

# Finnish Writers in Youkobo 2019 #4

Finnish Writers in Tokyo in cooperation with the Union of Finnish Writers, Helsinki and Youkobo Art Space, Tokyo

## Contents

• Foreword Tatsuhiko Murata

• Essay

“How the coin with the hole in the middle lured me to Japan”  
Päivi Lukkarila

“Looking for the Diamond Path”  
Marianne Backlén

“The components of reality”  
Jyrki Heikkinen



## Foreword

**Tatsuhiko Murata**

The acceptance of artists and researchers at Youkobo began in 1989, and it became a place of residency program for artists and researcher activities from not only overseas and local. The number of recommendations from international organizations is increasing year by year.

This program was started in 2016 between Youkobo and the Union of Finnish Writers, UFW, Suomen Kirjailijaliitto in Finnish, and is based on the relationship introduced by the Finnish Institute in Japan, Tokyo. The acceptance of 10 Finnish writers ended the three-year contract last year, and a new three-year exchange began this year.

Three writers take turns residency in the research for one month each in spring, which is mainly a good opportunity to create new works. At the same time, they enjoyed interacting with the artists who were residency in Youkobo.

This collection of essays summarizes the frank impressions and opinions regarding experiences of different cultures during the residency and the work of the person. The comments of the writer through his/her words, which is a little different from the artist who creates mainly visual creation, are very exciting and interesting. Please watch and listen the footsteps of Finnish writers residency in Tokyo, three months from March 2019.

### **UFW Writers in Residence in 2019**

March 1-30, 2019 Päivi Lukkarila

April 1-30, 2019 Marianne Backlén

May 1-31, 2019 Jyrki Heikkinen



#### **Päivi Lukkarila**

Päivi Lukkarila, born 1967, is a Finnish writer and teacher of drama and Finnish language. She has written 14 novels for children and young adults and two non-fiction books for adults. The themes of her novels vary from loneliness and feel of inadequacy to overcoming one's fears. She received The City of Tampere literature award with her novel *Koitetaan kestää Nanna* in 2007.



#### **Marianne Backlén**

Marianne Backlén is a Finland-Swedish writer who has published 14 books, most of them novels. She also writes for various culture magazines. Her novel *Karma* has a Buddhist theme, following the Noble Eightfold Path. In her latest novel from 2015 she explores her family history, how wars wound and separate people. She is interested in social issues, the world of young people, gender equality, comparative religion, contemporary art and dance.



#### **Jyrki Heikkinen**

Jyrki Heikkinen is a Finnish poet, graphic novel artist, and illustrator. His work connects fragments, different realities and time levels to be conjoined on a slanted horizon with the dualism between chaos and order. Even though his poetry and images carry a narrative, it is not an intrinsic value. What is more important are the feelings risen, echoes of the dreams and paths that do not lead to anything or anywhere.

## How the coin with the hole in the middle lured me to Japan

Päivi Lukkarila

One summer evening in the early 1970s I was in the car with my parents when my father noticed a hitchhiker and pulled to a stop. We were a bit surprised when we noticed that this young man was not a Finn. I had only seen features like his in Kurosawa's films and fairy tale books about the Orient. We did not have a common language but managed to understand that he had been to Lapland and was now heading towards Turku.

This man with shiny black hair and round glasses sat down next to me on the back seat. I felt embarrassed as I could not say anything to him but he smiled kindly at me. As he got off the car he placed a coin which had a hole in the middle and some strange looking writing on it in my hand. Later I found out that the coin was Japanese. This was my first encounter with a Japanese person. This far away land with stunningly beautiful art and long history of intriguing stories has enthralled me ever since. As I grew up I started to read Japanese literature, studied Kabuki theatre in my master's thesis and took up Karate do at a club called Zenshindojo (The place for practicing zen mind). I dreamt of travelling to Japan one day.

Therefore I was extremely happy to hear that I was chosen by the Union of Finnish Writers as the writer in residence of March 2019 at Youkobo Art Space. I must admit, the news also got me a bit worried at first. I realized I would be 7,700 kilometers away from my family – from anyone I knew for that matter. I could speak only some basic phrases in Japanese, not nearly enough to cope with should I end up in problems. Just days before my flight I read in a newspaper that notorious oarfishes had been seen on the coast of Japan. They are said to emerge only before massive earthquakes, last time prior to earthquakes in 2011.

