

**Japanese Prose Poetry:  
Postcards to Donald Evans  
by Takashi Hiraide**

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Takashi Hiraide was born in 1950. He is Professor of Japanese Literature at Tama Fine Arts University, Tokyo. Hiraide has published nine books of poetry, a novel, a travelogue, four books of critical essays and recently a scholarly study of Irako Seihaku, a Meiji poet whom he greatly admires. In his career Hiraide has won four national awards. Hiraide's cycle of prose poems, *Postcards to Donald Evans*<sup>1</sup> (2001) is addressed to a deceased painter. The poems explore an alternative world created by Evans embodied in thousands of paintings of stamps, a seemingly enclosed world which expands to become 'a field full of life'. The dominant theme of the cycle is the intersection of time and timelessness, the reality of the unknown.

Hiraide's first two series of poems were written in free verse form, but after that—that is, after 1976—he adopted prose as his major poetic medium, a form which is known in Japanese as *sanbunshi* (prose poetry). So great is the potential range of prose poetry that to attempt definition would be idle; it would always be possible to find aspects left out which could be included. Nevertheless, a distinction can at least be made between prose poetry and poetic prose, without being pedantic. The distinction lies largely in the form adopted and the intention of the writer. Poetic prose—that is, prose which is poetic in its effects—can be found in narratives of all kinds. An example of descriptive prose which advances to the level of poetry is the following short passage from *The Pillow Book of Sei Shônagon*<sup>2</sup> (1002), a diary kept by a lady-in-waiting at the Court of the Japanese Empress in the last decade of the tenth century:

When crossing a river in bright moonlight, I love to see the  
water scatter in showers of crystal under the oxen's feet.<sup>3</sup>

In Japanese the diction is exquisite. Prose poetry, on the other hand, as a discrete form, originated in France in the nineteenth century, with Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé rebelling against traditional versification and out-of-date language.<sup>4</sup> A similar movement arose in Japan, based on translation and adaptation from the West.<sup>5</sup> It came to fruition in the 1920s. Avant-garde poets broke free from the constrictions of the past, discarding florid language in favour of contemporary usage, and replacing set syllabic metre with the freedom, immediacy and potential for greater intimacy between poet and reader that prose expression offered. *Sanbunshi* is a branch of *shi* (free verse). It is a hybrid, a new form in the tradition of Japanese poetry, and Hiraide is one of its leading exponents.

Hiraide has always seen his poetry as 'a protest, a rebuttal, a piercing of reality. It is not a reflection of reality. It acts together with the sad unknown.'<sup>6</sup> What Hiraide means by the adjective 'sad' is open to interpretation. Because it relates to human emotions, my own view is that it relates to death, the cessation of one's life, the replacement of what we perceive as the known with nothingness, which may or may not be a gateway into the unknown. Of the greatest interest to Hiraide is the edge of conscious existence, the point at which the reality which we have fashioned for ourselves might dissolve into a reality beyond our knowing. For this reason, some of his poems are quite difficult, shattering observed experience and using dislocated imagery and startling juxtapositions in an effort to express traces of another world. Others are completely accessible, as in this prose poem of an unexpected encounter which still seems to be framed against infinity:

One day, in the afternoon, after the rain had gone, I became aware of a snail right in front of my eyes on the escalator heading towards the second floor from the west side of the first floor in Takashimaya department store, Nihonbashi. Suddenly I was deeply moved by the fact that there was no rhyme or reason for its being there. Was he on his way to the green of the roof garden, or was he going directly to the

kitchen of the big dining room? Should we assume that he had some shopping to do? You should at least go up to the magic section, my dear snail. I encouraged him in a small voice, but I could only see him twitch his feelers as if he were embarrassed.<sup>7</sup>

Words in Japanese such as *kagyu* (snail), *omomuku* (go) and *uzumaki* (snail) are deliberately archaic and create an exaggerated sense of humour in contrasting a small creature with a big department store in Nihonbashi. The line ‘Suddenly I was deeply moved by the fact that there was no rhyme or reason for its being there’ is central to the poem as, all of a sudden, it draws attention to the poet’s state of mind. His understanding of the snail’s existence suggests that our own existence (and, indeed, the poetry that he is composing) is without purpose or meaning. By translating the common English expression ‘without rhyme or reason’ into Japanese, Hiraide is able to express his sense of an overwhelming truth in life, that is, that there is no reason for our existence, or for poetry either. The snail’s pointless journey through the immensity and complexity of the department store represents life itself.

