



A street view of Tashme in 1942. Tashme was the largest Japanese internment camp in British Columbia with over 2,600 people incarcerated there at its peak.

Nikkei National Museum, 1994/99.4/27

# Haiku in Tashme: The legacy of Sukeo “Sam” Sameshima

By Jacqueline Pearce and Jean-Pierre Antonio

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*Jacqueline Pearce of Burnaby, BC is a grant recipient of the 2019 BCHF Centennial Legacy Fund in the amount of \$4,300 for her Japanese-Canadian internment camp haiku translation project. The goal of this project is to translate at least 300 of over 600 haiku poems contained in two unpublished documents written in Tashme internment camp as well as to translate a small selection of haiku from other camps. There are few published records of haiku written in internment camps, and the project aims to compile the scattered information and examples into a single collection, so that this very unique part of Canadian literature and history can gain wider recognition.*

It took almost three hours to drive to Sunshine Valley from Fort Langley. It is about 22 kilometres past Hope on the Crowsnest Highway. Our destination was the Sunshine Valley Tashme Museum, a relatively new institution dedicated to the memory of life in the Tashme internment camp. Tashme was the largest internment camp in British Columbia for

Japanese Canadians. The camp, built on the site of what was previously a working farm, was in operation between October 1942 and August 1946. At its peak, over 2,600 people were incarcerated there.

A large percentage of the Nikkei adults and children had previously lived in Vancouver and smaller communities along the coast, and they were accustomed



to urban living and modern amenities such as indoor plumbing, heating, cars, and stores. In Tashme, the majority lived in 347 uninsulated tar paper shacks. Each shack was occupied by a family of at least five people. Smaller families either shared a shack or were housed in an "apartment" building. Barracks housed young, single women and a large barn housed single men. In addition, there was separate housing for the non-Japanese supervisors from the BC Security Commission and for the

RCMP officers and teachers, many of the latter sent by churches. No prison walls were needed to keep people inside the camp, since the isolated location, rugged landscape, and the hostile social climate of the province were considered enough of a deterrent to thoughts of escape.

Over the years since the camp closed, few people passing by on the adjacent highway were aware of the site's internment history. Today however, there is a

newly erected Provincial historical marker on Alpine Boulevard, just off the highway, which provides basic information about Tashme and the people who were confined there. Visitors who pull off the highway and step inside the Tashme museum at 14781 Alpine Boulevard will find an opportunity to look through a window into the past and gain a deeper understanding of the harsh realities of the internees' lives.

On the day we visited, brilliant sunshine was reflecting off a metre of newly-fallen snow, and the entire valley looked deceptively like an idyllic winter postcard. However, after a couple of hours touring the museum and the grounds and listening to the curator, Ryan Ellan, we were left with no illusions about this picturesque place. The museum provides plenty of detailed information about the site's internment camp years through archival photos, maps, personal artifacts, and the interior of a painstakingly recreated shack that accurately shows visitors what the cramped kitchen and tiny bedrooms were like. Kitchen utensils and personal items look as if they have been set aside for a moment and will be picked up again when the family returns. Through these tangible details, visitors can begin to understand the dramatically reduced circumstances that the internees endured. At the time of our visit, the cold of winter penetrating the thin walls helped evoke another layer of the internees' experience.

In addition to the museum, visitors can also see the outside of a cabin used for Tashme primary school classes, a long, barracks-style building used to house unmarried women, the remains of two silos and the massive barn that was used to house single men. All of these buildings are original and in need of restoration after so many years of neglect. Even so, the barn, despite its current condition, is awe-inspiring. The massive ceiling