The earth stood still on March 1st as my flight landed at Narita airport. I was surprised to see how easy it was to find my way around in a city of 50 million inhabitants. In the afternoon I arrived safe and sound at Youkobo and felt like I had come home. My residence proved to be very peaceful and offered an inspirational view over a lovely garden with a little pool and a cherry tree. Throughout my stay Mrs and Mr Murata and Ms Tsuji of Youkobo Art Space were ever so helpful, always ready to give advice or assist me with anything. They also kept me aware of interesting museums as well as artist events in Tokyo and Hiroko-san and Tatsuhiko-san even took me to an event arranged by the Finnish Institute of Japan in the beautiful Meiji-Kinenkan.

For me writing is as much walking as it is sitting at the computer. Ideas come to me more easily when I am in motion. While staying in Youkobo I included promenades in my daily routines. The map of Youkobo area came in handy when I first started exploring Suginami and Musashino area, later I extended my walks also to the other parts of Tokyo. I perambulated the parks that are like oases in the fervent city, strolled the tranquil, narrow streets of the suburbia, entered endless shrine and temple areas, crossed crowded stations and busy shopping streets. I was pleased to realise that Youkobo was so conveniently situated. Within 20-minute walk or a couple of minutes bus ride there were four railway stations. Trains would take me to the wonders of Shinjuku, Asakusa, Ueno or Harajuku in less than an hour. Before the end of my stay I also visited Kyoto and Nara and could finally see the magnificent Mt Fuji from the Shinkansen, a bullet train.

All in all, my residency turned out to be something even greater I had expected. I had seen with my own eyes the places I had dreamt of, but what was even more spectacular than the Japanese landmarks, was the kindness and warmth of the Japanese people. It didn't matter if I didn't understand what they said. If I was lost they would grab my hand and show me the way. Work wise I completed the first version of the manuscript I was granted the residency for, worked on another one and started planning a whole new novel set in Tokyo.

The oarfish did not forecast an earthquake after all. The only volcanic tremors I felt were quite slight. I flew back home happy and overwhelmed by all amazing experiences I had in Japan. Sitting in my kitchen I cook myself some ocha and cherish the possibility of seeing sakura for the second time, this time in my own garden.



## Looking for the Diamond Path

Marianne Backlén

In my childhood in Helsinki in the early 1960s, I nourished certain stereotypical ideas and myths about Japan. It was all about cherry blossoms and geishas, bright orange torii gates, Mount Fuji... My sister and I drew wonderfully colorful pictures with our Japanese Sakura crayons.

On the radio, Kyu Sakamoto sang *Ue o muite*, a song we loved, in the West renamed *Sukiyaki*, one of the few Japanese words people knew about...

In my teens, there were Kurosawa films, haiku poems, and later on Nichiren Buddhism, chanting *Nam myoho renge kyo* with Japanese people living in Finland and Sweden. The term *bonno soku bodai* became important: earthly desires are enlightenment. Or: changing poison into medicine. *Though worldly troubles may arise, never let them disturb you*, Nichiren wrote in 1276.

I arrived at Youkobo in early April and was immediately confronted with my childhood myths about Japan, still very much alive. A cherry tree in full blossom in the garden seemed to radiate a heavenly white light. When looking for the nearest supermarket, I caught sight of an orange red torii in the middle of the evening traffic and was almost moved to tears.

A few weeks later, I missed the tunnel of torii gates at Kyoto's Fushimi Inari Shrine, but maybe only one is sometimes enough, like the tiny gate by the pond at the Ryoanji Temple. A glimpse of Mount Fuji, sitting on the wrong side of the *shinkansen*...



I soon learned to love the quiet mornings at Youkobo, my walks in the park when the cherry trees were slowly turning green, and later, in the end of April, when the children's *kioinobori* fish were flying in the air. I loved the short bus ride to Nishi Ogikubo, past cosy looking houses, to the station where I had coffee at Kinokunya before taking the local train to Ogikubo and from there the Marunouchi Line. *Shinjuku*, another magical name from my youth.

Sometimes the choice was hard to make: shall I spend the day at the residence, writing and reading, enjoying the quiet neighborhood, or shall I go sightseeing in Tokyo, travelling exhaustingly long distances on the metro? I looked up futuristic glass buildings, Tokyo International Forum and the National Art Center.

