

THE IMMIGRANT, THE ÉMIGRÉ, THE EXILE

By Mukesh Williams

After the shochu and sayonara
A logocentric coffee aroma wafts,
Inviting a regret of something lost
In the barter of closed spaces.

The rowdy bustle of the souk,
The beating call of the cuckoo
Recede with the allure of pale skin,
The dancing silhouette of ardor.

The hard-drumming rain
Of the night is gone,
Bringing a sweet-smelling calm
Hard to imagine last night.

For me, the new blossoms
Are sakura and plum,
Not morning glory and
Red cotton!

I have left the glow of clouds
Iridescent and angelic,
For a mythical narrative
Of a promised land!

Now the language is mine
The foreign intonations are mine
And both the ridicule and promise
Are mine.

The whiff of your departure
Is the synonym of my new identity,
Where the ridicule and promise
Of one language is replaced by another.

A Failed Individualism

(for Natsume Soseki 1867-1916)

I am indebted to you

As the earth is indebted

To the sun

And this increases my anxiety

That, what if, I cannot reciprocate

To you, beyond compare.

It is an obligation to you

That prevents me to

Be spontaneous with you.

How can I feel

Godly love and grace

Without fear or guilt.

Perhaps when I vacate

The space where I stand

I can repay my debt to you.

Tokyo Metro

With a hum and a buzz
The train surges,
Picks up speed,
Zooms and rackets
Through silhouettes,
Shadows and figures,
Sniffing, sighing,
Texting, ear-plugging,
Snoring, manga flipping,
Newspaper folding.
The congeries suffocate
In self-absorbed silence,
Broken by makeup mirrors,
Surgical mask adjustments,
Cedar pollen sneezes,
Guttural announcements.
The coaches slow down,
The sliding doors sibilate,
Agape illusion pushes and shuffles,
A frosty blast hits the face.

Princess Kaguyaat My Window

The effulgence of the night moon

Illumines the latticed shoji,

Confounding the moment.

Listen to the celestial maiden

Descending the stairs

On bamboo and washi.

There are no social norms

To observe on her annual visits

Just take care of her white rabbit!

Hachioji Matsuri

A red lion snaps his jaws,

A white fox jumps,

Geishas strum shamisen,

Milling crowds eat takoyaki,

Grilled octopus and okonomiyaki,

Girls in blue yukatas

Twirl decorative poles,

As if organizing the cosmos—

The ruffled August evening
Is diaphanous with
Sanctified illumination.
At the smoke-filled intersection
Of Yokoyama-tsuji
Flute players synchronize with
All-female mikoshi bearers
And tekamai geisha guide
Their paper lanterns and peony flowers
Singing kiyari songs
Children watch goggle-eyed
The contortions of the shishimai actors
Forgetting their goldfish scoop—
The shrine gods are appeased.

Note

The Hachioji matsuri or festival is held in the first weekend of August around Hachioji JR station when schools are closed and colleges are vacationing. The festival mitigates the muggy drag of August evenings with food, drinks and festivities. Since the Edo period the religious festival centers on the HachimanYakumo Shrine and the Taga Shrine, but today it has become more of a community celebration.

The World of Genji Monogatari

Stars shine,
Amidst splashes of gold,
Magenta and blue,
Kimono-clad yokibito
Clip clop daintily
Over the stone bridge,
In a trance,
Following a dream
Hikaru watches
Wisp of clouds, locusts,
Cicada shells, fly
Auriferous.
Twilight Heian beauties with
Saké-young Murasaki
Dancing under cherry blossoms,
Falling pink, falling pink,
The pale pearl skin,
The fragrance, sacred blushes,
Hot seductions

Climbing in heat

Crushing wild carnations

Finding the secluded

Wormwood patch

In absinthe regret.

The first bush warbler arrives

With a splash of butterflies

Hoke-kyo! hoke-kyo!

The bridge floats,

His panache moves,

In a reverie

Past the oak tree,

The bell crickets

And the evening mist

Wet in the gullet

Tactile and olfactory

Spreading across the universe.

The privileged royal outing

The rose plum, the flawless peach,

The cherry blooms

Possessed with a *waka*,
Tantalizing allurements.
Decadence,
The sadness of things passing
The typhoon comes
The cypresses bend,
Fortune changes and
The wizard prognosticates.
Life vanishes in the clouds.
After a thousand years
The heady inebriation
Still swirls in feminine mist,
The musk of a night caught young
Still tastes fragmentary,
The cunning lips alive with
Unconsummated longing
Still indulge in a power game
Where the resolute hand
Holding an ink brush
In regal splendor
Paints on malleable wash.

Note

The Tale of Genji written by MurasakiShikibu in the eleventh century completed a millennium last year 2011. A story of love and intrigue of the royal ladies or yokibito, set in the Heian period, it has captivated the hearts of young and old alike. The shining prince HikaruGenji and the lady-in-waiting Murasaki prefigure the courtly world of seduction, power and intrigue. The tale within a tale provides a psychological window to a world gone by through Shikibi's skilful brush strokes on soft rice paper.