Sukeo "Sam" Sameshima, was born November 23, 1915, in New Westminster. He was the second of six children born to Saichi and Kumi Sameshima. According to the Sameshima family, Saichi most likely came to Canada in 1907, and Kumi arrived in 1913. Saichi repaired shoes and established a business in New Westminster, then later in Nanaimo. By 1920, with four children, the family returned to Japan for the children's schooling. In 1931, at age sixteen, Sukeo returned to BC. He apprenticed in New Westminster as a shoe repairman, then returned to Japan again briefly. When he came back to BC, he settled in Port Alberni to open his own shoe repair shop. In a 2002 interview published in *Frogpond*, the journal of the Haiku Society of America, Sukeo states that it was in Port Alberni that he was introduced to writing haiku. He joined a local haiku club called Kamome (Seagull) in 1940. After Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7, 1941, and BC's 100-mile exclusion zone was created in 1942, Sukeo was sent to Hastings Park in Vancouver to await his internment destination. From there he was sent to Tashme, where he set up another shoe repair shop and also helped to establish Tashibi, the Tashme Haiku Club. It was towards the end of internment that the two haiku volumes, *Reiko* and *Yamabiko*, were compiled. In Tashme, Sukeo married Kazue "Kay" Shimozaawa, who gave birth to their first child during their incarceration in the camp.

When the Pacific War of the Second World War ended, the internees were released from Tashme, but were not allowed to return to the coast. Sukeo and his young family moved to a Canadian Air Force base in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. He had a temporary job there, helping other Nikkei as they traveled across Canada to new homes outside of BC. In 1948, he moved his family to Alberta to be closer to his wife's relatives, and he opened a shoe repair shop in Coaldale, Alberta in 1949. He worked there until his retirement in 1992. Apart from a ten-year period after the war, Sukeo continued writing haiku until his death on October 5, 2017, a month short of his 102nd birthday.

As well as the publication of ten of Sukeo's haiku in *Frogpond*, seven of his translated haiku were published in *Paper Doors: An Anthology of Japanese-Canadian Poetry* in 1981, and two translated poems appeared in *Haiku: Anthologie Canadienne/Canadian Anthology* in 1985. His haiku were also included in Japanese-language publications. Thanks to his love of haiku, the two Tashme collections he helped create and safeguard, *Reiko* and *Yamabiko*, still exist today.

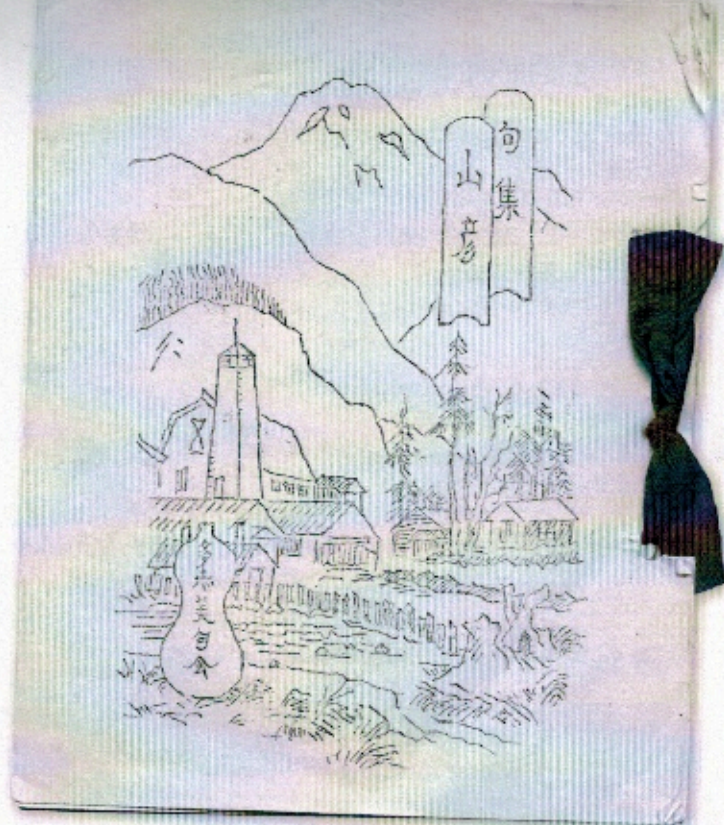


struts, visible from the second-floor loft space, suggest the interior of a cathedral. The comparison, however, relates only to the sense of open space. Standing there for a brief fifteen minutes, the icy chill penetrated our layers of winter clothing. There is no insulation in the building, and during the years the internees slept there, sleeping cubicles were separated only by thin curtains. At one end of the barn there was a wood burning stove for cooking, but it could not possibly have provided enough heat to warm up the vast space. We had to wonder: What did the internees think about their day-to-day life in Tashme? How did they feel about the deprivations, or about having previous routines and relationships suddenly taken away? How did they manage the hardships?