My Tokyo was filled with various sounds, an acoustic mat with both noise and voice. At a gaming arcade I felt as if a thousand Pikachu were chasing me. Announcements at metro stations, monotonous voices calling customers in front of the shops at Takeshita Dori. Trains slowly crossing the steel bridge at the Sumida River. Wind gusts moving the memorial boards at a Buddhist cemetery, creating a wooden sound, while the tall bamboo was creaking.

At six in the evening, I loved listening to the music coming from the school next to Youkobo, a children's song about birds going to sleep in their nests.

My residency at Youkobo will continue to inspire me in many different ways and I hope to come back to Japan, before getting *too* old... I want to express my gratitude to the Muratas and to Makiko, to Julia Santoli and Kai Rennes, with whom I shared the Art Space, and to KIDE, my sponsor in Finland.

A passage in my upcoming novel *Diamantvägen* (The Diamond Path) is taking form, perhaps it reads like this:

I wait for Jean-Baptiste in the hotel room, the vastness of Tokyo spreading outside the window. Clusters of skyscrapers, I spot the Cocoon Tower. From Brussels we flew to Dubai, from Dubai to Tokyo... This is the end, I think, this is the end of the Diamond Path. For Jean-Baptiste it started on the winding red roads up in the hills of Kigali, of South Kivu, with a fistful of raw diamonds... Today, in his early 30s, he travels from Antwerp to London, from New York to Tel Aviv... Mumbai, Surat, Bangkok, Hong Kong... *The diamond cutting perfection of wisdom sutra?*

I wait for him, feeling both anxious and angry. I'd like to see the Shibuya Crossing, the Sensoji Temple where people are shaking the *omikuji* boxes... Finally, I receive a message: Meet me outside Tiffany's in Ginza.



I wait and wait, watching the steady stream of people walking by, past Cartier, Prada and Apple Store. Someone approaches me, it's young Bonaventure.

Let's go, Jessica, he is not coming.

Where is he?

I don't know...

We check out from the hotel, Bonaventure is looking for reasonably priced Airbnb accommodation.

Let's see, we'll take the Marunouchi Line to Ogikubo...

He calls up the host for further instructions and we board a local train, then a bus, until it all starts to feel like a dream. *The diamond that cuts through illusion...*

The bus driver calls out: Zempukuji... The host, a young Japanese artist, offers us a cup of sweet tasting sencha. A children's song from a nearby school fills the air while tiny petals from a cherry tree keep falling, falling...

*How many many things*

*They call to mind*

*These cherry-blossoms*

Basho (translation R.H. Blyth)





## The components of reality

Jyrki Heikkinen

I turn and look back and I want to go and pass the Shibuya Crossing over and over again. Past the empty space, past the border and feel that I'm going somewhere. And at the same time to disappear into this wave of human beings flowing around me. To see familiar faces which can't be here and to hear my name calling. Above me the overflowing zeal of the advertising screen's flashing lights. Something important is happening and far too soon it's over because you just can't stop and stand in the middle of the crossing. How simple, but still it hides inside something I can't get a grip. Desire to be in the center of the movement and to simultaneously see all directions because at the same time there is so much happening. A glimmering echo is filled with hope and joy with every impossible encounters.



On the second day in Tokyo, I'm standing in the bedroom with my phone in my hand while gazing at the wall. It's evening and already dark. The balcony sliding door is slit and I can hear the swish of the banana tree leaves and I can feel the wind. My mother just told me that my father died. I'm trying to understand this immense distance, my family, the past and the future, and the first impressions of Tokyo brings these confusing side paths. At that moment, prepared work plans lose their meaning. However, I just can't exist without doing something, so I decide to continue my picture diary project, to draw at least a little bit every day, or at least to try. But before that I'll have to arrange a flight to Finland for my father's funeral.

This sorrowful news defined my residence period more and less and every now and then the awareness of the loss mixed with the sounds, smells and colours of Tokyo. Drawing is often like designing a map and a line is a path to be passed, but you don't have to follow all the paths even if you would like to. You choose any direction and the bird song, curious look of a passer-by and humming of the wind will lead you to a renewed state. If you stop and look too much the pattern forming will not find it's figure and the components of reality will not combine. After all, sometimes you have to stop and then the confusing ocean of possibilities or the network of flyaway shadows will open up in front of you.

