



Rampu no Yado, meaning “Inn of Lamps,” sits in an isolated cove. There is nothing else around. All you can do is eat, sleep, bathe, drink and dream. Above, Yoshi smokes at the inn’s charcoal-burning *irori*.

Poetic Interlude: Inn of Lamps



The view from the deck of our two-story suite was spectacular. You don’t have be much of a poet to find inspiration here.

I’m not a poet. I prefer prose. But I can string together words that are pretentious enough to pass for poetry, especially when I don’t have much else to do. And so, at a remote inn at the very tip of a peninsula that juts into the Sea of Japan, I wrote my first *tanka* poem, which follows a 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic format — almost twice as long as a *haiku* poem. Wordy guy that I am, I appreciated the extra 14 syllables. Here is what I came up with:

*I am but can’t be.
Life is too good to be true.
Sure I breathe, but wait:
Even the lowest creatures do.
When dead, I’ll be nobody, too.*

Tanka poems need not rhyme, but *tanka* fans appreciate it when they do. In trying my hand at *tanka*, I was responding to the urging of my friend Shozo Usami, a humanities professor at a Tokyo university. Three weeks earlier he had given me an English journal published by the Japan Tanka



Hot Springs Delight

My body is not what it used to be, but it enjoys long soaks at Japanese hot springs, and my skin seems to benefit from frequent immersions. Lesions tend to disappear after a few weeks of *onsen* bathing. I am not really fond of seacoast hot springs like this one. They are a bit too salty. I prefer the mineral waters found inland or in the mountains — the sulphur-rich waters of Kusatsu, the iron-rich waters of Ikaho, and waters at other places I could name. You don't have to go far inland to get away from saline hot springs. You just need to get away from the seashore.

Crab & Raw Fish

Take a look at that crab in front of me at the *Rampu no Yado*. It's a huge one, with a blue tag on one leg proclaiming it to be the very finest. When Yoshi shot this photo, I was pouring soy sauce into a tiny bowl prior to wolfing down *sashimi*, raw seafood that I crave nowadays. Truth be known, I was a little jaded on crab, which had come into season in recent weeks and was served everywhere I went. *Rampu no Yado* is 400 years old. Until about a century ago, customers had to come by boat. The inn didn't get electricity until six years ago. Even today, the dining room is lighted by coal oil lamps, which flicker charmingly and make everybody look young and beautiful. Well, sorta.



Poets Society. My goodness, one can write this stuff in English as well as Japanese, and it is bonafide! I asked Yoshi to translate my *tanka* for me, but she said not in a thousand years. Doing things like that makes her head hurt. But Shozo did it, as I knew he would, although he declared it was impossible to produce a literal translation within *tanka* constraints, as I knew it was. Here is his *tanka*, inspired by mine, and its translation, a little less morbid than mine:

いつの日か、
果てなん、この身も
虫の音も、
思いつ、今を
我、惜しむかな

*Someday, I'll vanish,
My body as well as the
songs of crickets,
Aware of that,
I cherish my time...
the present.*

Where did those crickets come from? Well, you see, Japanese listen to singing crickets in late summer and are saddened, because the crickets will die soon. Me? I hear crickets and I'm reminded of the time when a boy named Jack lay in bed at his grandmother's farmhouse in Kentucky and listened to crickets and whip-poorwills in the surrounding woods, before drifting into gentle sleep. Mine is a nostalgic and warm feeling, having nothing to do with death. Will the twain ever meet? No, of course not, and it shouldn't.