



“Your Own Sensitivity, At Least”: Remembering the Postwar Poet Ibaragi Noriko, an Appreciation and Four Translations

Greg Vanderbilt

This month marks the fifth anniversary of the death of the postwar poet Ibaragi Noriko (1926-2006). She was prepared: three months earlier, at age 79, she had written out a farewell letter and had it printed, ready to send to some two hundred of her friends and correspondents. Leaving blanks for the date (February 17, 2006, though it was two days later when she was found in her bed) and cause of her death (a brain hemorrhage), she expressed her wishes that there be no funeral or memorial and that no flowers be sent to her now vacant suburban home. Instead she made one request: “If you will pause for a moment, just a moment, and say to yourself ‘So now she is gone...,’ that will be enough.”

Among the first poets to emerge in a new generation (and often considered the first and best-known woman among them) after the 1945 defeat, Ibaragi was *sui generis* in a time when poets were part of rebuilding the imagination of a citizenry, seeking to “cultivate” (*tagayasu*, her favorite verb, she said) in the language, place, and time where they happened to make their homes. With her beret and dark-rimmed glasses, her ever-present slim cigarettes and mellow voice, and her keen, youth-filled observations, she cut an unforgettable figure to the end of her life. A comment she made in her last months may well be a fitting summation: “I never thought I would have any affiliation, but in the end I can say I was affiliated with the Japanese language.”¹

The following short biography is found in the three volumes of *Koto-no-ha*, her selection of her works, which appeared in 2002:

Born in Osaka, June 12, 1926 (Taishō 15). Spent childhood in Nishio City, Aichi Prefecture. Moved to Kira Town, Hazu County, Aichi Prefecture, in 1942, so father could open a clinic there. Entered the Imperial Women’s Pharmaceutical College (now Tōhō University) in 1943. In 1945, at the age of 19, while working as a mobilized student in a Navy medical supplies factory, heard the broadcast announcing the defeat. Returned to school and graduated the following year. Wrote plays and children’s stories. Married Miura Yasunobu, a physician, in 1949. In 1953, with Kawasaki Hiroshi, who had been submitting to the Poetics Studies Association, launched the poetry journal *Kai* (Oars). Husband’s death, 1975. Began to study Korean in 1976.²



Photograph at age 20

This account is indicative of the influences in her life and poetry: how she was born into the emperor system, on the eve of the Shōwa reign, elder child of a doctor who was determined his daughter would have an occupation of her own (and, in time, sister, wife, and aunt of doctors); how her only formal education was in pharmacy, and in wartime; how she experienced the last years of the war as a young woman and a mobilized student; how she was (at first) the one woman among a group of young poets, including Tanikawa Shuntarō, inaugurating a new, contemporary poetry in postwar Japan (one noted for its cheerfulness); how she started to learn a second language at the age of fifty, after her beloved husband’s death, choosing Korean and going on to publish her own translations of poetry by her Korean contemporaries; how quiet were her last decades, widowed in the Tokyo suburbs, observing and writing. It echoes her best-known poem, “Watashi ga ichiban kirei datta toki,” which she wrote at the age of 31, twelve years after the 1945 defeat:

When I was at my most beautiful
town after town came crashing down
I caught glimpses of the blue sky
from the most unexpected places...

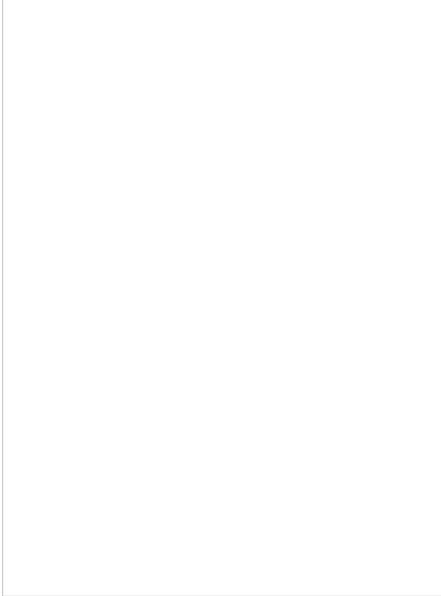
When I was at my most beautiful
jazz flowed from the radio
I devoured the sweet exotic sounds

