# Poetic Karma

Terry Watada

Why do I write poetry? There's no money in it unless you're Maya Angelou. I will admit poetry prizes of late have become tantalizingly large: the Griffin Prize in Canada is worth $40,000 (Cdn) and the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award can net a poet $100,000 (US). Honestly speaking, however, what chance do I have in snaring one of those? In social situations, people sneer at me if I declare myself to be a poet. Such a pronouncement smacks of elitism. There may even be some truth to it. If I find myself in a room full of poets, chances are, I will never be able to enter one of the long standing cliques that were formed in the genesis of the current poetry scene. Not that I'd want to anyway since poets are a rather precious lot. Then there is the mortality factor. Through statistics, researchers have shown that poets die younger than any other writers. "The Sylvia Plath Effect" holds that poets live, on average, sixty-two years. Novelists are blessed with four more years. I know anything can be proven using statistics, but it doesn't exactly inspire me to be a poet.

Yet, I've written three manuscripts worth of poems, two have been published. Recently, I was commissioned to compose an epic poem to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the forty-seven ronin. At present, I am working on a fourth collection entitled **Akari**. I even achieved some level of success with my first book: **A Thousand Homes** was short listed for the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award, a prize given by the League of Canadian Poets for the best first book of

poetry published in the previous year. I didn't win but the recognition was nice. So some consider me to be a poet. Yet I wonder what is it in my makeup that drives me to pursue such an unprofitable, apparently fatal and much maligned art form.

My father, Matsujiro Watada, wrote *tanka*. At least he told me he had. I have never seen any of the many, many poems he claimed to have written. In point of fact, he never showed them to anyone, not even his own wife. It wouldn't have mattered to me in any case, since they were, in all likelihood, written in Japanese. I did believe he was a poet, however.

He had a poetic soul. Even in his dotage, he impressed me with how he expressed himself. After I lifted him into his wheelchair one day, he told me of a dream he had the night before. I turned it into the following poem:

Last night I dreamed
I was running, dragging the wind
Along with strong arms.[1]

On another occasion, my father was in a contemplative mood and told me a story about the internment years. He was in Vancouver before the outbreak of World War II. Being a lumberjack, he was on hiatus and so was enjoying the company of family and civilized surroundings. Pearl Harbor changed all that.

He was summarily ordered by the government to a road camp about five hundred miles inland. With tears in his eyes, anger in his heart,

he kissed his wife and seven-year-old son goodbye and left for Five Mile Camp.

A few months later, my mother and brother gathered their meager belongings and went to Minto Mines, a self-sustaining camp near Lillooet B.C. My mother certainly didn't have the $1200 required to live in such a camp but my father's boss had offered to sponsor her. Despite her worry over her missing husband, she made the best of things and set up house in a rustic cabin, dragged from miles away to Minto.

After nearly a year, through my mother's pleas and my father's boss's connections, Matsujiro Watada made it to Minto to reunite with the family. Unfortunately, this was not the end of their troubles.

I'm not sure which came first but my mother began suffering severe abdominal pains. So much so that she had to be taken to Vancouver for an operation to remove kidney stones. Her chances of survival were 50/50. Such iffy prospects were made worse by the indifferent nurses at the hospital. "She's a Jap," explained a nurse when questioned by the Mother Superior who demanded to know why the patient was not being attended. If not for the good nun, my mother would have, in all likelihood, died on the gurney in the hallway that afternoon.

Soon thereafter my father had to endure broken ribs and a collapsed lung because of a truck accident. One morning as his work crew was being transported to a sawmill, the hung over driver made a fatal mistake and sent the truck off the road and careening down the mountainside. One man was killed and one man severely injured. My father had to be sent to a hospital in Kamloops.

While he was in his bed in agony, he pondered his bad luck and the fate of his family. He gazed through a hospital window and saw the full moon. The way he described it was very poetic and again I composed a poem based on his observations.

To my lonely wife –

Do you see the autumn moon?
I'm broken like you,
taken far away from you,
but I see the same clear sky.[2]

My maternal grandfather, someone I had never met, also wrote poems throughout his life. Unfortunately, I only have five of them. He had sent them to my mother in 1944 as a farewell gift to his youngest living daughter. He knew he was about to die.

