

Asia Poems

A. Robert Lee

“Tokyo Quartet”

karasu

Hard to tell whether Tokyo crows
are smarter than other city crows
but you have to suspect.

Aren't they raised on
kanji and the two *kanas*?

Haven't they been around long enough to decipher
honne and *tatema*?

Don't they perch in theatres performing
kabuki, *bunraku* and *noh*?

Does anyone get an earlier shot at blossom-viewing
hanami?

Can't they always hear the rattle of Tokyo eat and drink
sushi, *ramen*, *soba*, *nama bīru* and *sake*?

Have they not heard a thousand
Bashō *haiku* and Man'yōshū *tanka*?

Do they not linger after each Shibuya showing of
Rashōmon?

Do they not monitor by cable and pole
NHK, *Wow-Wow* and *Tokyo MX*?

Have they not listened from window ledge or street to
karaoke, *enka*, *pachinko*?

Is theirs not a fly-past of Roppongi or Ginza
bijouterie?

Are they not witnesses to Tokyo going round in train circles on the

Yamanote-sen?

Do they not understand the nuances of the
Japanese bow?

Look at those swoops over the just-bigger-than-Eiffel
Tokyo Tower.

Look at those glides along the
Imperial Palace Moat.

Look at the hop and peck conference gatherings at
Ueno Park, Hibiya Park, Yoyogi Park.

Look at the dive-flights round

Tokyo station, *Tokyo-eki*.

Look at their observer-status in

Electric City Akihabara and Goth and Lolita Harajuku

But is not their true qualification

their Emperor's Cup

and their University of Tokyo/*Tōdai* Ph.D

the disrespect for the command and control

of Tokyo trash

Tokyo trash collection

And Tokyo trash truck?

Gomi

gomi-shūshū

gomi-shū-shū-sha?

“Ordinary Waste”, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday

“Cans, bottles, batteries,” Monday

“Metal,” First and Third Thursdays

“Oversized waste” – please apply “Oversized Waste Center.”

The best

collection-regulated

city in the world
under
scavenger surveillance.

Regimes of eye and beak
tear and snatch
strewn plastic and old food.
eco-centrics.

Not even the green netting
or each lid and cover
stills their inspector-general scavenge.

Tenors and basso profundos
of repeated guttural caw
even as they perch and loop.

Trash saboteurs.
Quilled wiseacres.
On patrol foragers.
Custom officers.
Park and fly commuters.
Orchestra and chorus.
Lexicographers of the city.

Feathered companion Tokyoites.
Tokyo's guardian Tokyoites.

oto

Every Tokyo neighborhood street
if less name than block and post code
a sound system from

good morning *konnichiwa* and *Ohayō gozaimasu*
 to take-care-of-yourself evening *ki o tsukete*
 and thank-you-for-your-work *otsukaresamadeshita*
 from meticulous thank you *arigatō*
 to politeness's excuse me *sumimasen* and *gomennasai*.

Overheard spoken Japanese
 of dark suited dressed-for-work salarymen
 of Bismarck-uniformed schoolboys
 of maritime-kitted schoolgirls
 of shopper women, mothers and children
 of bike-bell riders
 with gloved handlebars in winter
 and boy-on-pedal girl-on-pinion
 of *keitai* wafts of conversation across the wires.

First the ghost footsteps
 the someone's following me feel
 turn around, look up, listen again
 and it's futon-beats, balcony bed-spans and mattress-thumps
 paddled corporal punishment to dust or tick.

Gomi collection with warning ping
Gyōza delivery man with recording chant
Tōfu seller with hunting horn call
Sodaigomi kaishūsha desu recycle truck

Ward Office canned tunes
 Vivaldi to Beatle
Enka to J-Pop
 music while you walk
 from discreet speakers

on street corner and wall.

Round the corner

Pachinko parlor clang and rush.

Top of the street

staccato whack of

practice golf-swing

into third story wall

of draped and hanging net.

Japan Post motorbike roar and swerve delivery.

Recorded stop announcements from passing bus.

Drink machine delivery for Boss, Calpis, Tea and Water.

Dovecot chorus atop the corner apartment block *manshon*.

Typhoon blasts numbered in-season.

Engine-purr of Black Cats storage and furniture removal vans.

Braking of night cars with square-green firefly license plates.

Rail sounds of *Odakyū* Line Locals and Expresses.