The GionMachiya, Kyoto

The crisp evening air
The shamisen across
Shirakawa canal,
The auricomous winter reeds
Praying in moonlit waters,
The machiya silhouetted.
Somewhere in the dark ochaya
On rice fresh tatami mats
The recherché maiko
In emerald green kimono

Serves whipped tea
To audacious guests.
The dragons at Kennin-ji
Remember the crackling fire
And the whizzing arrows
And send a message in
Zen, Shingon and Tendai,
Survive and relax.

Note

GionMachiya is a series of wooden town houses in Higashiyama Kyoto near the Kenninji and Kyomizudera temples where people can stay and enjoy the ambience of ancient Kyoto. Priests from different religious sects such as Zen, Shingon and Tendai can be seen walking in their traditional attire. The Kyomachiya style has taken a thousand years to evolve. The craftsmanship is aesthetically intricate using renewable resources in construction such as hinoki wood, bamboo and kusa grass. The narrow lanes, traditional Japanese food and kimono dresses provide an inimitable window to the past. The machiya is divided into three parts. The front is reserved for the store, the middle for the living quarters and the rear for the workshop. It has a laid back atmosphere, slow and elegant. Next to it is the Gion district where maiko and geisha are trained. It is quite a compact neighborhood like a mini city with cafes, supermarkets, convenience stores, post offices, restaurants, tea houses, ATMs, train and bus stations.

Nakasendo, Hime No Kaido

Dry morning cold
Snow piling up silently
Houses curving slowly
Along the winding road
Sekigahara cedars watch
A lonely crow
Against the clip clop
Of a bent figure
Climbing the stone steps
Of Amaterasu shrine.

History is all there
But apart from birds
Only imagination traverses
Real and symbolic distances,
The palanquin trudges
Along the darkening highway

With princess Kazunomiya,
Snaking their way towards Edo
To marry the shogun
In a world-renouncing gesture.

The horses whinny,
The soldiers wheeze,
The villages cumulate their fires
Fixing sake, fish and rice,
And the paper doors flutter
Their translucent pages
Of memory while
The children eager-eyed
Peep inside
Oblivious of any mischance.

At Lake Biwa a last look back
Towards Kyoto,
Of what is left behind in departures
And then the floating world
Moves once more, slowly
Past sukego villages

Into the modern concerns

Of daily life,

Priorities, intrigues,

Profit and loss.

A Brief Note

Nakasensdo Highway is an old Japanese highway connecting Edo and Shinano, Nagano Prefecture and was once an important political and commercial artery. It is well-preserved even today and we can still see many wooden houses belonging to that period. Often the roads are inlaid with stones that catch moss and blend with the surroundings. Nakasendo was once called hime no kaido or 'The Road of the Princesses' as many princesses traveled on this road for one reason or another. In their journey they were supported and sheltered by village folks, who made some money out of them but essentially provided board and lodgings. Sukego villages were the surrounding villages, which were expected to provide extra men and animals to post towns whenever large official parties like Kazunomiya visited. In the Edo period the sukego villages were duty-bound to offer help and in this manner supported the highway system.

Sannenzaka Street, Kyoto

The child stirs

In the womb

In a breathless decent
down the narrow
stone steps of Gion
lined with sukiya chic
lacquer ware , Japanese fans,
cloisonné and metal work.
Sanctified by the incense
from Kiyomizu-dera
for easy delivery
the algid wind
from Higashiyama
surrenders to the wish
of the mother
in a swell of Kanji inspirations
on wooden tablets.

Bio:

Mukesh Williams has been published in Indian, Canadian, Caribbean, and American journals such as Indian Verse, The Journal of Indian Writing in English, Muse India, Centrifugal Eye, The Blue Fog Journal of Poetry, Foliate Oak, Plankton, and Best Poem. His poetry possesses a startling mixture of Japanese minimalism and Foucauldian coups and carries with it an uncanny postmodernist signature. His works have been quoted in reputed journals around the world from The Journal of Commonwealth Literature to The Other Voices International Project. He is listed in the World Poetry Directory of UNESCO 2008, Marquis Who's Who in the World 2010, Encyclopedia of Indian Creative Writers in English, and 2000 Outstanding Intellectuals of the 21st Century, IBC Cambridge England. Williams has published two books of poems, Nakasendo and Other Poems (2006) and Moving Spaces, Changing Places (2007); and is now working on a third book The Figural Moment. His co-authored book, Representing India: Literatures, Politics, and Identities (OUP 2008) and has been favorably reviewed in many international journals and newspapers. He was named UNESCO Poet, Other Voices of Poetry and Poetic Portal Poet in 2008. He is professor of humanities at Soka University and visiting faculty at Keio University-SFC Japan. He can be contacted through his blog site <http://beyond-the-shadows.blogspot.jp/>