the way I smoked my first forbidden cigarettes.³

Regularly found in textbooks and anthologies, called by one translator “a kind of anthem for a generation,” and even set to music by [Pete Seeger](#), the poem re-establishes a feminine self who laments having suffered the futility of the war, tacitly admitting having escaped its destruction and deprivation, but at the same time having had to forfeit the possibility of the joys of youth and love due to ideologies which left the young men around her capable only of saluting and marching off to war and her own young self empty-headed and unfeeling. When “my country lost the war (how could something so foolish have happened?), I rolled up my sleeves and marched alone through my humiliated town,” making up her mind to “live a long life, like old M. Rouault of France who painted such amazingly beautiful works once he was up in years, yes?”⁴

Ibaragi had, in fact, begun writing poems soon after she married and moved to the Tokyo suburbs, settling finally in Higashi Fushimi, in a remarkable *modaan* elevated house she designed with dark wood and wrought iron. When she submitted her first published poem to another new magazine *Shigaku* (Poetics) in 1950, she was asked by its editor if she had a penname, thought for a few minutes, and, keeping her given name Noriko, came up with Ibaragi, after the story much retold throughout Japanese literature and theater of the demon fought by the Heian-period hero Watanabe-no-Tsuna at the Rashōmon gate to Kyoto, which she’d recently heard on the radio.⁵

Soon after the 1960 conflict over the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, during which she had joined her fellow citizens in demonstrations, Ibaragi wrote an essay



entitled "The Poet's Attitude towards the Times." She argued that where poets had once served to both provide a sense of record and a vision for their age, they had lost the latter function to science. Shifting from the subject of that issue of the contemporary poetry monthly *Gendaishi Techō*, the model of the poet-activist Yoshimoto Takaaki, she recounted how, in the midst of the Ampo struggle, she had met a dramatic actress who "could hardly be called young" and yet had what might be termed a "honed youthfulness," which Ibaragi set as her own aspiration, not as an abstraction but as an actual way of being. She quoted the French surrealist poet Paul Éluard, of whom she knew through her fellow *Kai* poet Ōoka Makoto, "Vieillir, c'est organiser sa jeunesse au cours des ans." Coinciding with her country's defeat in war, her own youth had been "awash in contradictions," but she expressed the desire to be involved in, and to put into words, her times as they unfolded.⁶ Ibaragi did not identify the actress, but likely it was Yamamoto Yasue (1906-1993), whom she had met soon after the war and who remained this sort of presence in her life. In a poem dedicated to "Y.Y." in her 1965 collection *Chinkonga* (Requiem), she

When I was at my most beautiful, a 1990s translation and interview

Late 1950s photograph by Tanikawa Shuntarō

described what she learned from this "elegant" woman:

Yes, it is good even for adults to be rattled,
to give awkward greetings, to turn an ugly crimson,
to forget how to speak, to be clumsy,
to be as sensitive as a helpless oyster,
vulnerable even to harsh words from children.
There is no need whatsoever to hone these things.
It is difficult even for a new rose
to open outward, tenderly

as it gains in years.

At the core of all good work

is hidden a fragile, trembling antenna—⁷

Ibaragi was creating a lineage for her poetry in profiles of four modern poets "who lived in the heart of the poem"—Yosano Akiko, Takamura Kōtarō, Yamanokuchi Baku, and, most importantly, Kaneko Mitsuharu, whose own struggle against the ideological tides became an example to her—and was offering a definition of poetry for younger readers—"A good poem has the power to liberate a person's heart..."—and opening the world of postwar Japanese poetry while also discovering her readings answering a series of life stages: being born, falling in love, the travails of life, reaching the pass where struggle yields perspective, and parting.⁸ In her poetry she was seeking to understand and to engage in dialogue, the title she gave her first collection (*Taiwa* (1955)), as in the closing lines of two memorable poems. The first addressed to Jean-Paul Sartre appeared with "When I was at my most beautiful" in her second collection, 1958's *Mienai Haitatsufu* (Invisible Deliverymen):