Late in the nineteenth century, Japan was coming out of the feudal system with the rise of the middle class. Iwakichi was the second son of Bishop Fujita, a prominent clergyman of a Shinto sect (Tenrikyo) in Fukuiken. Within a privileged and wealthy environment, the monks taught him literature and philosophy. He was apparently quite a good poet.

Japan was an agrarian society as well and families depended on having many sons to help with the planting and harvesting. If a family was 'son poor', it was customary to adopt one from a 'son rich' family. So it was that a rice farmer named Takehara approached the Bishop and asked to adopt his second son. He reasoned that the

Bishop had his first son to be his successor and a third to guarantee the survival of his name.

The Bishop was infuriated by the audacity of the peasant and dismissed him. Unbeknownst to anyone, however, Iwakichi had overheard the proposal. The young man of twenty was taken by the brashness of the peasant and surreptitiously met with him. He liked Takehara's irreverence and ambition for a better life. After the meeting, he made a momentous decision.

Iwakichi declared his intentions to the Bishop: he was to be adopted by the Takehara family. Bishop Fujita was utterly dismayed and warned his son of what he was giving up: his good name, any claim to inheritance, and most of all, a privileged life, full of study and luxury. He went on to tell of the hardship Iwakichi could expect in poverty. His son's hands were soft and not the hands of a labourer.

Iwakichi was undeterred. He said to his father that that was the point, he wanted to work with his hands, to experience life. He boasted that he would make something of himself on his own: he would make the Takehara family rich.

What could the Bishop do? He allowed the adoption to take place.

Before he left, Iwakichi gathered together his books and went to a prominent point high above the river near the village. He shouted as if declaring to the Shinto gods that he no longer needed the books since he was to become a farmer. With a tremendous heave, he tossed them into the raging waters below to be swept out to sea.

Iwakichi was as good as his word. He worked hard and expanded the farm to include lumbering and fishing. He in fact built up a fleet of boats. In the end, he was a wealthy man with a large estate, named

*Genyo*, situated high above the village. Despite his repudiation of books, Iwakichi never forgot his upbringing; he remained a poet until his death.

One day in 1944, Iwakichi Takehara gathered his wife and five of his children together and predicted that on a certain day in February, at a certain time, he would die. No one believed him since he was in perfect health.

In the weeks remaining him, he composed poems. He sent five to his youngest daughter, who after moving from an internment camp in the interior of British Columbia, was living with her own husband and son in a shack in Alberta. They were five poignant meditations on death. My mother said she knew her father was dead upon receiving the poems sometime after relations between Japan and Canada normalized.

Death has no meaning to me,
But when I give thought to the
Moment of death,
I grow sad at the loss of
Warm family memoriess.[3]

According to my mother, Iwakichi Takehara had died on the appointed day, at the predicted hour.

Both of these stories are romantic and poetic, but do they prove a *karmic* link. Am I a poet because it's in my blood? The stories are

probably exaggerated for effect but for me they do create a context. I recall being in Japan in 1959 and all my relatives marveling how I was the spitting image of my maternal grandfather. I also remember feeling an inexplicable joy when I stood at the top of a promontory high above the river. As it turned out, I was standing in the exact spot my grandfather had when throwing away his books. Perhaps it is my *karma* to be a poet.

On the other hand, *issei* in North America and Japanese of that generation in Japan were known for writing poetry. It was an essential part of their education.

In 1975, the **Continental Times**, a wholly Japanese-Canadian newspaper located in Toronto, Canada, published an anthology of *tanka* by *issei* called **Maple**: *Tanka Poem by Japanese Canadians*. Members of the Kisaragi Poem Study Group had composed the poems with great care.

What strikes me about the collection is the large number of poets and the breath of skill and subject matter. There is a poignancy to the lines that captures the essence of their immigrant experiences in Canada.

Day in and day out
Thinking of home
For forty years.
Accustomed to living in Canada
Now I am old.[4]

The Kisaragi group is but one of several Japanese poetry groups in

North America. Writing poetry then is a common activity.

