

Ground Control to the Flying Pope

by Paul Miller

As more and more modern Japanese haiku arrive at our shore, it is worthwhile to look closer at some of them before fully stamping their passports. This paper will focus on Ban'ya Natsuishi's flying pope series. These poems were chosen because in many ways they seem to represent much of what goes on in modern Japanese haiku. The series has been looked at previously, in particular in the collection of essays edited by Santosh Kumar, *The Poetic Achievement of Ban'ya Natsuishi* (Cyberwit, 2009)—not at any great depth however and in one case in a completely wrong-headed way. I will address both those issues. In addition, some Western poets are exploring similar terrain as Ban'ya's pope in editions of the online journal *Roadrunner* (IX:2 and IX:3).

Ban'ya Natsuishi's work is well known to most Western haiku poets. A professor at Meiji University, he has written haiku for nearly forty years. In 1992 he was awarded the Modern Haiku Association Prize. In 1998 he co-founded the international haiku magazine *Ginyu*, and shortly afterward the World Haiku Association. He is the author of more than a dozen books of haiku and haiku criticism. English translations of his haiku include *A Future Waterfall* (Red Moon Press, 2004; translations by Richard Gilbert, Stephen Henry Gill, Jim Kacian, and Ban'ya Natsuishi), *Right Eye in Twilight* (Wasteland, 2006; translations by the author and Jack Galmitz), and *The Flying Pope: 161 Haiku* (Koorosha, 2008; translations by Jim Kacian). As would be expected from this résumé, Ban'ya is very involved with international haiku.

In the anthology *World Haiku 2005* Ban'ya related that the genesis for the series was his utterance in a dream of the phrase “flying pope,” which, as he implies in *The Flying Pope: 161 Haiku*, is based on his acquaintance with Casimiro de Brito, a well traveled Portuguese writer whom Ban'ya referred to as a “flying poet.” However it came about, Ban'ya set out to discover what meaning could be found behind the phrase. Such a journey is similar to the journey of a haiku that starts with the known and leads to the unknown. And what a journey it turned out to be—especially for Western readers raised on realism and Zen. While haiku series based on characters had been done before, including some by Western writers (Charles Dickson's old Cajun, LeRoy Gorman's (and others') billboard girl, and Garry Gay's billboard cowboy come to mind), none are as varied or large in scope as Ban'ya's pope. A few examples from the series:

While flying
the Pope reads aloud
haiku without season words

With peacocks
the Flying Pope
enclosed in a cage

Cherry blossoms
inviting
50 Flying Popes

How many hair roots
have disappeared?
Flying Pope

Ban'ya's choice of subjects—the powerful, infallible spiritual leader of hundreds of millions of people—is an exciting one. It is a fictional persona to which Ban'ya can assign a variety of roles: actor (“While flying”), observer (“Cherry blossoms”), social critic (“With peacocks”), humorist (“How many hair roots”), among others. It is important to understand that the flying pope is a fictional persona. Ban'ya has made it clear that it is not modeled on Pope John Paul II, as one writer suggested, but is used as a “freely moving perspective” on the “post 9/11 21st century.” This approach allows the author the freedom to wonder what his creation would do in any specific situation. For example, in the following haiku, the author himself may have seen a flock of migrating geese and imagined the flying pope's reaction to them.

Confronting a flock of geese
the Flying Pope
suddenly stops

Despite its surreal nature, there is no doubt that this is a haiku. It has the keyword “geese” (Ban'ya prefers keywords to kigo) and a cut. It does what the best haiku do: it offers a discovery or surprise, and leaves any interpretation to the reader. More important to this discussion, a poem such as this releases the poet from discoveries that only the poet could make. It instead allows poets to use their imagination and approach perhaps staid topics such as migrating geese from a fresh perspective. The question is no longer what do the geese mean to the poet but what might they mean to a flying pope? To understand the difference here, and perhaps underscore Ban'ya's choice of subjects, consider that an encounter with migratory geese might incline a person to reevaluate some old habits—in the case of the flying pope perhaps the whole Western religious canon!

