

Poetic *Karma*

Why do I write poetry? My father wrote *tanka* and was himself a great inspiration to me as he suffered his infirmities. 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

My maternal grandfather, someone I had never met, also wrote poems throughout his life. Unfortunately, I only had five of them handed down to me. 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.

Both these men, however, had little influence on my early efforts to write poetry. In the first place, I hadn't known they 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 read their poems 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 obscurity 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.

It was not until I discovered my family heritage that I fully appreciated the role and purpose of poetry.

In 1980, my parents went to Japan as they did every twenty years or so. It was their last trip and they knew it. When they came back, my mother had an exciting story to tell me. She and dad had gone back to her village on the Sea of Japan side. Mom visited her older brother’s wife, who was well into her eighties by that point. They sat for afternoon tea and, in the summer heat, my old aunt told my mother of Iwakichi Takehara, my grandfather.

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. Within a privileged and wealthy environment, he was taught literature and philosophy by the monks. 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 carry on his name.

The Bishop was infuriated by the audacity of this peasant and dismissed him. Unbeknownst to him, however, Iwakichi had overheard the proposal. The young man of twenty was taken with 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 life decision.

Iwakichi approached the Bishop and declared his intention of being adopted by the Takehara family. The Bishop must have been utterly dismayed. He 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 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 high point above the river next to 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 an unceremonious heave, he tossed them into the river to be swept away 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*, 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, he gathered his family together and predicted that on a

certain day, at a certain time in February, he would die. No one believed him since he was in perfect health.

In the weeks remaining to 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 after reading them her father was about to die.

Death has no meaning for me,
but when I give thought to the
moment of death,
I grow sad at the loss of
warm family memories.²

According to my mother, Iwakichi Takehara died on the appointed day and hour.

The story was romantic and poetic, probably exaggerated for effect, but for me, everything fell into place. I recalled being in Japan in 1959 and everyone marvelling how I was the spitting image of my grandfather. It was my *karma* to be a poet, something which became painfully clear to me shortly after my mother died in 1984. In an outburst of grief, love and creativity, I expressed my mother's life in verse. It took about a week, and when I finished, I broke down in tears.

The long poem "A Thousand Homes" became the centrepiece of my first published collection.

Sometimes I dream of that 1959 trip to Japan. One incident in particular stays with me. On a busy day of aunts and relations preparing an evening feast, I wandered away from *Genyo* (it was still standing albeit worn down by time and lack of money) and came to a bridge above the river my grandfather had anointed 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, I was scolded by my mother. 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 wanted to make a good show for them.

The youngest child, six years old, wandered away from *Genyo* 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 eventually 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, 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.

A Simple Face

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

[moulded by a lumber
camp survivor of the
internment scarred by
a construction site
and instilled with father-
hood]

a simplicity fixed in love

november 1996

NOTES

- 1 Matsujiro Watada, "From a Wheelchair," *A Thousand Homes*, trans. T. Watada (Stratford: Mercury Press, 1995), p. 31.
- 2 Iwakichi Takehara, "Death has no meaning . . .," *A Thousand Homes*, trans. T. Watada, p. 21.