

Dallas Angguish

割青 IREZUMI

A monk sips morning tea

It's quiet;

The chrysanthemum flowers.

- Basho.

Kyoto, Japan.

It's early springtime. Just after dawn. I'm sitting under a flowering cherry tree in a temple garden. The cherry trees are called *Sakura* 桜, which translates literally as 'seat of the Rice God'. This god, Sanokami, is a kind of ancient Dionysian harvest deity, which is why each year, in remote parts of rural Japan, there are still raucous parties beneath the *Sakura* at their peak blossom point. The cherry blossoms are considered divine. It's believed they emit a kind of energy or radiance at full-bloom that is an elixir. A panacea for all ills. There's a whole avenue of them here, their stunning blossoms forming a dusty pink canopy that glistens with dew. But I'm not

feeling the benefits of any elixir. I'm bone cold. It's unseasonably frosty for this time of year. Or so the monks tell me. I'm perched uncomfortably on a stone bench, shivering; my tailbone aching from the cold transferring from the earth to the bench to my frozen spine.

The sun arrives in the garden as orange shafts of light, touching only the very tips of the cherry trees. Soon, it strikes granite boulders—arranged here to mimic a range of mountains—and bounces off veins of quartz embedded in the stones that imitate the white froth of waterfalls. Despite the reduced scale, the scene inspires the same sense of awe I felt when I first saw Mount Fuji, 芙蓉峰, the lotus peak; its perfect snowy summit overhung by a circle of pristine white clouds.

As the sun reaches the faultless surface of a nearby pond, tiny ripples erupt. A miniscule plop here, and another there. The gentle shockwaves formed when multi-coloured Koi 鯉 kiss the air looking for food or, as the younger monks believe, love. The monks say the carp were human in their last life. Humans who suffered unrequited love. Now the Koi obsessively kiss the air hoping to connect with the lips of their indifferent lovers; whom they imagine are just beyond the water's surface, maddeningly out of reach, somewhere in the light above. To the carp, with their scales and gills, the surface of the pond is the edge of the universe. A thin veil between their world and another; the terrestrial world of monks and temples, geishas and yakuza, sushi and saki. This world, the world of modern Japan, is as alien to me as it is to the Koi. I'm a white fish out of water.

The air, bitterly frigid overnight, begins to warm. The sun finally creeps into my corner of the garden. I'm thankful. I'm not used to this kind of cold. I shivered all night. When I woke, my skin looked like that of a plucked chicken kept too long in a deep freeze; pale, goose-pimpled. The thin futon underneath me barely held off the

cold of the floor; chilled to freezing as it was by the granite foundations beneath. I position myself so that the sun lands on my face, on my hands. I soak it up, love it. I am like the Koi, looking for love in the light. I want to be cheek to cheek with sunbeams.

I'm here to meet Aiki Matsuo. He's eighteen and a Buddhist monk. He's going to teach me about *Irezumi*, 刺青, the Japanese art of tattoo. In the West, Irezumi is associated with the yakuza, or *Gokudō* 極道, the Japanese version of organized crime gangs, but Irezumi has older and deeper associations. The art of Irezumi reached its peak in the Edo period (1603-1868). Apart from the yakuza, Irezumi was practiced mainly among courtesans; as a way for their wealthy aristocratic lovers to literally leave their mark on the geisha's butter-soft skin. By the late 1700s, Irezumi tattooists had reached the status of master artist, or *Horishi* 彫物師. Their work drew influence from Japanese woodblock prints, an art which began with the printing of text and illustrations for Buddhist scriptures.

Aiki Matsuo is taking the art of Irezumi in new directions. For Aiki, the practice of Irezumi is a way to show loyalty to his 'sponsors', the wealthy older men whose donations keep his monastery viable in an age of shrinking community support. In a sense, Aiki Matsuo is a monk courtesan.

Aiki is a conundrum. He is the opposite of his peers. So few young Japanese are choosing the religious life these days. They prefer karaoke and the company life. They want to finger hand-held computers, not a bodhi-seed rosary. Where Aiki wishes to spend his energy in meditation, his peers want to sink their spare change into vending machines that dispense, among other things, the used knickers of Japanese schoolgirls.