There is not a great deal of first-hand information available today to let us know the internal thoughts and feelings of those who lived in the camp. Many of the adult internees have passed on, and those who were children in the camps are now entering their eighties and nineties, and the decades have taken away many of the sharper details of their memories. Perhaps, however, some of the emotional insights can be found in the rediscovered haiku poetry of Tashme.

Few examples of personal writing remain from the internment camps. Most were lost, destroyed or discarded over time. This makes the collection of materials recently donated by the Sameshima family to the archives of Nikkei Place, the National Japanese-Canadian Museum and Cultural Centre in Burnaby, particularly unique and significant. In the collection there are two remarkable volumes called *Yamabiko* (Mountain Echo) and *Reiko* (Spiritual Light). They contain over 600 haiku composed by members of the Tashme Haiku Club during the years of internment. Their existence today is due to the care of one of the club members, Sukeo "Sam" Sameshima. He kept the two mimeographed volumes safe for over seventy years as he moved from home to home after internment, before finally settling in Coaldale, Alberta. It says a great deal about his love of haiku and his determination to not let the life he led in Tashme be forgotten.

Haiku is a short form of poetry that has been popular in Japan for several hundred years. In fact, the word *haiku* is both singular and plural. It was brought to Canada by Japanese immigrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Traditionally, haiku tends to use natural imagery to express ideas and emotions associated with a particular moment of experience. Many of the haiku in *Reiko* and *Yamabiko* draw from the natural setting of the camp, including the gentle agricultural valley and the rugged mountains surrounding it. The internees



**The publication, *Yamabiko*, consists of haiku from numerous authors. Its cover features a hand-drawn illustration of the mountains surrounding Tashme and incorporates details of the camp, 1946.**

Nikkei National Museum, 2017.18.2.2.1

also used imagery from their own lives, recording both their industrious and their leisure activities. The portrait of life in Tashme that emerges is complex. Their work conveys the beauty of the environment they lived in, but the natural imagery they incorporated also speaks clearly of pain, worry, and loneliness.

For example, the following haiku from *Reiko* was written by one of the second-generation<sup>1</sup> poets, who went by the pen name Kiyoshi. No pronoun is given in the first section, but one might assume the poet is talking about himself, walking alone and perhaps feeling the weight of being cut off from his previous activities and friends, yet, at the same time, beauty is found in the autumn leaves that form a path underfoot.

一人行けば 足音淋し 落葉道 きよし/Kiyoshi  
*walking alone/a solitary person walks/goes*  
*footsteps sound lonely*  
*fallen leaves path*  
 walking by myself  
 the lonely sound of footsteps  
 on a path of fallen leaves

The following eight haiku, also written by second-gen-



eration poets, convey a keen sensory awareness of the environment and reflect some of the day to day activities of camp life (the poet's pen name is given on the right).

ほやほやと 霞につつまれ 冬の川 雪男/Yukio

*rising/lifting  
mist covered  
winter river*

cover of mist  
rising off  
the winter river

カチカチと ハンマーの音 冬の朝 美津子/Mitsuko

*crack-crack  
hammer's sound  
winter morning*

crack crack  
the sound of a hammer  
winter morning

## Translating Haiku

While haiku are very short and simple, they can be difficult to translate. The Japanese is often intentionally ambiguous, with no pronouns included and no clear indication of whether a subject or object is singular or plural. Each haiku can be interpreted in several different ways. In addition, a single kanji (Japanese character) may have more than one meaning, and some kanji used in the 1940s and earlier are no longer in use today. Sometimes, metaphors and references have been lost to time, or do not translate well. In other cases, the original poem's rhythm and sound-play can be difficult to convey in English. Keeping these considerations in mind, we have created a rough direct English translation of each Tashme haiku, followed by a more polished English haiku version (for the sake of brevity, we have not included all of the polished versions here).