At the same time, both my father and grandfather had little influence on my early efforts to write. In the first place, I hadn't known they had composed poems until I was in my thirties – a time when my mother thought it right that I should know something about the family. And secondly, I couldn't have read their poems without help since they were written in Japanese, an ironic fact since it was the first language I learned.

Born to an immigrant family living in Toronto's east end, I was surrounded by love and working class concerns, all expressed in Japanese. Today, the 'new' immigrant experience is common, but in the 1950s, I seemed to be a unique case, illustrated by the fact that I was the only one singled out to repeat kindergarten because of my lack of English.

Somehow I muddled through school, picking up English and discarding Japanese, until I felt I was part of the "Canadian mainstream." I watched *The Flintstones* and ate Kellogg's *Frosted Flakes* to my heart's content. So it came as quite a shock when my grade-twelve teacher took me aside to inquire about my family background. I was angry at his impertinence but I couldn't find the words or the courage to rebuff him. Instead, I told him about my parents. He paused and sighed a conclusion. Since English was not consistently spoken in the house, I could never hope to develop a competence in the language. I was shocked and felt more than a little disempowered.

At about the same time, I began to express myself creatively, mainly to find my place in a society in which I seemingly didn't belong.

Because my teacher had shaken my confidence in my English skills, I decided to write verse. I mistakenly thought that poetry did not require complete control of spelling and syntax. I produced some pretty bad stuff, but I did find an effective outlet for my creative urges.

As time went on, I armed myself with grammar texts and writing courses on my way to an MA in English. I developed, as a result of my studies, an appreciation of poetics and so began to write poetry seriously.

Serious poetry but not good poetry. I became enthralled with the literary theories of Pound and Eliot. I admired the complexity of Wallace Stevens, the imagery of James Joyce. I saw poetry as a collection of allusions, literary and historic, that was somehow to replicate poetically great movements of time and action. I appreciated the beauty of the language and the epiphanies created in the image, but I personally could not bring together the words to approach the erudite poetry of Pound, Eliot or Stevens, even though I must have convinced myself of how profound my work was.

In 1979, the Powell Street Revue and the Chinese Canadian Writers Workshop in Vancouver B.C. produced **Inalienable Rice**, the first Asian-Canadian anthology of writing. For some reason the editors included my submission, a long poem entitled *Falling Doves, Rising Dragons*.

*Taga hiroi Nokoshishi ka Ise no umi no*
*Kiyoki nagisa no Aki no yo no tsuki.*

ships and ships yawn

drowsy of sleep
as the aging day hurries sundown
the east wind holds the sweet smell of home
On the horizon
pirate ships flounder in the
shimonoseki straits
heavy are the steps upon the inland sea spiders
and demons
rags and spoiled rice
nihonbashi bangs with firecracker
a golden face set sail
from hyuga in Kyushu aura of sapphire

the hidden charms
are all consumed in
the fire of history.[5]

Obtuse, pretentious and obscure, *Falling Doves, Rising Dragons* rambled on for seven pages. What I was talking about, I'm not sure. Perhaps I was exploring Asian-Canadian and Canadian themes in the context of ancient Japanese culture and history, a motif I was to exploit throughout my writing.

i stand mirrored against
the constant flux
of colours that is
the north

with all the intensities
that are maple peeping through
the network of black
sinuous trees and
the blue romance with the sky
floods
the mouth of the drowning
canoeman

with all that i am
i am still like some
old foreign Chinook
blowing barren across
the prairies
whistling wild in want
of heroes.[6]

Then again, the Japanese-Canadians poets at the time were writing in a similar style.