M. Sartre,

I do not know you well

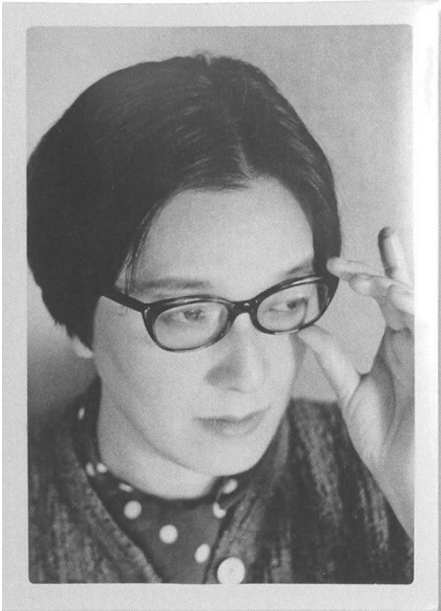
nor are the attitudes and feelings of the Jewish people familiar to me.

I have gained another horror in humanity,

but also a pure joy in the present!

Surely this is good

even if no actual hairs stand on end.



Late 1950s photograph by Tanikawa Shuntarō

That is what reaches me
from what you were writing in Paris in 1947

Reflexions sur la Question Juive

as I make my life in 1956,
hanging out the washing each and every morning
like the flags of all nations.⁹

And from the title poem of her 1977 collection *Jibun no Kanjusei kurai* (Your Own Sensitivity At Least), a conversation with herself that also struck a nerve with her readers lulled by prosperity:

don't blame your loss of innocence
on the way you have lived
your will was weak from the start

don't blame the times
for whatever is useless in you

you yourself abandoned the light of dignity

the least you can do

is defend

your own sensitivity,

you fool!¹⁰

Poetry could also be directly political, with a poet's distance, as in "Shikai nami shizuka" (The waves are quiet on the seas) in the same collection, in which she quoted verbatim a notorious answer the Shōwa emperor gave at a press conference in 1975:

Asked about responsibility for the war

here is what he said

Having not studied the expression

from a literary perspective

I am unable to reply.

Without thinking I was consumed with laughter,

dark laughter erupting, halting, erupting again

like coughing up blood.

Even a three year-old child would laugh.

What are the four islands to do

if nothing can be uttered

without the benefit of literary study,

laughing and laughing

at this once-in-thirty-years black humor?¹¹

At the time, Ibaragi was newly widowed and writing a remarkable essay "Losing the War at Twenty" in which she looked back on her experience of the war and postwar, when she had been her most beautiful and when she had made the decision to devote herself to writing. She described the incredulity with which her fellow mobilized students greeted the announcement of the defeat, how she returned to school in burned-out Tokyo in the fall of 1945 and went about attending as much theater as she could, happening on the announcement for a playwriting contest at a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Imperial Theater. Noting that she was now alone at fifty, a "late bloomer" ready to test herself at "a woman's self-reliance," both emotionally and economically. "It is ironic that I have now come to comprehend in my body the meaning of 'freedom' that was so discussed after the war without me understanding it. It is living each day 'with loneliness as my companion.' I intend to make full use of this freedom."¹² Perhaps that is what it meant to be "postwar."

The following translations are from Ibaragi's eighth and final collection, *Yorikakarazu* (Relying on Nothing) which was published in 1999.¹³ (There is also *Saigetsu* (Passing Years) of 2007, the posthumously published collection of often sensual poems addressed to 'Y' (her late husband Yasunobu) which her nephew found carefully arranged in a letter box in her study.) With their penetrating but everyday language and close but transcendent observation of life, it is easy to imagine them in the company of the work of such contemporaries as Mary Oliver and Wisława Szymborska. They also show a poet continuing to guard and cultivate her own sensitivity but withdrawing from the world, observing, at times through the medium of television, such distant phenomena as cranes flying over the Himalayas and the eyes of Picasso and Mother Teresa, but called back to publishing, as explained in her afterword, by a letter from a young man volunteering on a forestry project in Inner Mongolia. Perhaps because the title poem (the final translation below) has also been widely enjoyed as an anthem of encouragement for the present, the book was featured in the *Asahi* newspaper's Tensei Jingo column and became a best-seller, a surprise for a poet already in her seventies.

