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Four Poems from *To Young Utari* by Yaeko Batchelor

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Cover Page Footnote

Batchelor, Yaeko. *Wakaki utari ni*. Edited by Sasaki Nobutsuna. Chikuhakukai, 1931.

Laurel Taylor
Four Poems from *To Young* ^{K i n}Utari

Yaeko Batchelor
若きウタリに

Wild stag, doe, and fawn
all chased across field and plain
to their bitter end

Had I even a narrow field, I'd keep them
buck, doe, and fawn
though they be bound by a shrine-red fence

Raised on the ancient ^{l e g e n d g o d s}yukara-kamui
^{s a p o}my sister
I wish you were still here

^{k i n}My utari, the shore at last draws near!
Pray and into your oars
pour strength!

Commentary

These four waka are excerpted from Yaeko Batchelor's 1931 collection, *Wakaki utari ni* [*To Young Utari*]. Yaeko Batchelor (1889–1962), born Mukai Yaeko, Ainu name Fuchi, was a member of the indigenous Ainu population of northern Japan, born in what is now Usu, Hokkaido. She lived through the tumultuous period in which the Ainu minority was being forcibly subjugated and assimilated by the Japanese Empire, a process which included the deliberate elimination of Ainu culture and language. Batchelor lost her parents at a young age and was adopted by John Batchelor, a British Anglican missionary who was traveling in Hokkaido and attempting to convert the indigenous population, and his wife, Louisa. Yaeko herself was trained in England as an evangelist, and lived out her final years preaching at a church in Usu.

Wakaki utari ni, Batchelor's only published collection of waka, utilizes her unique position at the confluence of three cultures to express her cultural identity through traditional Japanese forms. Though she maintains the traditional 5-7-5-7-7 meter of waka, her verses contain a mix of Ainu language and Japanese, and their blending of allegory, personal memory, and didactic preaching demonstrate her sorrow for her people as well as her evangelical background and her attempt to give the Ainu guidance toward a better future. All four excerpted poems come from her first and longest chapter, which opens completely in Ainu and gradually shifts to Japanese. The first two excerpted poems fall in sequence and demonstrate her allegorical voice, while the third poem concerns her family. The final poem utilizes traditional Ainu imagery to deliver a message of hope.

Batchelor's use of comingling Japanese and Ainu provides an ethical dilemma for the translator. In the book, the all-Ainu and mixed-language poems are heavily footnoted and explicated, though certain words are eventually left untouched with the assumption that the reader has learned them. In other sections, Japanese terms are marked with an Ainu reading above them or vice versa, as with “^s_a ^p_o” in the third poem. To the Japanese reader, thanks to the katakana writing system in

which these Ainu words are rendered, it is immediately clear that these words are foreign. I wanted to create a similar visual cue for the Anglo-reader, even at the peril of exoticizing these words. They are marked as other in the Japanese, and moreover, their meanings are opaque because Ainu and Japanese are not related languages; there are very few words a Japanese reader could recognize without further translation, and so it seems right that the words appear equally strange to the Anglo reader's eyes.

At the same time, however, in these excerpts the Ainu words are scant enough that footnoting them feels equally a disservice. A footnote draws the reader's attention away from the sound and content of the poem and removes them from the reading experience, and with poems as short as waka, the loss of attention is even more marked. Following Batchelor's example, I have created super-scripts instead, glossing Ainu words with their English equivalents. In this way, the reader can experience the sound of an Ainu term as well as quickly reference its meaning.

As to the waka form, though many Anglo translators break these poems into five lines to mimic the 5-7-5-7-7 meter, I've often felt that this creates too much visual distortion in what is otherwise a continuous line, and I feel this even more strongly with Batchelor's particularly prosaic voice. Interestingly, Batchelor's publisher chose to insert spaces between each metered five or seven, but this seems to be a means to make the Ainu language waka easier to read rather than serving any poetic purpose, especially when some of the lines in the complete collection are broken mid-word while others break after the end of a five or a seven. After toying with various forms, I settled on a three-line poem as a compromise, a waka translation method which also has precedence. Though these may visually appear more similar to many translations of haiku/hokku, I feel they better mimic Batchelor's voice.

Source text:

Batchelor, Yaeko. *Wakaki utari ni*. Edited by Sasaki Nobutsuna, Chikuhakukai, 1931, pp. 20, 23, 31.