*in a circle*
*anyone who moves*
*away from the center*
*moves into*
*an opposition*
*to centrality*
*otherwise impossible*[7]

And,

Swinging bar doors part
in fearful respect
she walks in with a dimestore gait
borrowed from a sailor in heat
The threat of life
and the fine French perfume
cling in loyalty
to her black leather jacket …

she is a samurai
and you'd best wipe your feet
and draw your sword
before entering her circle[8]

Similar but not. The poets represented above (Roy Miki and Helen Koyama respectively) had more control over their work than I did. Miki, in *Saving Face*, eventually centred on recovering and contextualizing his family's history during the internment years. Helen successfully empowered Asian women with her poem. *Bar Doors* inspired members of Katari Taiko to compose a musical piece based on the images in the poem. It remains an essential part of their repertoire to this day.

Other influential poets at the time who revolved around the periphery of my consciousness were Roy Kiyooka and Mark Toyama. A celebrated artist who happened to write poetry, Roy Kiyooka's work is at

times unfathomable but there are moments of lucidity that exude a beauty unparalleled in Japanese-Canadian poetry.

the song is
about tortoise

and not the hare
not the hare

black heads lifted
there sing

sing into the air
walking by sun

in my eye sing-
ing also singing

another song the
air of Kyoto sings.[9]

Mark Toyama was arguably the best-known poet to the second generation of Japanese Canadians. His poem *Powell Street Knows* remained central to the *nisei* consciousness throughout the years.

powell st knows
all about those

who limp, run, stagger or
walk
criss-cross, stop and talk
for echoes of laughter
whispers of pain
odour of burnt toast
exotic scent of chow mein
dissolve into the street in
midnight rain
that's how
powell st knows[10]

Toyama himself died in May 1946, age 28, but his influence was profound. Sam Yamada, a well-known photographer after World War II, wrote of the young poet in the September 1990 issue of the **Nikkei Voice**.

> Mark was a gifted writer. When he showed me the poem ... I wanted Shinobu Higashi (**The New Canadian** editor) to see it. Shinobu fell in love with it.[11]

In spite of the plethora of writing, the only poet who wrote the only poem of any significance for me was Joy Kogawa. At the time, she was an obscure writer known mostly as a protégé of Margaret Laurence. She had written three books of poetry and suffered the anonymity most poets endure. Yet *What Do I Remember of the Evacuation?* spoke to me. The images were vivid, the emotion clear, tugging at the heart.

And I remember the mountains and I was
Six years old and I swear I saw a giant
Gulliver of Gulliver's Travels scanning the horizon
And when I told my mother she believed it too
And I remember how careful my parents were
Not to bruise us with bitterness
And I remember the puzzle of Lorraine Life
Who said "don't insult me" when I
Proudly wrote my name in Japanese
And Tim flew the Union Jack
When the war was over but Lorraine
And her friends spat on us anyway
And I prayed to the god who loves
All the children in his sight
That I might be white.[12]

I am not saying her other poems are unworthy. Her Japan poems are lovely; her later poems are a bit inside for me but evocative. *What Do I Remember of the Evacuation?*, however, struck a chord with me, a poet in search of his voice.

Still other poets came across my consciousness as I turned to composing songs. Ron Tanaka, a professor at the University of British Columbia, moved to the United States in the late '70s and created some of the most influential, if ugly, poems.

I hate my wife for her flat yellow face

And her fat cucumber legs, but mostly
For her lack of intelligence and lack of
Intelligence compared to Judith Gluck.[13]

Lawson Inada, an activist and English professor, was part of the first wave of Asian-American artists. His poems bordered on the heroic by mythologizing the Asian-American experience, bringing together the internment and the free spirit of the Asian American Movement.

you get up by Shasta
in the pass
& all that air comes at you
all that breath you used
comes blasting at you
hot stale punctured
out of a tube

I told you so
oh yes
when you left it was
numbest winter
lugging a bass on the Santa Fe[14]

Later, in 1981, Gerry Shikatani, poet and food critic, published the first anthology of Japanese Canadian poets. **Paper Doors** brought together poets from three generations in an attractive package tracing the "poetic history" of Japanese Canadians. Subjects range from the

idyllic of the *issei tanka* to the bleakness of *sansei* meditations. Underlying everything is the outrage inherent in the internment experience.

