

## David Gilbey 'Pachinko Sunset: A Narrow Road to a Deep North'

### 1. Matsuo Basho *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

There is a mountain temple in the region of Yamagata called the Ryushakuji. It was founded by the great teacher Jikaku and is a place noted for its tranquility. People had urged us to go there 'even for a brief look' and we had turned back at Obanazawa to make the journey, a distance of about fifteen miles. It was still daylight when we arrived. After first reserving pilgrims' lodgings at the foot of the mountain we climbed to the temple itself at the summit. Boulders piled on boulders had created this mountain, and the pines and cedars on its slopes were old. The earth and stones were worn and slippery with moss. At the summit the doors of the temple buildings were all shut and not a sound could be heard. Circling around the cliffs and crawling over the rocks, we reached the main temple building. In the splendor of the scene and the silence I felt a wonderful peace penetrate my heart.

how still it is here

stinging into the stones

a locust's trill (Matsuo Basho *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* trans. Donald Keene)

### 2. David Gilbey: from 'Haibun Hikes'

Matsushima existed in my imagination long before I actually travelled there, exploring the Bay and the two hundred-plus islands from different boats on different occasions. Its wind-and-rain-shaped soft-stone islands make up one of the three 'wonders' of cultural Japan, though the foreshore view is cluttered by industrial chimneys and redefined by the diesel and gaud of commercial tourism. The aquarium's pale blue paintscape rust towards oblivion and the Tower leans, like a displaced Meccano Pisa. There are curious shrines (one celebrating a mission to Italy), gardens, bridges, caves and funerary alcoves carved into rock faces, a legacy of previous Buddhist communities. Bright and dark green mosses suggest carpeted forest civilisations, paths and tracks leading off behind trees past even more secluded caves.

The Zen temple Zuiganji (completed 1609) is also here - on one occasion I leap to prevent my son from swinging on the 500 year-old Korean plum trees propped geriatrically, pink and white sleeping dragons. Basho is memorialised by statues and souvenirs, along with *matcha* (a green tea flavour) ice cream, dried and barbecued squid, and *kokeshi* dolls.

In the winter of 2000, despite the tawdriness of tourism, I caught the sun in the Bay and later, after walking to Oshima Island over a vermilion bridge and around Godaido hall (housing five deities, the replicas of which can only be seen every 33 years), witnessed a snowstorm from the fried oyster restaurant. Then I headed off to the glass museum. I felt as if I was travelling through several stomachs of an exotic cow - photographing as I went.

## Oku Matsushima

The luckiest cicadas in the world  
live out their twenty-four hours  
on a sunny rockface in winter  
in Matsushima Bay.

Floating islands in a turquoise sea shape dreams:  
dragon heads, fringed Castilian ramparts,  
a child's sculpture of Honshu with a backbone of bonsai pines –  
furry dinosaur skeleton.

Close up, cliffs crowd dirtily to the lapis waters  
like wire-dredged slabs of creamy tofu  
edged with crusts of grey volcanic stone,  
their secret fissures probed by root knuckles.

At the tourist wharf passengers ignore  
the peacock ferry's pretend display,  
distracted by the drive-your-dream Toyota radios  
blaring waves of heavy metal Dragon Ash and Eminem.

We opt for fried oysters at the seafood *resutoran*  
watching the sky's grey blanket dissolve into  
white chickenpox flakes, rice crosshatching.  
Truck tyres score the new top-dressed carpet.

In the glass museum enchantment rules -  
gold flake filigree,  
solid skeins of emerald and chrysoprase  
upstage the still white magic of the otherworld outside

where pine trees acquire white feathers,  
crouch like heavy birds  
ready to lift off into slate skies.  
Grey sheds become karaoke palaces

for the sea birds' raucous music.  
Photographers scurry like archaeologists  
clutching tripods, special lenses, and eyes  
illuminated by the prospects of 10,000 yen views.

Matsushima! O Matsushima!