And ever your own chorus

of caw-speaking crow battalions.

sakura

sakura Tokyo

of white heron

flutter striding

along the Mukōgaoka-yūen

river-canal by the small

dry rice-field under spring

sun cherry-blooms

and white-pink cloud

swirl of petals

sakura Tokyo
of Shinjuku Gyoen
National Garden
weeping *shidare*
city *somei*
March-April
open to view *hanami*

sakura Tokyo
of tree and branch
as 17-syllable
precise as haiku
lovely as an Edo
flower kimono
picturesque as a Kanto
shrine festival

sakura Tokyo
of rain with petals
necklaced
around the cruising
duck and above the restless
brown river carp

sakura Tokyo
of color and odor
jasmine azalea
lemon iris

sakura Tokyo

of also pollen murder
for your sinuses
a hay fever storm
a histamine ambush
an allergy rampage

sakura Tokyo
of reach for your kleenex
and your best Japanese decongestant
amid whirling
small angel
petalled blossom glories

sakura Tokyo
of gaze and admire
yet also sneeze
as rivulets of salt
eye-drops well
and flow over a
drip drop nose for beauty

kakitsubata

Step through fashion Tokyo
Omotesando-Harajuku

Step through well-dressed, well-heeled
Prada, Cartier, Gucci, Dior

Step through bamboo alley
Nezu Museum, *Nezu bijutsukan*

Step through China, Korea gallery

Edo's Ogata Kōrin's iris screens

Step through 12-folds of linen paper

Purple flower on green stem cluster

Step through two-color stalk and bloom

Eyes on painted movement, stillness

Step through balance, composition, grace

Art's time and season flower poetry

Step through elegant glassware portal into

Gardens of lantern, pagoda, seated Buddha

Step through pergola, bamboo hoops along

Positioned terrace, terraced rock

Step through downward slope towards

Pond iris, upright against breeze and ripple

Step through citted Tokyo

Kōrin originals still alive in May

Step through gardened shade and green

Nature's originals still alive in May

“Japan 8.9”

Auden’s Icarus gives the right measure:
Tragedy as we eat, open a window, walk dully along.

Tokyo—I feel the irritation of
unheated train, unlit carriage, stilled elevator,
the unsought request to deal with
Rolling Power Outage, conserved electric power,
the save energy on-offs at the ATM,
the run on plastic-bottled water.
Nobody asked for this.

Tokyo—we all have our March 11, 2011 story.
Tsunami. Quake. Reactor.
Mine was to see a city street surge and shudder,
look upon macadam splitting,
watch high-rises sway,
join a bus lane full of shoppers and store people,
hear the plated glass doors of an office block
rattle like violent false teeth,
and walk to Shinjuku Station for a 12 hour wait as
rail lines received check, systems inspection.
Nobody asked for this.

And then guilt, needed diminution, at the played-over TV
of
sea-raged Miyagi tsunami wave,
jagged Tohoku earth split,
floating matchbox coast of Sendai,
rooftop tidal collisions with boat and bridge.
Nobody asked for this.

Fukushima Dai-ichi.

Fukushima Number One.

Fukushima's heat and poison.

Fukushima black fire smoke, white hydrogen steam.

Reactor vesuviuses, Plutonium vulcans.

Pacific winds, and clouds, and particle-bearing rain.

Repair-worker heroism of nerve and duty.

Irradiated air and underfoot water.

Nobody asked for this.

A whole invader language of

iodine-131, caesium, zirconium, argon,

bone, liver, thyroid, lymphocyte,

microsievert and becquerel,

rods, fuel pool and coolant

helicoptered and fire-engined sea-water spray.

Nobody asked for this.

And

each

augmenting

number

of bodies dead, drowned, beached, coffined, missing,

and

each

augmenting

number

of bodies

evacuated, orphaned, un-housed, school-gymnasium futoned.

Nobody asked for this.

I try to stand my petty ground in the face of
every ongoing after shock,
every smaller saw-tooth grind of the plates below
five kilometers, ten kilometers, twenty kilometers down.
The *konbini* runs out of rice or pot noodles.
Bans on Ibaraki spinach and broccoli.
Should you eat the washed lettuce,
wear the washing-machined clothes,
drink *o-cha* watered from your own tap,
face-mask your breathing in everyday Tokyo?
And then see firefighter, soldiery, engineer, entering Fukushima
with radiation meters strapped to waist or chest like outside lungs.
Clockworks of risk, ticking cancer.
And listen to TEPCO, Kan and Edano.
And listen to each cliché, Japanese calm, good order.
And watch tears, disbelief, anger.
China checks Japanese produce.
Nobody asked for this.

