

## **The 2nd Tokyo Poetry Festival & the 6th World Haiku Association Conference 2011**

**Theme: With or Without Mythology  
9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> September 2011**

**Report by Doc Drumheller**

*In the awake of all civilizations, there were mythologies and poems. As rationalism and materialism grew to encompass the world, mythologies and poems weakened their presence, leaving human spirit in stagnancy. In this beginning of the 21st century, are poems to seek for liberty that surpasses mythologies, or are poems to regain the spissitude of mythologies? In the capital city of Japan, a country of Kojiki mythologies and rich poetic heritage, poets from around the world will present their creative works as answers to this compelling question.*

Six months after the triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear radiation that devastated Japan, poets came together in the city of manga for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tokyo Poetry Festival and 6<sup>th</sup> World Haiku Association Conference 2011. The Festival Director, Ban'ya Natsuishi wrote in his introduction to the festival anthology: *Since 11 March 2011, everything has changed: our lives, our sky, our sea, our earth, our water, our fire, our time. Of course, poetry is more essential and significant than ever before.* In a country coping with such adversity, the reality of staging an international gathering of poets, must have been very difficult. However, the dedication to world literature demonstrated by Natsuishi and the World Haiku Association showed just how resilient and courageous the Japanese people are despite the many hardships they have had to endure.

The festival began on Friday September 9<sup>th</sup> with a reception/buffet dinner and poetry readings from 20 poets. We were also treated with a taste of world music with traditional and contemporary music from China, Mongolia and I also joined in with a kiwi-style ukulele performance. Threads of music and poetry in performance would continue throughout the festival over the next few days and I was very inspired by the virtuoso performances by URUGUN on the Mongolian horse headed cello. This multi-media flavour added another dimension to the readings and created a celebratory feel to the festival that is sometimes lacking in a purely literary environment.

Liberty Hall in the Meiji University was the home for the readings and speeches over the next two days, where we heard the voices of poets from: Japan, Hungary, New Zealand, Australia, Israel, Sweden, USA, China, Finland, Korea, Taiwan, Slovenia, Lithuania, Mongolia and Inner Mongolia.

The on stage chemistry between Joyelle McSweeney (USA) & Takako Arai (Japan) was exciting to watch as they both shared a similar performance style that was both energetic and playful. Their individual performances were a highlight of the festival readings.

Joyelle McSweeney looked like she would feel at home in the poetry slam arena with her confident reading and socially relevant subject material:

from *Killzone 2*

*Of my love for you from the sixteenth chamber/ Of my heart/ Multiplied/ In that chamber/ I take a bullet/ For every member of my team/ A learned violence from the game of the year.*

Takako Arai performed live percussion with a projected film of her poignant reading in Japanese with English translations by Jeffrey Angles delivered inside a derelict spinning factory:

from *When the Moon Rises*

*It is the night shift in an abandoned spinning factory/ There is only a single light bulb here/ The spools of thread turn by themselves/ Click goes the bobbins/ Changed by the machines/ It has already been a decade/ Since this place shut down/ But when the moon rises, it begins to work/ Its strange automation*

Ginema from Japan dressed in a kimono and read from a scroll in her unique theatrical performance that incorporated a rubber penis as a prop in an absurd and tragic tale of love:

from *The Night-Crying Stone*

*The earthworm that lived with intensity – now intensely rancid/ There's an insect song without feet or hands/ I thought my penis was a cartwheel/ I embrace a bee – oh thrust your sting into me, deeply*

The haiku poets had a chance to party on the second night of the festival in Tokyo's suburb of rock and roll, Ochanomizu, in the cabaret style setting of LOS CABOS restaurant and bar. An enthusiastic violinist accompanied some of the haiku readings and after a few drinks and a buffet style meal the poets loosened their ties and said goodbye to their inhibitions. I particularly enjoyed reading a marathon of English translations with the Japanese poets:

Hideki Ishikura (Japan)

Fantasy:

a milk cow stretching her wings  
flying to the Milky Way

Yo Tanaka (Japan)

A boy has been seeing  
too much of his future  
he stumbles on a stone

Yuko Tange (Japan)

When I embrace the sun  
the lemons  
are fragrant

During the festival I had the great pleasure to read English translations for more than ten Japanese poets and this experience was even more rewarding than reading my own poetry, as it gives you the chance to share the same breath with another poet in an attempt to bring life to their poetic voice:

Shuntaro Tanikawa (Japan), from *Self-Introduction*

I'm a short, bald-headed old man./ For over half-a-century/ I've lived tossed about by words such as nouns, verbs, postpositions, adjectives and question marks;/ so I rather prefer silence.