My usual short visits to Japan occur these days at the end of the year – early summer in Australia, early winter in Japan. Recently it's been after the busy academic year is finished and the launches of *fourW*, the annual anthology of new writing and graphics, published out of Booranga Writers' Centre at Charles Sturt University, have been executed in Wagga, Melbourne and Sydney. *Rotenburo* beckon, most memorably at Sakunami: Iwamatsu, whose fame I'd heard of from colleagues at MGU and Sendai Toastmasters and which I'd managed to visit twice. Iwamatsu traces its origin back 800 years to a time when, so it goes, a wounded *samurai* was led by a hawk to the healing hot springs deep in the clefts of the headwaters of the Hirose River. An enclosed pine staircase twists down from the hotel foyer to the baths and the grand mixed (men and women) *rotenburo* has four pools at different temperatures beside the river, under massive worn pine beams and roof, hunched into the stone of the cliff sides. Winter is best, with bearded icicles hanging from the rocks, monkeys scampering up in the trees and fresh snow on the ledges near the swift, narrow river, to scoop by handfuls and rub, stinging, over my body. On one occasion, in the bath, in broken 'Jinglish', I talk before dinner with an athletic man writing travel guides. Near midnight and unable to sleep, I find myself discussing *haiku* with a young woman studying English novels.

### **Rotenburo: Iwamatsu**

It's been snowing for days and at Sakunami  
the granite's icicle beards point from scarps and fissures  
to the clear headwaters of the Hirose River.  
This was my dream: a mixed *rotenburo* in the snow.

In yukatas and slippers we step, almost formally  
down the boxed, toffee-coloured pine staircase  
and eight hundred years  
where the hawk pointed the wounded *samurai*  
to the healing volcanic stream.

Soldiers, courtesans, lovers, and these days, salarymen,  
college sporting groups, come for a temporary rebirth.

At first you keep your bikini on, despite the signs  
but in the bath, with no other men to look at you  
you take off these brief black triangles  
and abandon yourself to our conversation.

I step to the edge and scoop snow from the boulder wall  
rubbing it, burning cold, on my hot body.  
A smaller, rectangular pool, in grey-green granite,  
formal, almost Roman, invites us to creep back  
into the mountain's lips and folds.

After, on *tatami*, facing each other across the low cherrywood table  
we *kampai* sweet saké before tasting the local freshwater sashimi

and the night's specialty: abalone cooked in salt cake  
served on hot rocks and bamboo leaf.

Later, by the blue light and soft ice of *Swan Lake* on NHK  
we sleep apart in yukatas, my mind dancing  
a precise wild ballet of purple skin, glistening valleys and hills.  
I dream conversation: "Can you see me? Come here."

In the morning a 'Viking' buffet: miso, salmon, eggplant,  
*hijiki*, then bacon, sausage and salad.  
Hotel staff slide the huge cedar screens,  
changing the vestibule to a more modest  
autumn forest for company men.

#### 4.

##### Touba

The blind, brooding *moai* from Chile were thought quaint,  
their warning to local citizens to be mindful  
of the Pacific's deceptive calm  
politely ignored  
but tsunamis make strange bedfellows  
and now a temporary shrine with two red-bibbed *ojizo-san*  
receives prayers from the living to protect the dead  
from the six levels of hell  
before Nirvana.

These lines are my prayer planks.

The morning's bright with weeds and aggregate  
as Kumiko ties the rainbow tails of origami cranes  
to the twisted rusting steel of the refuge building skeleton.  
Strung from Munich to Minamisanriku –  
a lifeless flight of a thousand sorrows  
for the drowned children, grandparents,  
aunts and uncles.

Once, houses, apartments, convenience stores, banks and businesses  
crowded this small coastal stretch, the toes of civilisation.  
Now the names of the Tohoku towns are a keening chorus,  
mouthing the ocean:  
Kesenuma, Togura, Ishinomaki, Shiogama ...  
mashed by the wall of black water.

Fire-escape stairs still cling to the six-legged, red lead meccano cockroach  
that was once a three-storey assembly-point  
its top floor door now crazily open to metal safety rails leading nowhere.  
Electric cables hang like verdigris cannelloni from ruined power boxes and  
connectors.  
Yukiko holds a shawl of bright crane tails  
as if she's taking a dead baby from the building.

At the watermarked shell of Togura, the new school on the hill, whose car park  
was thought to be the safest place to assemble,  
Kumiko tells us what she remembered moment by moment:  
"It was unbelievable ... the dirty water just kept rising ...  
The teachers and students ran so quickly ... through the bushes and fences and  
trees  
up the mountain side ... On the ridge we found a factory warehouse to shelter ...  
There was no power ... no light ... no phone ... no running water ...

It was so cold ... then it snowed ...

In the morning a volunteer emergency brigade helicopter

lifted a sick teacher ... he'd tried to save a student ...

up and away ... He was the youngest ... I felt sorry for him ... Now he runs ...”

She can't say all she feels in English but tells us she has been very sad.

“Every time I had to retell my story I would practise at home, crying,  
so I could repeat it without tears.”