Night thoughts
on this journey
far away
from my family

Cricket comes to me
crying.[15]

Despite the influences, I did not write much poetry after *Rising Doves, Falling Dragons*, choosing instead to concentrate on music. I seemed to have found an audience for my songs throughout the '70s and early '80s and so traveled the country playing and singing in any venue available. Kuan Foo, a fellow songwriter and performer, once mused that song lyrics (though brilliant in a song) are just bad poetry, so I was quite content doing what I was doing.

Closing time at the Hinomaru,
Got to be the saddest time I've known.
The Mounties are coming to take us away
And you know there's nothing we can do.

Come and drink with me.
Taste the last drops of freedom.

Come and drink with me, my friend,
To our children.[16]

I really didn't begin to write serious poetry until my mother died in 1984. In an outpouring of invective and love, I examined the events of her life. I discovered a world filled with ghosts, struggle and beauty. In a period of two weeks with little sleep and obsessive work, I composed the long poem *A Thousand Homes*, named after my mother, Chisato.

The drowned baby was blue
and seemed to have pearl eyes.
*She isn't my sister.*
She wasn't my sister any more.
Dark figures muttered
in the decay of a swirling shadow;
another ghost roamed
the hallways of Genyo.[17]

I then began the long process of building a collection around my mother's poem. Utilizing actual events, cultural touchstones and the supernatural, I composed poems about my parents and their friends, lives rich in adventure and imagery.

He was always a quiet man.
His *Meiji* face
remained stern, frozen

throughout/ his life
it hid emotion,
yet he must
have felt something.

As a lumberjack,
he once told my father
he wanted a woman
– not a hooker
never a *joro* –

but a wife.
He wanted the boss's daughter.[18]

Critical reaction to the book was very positive, and, as a result, **A Thousand Homes** was short listed for the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award.

> In Terry Watada's **A Thousand Homes** language has the stillness of a reflecting pool, as if the poet has looked at his subjects carefully over a long time ... Watada's poems cross and re-cross the vast spaces between Japanese and Canadian locations, the spaces cultural as well as geographic, full of adaptations, changes and ghosts. Long poems cross over time and memory, and Watada's skill makes these crossings seem effortless.[19]

With such encouragement, I continued to write poetry. I was also by

this point armed with the knowledge that my father and maternal grandfather were poets. I soon realized that creating poetry was wrapped inextricably with my family heritage.

The ensuing poems came together thematically when a friend noticed the rain imagery running throughout. I then decided to build a new collection, organizing the poems under the following sections: **The Rain Cantos, Uta-gokoro** and **Nikkei Monogatari**: *Impressions of the Japanese Canadian Internment Experience.* Taking as a model the woodblock print series *One Hundred Views of Famous Places in Edo* by Hiroshige, Ando, I called the manuscript **Ten Thousand Views of Rain**. Combining a Japanese appreciation for nature and themes common to life for Japanese Canadians, I was able to succeed, in my estimation, in that which I attempted to fashion with *Falling Doves, Rising Dragons* – a contextualization of Japanese culture within North American poetics.

> The form is free, the connections suggestive, often tenuous. Images tumble one on another, some more powerful than others, like "a wound of bad weather" and the image of rage "vomiting" a word. Watada plays with words, ideas and emotions, even with individual letters, like a juggler or magician. Childhood is "like a slow tumble of thunder / as my eyes liquefy … and then close / shut with / the glue of night."[20]

Of particular interest to the reader was the last section of the book, **Nikkei Monogatari**. As I had done in my first book, my music and my collection of short fiction, **Daruma Days**, I continued to work to

turn the stories of Japanese Canadians into art.

> Watada's graceful and evocative style impresses as he gently tells the inner stories of Japanese Canadians and their experiences, and yet, he never shies away from hard reality ... In the third section of the book, "Nikkei Monogatari", the wild landscape of the B.C. Japanese Internment Camps mirror the harsh treatment given Japanese Canadians during WWII. There is a beauty here, too, and herein lies the irony: Watada tells stories of grief and loss but in those very stories there are also the very images of beauty, grace and hope.[21]

During the same time, Japanese-Canadian poets multiplied in number and produced work always with a nod to their cultural heritage, both Japanese and Japanese Canadian. Gerry Shikatani published his immense work **Aqueduct** (406 pages), much to the fascination and consternation of poetry lovers everywhere. David Fujino self-published many of his abstract pieces, both concrete and found, and Roy Miki produced a prolific amount of work, much of it centering on the Japanese-Canadian Redress Movement.