On the final day I had the great honour read with one of my favourite Japanese poets, Sayumi Kamakura. The powerful images from her haiku sequence *The Sun After the Tsunami*, show how a sensitive approach to writing about disaster can also play an important role in the healing process:

A shattering glass –  
the moon doesn't shatter  
in the heavens

I want to believe  
in the power of blue  
beyond the clouds

Kika Hotta from Japan has emerged as one of the most original and interesting haiku poets in recent WHA publications. It was also a great pleasure to have the opportunity to read with him. His *Radioactive Haiku* show how 21<sup>st</sup> Century haiku can incorporate critical observations of modern society without preaching to the reader:

A scarecrow stands  
in Fukushima  
castrated

Autumn wind  
so harmless  
it penetrates only babies

I approached these two readings in particular with a strong sense of empathy for the Japanese people, as the city of Christchurch where I am from has experienced thousands of aftershocks since the powerful quake and the worst natural disaster in New Zealand's history on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, just two weeks before Japan's terrible tragedy. Kika read the Japanese translations of the haiku I wrote in response to the Christchurch earthquake that were inspired by Maori mythology:

the god of earthquakes  
wakes from a flying dream  
in his mother's womb

Rūaumoko  
oho mai ana i te moemoeā rere

i rō kōpū whaea

In an attempt to answer the question: With or Without Mythology, I have highlighted several quotes from the speeches concerned with haiku as myth and poetry as myth:

Kika Hotta (Japan) *talented haiku poets are talented priests; they are awesome spiritual mediums; and they are powerful magicians...*

Kornelijus Platelis (Lithuania) *... mythologies like languages started to compete in the early phase of globalization when states and empires started to appear in the world. The realm of this competition was the human mind, the aim of it was domination of one or another culture system.*

Mordechai Geldman (Israel) *... myths rule since we dwell between tsunamis Nazi tsunami brought us back home and now we fear a Moslem tsunami that will expel us into the sea myths defend us...*

Judit VIHAR (Hungary) *11th March/ bleeding teardrop is falling/ on cherry blossom*

Iztok OSOJNIK (Slovenia) *Haiku is a supreme political act.*

The inevitable question at a festival concerned with haiku will be: What is a haiku? Festival Director Ban'ya Natsuishi dispelled the myth that a haiku should be a Zen moment when he asked the audience in Japanese if they believed in Zen to put their hands up and no hands went up. In his speech he revealed to the audience: *In our time, Japanese people don't know what haiku is. They don't know why haiku writing is so widespread. They are enclosed in a narrow prison of the stereotyped concept of haiku: 5, 7, 5 syllables, season word, and so-called Japanese sentimentalism. So haiku is mythological and unknown to Japanese people.*

Dimitar Anakiev of Slovenia wrote in his message to the festival participants an opinion he shares with Ban'ya Natsuishi: *...the basis of haiku is animism... Even in a culture that is reluctant to animism – such is the materialistic culture of capitalism – there are individuals who are able to identify deeply with the beings and things around them...Animism is much deeper and bigger thing than ecology, but animism can enrich men's environment just as it enables people to hear the voice of their own heart.*

Jim Kacian of the USA wrote in his message: *Our coping mechanism is poetry. Somehow, we believe, our relationship with the uncertain, shifting meanings inherent in language provides us with the means not only to meet the challenges of our personal lives, but to connect with others.*

This has been a year of many challenges for the Japanese people, and the fact that the farewell party was held on the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor of Meiji University Liberty Tower, in a city that has felt a multitude of earthquakes, didn't seem to matter as everyone clustered to catch a glimpse of Mt. Fuji in the distance before the sunset. These bonds of friendship and compassion shared in Tokyo with poets from all over the world has given me a renewed sense of hope and optimism for the future.

Thank you very much to the World Haiku Association and the Asia New Zealand Foundation for this opportunity to reinvigorate my enthusiasm for poetry.

Kia kaha,

Doc Drumheller, New Zealand, October 2011.