With the English haiku, we have attempted to keep as close to the Japanese as possible, providing an interpretation that we feel makes sense given what we know about the context in which the poems were written. While the Japanese poems tend to be written in a pattern of 5-7-5 *on*, or sound units, we have not attempted to translate these into 5-7-5 English syllables. To do so would impose too many extra words on the poems. We have tried to retain the brevity, focused imagery and mood of the original poems.

寝ね足らぬ 目にストーブを 抱きけり 綾子/Ayako

*lack of sleep/sleepy  
eyes to/on stove  
huddle round*

feeling sleepy  
our eyes on the stove  
as we huddle around it

晝の鐘 いてつく路を かける児等 正茶/Shocha or Seicha

*noon bell  
frozen road  
running children/child*

noon bell  
children running  
on the frozen road

降りしきる 雪の奥から 犬吠えり きよゑ/Kiyoe

*falling heavily  
far off snow  
dog barking*

heavy snowfall  
in the distance  
a dog barking

クリスマス カード手に手に 子等の笑み かよ子/Kayoko

*Christmas card/cards  
holding in his/her hand  
children's smiles*

Christmas cards  
in every hand  
children's smiles

年惜む 失業の身 家にあり 肇/Hajime

*lament/regret the year's end  
still unemployed  
sitting at home*

regretting the year's end  
I sit at home  
still unemployed

床の母 かかへて見せる 雪の街 正茶/Socha or Seicha

*Mother in bed  
help sit up/hold up in arms  
can see snowy town*

bed-ridden mother  
I hold her up  
to see the snowy town



Sameshima's own haiku show a great sensitivity to the beauty and power of the natural environment surrounding the internment camp, which seems to both reflect and inform his inner state of being. In the following example from *Yamabiko*, he notices the simple beauty of the pattern of frost that has formed on a discarded bicycle. The haiku describes a direct moment of observation, but at the same time, the image of a bicycle, thoughtlessly dropped and left behind, might also be read as a reflection of Sameshima's feelings as a Canadian internee, tossed aside and forgotten by his country. Since we cannot confirm with Sameshima himself, we cannot know for sure if this metaphorical meaning was intended.

霜の花 自転車無惨に 放られあり  
 frost flower  
 bicycle thoughtlessly  
 thrown away / left behind

frost flowers  
 a forgotten bicycle  
 left behind

In the following haiku (also from *Yamabiko*), we get a picture of Sameshima walking through the forest, surrounded by trees, their tops rising into the blue sky. His eyes, too, are drawn upward, and there is a sense of his spirit lifted as well.

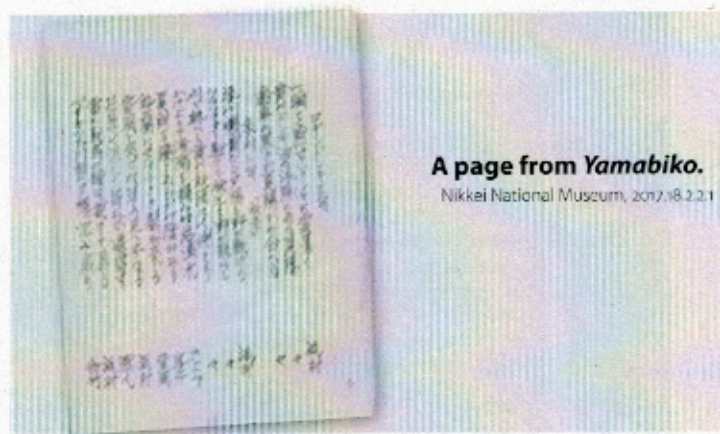
早春の 梢々が 青空へ  
 early spring  
 treetops treetops  
 to the blue sky

early spring  
 so many treetops  
 rising to the blue sky

The following are further examples of Sameshima's haiku from *Yamabiko*, with the kanji and direct translation provided. For brevity, we haven't provided the polished English haiku, but have instead left the interpretation up to the reader.