While poems such as these are vastly different from the majority of what is being published in the West, they are part of an established tradition in Japan. Western haiku writers, with their emphasis on the “haiku moment” and individual epiphanies, tend to write about themselves from a realistic perspective. Japanese poets often invoke their imagination and use invented personas. The following are examples:

this piercing cold—
in the bedroom, I have stepped
on my dead wife's comb

Yosa Buson

Cherry blossoms are falling—
you also must become
a hippopotamus

Toshinori Tsubouchi

In the first haiku, one familiar to most Western readers, Buson takes on the persona of a widower. The poem's impact would not be half as great if he had instead written “I imagine my wife dead.” The twentieth century poet Tsubouchi likes to inhabit the persona of a hippopotamus to view “society and nature” afresh. He says that “using one's real name causes a poet to become isolated (alienated); tends to cause restriction, compositional limitation.” Japanese haiku, both classic and modern, are full of such examples.

Ban'ya makes it clear in the collection's first poem that a newness of seeing is what he is after.

Falling from a waterfall
in the sky
the Pope begins to fly

This haiku references both his famous verse “From the future/a wind arrives/that blows the waterfall apart” and his related ocular problems, the subject of his book *Right Eye in Twilight*. In this poem, much like Tsubouchi and his hippo, Ban’ya is the flying pope. A later poem, reminiscent of Japanese master Matsuo Basho, shows the same commitment to a new way of seeing by having the pope fly from an “old pond.” In these poems Ban’ya himself is playing the role of the pope. Two additional examples:

Foxes and sheep
in the university—
the Pope Flying

The Flying Pope
his lower back pain
comes from underground

It is not hard to see Ban’ya’s experiences in academia in the first poem. But by allowing himself to take on the role of pope, he adds weight to his personal opinions. A similar poem has the pope flying out “of a meeting room/filled with beasts.” If the pope storms out of a room the other participants might question their behavior; not so much so if just one of many professors does. In the second poem (one of two about back pain), where Ban’ya is a stand-in for the pope, his pain is demonically sent and thus that much more vexing—again, probably not the case for mere mortals.

Ban’ya has been called the bad boy of Japanese haiku, a position he seems to delight in. A few poems show him reveling in this perceived outsidership. The first poem in particular allows him to give additional standing to his personal view on season words.

While flying
the Pope reads aloud haiku
without season words

The Flying Pope
winks sometimes
to angels

However, the flying pope is more versatile than simply being Ban’ya’s stand-in. This is when the poems begin to get more interesting.

For a while
the Flying Pope
follows Cinderella

In the palm of
the Flying Pope
a manhole

Passing over

countless broken bridges
the Pope flies

The Pope
flies to Iraq
his head so enormous

The first haiku speaks to the process of papal ascendancy and suggests a candidate's possible reticence. The second on the weight of religion itself. The third and fourth suggest something of Ban'ya's geopolitical leanings. These last two haiku are complemented by additional verses in which the pope flies seemingly oblivious to human suffering—or as Adam Donaldson Powell posits in his forward to the book, exploring the themes of the “burden of conscience.” Yet in another poem, the pope is victorious over “electric waves of malice.” He is clearly not a black-and-white figure, and in some poems we find ourselves empathizing with a very human being.

The reason why
the Pope flies:
a dew drop

The aged Pope
makes a slip of the tongue
while flying

The ephemeral dewdrop world is well-trod territory in haiku. The master poet Issa spoke of it often. There is a palpable sense of regret in the second poem. In the previous poems in which Ban'ya used the pope as a stand-in for himself, and then again with poems that were more social commentary than action, it would be easy to view the flying pope in a two-dimensional if not cartoonish way. Haiku such as the two above refute that perception. Some critics, such as Robert Wilson in the e-journal *Simply Haiku* 12:1 (spring 2009), view the series too myopically to see the other sides or uses of the flying pope persona. Wilson's particular viewpoint is over-focused on a perceived slight of Catholicism. But Ban'ya does not seem to be looking to make one point over and over, or to even use the pope in the same manner twice (if it is even the same pope in each poem). Instead he is looking at a myriad of popes in a myriad of situations. It is too limiting to view him as a static prop. He is a “freely moving perspective” indeed.

How many hair roots
have disappeared?
Flying Pope!