Kevin Irie turned his poetic eye to the internment as well to illuminate its effects on his family.

The Nisei

Today, as before,
they wash the white rice,

alter hems
and pleats of fashion,
reconciled
to eastern snow.[22]

Phillip Arima, a young Toronto Japanese Canadian, veered away from his heritage and set about creating an urban poetry to enhance his performance art. The cover of his collection, **Beneath the Beauty**, displays to exploitive and lurid advantage his abdomen length scar. He does embrace his Asian-ness, however, since he wanders the streets of Chinatown and features *kanji* on the cover of his first book.

Sally Ito, a transplanted Alberta writer living in Vancouver B.C., immerses her work in Japanese culture, Japanese-Canadian history or her Christian faith. What emerges is a poetry that is spiritual, filled with vivid images, yet difficult to reconcile as a cohesive whole with the range of diverse voices, emotions and images.

Six miles of Jerusalem
stretch out before me in my sleep.
Everywhere sand,
and the distant jockeying of stars
heralding the great birth
Of a new what? …

and a glimpse of that glittering city
skips across the eye,

burns like live coals,
sears in the palm
crimson buds,  two bright windows
from which to see Paradise.[23]

Reading Sally's work, I found I had been thinking in a similar vein. Can Buddhism be used to frame a poetry that is contemporary, relevant to my culture and traditions, and lends vitality and ingenuity?

The introduction to my latest collection of poems outlines the structure for the book. **Obon**: *The Festival of the Dead* attempts to pay tribute to all those whose lives, words, and feelings served to mould me into the artist I am today.

> Obon is a time-honoured celebration and religious commemoration for Buddhists. In Japan, the *Festival of the Dead* or *Festival of Light*, as it is also known, takes place between August 13 and 15. In North America, there is actually an Obon season, stretching from early July to mid September. The different temples across the land slate their rituals and celebrations on different weekends throughout the summer so that the membership and public do not have to choose which temple's festival to attend.
>
> The origins of Obon are somewhat vague. Yuri Ogura of the **Japan Times** relates the story of a Buddhist monk named Mokuren Sonja, a devoted disciple of Sakyamuni Buddha (563 B.C. – 483 B.C.). He apparently had the ability to see visions and so saw his mother suffering from hunger in the depths of hell. He presented an offering of rice and her suffering was eased.

In his Dharma talk, Kendo Sensei of the Calgary Buddhist Church told of Arhat Maha Maudgalyayana, the foremost in psychic powers of Sakyamuni's followers. "A short while after his mother died, Maha Maudgalyayana went into meditation and began searching for his mother's rebirth. He was shocked to find her reborn in hell. Eventually, he seeks Sakyamuni's advice. He tells him to hold a celebration for the departed or Obon. Maha Maudgalyayana does this and his mother is freed from hell and reborn in heaven."

I recall from my days attending Dharma School that the disciple's name was Moggallana and he dreamed of his mother in torment in the underworld for having killed a man to feed her children. He tried desperately to send her food but the realm of hungry ghosts would not allow any food to touch her lips. When Moggallana consulted the Buddha, he was reminded that it was because of him his mother created such *karma*. "You must show appreciation for what your mother sacrificed," the Buddha said. Moggallana made an offering of food, repeating his gratitude several times. He then saw her released from the realm and allowed to enter the Pure Land or Nirvana. Overjoyed, he began to dance and sing, thus creating one of the most popular customs of Obon: the Bon dance. No matter which version of the story is to be believed, the lesson is the same. The purpose of Obon is to remind everyone of filial piety and expressing gratitude for the past.

