily Yomiuri. In 1988 she won the senryû Ze Prize.

The snow's falling the snow's falling these two breasts

Lightly lightly a butterfly lies dead on the canvas of snow

My skull squeaks right in the midst of ecstasy

•

Hayashi Fujio (1926–1959)

A war widow, Fujio was active in senryû for only about three years before she died of stomach ulcer, but she has greatly influenced those who have come after her.

I close my eyes I drop into sex the bottomless swamp

I submit to a single male the male's arrogance

With the tip of my tongue I roll the delightful evil

The whole thing the whole of it slips in I slip in

•

Saigô Kanojo (born 1928)

Kanojo started writing senryû in 1953 and has remained active since. She once headed a group to study the genre.

The light falling on her aslant she's an ordinary woman

He leaves and I put away the lonesome sound

•

Tokizane Shinko (born 1929)

Compared to Yosano Akiko in tanka, Shinko has been the most influential senryû writer for the past few decades, her liberating boldness attracting many admirers.

So I hate him to the very end I dress to kill

Love achieved at 4 o'clock the 4-o'clock train leaves

Savage love's what I want I say smoke-stack

Since I became again a wife who laughs often winter

•

Morinaka Emiko (born 1930)

In 1981 she became a senryû judge for the national broadcasting corporation, NHK, and now works as an instructor at NHK Academy of Distance Learning.

The pale moon whose are these tiny breasts?

On a promise not to bear a child we meet snow ceaseless

The bell insect dies the bell insect's food remains

I like humans I'm being drunk with humans

•

Kodama Yoshiko (born 1934)

Yoshiko learned about senryû in 1952 while in a sanatorium. Since 1988 she has been independent, not associating with any group.

I'm in the shadow of countless prostitutes

Conflict at the base of this silvery night

•

Mayumi Akiko (born 1934)

Akiko won the Fukushima Prefecture Senryû Prize in 1983.

Though hugging each other my back suddenly feels cold

Let me eat you you eat me to become nothingness

Though lying close to each other two separate snails

•

Kino Yukiko (born 1936)

Arriving at senryû at twenty-nine, Yukiko became the founder and president of the Bangasa Kikyô Senryû Association in 1982 and the executive director of the All Japan Senryû Association in 1991.

In too much sorrow I sleep with my mask on

•

Matsuda Kyômi (born 1942)

Arriving at senryû at thirty-seven, Kyômi has won a variety of prizes, among them NHK's Kyûshû Contest Special Prize.

Suppressing yawns suppressing myself I remain wife

Combing my hair in love I scatter and spill sparks

Having my lover unbutton me early summer

Every time I weep I rise to my feet like a man

•

Ônishi Yasuyo (born 1949)

Yasuyo is at the forefront of “New Wave” senryû writers. She teaches at Kansai Gakuin University while running a restaurant.

My bones and cherries are in full bloom

Lifelong I count dandelions count clouds

In Clothes Doubled my reproductive organ dies beautifully

The metaphysical elephant drinks water from time to time

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Seino Chisato (born 1948)

In 1986 Chisato created “senryû performances” to stress what she termed the physicality and eroticism of senryû and staged one-woman shows in Himeji, Okayama, Tokyo, and Kyoto.

The night I meet my younger brother I’m a Klimt woman

I bought at a kiosk and brought home as the sound of waves

Running down the giraffe’s neck the orgasm

Seeking love just as a Javanese lizard calls

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