Trees like traveling

A tree

is always

thinking of

the day when it will set out on its journey,

as it stands, rooted in one place,

immobile.

***Yorikakarazu*, her final collection of poems.
Painting by Takase Shōzo**

It flowers,

invites insects and the wind,

hurries to bear fruit,

whispering,

"somewhere far away,"

"somewhere far away."

At last the birds peck at its fruit

and the wild beasts come to nibble.

A tree needs no backpack, no suitcase, no passport to travel.

It hitches a ride on a bird's belly,

stealthily making its own airship,

and, when the day comes, it sets out abruptly,

into the sky.

The seed falls.

"Here's a good place. I can see a lake.

I'll stay here for a while."

It becomes a seedling and puts down roots

and, like the tree from which it came,

it too begins to dream of the day it will set out on its own journey.

When I touch the trunk of a tree

I understand how it aches:

how it loves to travel

how it yearns to wander

how it writhes, longing to be a nomad.

The country where she makes her home

For F.U.¹⁴

The country where she makes her home is

the tenderness with which she grasps my hands

the low notes of her voice

the way she peels a pear

the warmth of her heated floor

There are two desks

in the room where she writes her poetry,

piled high with letters requiring answers,

something I know all too well.

On her wall, a great *magatama* jade.

Seoul for me is her house on a hill in Jangchungdong.

Was the persimmon tree in her garden

loaded with fruit again this year?

When she visited me late in autumn one year,

she looked out my window

and murmured, "There's beauty in such a wild garden."

I was ashamed for having left the fallen leaves unswept,

the flowers withered,

but it seemed to please my guest, who likes things without artifice.

In mixed Japanese and Korean,

we shared how we had spent our lives

and she said, "You are a good friend to me,"

saving me from my regrets.

Her frank way of talking

Her air of simplicity and grace

The country where she makes her home

I put no stock in the avalanche of information,

nor in too-common statistics.

I can make my own discoveries.

Here and there around the globe,

connections between one person and another

leave aside the rigidity of governments

and become miniature whirlwinds.

Radio waves fly freely, nimbly,
but there is something slower
which can be caught and tossed back,
something I could not imagine
when I was a girl and
taught to see foreigners as spies.

A resting place

Long ago and far away,
a road ran past a girls school
toward the village of Imagawa,
in the country of Mikawa,
where once lived the great warrior Imagawa Yoshimoto.

Beside the sun-bleached road,
a faded banner the color of bricks fluttered in the breeze
announcing "a resting place."

Modest and deserted,
little more than a roof tacked onto a bus stop,
it offered a few cups to turn and fill
with cool barley tea in summer,
hot green tea in winter.

"Peddler, farmer, medicine seller,
you shouldering a heavy burden,"
it called out,
"stop and rest here a while,
quench your thirst
and then go on into town."

Not the insincerity of a vending machine,
but the kindness of an absent someone,
as can still be found at the way stations of long ago
and along pilgrims' paths.

"A resting place...
Maybe that is what I want to do in this life..."

The thought came into my mind:
I was fifteen then, wearing a schoolgirl's sailor uniform.
Now roadside chairs and benches have been taken away,

as if to say, "Don't sit here. Keep moving!"

*

Late one fall, forty years ago,
the night train left me at Nara Station before dawn.

Too early for the bus to Hōryūji temple,
I ate my box lunch from the day before.

The stationmaster brought tea
to the two or three of us travelers
huddled there in the waiting room.

Time passed so slowly then.

I have forgotten his face,
but I still remember
his big kettle, his uniform,
and the taste of that oh-so-hot, too-strong tea.

Relying on nothing

No longer
do I intend to lean on ideas already in place.
No longer
do I intend to trust in religions already formed.
No longer
do I intend to rely on knowledge already established.

No longer
do I intend to count on any authority whatsoever.
Having lived long
I have learned this much to be my truth:
nothing is the matter with me
when I see with my own eyes, hear with my own ears,
stand on my own two feet.