Flying Pope
visible only to children
and a giraffe

The second poem is especially charming with its notion that only innocent children (or haiku poets seeing with a new eye) can see the pope—unless you are tall like a giraffe! As was noted above in regard to Basho's “old pond” haiku the series references literature as well. Hôsei Ozaki's haiku “Coughing, even: / alone” is redone as:

The Flying Pope
even coughs

alone

It would be wrong to suggest that all of the poems in the book are equal to those presented so far. Some are merely clever.

Stuffing
the ozone hole
Flying Pope

The Flying Pope
very sticky
with blue paint

Most of the haiku above are straightforward readings. Ban'ya does a good job of leaving them open enough to allow reader participation, but not so far open that his discovery is not shared. In this way they are similar to much of modern Japanese haiku. However, there are some exceptional verses in the series that remain open to further readings beyond what it seems Ban'ya intended. In particular,

The Flying Pope's
eyes
limestone caves

Only one
witness to my alibi:
Flying Pope

However, as in other modern arts, there is a risk to being too open, in particular what *Modern Haiku* editor Charles Trumbull refers to as requiring "strenuous mental gymnastics" of the reader. This is where some modern Japanese haiku often fail, and Ban'ya is not immune. For example:

Enclosing the sun
in a rock salt lamp
the Pope flying

Christmas—
the Pope flying
with only one lung

No matter how much stretching I do I find these haiku inscrutable. Why a rock salt lamp? Why one lung? Unfortunately, these kinds of haiku are not alone in modern Japan. They are instead typical of many post-Shiki poems. One sample each from the Modern Haiku Association's anthology *The Haiku Universe for the 21st Century: Japanese Haiku 2008*, Richard Gilbert's *Poems of Consciousness*, Sayumi Kamakura's essay from *The Poetic Achievement of Ban'ya Natsuishi*, and Ban'ya's own *A Future Waterfall*:

In the fountain
floats a coffin
at the close of day

Seiichiro Watanabe

The column of ice irritated
You can see right through
To my insides

Koji Yasui

wheat—
realizing death as one color
gold

Uda Kiyoko

Going under the sea
yellow light
and purple music

Ban'ya Natsuishi

Sayumi Kamakura (Ban'ya's wife) states the obvious in her essay that modern Japanese haiku did not originate with Ban'ya, as editor Kumar widely infers. In particular, she details the debt Ban'ya owes to modern poets such as Koji Yasui who went before him. In the same volume Max Verhart rightly wonders if, when confronted with such modern haiku, he is not "missing a lot of context." Regarding Ban'ya's poem, he was aware (as I was not) that Ban'ya had taken a trip through the Chunnel beneath the English Channel. Verhart adds, "Interpreted that way, the haiku is quite realistic, if one can take 'purple music' as a poetic description of whatever the author was hearing." However, how is the reader to know that?

In his introduction to the *Modern Haiku Association's Japanese Haiku 2001*, on the subject of contemporary haiku (1971–1999), Ban'ya makes the following claim: "Writers [are] ... interested in capturing their inner spirit through the use of vivid, fantastical images." From the 2008 edition, editor Toshio Kimura reinforces that idea when he writes: "Pursuit of free themes in haiku was based on individualism." It could be argued that modern Japanese haiku can be differentiated from traditional Japanese haiku in those two ways: a tendency of authors to use their imagination to create fantastical images (as opposed to the objective realism of the traditional school), and a focus on individual interior landscapes. Perhaps this is where my claim that some modern Japanese poems fail is really a way of saying that they are too personal for me to understand fully, and that the writer is not taking readers' involvement into consideration. A haiku by Hoshinaga Fumio is a good example.

twenty billion light-years of perjury your blood type is "B"

In an interview the poet reveals that type B blood is considered melancholy, and that the poem is ultimately about his sense that he has been fooled too long into believing he should be happy. He says, "I felt my rebelliousness or revulsion could not be blood-type A—it must be blood-type B." I am not sure a reader could be expected to understand the poem without that external information. In defense of Hoshinaga's haiku, Richard Gilbert commented on the Haiku Foundation blog *Sailing #7* that "readers in Japan generally expect to learn something of a poet's era and biography in order to understand or even adequately grasp their oeuvre." However there is a large difference between knowing a writer's biography and knowing his or her innermost thoughts and feelings at a particular instant. In regards to Hoshinaga's haiku, it is unlikely that knowledge of his upbringing, schooling, and world-view would make this poem any more accessible. Gilbert says much the same when he adds: "the poems do not

necessarily ‘stand alone’ in Japanese (in the Western sense of a purely autonomous artwork); there often exists vectors of reference for which the (intercultural) reader requires information, in order to enter the richer landscapes of authorial intention.” In other words, the writer needs to be present to explain the poem, an unlikely event in almost all circumstances.