Hiraide has seen in a phenomenon of the sky known as ‘the green flash of light’ a moment or symbol where two worlds intersect: the world of observed experience and an alien world beyond our understanding. The green flash is seen rarely on this earth and only at sunrise or sunset. The mysterious green flash appears only for a short period of time and not many people have seen it. There are two theories about this natural wonder: one is that there is a scientific reason for the phenomenon, and the other is that the green flash is an optical illusion. It is in the sense of wanting to be at the perimeter, of seeking to find linkages with unknown worlds that Hiraide’s poetry pierces reality in its recognition of an otherness which lies beyond the limitations of our consciousness. The green flash is a key symbol in Hiraide’s work. It first appears in his third series of prose poems, *Green Flash in the House*<sup>8</sup> (1987). This series contains 52 poems, of which the first nine comprise variations on the theme of the green flash. Hiraide describes here how he became interested in this phenomenon by browsing through a book of essays written by a metrologist. It led him to further research and, as we shall learn from the postcards, he actually witnessed the green flash.

*Postcards to Donald Evans* consists of 139 poems in postcard form written over three years, commencing in Iowa City on 25 November 1985 and ending on the ferry from Lundy island in the Bristol Channel on 19 October 1988. Within this cycle there is a complete gap of one year—1986—when Hiraide was in Tokyo.

Donald Evans (1945-1977) was an American artist. He had a short life, dying at the age of 32 in April 1977 in a fire in an apartment block in Amsterdam. Evans' art centred around creating a miniature alternative world in stamps. At the time of his death he had created 4000 painted stamps, representing 42 imaginary countries—their climates, their customs, their currencies, their language and their people. All the countries have strange names—for example, Nadorp—but, if you think about it, they are no stranger than names we are familiar with, such as Egypt or Brazil. Donald Evans not only painted the stamps but set them in order and contained them in what was to be his one and only book, *Catalogue of the World*. The more he painted, the more his book expanded. Hiraide writes in one of his postcards: 'Once you stopped, the book—discontinued after so much expansion and saturation—seemed actually to open up the bleak horizon called the world... Your work seems to belong more to the world that borders on each and every membrane and edge of this world than to a completely fictitious world. It is as if, in other words, the very incompleteness of this world had produced your imaginary one.'<sup>9</sup>

Given Hiraide's fascination with the mystery of existence, it is not difficult to see why he would be attracted to Donald Evans' art and to Evans himself. At this point it is possible to see a difference between the two in their conceptions. Evans' work seems to be an escape, a retreat to an imagined world which may be, as Hiraide says, on the borders of this world. He had a brilliant idea for making perforated edges to his painted stamps, using lines of black dots from an old typewriter. At exhibitions, all the stamps were clustered in groups against a black background with the stamp edges merging into the blackness, giving the effect of a bright enclosed world divorced from our everyday world. Hiraide's poetry, on the other hand, while taking as its theme intimations of the unseen, still retains fragmented images of everyday life. He does not let go completely, as Evans does in his creations of imaginary countries in an imaginary world. The point might be usefully illustrated

if I quote a single-sentence poem by Hiraide entitled ‘Memorial Piano’, a memory of his childhood:

The cheap toy piano with an untuned keyboard, held between my scratched legs on the sunbathed verandah, could only hit out the possibilities of the sublime beauty of prose.<sup>10</sup>

Here we have the actual and the possible conjoined.

The first thing to notice about *Postcards to Donald Evans* is the role that the postcards themselves play. Their very size enforces compressed imagery, exact observation. A potential danger of *sanbunshi* is prolixity, a tendency towards looseness in construction and expression. I must add at once that this is not so in any of Hiraide’s work. Nevertheless, the size of the postcard provides an immediate frame for concise expression and a certain emotional tension, which is necessary for poetry. And a succession of postcards allows for complex associations to be built up, as in a piece of music. Creating cycles is one of Hiraide’s favourite techniques, in which each poem is separate in itself, with all coming together to form a unified whole. He has produced several books of poetry in this way. I shall mention only one—*Notes for My Left-hand Diary* (1993), which won the Yomiuri Literary Award.<sup>11</sup> So it is no surprise, as far as form is concerned, to find that his latest book is comprised of 139 postcards.