耕馬帰る 夕日抱きし 並木道  
 plough horse returns  
 setting sun embraced  
 tree-lined road

夏の朝 口笛の子に 出会ひけり  
 summer morning  
 whistling children  
 meet / met



A page from *Yamabiko*.  
 Nikkei National Museum, 2017.18.2.2.1

理髪師の 日向に佇てり 長閑なる  
 barber in the sunlight  
 standing  
 tranquil / peaceful is

腕時計 はづし涼しき 夕風に  
 wristwatch  
 take off  
 cool evening wind

秋の燈に 眼鏡のケース そと置かる  
 autumn lamp-light  
 glasses case  
 gently put down

冬の灯に 帽子二三が かかりあり  
 winter lamplight  
 hats two or three  
 are hung

The following haiku of Sameshima's are from *Reiko*:

春天へ 警報黒く 吊られたる  
 spring sky in  
 warning/alarm bell black  
 is hung

春水の 溢るるバケツ 持上ぐる  
 spring water  
 overflowing bucket  
 lift/lift up

馬びんと 耳を立てたり 雪解の陽  
 horse straight up  
 ears stand  
 snow-melting sunshine



猫の髭 衣裁つ鋏 置かれけり  
cat's love  
fabric/garment scissors  
put down

つばめ大きく 舞ひ朝の ビル高き  
swallow big looping  
in the morning  
building high/tall

路地出でて チューリップの陽の ありにけり  
lane/alley exit  
tulip/s in the sunshine  
there is/are

朝空へ 鯉織なる 風がある  
morning sky to  
carp banner full  
wind blows/enough wind<sup>2</sup>

荷車の 子等積んで駆く 秋の晴  
hand cart/wagon  
full of children/loaded with pulled  
autumn clear day

雪の朝 牧師の瞳に 触れ合ひぬ  
snowy morning  
priest's eyes (glance)  
(my eyes) meet/met

凍つる夜の 夜光時計を 見さだめぬ  
freezing night  
dimly lit clock  
checking the time

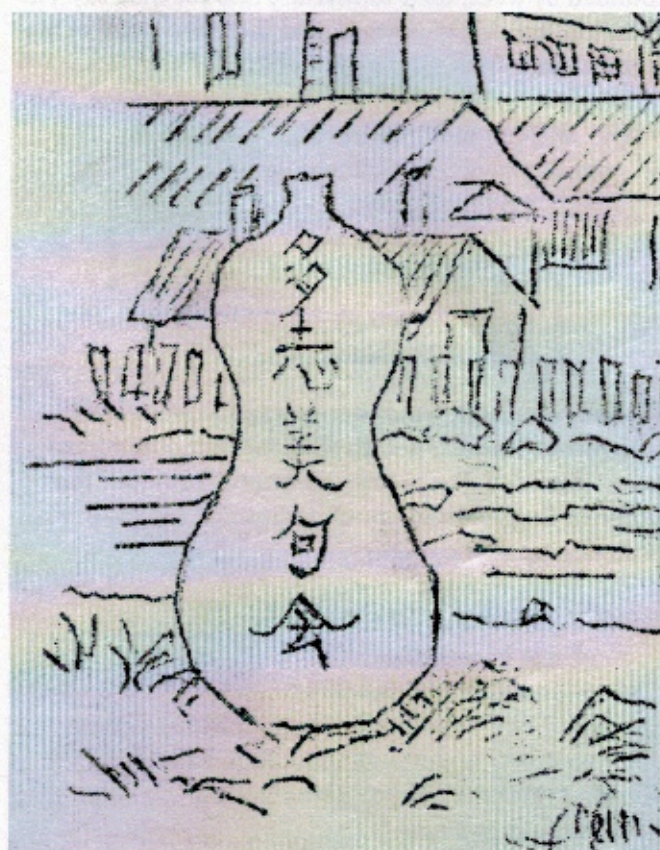
冬の灯の 棚の古本 見つめみる  
winter lamp light  
old books on shelf  
gazing at

小さき家 雪の朝日の 煙上ぐる  
small house/houses  
sunrise in snow  
smoke rises

パンの雪 栗毛の馬が 踏み出づる  
snow on the carriage/van  
chestnut (coloured) horse  
steps out into the snow