I think it is fair to say that a reader should be allowed to expect independent meaning (what Gilbert above references as “stand alone” meaning) of some sort from a haiku that is published with the intent to be read. If not provided, and if all the reader is looking for is clever juxtapositions or clever wordplay, then randomly picked words/images from a dictionary will suffice—and the poet is not needed. Poets are needed to convey some sense of purpose to the chosen images, and in doing so they need to be conscious of the readers. Many modern Japanese haiku do not seem to do this, and one has to wonder how Japanese editors parse such mysterious verses for publication. Unless each haiku comes with an explanatory footnote, they cannot possibly know the mindset that spawned them. Ban’ya’s poem, “Going under the sea” is a good example of that kind of haiku. The good news is that the poems in the flying pope series, despite their moniker, are for the most part well grounded, and they usually provide the reader adequate information to inhabit and find meaning in the poem.

As we have seen, a successful haiku is one that moves from the known to the unknown. The shift from realism to strangeness can be an exciting adventure, but it can also be a risk, as we saw in the poems above. Consider two classic poems by Basho.

the old pond—
a frog jumps in,
water’s sound

the sea darkens—
a wild duck’s call
faintly white

What makes Basho’s iconic “old pond” work is that he gives the reader a comfortable base to start with before he makes any imaginative leap. Everyone knows what an old pond is, so when the reader gets to the last line he or she is pleasantly surprised by the freshness of the sound moment. Likewise, the reader is comfortable with ducks and a darkening sea, so they can leap along with the poet into the strange and unexpected “faintly white.” That same sense of initial grounding is evident in Ban’ya’s flying pope haiku. While no one has technically witnessed a flying pope, everyone knows what the pope looks like and can picture him flying with their imagination, so such poems have a place that can be inhabited somewhat comfortably initially. It is from that grounding (however imaginative) that Ban’ya can make further leaps. As mentioned in the introduction, some Western poets have taken a cue from Ban’ya and are exploring similar terrain. In issues IX:2 and IX:3 (May and August 2009) of the online haiku journal *Roadrunner*, Michael Dylan Welch published a series of haiku using the subjects “seven suns” and “neon buddha.” He has also written a series of “hydrogen jukebox” poems. Tanya McDonald has published similar experiments in *Roadrunner* IX:2, coincidentally called “seven moons,” while Chris Gordon has written a “Chinese Astronauts” series that was published in *Roadrunner* IX:2 and IX:3. Like the flying pope series, these poems can be challenging. A few examples from each:

seven suns
the wrench floats
in our common dream

the long wait
to cross the border

neon buddha

seven suns
disjunction
on a sycamore leaf

neon buddha
the exclusivity
of rhinos

Michael Dylan Welch

seven moons
the globe from my childhood
out of date

seven moons
the shopping list
includes condoms

Tanya McDonald

The Chinese Astronauts
Aren't able to touch
Their own faces

Carried from the capsule
The Chinese Astronauts
Sit in blue fold-out chairs

Chris Gordon

Welch's first seven suns haiku seems to speak of a shared universe that while romantic is nonetheless practical. His second poem can be interpreted as an interesting take on the big bang theory of the origin of the universe and our planet's place in a galaxy on a leaf. His neon buddha, much like Ban'ya's pope, seems to take on a variety of roles—in the first poem perhaps that of a traveler, and at other times an object. McDonald's first haiku suggests a larger universe than the tiny globe she learned on, yet the number of moons opens up a larger number of possibilities beyond that initial notion. In her second haiku the moons seem to be temporal markers. Chris Gordon's first haiku is a wonderful take on the question of who defines identity—the person in the helmet or those reflected on it, while his second cleverly recreates the weightlessness of space on Earth.