The only place I will lean
is at the back of my chair.

Greg Vanderbilt studied history at UCLA and is now working on a book on the lives of people who had Hansen's Disease in modern Japan. He previously contributed a translation of the essayist [Okabe Itsuko](#) (1923-2008) to The Asia-Pacific Journal.

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Notes

¹ I was fortunate to visit Ibaragi-san twice, the second time just two months before her death, and join her for lunch at her favorite upscale Chinese restaurant in Kichijōji, together with a friend, Uejima Shōkō (1955-2007), who was inspired by the poem "A Resting Place" (included below) to open a quiet retreat in a farmhouse in the Kumamoto mountains. Uejima met Ibaragi at the remarkable [Kobushikan](#) in Tottori, a house and meeting hall built by a physician, author, friend of Tanikawa Shuntarō, and now hospice director named Tokunaga Susumu as a "home away from home" for Hansen's Disease patients who had been exiled due to Japan's absolute quarantine policy and brutal discrimination. These translations began with the help of Uejima's former protégé Okino Yasunari.

² *Ibaragi Noriko-shū: Koto-no-ha* (Chikuma Shobō, 2002).

³ This is Leza Lowitz's translation from her essay on the issues surrounding the translation process and other translators' choices in this poem: "Midwifing the Underpoem," in Frank Stewart, ed., *The Poem behind the Poem: Translating Asian Poetry* (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2004), pp. 113-120. Where Ibaragi's writings, especially this poem, were regularly included in anthologies like *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse* (first published in 1964) and Atsumi and Rexroth's *Women Poets of Japan* (1977), her work is absent from both Rimer and Gessel's *Columbia Anthology of Modern Japanese Literature: from 1945 to the Present* (2007) and Sato's *Japanese Women Poets: An Anthology* (2007). Better read at present is Ibaragi's close friend Ishigaki Rin (1920-2004), appreciated both for her "feminist irony" (in Leith Morton's words) and her compelling self-won independence through forty years working at a bank.

⁴ "Watashi ga ichiban kirei datta toki," *Koto-no-ha*, vol. 1, pp. 81-84. The French Expressionist painter Georges Rouault (1871-1958) has long been popular in Japan, but his appearance here is typical of the range of images available to this poet.

⁵ Ibaragi recounted this story in "A Short History of *Ka*" (1969; reprinted in *Koto-no-ha*, vol. 1, pp. 207-233).

⁶ "Jidai ni taisuru shijin no taido," *Gendaishi Techō* (March 1961; reprinted in March 2009, pp. xii-xv).

⁷ "Kumu," *Koto-no-ha*, vol. 1, pp. 124-126.

⁸ *Uta no kokoro ni ikita hitobito* (Chikuma Bunko, 1994 [1967]); *Shi no kokoro wo yomu* (Iwanami Shinsho, 1979).

⁹ "Jyan Pōru Sarutoru ni," *Koto-no-ha*, vol. 1, pp. 66-70. The book referred to is translated into English as *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate* (Schocken, 1948) and had appeared in Japanese as an Iwanami paperback that January.

¹⁰ "Jibun no kanjusei kurai," *Koto-no-ha*, vol. 2, pp. 60-61.

¹¹ "Shikai namishizuka," *Koto-no-ha*, vol. 2, pp. 90-91.

¹² "Hatachi ga haisen," *Koto-no-ha*, vol. 1, pp. 190-201.

¹³ Chikuma Shobō, 1999; reprinted in vol. 3 of *Koto-no-ha* and reissued in 2007 by Chikuma Bunko with three additional poems. The titles of the poems translated here are "Ki wa tabi ga suki," "Ano hito no sumu kuni," "Oyasumi dokoro," and "Yorikakarazu."

¹⁴ As noted above, Ibaragi started studying Korean in 1976 and started translating a number of poets in South Korea who were her contemporaries and friends. In 1990, she published *Kankoku Gendai Shisen* (A Selection of Contemporary Poetry from South Korea), her translations of sixty-two poems by twelve poets.