Another characteristic of Hiraide’s poetry is to take an exact point of departure, based on something he had read or heard about, and to write poetry which is addressed to a particular person. In this case it is Donald Evans and his art. But again we can find similarities with an earlier work. In *Portrait of a Young Bonesetter* (1984)<sup>12</sup>, a series of prose poems about insects, the poems are dedicated and addressed to Mr Fujio Iwata, a naturalist and botanist, who had recorded in vivid language an incident which he had witnessed on the banks of the Inagawa river on 13 May 1931, when a bee attacked a spider in order to lay her eggs. Hiraide returns to this incident in a collection of essays, one of which is a letter to the bee:

I feel as if all the metaphors of which poetry is capable are hidden in your actions. And in the language which Mr Iwata uses in his scrupulous observation I think there is an attitude so fertile that it is beyond any poetic achievement.

Dear Ms Bee. Correctly speaking, Ms Nikko Kumo Himebachi. I wrote about your attack that day in the form of poetry, using your point of view.<sup>13</sup>

In his cycle of postcard poems it is Donald Evans' point of view that Hiraide takes up. What begins as an exploration ends as an identification, as gradually Hiraide begins to see and react as Donald Evans had. Naturally, each postcard with its specific date and location mainly picks up what is happening in Hiraide's own life, or what he is thinking, so that two lives, two worlds intermix. The postcards are, in effect, a succession of fragments projected into a multiplicity of moments, and with a developing mood which gives the sequence as a whole its force. And the intertwining of two lives, past and present, creates a curious effect of living both in time and out of time.

The book is divided into three sections, with examples of Evans' stamps and post office imprints also dividing the pages. Each postcard poem is on one page. In Section I Hiraide travels about the USA in search of facts about Evans, people who knew him, and places where he lived. He learns that by the age of ten Evans had a passion for miniature architecture. On the shore of a lake in Morristown, his birthplace, he built a sand house, a sand town, a sand highway and a sand cathedral. In the Library of Congress in Washington Hiraide finds a copy of the *Paris Review*, 1975 in which there is an interview with Evans, who comments on his solitary world:

'No catastrophes occur. There are no generals or battles or warplanes on my stamps. The countries are innocent, peaceful, composed.'<sup>14</sup>

Within weeks, writing imaginary postcards to Evans became more and more normal to Hiraide, and on an aircraft back to Japan he writes:

'I feel like I have been travelling with you. I have just taken off from San Francisco Airport. I can see the green continent from the window. The faces of many people I became acquainted with come back to me. It is hard to believe that I am returning to the hustle and bustle of Tokyo. In fact, this takeoff itself is unbelievable. This world itself, with its many islands and several continents, is unbelievable. I just left and the world is so different and I don't understand anything.'<sup>15</sup>

As we find at the beginning of Section II, this last sentence is a direct quote from a letter written by Evans in Holland in 1972, just after he had left America and abandoned his employment as an architect. In Section II Hiraide examines his own reactions, noting: 'I seem to lack the will to rid myself of an invisible world.'<sup>16</sup> At a later point he summarises Evans' work:

'From small to minute; from minute to microscopic. What you had started partly for fun had become your life.

It gets lost as you become more and more enthusiastic, in a tinier area, but a seriousness verging on deadliness dominates these stamps, stamps that are not stamps, infinitesimal tableaux with vague borders.

From small to minute; from minute to microscopic.'<sup>17</sup>

In this section Hiraide also records memories of his grandmother and two of his own friends who died in a short space of time between July 1987 to May 1988.