Each timeline memory stirs—
1923 and Tokyo's Great Kanto Earthquake
1995 and Kobe's Great Hanshin Earthquake
1979 and Three Mile Island
1986 and Chernobyl.
And now, like some redivivus China Syndrome,
some nuclear string-arithmetic,
Reactor 1.2.3.4.5.6.
Nobody asked for this.

More death in the northeast.
More bodies.
More quakes.

More floating isotopes.

More shindo scale.

More richter scale.

More “missing.”

Less plastic bottled water
(even for baby thyroids).

Less carriage journey heat.

Less light on the trains.

Less moving escalators.

Less vegetables.

Less *konbini* altogether.

Nobody asked for this.

Both more and both less.

8.9 or 9.0.

Japanese or western scale.

Nobody asked for this.

Nobody at all.

“Badeling Wall Curve”

Off from Beijing in December cold.

China Great Wall Badeling.

A mind-ply of other walls.

Berlin. Frost poem. Pink Floyd.

Qin, Han, Sui, Ming dynasties.

Juyongguan Pass.

Read up on Manchu, nomadic Mongol.

Fortified, unfortified China.

Then funicular mountain-ride.

Then pathway, watchtower, embrickment.

The eye-line follows.

Rise and dip. Corner and straight.

Snow-strewn walk.

The very postcard of a 10,000 Li Wall.

One of the visitor throng.

Winter-clad, headgeared for climate.

What is for you alone?

What does the sighting eye claim for its own?

You follow wall curvature, swerve.

And, just, enter the imagined deeper bend.

Time-bend, history-bend.

The lean into epoch, dynasty.

Breath expels, legs seize.

But mind conjures gyre, China cycle.

It's a hard imagining in the frost.

A cold wall of emperor, soldier, change.

Then you revolve back to present.

Your next best leg forward wall corner.

“Taipei 101”

It takes no time at all to learn that 101

means floor number, vertical level.

Stairway to Heaven. Almost. Via zoom elevator.

91st floor observatory. Taiwan in relief.

Feng shui notwithstanding, and four a taboo,

A four-side city panorama and you think equivalences.

Four points of the compass. Four elements.

Four seasons. The Amadeus String Quartet.

The eyes open, amaze, squint, roll.

A touch of vertigo, a check of the window's glass thickness.

You look down upon summits of each Xiani District high-rise.

Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, Hillary, on highest Everest ridge.

It's then that thoughts of quake, drift, tempest, enter.

New technology gives due comfort: *Tuned Mass Damper*.

Suspended pendulum, interior globe, circle-plates, cables.

So close to sky, to cloud, can all be safe?

First time view and it feels like one or another Space Capsule.

Shuttle cone. NASA Mars probe. Soyuz.

Not to mention Dustin Hoffman *Sphere*, George Lucas *Death Star*.

Are you still on earth or extra-planetary?

But the *Damper*, well, dampens, stills all sway.

Not, however, all of yourself.

Inner ear, stomach, ganglia, dry throat.

Cockpit nerves of Canaveral launch, Kazakhstan landing?

But then you grow bold, Skyscraper101 A+ student.

Restaurant, mall, business office, each a building text.

Even the Fitness Center. Even the Library.

You rise to the occasion.

“Angkor Wat Bowl”

I know, I know ... you're right

World Heritage fare

Siem Reap Province

beehive turret-towers

galleried corridors

temple corners

palmed waterways

India to Cambodia friezes

Ganesh and Monkey

dancing shivas

Thai over Khmer war engravings

tree root-tentacles

Buddhist metropole

A look of deliquescence

peeled paint

steps crumbled

“Magnificent”

“Lost Civilization”

“Time Palace”

And amid your clamber

your viewfinder shots

the neophyte monk

young, shaven, red-robed

plus

bowl

comes at you.

In buddhist-business English

“A dollar for a photograph”

“Please place in bowl”

Is this world heritage

too?

Afterword

*The above poems were taken from a number of my recent verse collections. They each give tribute to the Asia, and Japan in particular, in which it was my good chance to spend well over a decade. They endeavour to pick up on the temper of place, the cultural energies of sight and sound. “Tokyo Quartet”, “Japan 8.9” and “Angkor Wat Bowl” appeared in *Ars Geographica* (2012), “Badeling Wall Curve” in *Imaginarium: Sightings, Galleries* (2013), and “Taipei 101” in *Portrait and Landscape: Further Geographies* (2013).*

Author email: arobertlee24@gmail.com.