My father chose an image of a walking man well in advance for his gravestone. Because he was always so excited about making a new journey with my mother he was called Columbus. It's funny that I didn't know this nickname, and his strong will to be the go. Maybe a man can choose his memories, or invents same memories over and over again. And maybe that's why forgetting is necessary. Nearby surroundings are important for me when I work. I've looked for meaning from rusty bicycle frames in wastelands, railway yards and near woods. From trash I've looked for messages from the past and from shards of glass stories. However wastelands are on the decrease especially populous cities like Tokyo.

I sit on a bench in the shadows of the trees of the Zempukuji park because it's such a hot day. A crow is cawing, water is bubbling from a spring to the pond, and I hear a short, intense singing bird, which suddenly breaks song. A very old man is leaning over his cane as he walks along the path. He passes me wearing a half-length grayish brown coat and a hat. He continues a little more and stops. The man turns toward the pond and a tiny island where a shrine is situated under the branches of the trees. The island is located only a couple of meters away from the shore. In the past there's been a bridge to the island but nowadays water separates the shrine from the park. The man takes his hat off and makes a bow. For a while he stands still and then he continues walking and slowly disappears behind the trees as he turns with the path.

In Tokyo I enjoyed everything I saw; colours of the buses, the parks' information boards, design of the drain covers. All in all, Japan came real through the sounds; in local buses the recorded announcements made by children, various intonations of Japanese heard in passing in the street, crow choir in the Yoyogi park. And all the most unnoticeable everyday sounds from bicycles, trash cans, restaurant kitchens and the wind swirling, leaves rustling, bees buzzing in the garden of the residence.

In Shin Okubo Korea town we pass countless people in a queue. I see tentative looks on people's faces and notice the careful touching of the flyaway borders. I hear shouting in the afternoon heat. I can taste the sweet and greasy smell of the corn hotdog. And on the other side of the street the same in the opposite direction. We see motion and bustle around us and airy breaths of the silence. We can understand it partly and yet it's sometimes too much.

Many surprises were found in Tokyo. One of them, not so important but interesting, were the new smoking regulations. I had learned from old movies and books that smoking in Japan is more than a habit but reality stumped me. People in Tokyo seemed to follow these new regulations quite precisely. Because I'm looking for order around me, I miss it and at the same time I'm afraid of it. It was quite easy for the most part for me to accept the matter. The lack of trash and cigarette smoke created a certain kind of looseness and nameless atmosphere. We can view dirt and overconsumption as obscure messages with different meanings and ambiguous distractions in populated environments.

I roamed around Asakusa with my daughter for some time looking for a specific ramen restaurant and for me a place to use my e-cigarette. Suddenly I noticed a smoking allowed sign in the window of a small and unnoticeable door. Behind the door there was a narrow vestibule and on the left side there was a high counter with a cash register on it. An elderly gentleman welcomed us behind the counter. The cafe was small and very simply furnished. A hazy hunch gave me the feeling that we had entered into the past. The coffee was the best in Tokyo and the tea was excellent. The dishes, tablecloth and furniture took us to a world where every object has a meaning. I rested my weary feet and I watched the passer-byers behind the window. I felt that now I don't have to rush anywhere. I just wanted to sit at the cafe and listen to the silence and wonder.

During the day time I explored Tokyo and in the evenings I continued my picture diary project. I had a chance to introduce my new images at my solo exhibition in Youkobo towards the end of my residence period. Sadness mixed with happiness, longing mixed with the Sensoji Matsuri merry bustle and blended into the crowd of the Hibiya park Oktoberfest. The yearning escaped to the colourful profusion of the shopping arcades and to the silence of the streets. The path disappeared into the landscape like the line into a picture where figures without words begin to appear.

I think I can forget a lot from my time in Tokyo but I cannot forget the warmth of the people met. I cannot forget the tune blasting from the roof of a nearby school to call the local children to go home at 6pm: What are you thinking now Tatsuhiko? The touch of wind on the surface of a goldfish pond reminds us: Hiroko was here. And the light in the window on a dark street at dusk reminds me of my unfinished work and Makiko's voice: Everything is as it is.