ひしひしと 路地を通りぬ 星冴ゆる  
shuffling through the alley  
stars shine bright  
look up

In his book, *Within the Barbed Wire Fence*, renowned Nikkei poet Takeo Ujo Nakano talks about his experience interned in Camp Angler in Ontario. This camp was designed to house German prisoners of war captured in Europe, but was pressed into use as a camp for Japanese-Canadians deemed a danger to the state. Nakao noted that "Because of the tedium of camp life, [the haiku club] quickly attracted members."<sup>3</sup> Haiku clubs (as well as other clubs and activities organized in the camps) broke the monotony of camp life. In his online article on the recently created Tashme Historical Project website, independent scholar Eiji Okawa suggests that for the haiku club members, writing haiku was more than a hobby, or leisure activity to fill the days' empty hours. He says, "It gave them the avenue to express their emotions and visualize their heart and soul during the dreadful internment years."<sup>4</sup> He goes on to say that writing haiku, "facilitated cultural adaptation to the environment of Tashme."<sup>5</sup> Reading even a sample of the Tashme haiku, we can find support for his points. For example, after the tragic drowning of a child in one of the two rivers flowing past the camp, writing haiku may have offered a cathartic experience for a poet known by the pen-name, Koson (Lonely Village). The first haiku below refers to the tower at the edge of camp,



"Tashibi" cartouche cropped from the cover of *Yamabiko*.

Nikkei National Museum, 2017.18.2.2.1



which held an emergency bell, or siren. There is the sense of both the sound and the people's panic rising.

非常警報 人沸きたたせ 夏天へ

*emergency bell  
people upset/panic/disturbed  
to the summer sky*

people panicking  
the emergency bell rises  
to the summer sky

いたいけな 死肢硬直 青草冷ゆる

*sweet/adorable  
corpse grown stiff  
green grass becomes cold*

a sweet child  
limbs stiffening  
the green grass chills

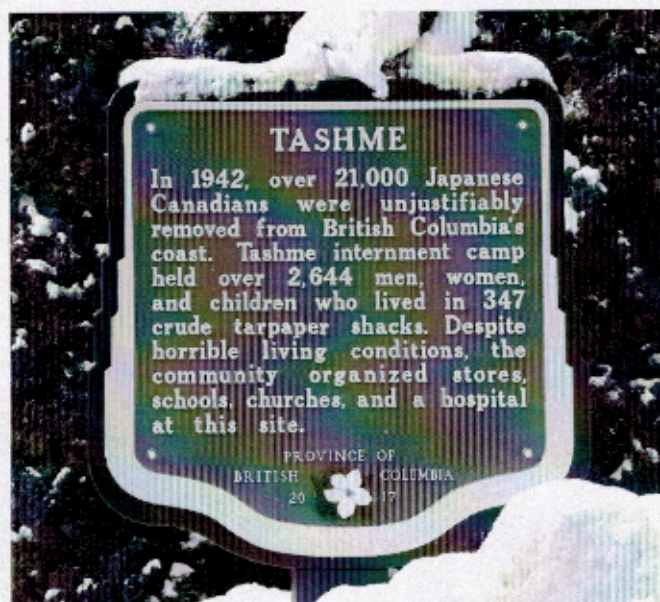
夏天へ 命奪へる 水音鋭き

*to the summer sky  
life robbed/stolen  
sharp sound of water*

a life is taken  
into the summer sky  
the sharp sound of water

In these three haiku, the expression is restrained. The situation and the poet's emotions are not explicitly stated. Yet, there is an implied sense of sudden deep and painful emotion, which the poet is perhaps coming to terms with through the act of writing.

Within the simple imagery of haiku, the poets were able to give voice to deep emotions they might not otherwise have been able to share. The haiku club used language to quietly reclaim a small, but significant, agency in their lives, presumably unobserved by camp authorities. As with other circumstances of internment, the name of the camp, Tashme, was imposed on the Nikkei. The name was created by the BC Security Commission as a kind of anagram, combining the first two letters of the names of three commissioners — Austin T. Taylor (TA), a prominent Vancouver businessman, John Shirras (SH) of the BC Provincial Police and Frederick John Mead (ME) of the RCMP. The members of the haiku club, however, reinvented the name Tashme, using Japanese characters. They chose three kanji that can be read with almost the same sounds as the three parts of the name, "ta-shi-mi." *Ta* means "many/plenty." *Shi* means "strong resolution/"



The Stop of Interest Sign erected in 2017 on Alpine Boulevard, just off the highway.

