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Stephen Henry Gill, ed. *Meltdown: an anthology of haiku.*
Kansai, Japan: Hailstone Haiku Circle, 2013, 226 pp., perfect
softbound, 5 x 7.5 inches. ISBN 978-4-9900822-5-3. US\$20
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by George Swede, Toronto, ON

I first met Stephen Gill (aka Tito) in 1994 when I gave a paper for the conference, “The World of Haiku: From Bashō to the Present and Beyond,” at the School of African and Asian Studies, University of London. Gill was one of the conference organizers and interviewed me about my haiku for BBC 3 radio for which he was a producer. A year later, he moved with his Japanese wife, Kazumi, to Kyoto, where he teaches, writes, edits, creates artworks with stones (*ike'ishi*), participates in nature conservation, and also heads the group, Hailstone Haiku Circle, which published this anthology as well as earlier ones.

The book is laid out in Japanese style—to be read top-to-bottom and right-to-left. The result is that readers must start from what we in the West know as the back cover. The 494 haiku, haiku-like poems, and four twelve-stanza renku were all composed in English by the 75 contributors, including the 50 or so from Japan. The poems are arranged by topic according to an inverse alphabet, Z to A, which for Gill reflects the topsy-turvy times in Japan. For instance, S includes typically whimsical subsections: Sunset, Stump, Stream, Storm, Spring, Sport, Spell, Sound, Song, Seed, Secret, and Scarecrow. The title, *Meltdown*, is meant to evoke not only the Fukushima disaster, but also the general decline of well-being in this complex nation, as echoed in these poems:

Earthquakes, tsunamis,
meltdowns;
yet still the cherries bloom

Yoshiharu Kondo

Spring night—
inside the spiral shell
whispers
the radioactive sea

Masako Fujie

Autumn sadness—
it might be buried
in that ancient river
they found on Mars

Keiko Yurugi

Reed blinds
rolled up at sunset—
the blood donation tent

Akira Kibi

Most of the poems, however, strike more calming and pleasant tones:

Door creaking as it shuts—
the icy night

Mizuho Shibuya

Morning sun . . .
nice print shirts
on the scarecrows this year

Duro Jaiye

From barbers to the bar
winter evening calm

Hisashi Miyazaki

Once seated
it begins to move,
the ball of knitting wool
in Mother's hands

Michiko Suzuki

The kingfisher rends
the valley into two halves
with its beam of light

Nobuyuki Yuasa

Crows high on the temple hill
narrate the ancient story
of evening

Robert MacLean

Quiet temple—
the sound of a stream
in Buddha's eyes

Akito Mori

The preponderance of poems in the anthology are of similar quality to these, with only a small percentage lacking the expected resonance. What unilingual North Americans might find intriguing is how two-thirds of the contributors, for whom English is not their first language, can write so well.

In terms of format, the anthology shows considerable variation. In addition to the given examples, there are one-liners, five-liners (that could pass as tanka), as well as poems with from six to eleven lines. Adding to the mix are four of Gill's haiku arranged in a circle. For him, these "cirku" suggest the value of re-reading: "When the eye has read through a haiku once, the mind may decide to read it over again . . . and again, till a more complete satisfaction wells (p. 11)." There is, however, one uniform text element—the first letter of each poem is capitalized—something that Gill, as editor, seems to have required from his contributors.

The four twelve-verse renku (viz. *junicho*) at the end of the anthology are, in Gill's words, "mercifully short" and I'm in full agreement with him when he further states that, "each packs a punch (p. 10)." After the renku, Gill includes a list of 46 Hailstone events already held from 2010 to 2013 as well

as 3 forthcoming in 2014. Clearly, this haiku society has a vigor to be envied by other organizations.

While Gill expresses personal gloom in the Foreword—“For how long, I wonder, should I remain in this beloved but unsettling land (p. 8)”—the prevailing mood of the anthology is upbeat and is, ironically, best expressed by the editor himself:

Our little world—
from it we search for meaning
in the spring stars

Readers will need an extra effort to navigate *Meltdown*, but, ultimately, the experience will be rewarding. They also will come away impressed that a distant outpost of English-language haiku is creating such fine work involving a broad range of topics and formats.



George Swede cofounded Haiku Canada in 1977; was the Honorary Curator of the American Haiku Archives, 2008–2009; and edited Frogpond from 2008 to 2012. His latest collection is micro haiku: three to nine syllables (Toronto: Inšpress, 2014).

