

OREGON POET WRITES POEMS IN ASIAN FORMS

By Colette Tennant

Have you ever been to a lecture or a reading where you felt at ease because the speaker or writer was so at ease with his or her subject? That's how I felt this past Sunday when I heard Margaret (Maggie) Chula read at the Lan Su Chinese Garden in Portland. It was a gorgeous day, and the Asian setting was perfect for her Asian-inspired poetry.

In late September, Maggie read her poetry here in Salem at the IKE Box. I had the privilege of accompanying her on the piano. It was great fun, but as accompanist, I couldn't take in her reading like an audience member. Sunday's reading gave me that opportunity.

We are blessed to have a nationally known, award-winning master of Japanese forms living right here in Oregon. Maggie's latest book is *Just This*, published by Mountains & Rivers Press in 2013. She explains that she intentionally gave it a vague title because she wants her readers to decide what the book is about. There's a certain trusting, generous impulse in that.

All of the poems in *Just This* are tanka, a Japanese poetic form 900 hundred years older than haiku. In the Introduction, Amelia Fielden writes that "tanka are normally composed in five lines, using between nineteen and thirty-one syllables. . ." Maggie groups her tanka in *Just This* into five sections, each beginning with a tanka by a Japanese woman poet who lived and wrote about a thousand years ago. Four of these introductory tanka are by Izumi Shikibu, and one is by Ono no Komachi.

Maggie told us she was attracted to the tanka form while living in Japan for twelve years partially because they were mostly written by women. Certainly, women and their concerns are the focus of many of the tanka in *Just This*, as seen in these lines taken from the work:

my younger sister
now sends me her castoffs

Vicks Vaporub
the smell of Mother in winter

my old evening gown
on a flaxen-haired manikin

What some readers might not expect is that Maggie includes humor here as well. To give one example, her tanka about a date at a drive-in movie ends with the lines, “between us / all those unpopped kernels.”

Some of the most memorable lines for me are the ones I find most poignant. Here are a few of them:

who can say
what loneliness is?

how fragile
the long necks of daffodils

trying to remember
why I didn’t have a daughter

Another observation made about tanka in the Introduction of the work is that they are intensely personal, so I won’t say why these lines are memorable for me. Instead, I invite you to take in *Just This* and decide what these tanka and the collection’s mysterious title mean to you. Maggie would want it that way.