What is interesting about the Western poems is that their subjects are not as readily identifiable as the flying pope, so the reader is always in an unknowable strangeness. For example, in the first seven suns verse the reader is unsure if this is one solar system of seven suns or for whatever reason only seven stars are noticed in a larger spacescape. The second haiku suggests a planet with seven suns, although they could also be seven dewdrops on the sycamore leaf. The word "buddha" in Welch's neon buddha series is itself vague. The Buddha (capital B) or a buddha? If a buddha, which one? What color neon? McDonald's poems are similarly confusing. And in Gordon's case, not having seen Chinese astronauts

the reader is unsure how to define them: in modern space suits or retro 1960s suits? And how many are there? Two, ten? This definitional risk is not present in the flying pope series. The pope image is constant.

This is a major difference between the types of haiku and may be responsible for less reader ennui in the case of the flying pope. As mentioned earlier, an initial grounding is important to the reader. After ten flying pope poems the reader can still feel somewhat comfortable with the character and be willing to continue the journey, despite how confusing some of the individual poems may be. In the case of the Western poems, since the readers have never gotten a firm footing regarding the subject matter, they may be less inclined to do so. Strangeness, no matter how exciting at first, is only comfortable for so long. This is not to say the Western poems have less value. Like Hoshinaga's type B haiku, they may simply be too personal for the reader. However, because the subjects' representation may shift from poem to poem, it should be noted that they are less of a cohesive series than Ban'ya's pope.

Like all art forms, modern Japanese haiku has gone through its phases of innovation and fads. The Modern Haiku Association in its anthologies *Japanese Haiku 2001* and *The Haiku Universe for the 21st Century: Japanese Haiku 2008* details these phases from the objective realists of the Shiki school, to New Trend haiku, free-form haiku, New Style haiku (including serial haiku, *muki* haiku, social problem haiku, puzzling haiku, etc.), to avant-garde haiku (with all its subgroups). As would be expected, each new direction has had its proponents and detractors. Importantly, the poets of these new directions did so with purpose and the aim of keeping the genre fresh and interesting to themselves. Today, modern Japanese haiku has a healthy diversity of style and content, which from each fiefdom—including Western viewpoints—is sometimes overlooked; however, it is important to realize that new does not always equate to better.

Before Shiki, most haiku operated in a common realistic landscape. This landscape was consistent with everyday expectations: gravity pulled things down, geese traveled south in the winter, the sky was not wet with blue paint. As modern Japanese haiku shifted from a shared realistic landscape to a private individual landscape (arguably influenced by Western notions of art), the understanding between writer and reader relaxed. This created a division between the poems a reader could be expected to understand and those that were too personal to understand without authorial help. This division is not necessarily one of logical understanding, but a transference of meaning from the writer to the reader, even if such a transfer is strictly emotional. Readers have to decide for themselves what kind of meaning they are looking for in a poem, and that decision helps to define the dividing line. Some readers may want to view a seasonal activity occurring in its season, or the surprise of its opposite. Other readers are looking for a puzzle to solve. Still others may not want a clear situation, but instead to come away with a purely emotional reaction. Personally, I want to inhabit a poem, to reenact it as if I were on the scene, and to recreate the poet's discovery as my own. For me, in a personal poem such as Ban'ya's "Going under the sea" or Hoshinaga's "twenty billion light-years" that kind of reading is not possible.

What is interesting about the haiku of the flying pope is that they cover much of the spectrum between communal and personal. The question of the pope's ability to fly aside, haiku such as "the Flying Pope / follows Cinderella" and "stuffing / the ozone hole" are well within the understandable tradition, while a poem such as "Enclosing the sun/in a rock salt lamp" inhabits perhaps the other side of the dividing line. In the end, it is ultimately up to each reader to decide where that line is and how comfortable he or she is near its edge. Modern Japanese haiku test that dividing line. I cannot think of a better way to end than with a haiku of Ban'ya's that seems to touch upon that very decision each individual reader needs to make:

Waiting
for the Flying Pope
on the cliff