

“Intimately Entangled”:

Professor David Farrah at Kobe Gaidai

Hitomi NABAE

Professor David Farrah came to Kobe to teach at Kobe Gaidai in the year of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of 1995. He had a hard time finding his place, but he did what we thought most suitable for a Saigyō of our day.¹ He writes in the preface to *The Poems of Nunobiki Falls* (2003): “I was tipped off to an availability in an old-earth-walled Japanese-style apartment house (*bunkajutaku*) that sits nearly alone and quite precariously above a river at the city’s edge” (4). He, however, turned out no recluse; he was an expert in bringing people together. Soon after his arrival at Kobe Gaidai, he suggested a department gathering in a small public park just a few minutes’ walk up the mountain from his abode. He hosted an American-style potluck party, meaning he asked us to bring food, as well as our spouses, friends and children. Especially as it was soon after the earthquake and we still felt shaky, we were all the more grateful for his ingenuity and hospitality. We ate and laughed, sharing our stories.

For the last 27 years, we have had the pleasure of a poet in our department. We became so accustomed to his presence that I am afraid we never really expressed our gratitude for his being with us. He let us casually knock on his door, his soft voice, “Haai, Douzo! (Yes, come in),” welcoming us in. He listened to us with his eyes wide open, which somehow made us feel better and healthier. He is also the first one to teach poetry as part of creative writing in our curriculum. For his students, he hosted “Poetry Oyatsu,” a poetry reading with sweets. I remember at one time about 20 of us, students and faculty, sat together in a tatami-room in the Student Union from which we could view a small

¹ Prof. Farrah composed poems after the illustrations of *The Tale of Saigyō* in *Borrowed Landscapes* (2012), whose cover is a picture of the monk-poet Saigyō viewing cherry blossoms alone from Tawaraya Sōtatsu’s Saigyō picture scroll.

Japanese garden outside, while students read their poems aloud. We listened, ate sweets, and talked about the poems. This exchange is perhaps precisely what Prof. Farrah had in mind. That is, poetry does feed our whole being, both mind and body. In this way, he created a space for us where we could meet and share poetry and, of course, all kinds of other things.

In his final lecture, “Walking into Poetry,”² he guided his audience through the poems that made him a poet. I imagined a nature-loving boy born in Ohio, US, who happened to find a place for himself in Kobe, Japan. Kobe became his home and there he wrote all of his five books. Read chronologically, they demonstrate the process of his growth as a poet. His original feelings of displacement induced him to seek a way to engage himself in the landscape of his surroundings. The epigraph to *Small Sounds in the Brush* (1998), his first collection, ends: “There is / distance between me / and the orange earth / birds fly up to.” The poet feels the “distance” between himself and the view, although birds can overcome any distance. But his engagement with Kobe’s culture and history came when he discovered small stone monuments scattered along the Nunobiki hiking trails on which were inscribed old Japanese poems. The idea of the communal function of poetry inspired him, resulting in his translation of *The Poems of Nunobiki Falls* (2003). The book was dedicated to the citizens of Kobe.

His next book, *Parity’s Ground* (2005), as the title conveys, explores the question of displacement in our globalizing world. The poet seeks ground where all can respect equal standing. A scene he envisions is: “O’ Comfort, like a woman between us / who has made the wine // so that two men might drink / from the same cup // the preponderance of night?” (56). The idea of the “middle ground,” here personified as a woman, is further cultivated in *Borrowed Landscapes* (2012). He finds *shakkei*, or “borrowed landscape,” an architectural form of a Japanese garden. In *Intimately Entangled* (2021), in which he attempts to bring prose and poetry together, he describes how *shakkei* creates “a fecund ‘middle-ground,’” where the poet’s imagination may find expression through design and form. His poem projects a moment of such double vision in our daily life: “Outside my window / in the February sun / the oranges are bright / and big and fat. How easy / to forget the world is round” (42-43). Outside where the oranges hang and inside where the poet sits turn into a “middle-ground,” via the poet’s imagination, where he becomes aware that the common nature of all, be it organic or not, is “round.”

For the cover of *Intimately Entangled*, Prof. Farrah chose the first photograph of

² He delivered his final lecture on 6th March 2022 at Kobe Gaidai.

“quantum entanglement” (2019) which demonstrates his belief that both science and poetry aim for the same truths. He states: “poetry is the mathematics of non-rational ideas. . . poetry gives form and expression to the complex thoughts, unwieldy emotions, and unfolding experiences of human existence” (12). The two poems that end the book exemplify his idea but with an unanswerable question. They are about Nagasaki. In “Fukusaiji,” the poet listens to the noises that a Japanese sliding door makes: “Alone with my thoughts / As the fusuma rattle / The pendulum swings” (49). It has been noted that Fukusaiji Temple was destroyed by the atomic bomb in 1945 and later restored, now housing a Foucault Pendulum under which lies the remains of bomb victims (60-61). The universe is round and the swing of the pendulum proves the earth’s rotation. Yet, perhaps, the poet confronts a double-faced truth. His words turn into a scientific formula and the last poem is titled, “ $t=0$,” the equation representing the moment when the Big Bang occurred (50). We are left in dismay—a Big Bang of our day, at a presumed zenith of human intelligence? But this poetic expression conveyed through a scientific formula may activate our awareness and prophecy.

In *Intimately Entangled*, Prof. Farrah references Masaoka Shiki. Prof. Farrah has suffered from backaches and felt much affinity with the poet. What he says about Shiki, however, is his creed as a poet: “During most of his later life he was bedridden, and, as a result, had an extremely limited view of the outside world as it was seen only through his bedroom window. More than most, he would have understood that all landscapes—including our very own bodies—are borrowed. We are, after all, mortal” (45). Prof. Farrah, as was Shiki, is never tired of making observations through his window, however limited, and understands the ultimate “borrowed ground” is his own physical body. He is poetry himself, body and soul.

Having Prof. Farrah as both colleague and friend, I too have learned to live with poetry as it is part of us. He used to write notes on small pieces of paper in all sorts of sizes, much like the way Emily Dickinson wrote her poems. One slip read: “Cicadas bloom / themselves // a sound / above the river.” Later, a slightly modified version appeared in his *Borrowed Landscapes*.³ His daily notes, as I reflect now, were part of the creation process of his poetry. And we were all there, in the moment of his creative sparks. We will miss these. Yet, I believe we will always be, to use his words, “intimately engaged.”

³ “Cicadas bloom, themselves // a sound / above the river” (35).