Jacqueline Pearce

will." *Mi* means "beauty." They could have chosen other kanji characters that can be read with the same sounds, but in selecting these particular kanji, the haiku club imbued the name, Tashme, with new meaning. For them, the camp name no longer referred to three BC Security commissioners; instead, it expressed the haiku club's goal of creating plenty of beauty through their own resolution and will.

This re-imagined Tashme can be seen very clearly on the covers of the haiku collections, *Yamabiko* and *Reiko*, in the lower left-hand corner in a gourd-shaped cartouche. Its creation was a subtle act of autonomy, an indication that through writing, the Nikkei internees would at least see this new environment in the way that they chose to see it — a way that allowed them to maintain a burning ember of their cultural and human identity. This ember is also kept alive through their haiku. These two collections, *Yamabiko* and *Reiko*, are invaluable documents that record the internal lives and the extraordinary endurance of the internees. ■

## Sources

- Yamabiko*, Tashme Haiku Club, 1945, Kazue and Sukeo Sameshima fonds 2017.18.2.2.1, Nikkei National Museum Archives, Burnaby  
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## Endnotes

1. Second generation (Nisei) refers to Japanese-Canadians born in Canada to parents who immigrated to Canada from Japan. The generation born in Japan is the first generation (Issei).
2. A carp banner is a koi fish-shaped cloth or paper banner (or wind sock) that is hung to celebrate Boys' Day (now called Children's Day) in May.
3. Ujō Nakano and Leatrice M. Willson Chan, *Within the barbed wire fence: a Japanese man's account of his internment in Canada* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 2012), 70.
4. Eiji Okawa, "Tashme Poetry Club," Tashme 1942–1946 Historical Project, <http://tashme.ca/>, assessed April 10, 2019. Quoted with permission.
5. Eiji Okawa, "Tashme Poetry Club."



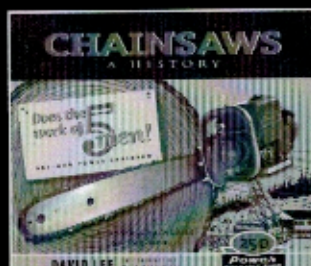
Jacqueline Pearce is an award-winning haiku poet and children's book author based in Burnaby. Jacquie has degrees in English Literature and Environmental Studies and an interest in local history. Her first novel for children focused on the friendship between two girls of Sikh and Japanese heritage in the Vancouver Island community of Paldi during the Second World War.

Born in Jamaica, Jean-Pierre came to BC as a child. He grew up in Duncan and graduated from Cowichan Senior High School. He graduated from UBC with a BFA before taking an MFA at York and a BED at the University of Toronto. He is currently teaching English at Suzuka University in Japan.



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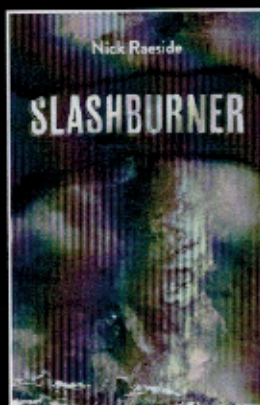
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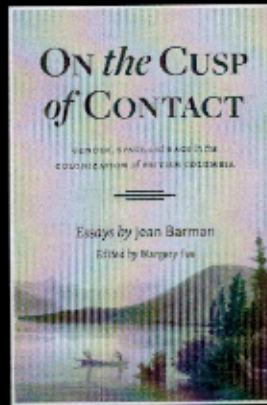
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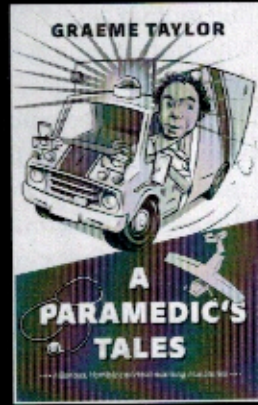
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