Obon begins with the lighting of *cho-chin*. The lights are placed outside the home along with burning incense to guide the ancestors back home. The descendants then place food and drink before the *butsudan*. The commemoration continues with a grave site visita-

tion. Here family members clean the grounds and pour clean, pure water over the headstones. Either a Buddhist priest or a lay minister then presides over the ceremony of lighting incense to remind everyone of the presence of the Buddha (and never extinguish a flame with the breath), clapping hands to summon the spirits of the dead and then chanting a short *sutra* in an effort to express everyone's gratitude for past lives. After dusk, the community gathers in an open area. Musicians and singers perform the traditional songs of Obon and dancers in colourful *yukata* or formal *kimono* dance in a circle around a *yagura* as Moggallana did so many centuries ago. The end of Obon is recognized in one of two ways. The toronagashi takes place by water. The devoted prepare boats carrying paper lanterns with the names of deceased family members written on them. With more incense and chanting, the boats are launched, symbolically sending the spirits back to the other world. An alternative is called Obikuri or fire ritual. The names of the dead are written on slats of wood. Again a priest presides as the wood is ceremoniously burned, the smoke representing the spirits returning to the nether world.

Obon is not a time of grief or haunting fear. Through the many rituals, copious amounts of food and celebrations, Obon truly brings everyone together in harmony and joy. It also, as Kendo Sensei taught, "allows us to transcend time itself. Just as in the past, great masters, disciples, emperors and empresses, wives, husbands and children have all joined in this festive occasion, we too are now joining. Thus we link the past with the present. So too, in the future, filial children will celebrate Obon and hold their festival remember-

ing their departed and all the departed. Thus we are linked with the future. So by our actions of today, the past, present and future are all connected. If you understand the teachings of shunyata then you will realize that time is illusory."[24]

The poems of the collection are steeped in Buddhist lore and teaching, yet the setting for the verse is contemporary. It my hope this juxtaposition evokes a world that is at once complex and fluid. Through references to fine art, music, family and Asian-North-American history and culture, I feel I can express my gratitude for the past and my hope for the future.

no shrapnel
had shredded him no
bullet had pierced
him no shell had
torn him
no bayonet had lacerated him

*he was a friendly sort*
*of a buddhahead,*
*with a horse's laugh …*
*died of a heart attack. he was*

Uncle George
[lowered] his
head

his riverbed hands clasped
in a squeeze
of sweat
eyes moistened
as he trembled in the humidity

*scared to death*

*namu amida butsu, namu amida butsu, namu amida butsu*[25]

Sometimes I dream of that trip to Japan my parents and I undertook back in 1959. One incident in particular stays with me. On a busy day of aunts and relations preparing an evening feast, I wandered away from the family estate (it was still standing albeit worn down by time and lack of money) and came to a bridge above the river my grandfather had blessed with his books. Being eight years old, I began exploring it. I suddenly slipped and fell into the water ten feet below. The current immediately caught me and pushed me toward the sea with its dangerous undertow. Fortunately, an adult cousin walking beside the river on his way to his fishing boat saw me struggling and jumped in to rescue me. He wrapped me in his coat and took me to the house.

Back within the warmth of my family, my mother scolded me. An aunt then reminded her of the youngest sister. Back when they were all very young, the household was busy preparing a welcome dinner for visiting *samurai* (tax collectors and minor government officials by this point in Japanese society). Iwakichi Takehara wanted to make a

good show for them.

The youngest child, six years old, wandered away from the house and went to the same bridge over the river. It was after a prolonged rainstorm and so the river was angry with muddy water. The child began playing on the bridge and accidentally fell to the depths below. She unfortunately had no cousin walking on the banks to save her. She disappeared without a trace.

The family was struck by the coincidence of circumstances. At the time, I didn't understand the significance of the events and, by extension, the writing of poems, but I see now that the generational leaps in my family have brought me to what I am at present. I am my grandfather, my father, my aunts, my mother and it is my *karma* to live as they lived – as a poet.

As I grow old
I look
　　into the mirror
among the liquid images
to find my father's face
surfacing
from　the silver depths

It has a simplicity
[
moulded by a lumber
camp　survivor of the
internment　scarred by

a construction site
and instilled with father-
hood]

a simplicity fixed in love
his face
in mine[26]

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