The sequence rises to a climax in Section III. Hiraide goes to Amsterdam, as Evans had. There he learns new facts about Donald Evans: that one of his lungs had been removed not long before he choked to death in the apartment block fire, and that his ashes had been sprinkled from an aircraft at sea, so that now his ashes were in 'all the seas of this world'. Hiraide went to a hut in Holland where Evans had lived. The location was so remote that it seemed like the end of the world. The empty landscape and its name—Achterdijk (a Dutch word

meaning ‘the last dike’ or ‘the furthest dike’)—gave the impression of reality dissolving into the infinite, of the merging of two worlds to which Donald Evans belonged. ‘I received a hard blow,’ writes Hiraide, ‘a hard but refreshing blow when a clear and distinct form is given to the world.’<sup>18</sup> He had discovered also that Evans had wanted to go to the island of Lundy in the Bristol Channel, because Lundy Island issued its own stamps. The postcards and Hiraide’s pilgrimage end there. ‘My five senses were torn to pieces by the strong sea wind; my mind was empty,’<sup>19</sup> he writes. In the ruins of a castle he places a maple leaf from Evans’ birthplace, which he has kept, together with one of Evans’ stamps. ‘I’ll leave them in the middle of the king’s castle where briny winds roll; in the smallest, weirdest kingdom of the world’.<sup>20</sup> The island begins to take on an air of unreality. Here is an excerpt from the third last card:

‘My own shadow has started to get longer and longer. I guess it’s grown to be as long as 30 meters. With nothing to interrupt it, it seems to be stretching endlessly... The sun was about to set in the Atlantic. Once again I saw my shadow, which was now extremely long... Then I saw a miracle. A green flash of light, a rare phenomenon in the air seen only in coastal areas, and only in perfectly clear weather. The moment the sun set on the horizon, the green light radiated from there.’<sup>21</sup>

And from the last card:

‘Stars seemed to fall without ever spoiling the entire constellation. I climbed down the steep cliff road in pitch black to the bay where the Oldenburgh was moored. When I finally reached the bay, the passengers were already waiting, whispering like shadows... As the ship started to push its way through the waves, more and more stars seemed to be falling.

Goodbye, Donald. I just left the world, and I’m bound for another. Everything is so different, dear Donald, and everything is new to me, too.’<sup>22</sup>

In an afterword Hiraide wrote: ‘From 1985 through to 1988 I wrote as many as 186 postcards. Nearly 40 postcards are missing. Their writer, it seems, cannot but believe that these lost postcards did actually reach the world of Donald Evans.’<sup>23</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Takashi Hiraide, *Hagaki de Donarudo Evanzu ni* (Tokyo: Sakuhinsha, 2001), Tomoyuki Iino, trans, *Postcards to Donald Evans* (New York: Tibor De Nagy Foundation, 2003).
- 2 Sei Shônagon, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shônagon*, Ivan Morris, trans. (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1971).
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- 4 See Introduction of Dennis Keene’s *The Modern Japanese Prose Poem* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).
- 5 See Introduction of A. R. Davis’s *Modern Japanese Poetry* (St. Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1978).
- 6 Takashi Hiraide, “Tataikai to shite no shi keishiki” (Forms of Poetry as Battle) in *Kôgeki no sessen* (The sharp point of attack), (Tokyo: Ozawa Shoten, 1985), p. 25.
- 7 Takashi Hiraide, Poem No. 83 in “Kurumi no sen’i no tameni” (For the Fighting Spirit of a Walnut) in *Hiraide Takashi shishû* (Tokyo: Shichôsha, 1990), p. 51. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.
- 8 Takashi Hiraide, “Ie no ryokusenkô” in *Hiraide Takashi shishû* (Tokyo: Shichôsha, 1990).
- 9 Iino (trans), *Postcards to Donald Evans*, p. 24.
- 10 Hiraide, “Ie no ryokusenkô”, p. 81.
- 11 Takashi Hiraide, *Hidarite nikki reigen* (Tokyo: Hakusuisha, 1993).
- 12 Takashi Hiraide, *Wakai seikotsushi no shôjô* (Tokyo: Ozawa Shoten, 1984).
- 13 Takashi Hiraide, “The sharp point of attack” in *Kôgeki no sessen*, pp. 10-11.
- 14 Iino (trans), *Postcards to Donald Evans*, p. 50.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 159.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 162.