A strange sexual obsession has taken hold of Tokyo youth. A kind of post-Hiroshima, post-Web 2.0 mutation of desire into little more than fetishism: life-sized more-than-life-like sex dolls; hydraulic dildo machines; *Omorashi* お漏らし (panty-wetting) game shows; *Erogē* エロゲ erotic video games; and the pornographic comic format *Hentai* 変態, which translates loosely as ‘strange abnormality’. As a celibate monk, Aiki is clearly not like other Japanese guys his age. It should not be a surprise then that Aiki’s monastic style should also break from tradition.

Aiki entered the monastery the minute he finished high-school. He’d quietly planned it for a year. Once the bell rang, on his last day, he walked out the school gates leaving his books and bag unclaimed in a tin locker. He boarded a train and went straight to his new cloistered existence. That night, in the temple courtyard, wearing nothing but a pair of Calvin Kleins his mother purchased at Seibu, the famous Ginza district department store, he burnt his school uniform in an old brazier normally used for burning incense. He offered the smoke up to the stars.

The next morning, his head newly shaved, he took the vows of a novice monk. When we first spoke—on a long distance call with its attendant echo and strange delay—he said that he had shed just three tears at his ordination. One of relief and two of joy. He claimed to have wiped up the latter with his index finger and flicked them into the Koi pond, thus transforming those tranquil waters into a mirror that reflected his happiness at finally living a life of purpose and meaning. When he said this to me over the phone, in slow considered English, I thought: This guy is like a living poem! A human Haiku, each rib a carefully placed syllable, each movement a punctuation mark in a long sonnet.

Aiki’s father still hasn’t forgiven him. These days no self-respecting family wants a monk in its ranks. The best families no longer give up its sons to religion.

They much prefer to sacrifice them on the altar of corporate finance. It isn't considered honourable, as it once was, to choose a life of renunciation. Nowadays, it's more important to have money in the bank than compassion in the heart. Certainly, this is how Aiki's father, a willow reed of a man, thinks about things. But Aiki bucked the trend, defied his father, and became the first member of his family to ordain as a monk for more than a hundred years. Having met his father, and spent an uncomfortable night with the family, I can see how Aiki's break with them must have taken a huge amount of courage.

Aiki arranged for me to stay with his family in Tokyo before I made my way to Kyoto by bullet train. An arrangement that his parents would have preferred not to honour. Aiki's father is a Tokyo tycoon who made millions selling the electronic innards of computers to America. He is brittle and upright; an iron girder of a man who is so in control of his every organ that he seems barely to breathe.

Aiki's mother is like a Japanese Doris Day. She's also insane. I'm not kidding. But unlike other lunatics, she is not bound in a straight-jacket. She's restrained by pink tailored skirt suits that are equally tight-fitting. She thinks she's living in nineteen-fifties America. Everything is soda pop and potato chips, milk and cookies; valium and serapax. It's all about keeping up with the Joneses, or rather the Suzukis 鈴木 who, like the English-speaking Joneses, carry the second most common surname in their language. Her house is a spotlessly clean temple to consumerism; a *Zendo* 禅堂 of designer furniture and pop art. She rearranges Warhols like they're pressed flowers in an elaborate *Ikebana* 生け花 display; moving prints from room to room according to a seasonal schedule. In spring, the Warhol of Elvis (with pistol) goes into the entrance hall, the Elizabeth Taylor into the dining

room, the Marilyn Monroe into the guest room. The Basquiat stays where it is until autumn, when it will be moved to the main sitting room.

No matter what's going on, no matter how chaotic things get around Mrs. Matsuo, she bows and smiles. Bows and smiles. Smiles as if her life depends on it. Smiles until her gums bleed. And things get very chaotic at the Matsuo house, which is shared by Aiki's parents, his older brother, his brother's wife and their twin children; Tokyo's version of the no-neck monsters.

According to Aiki's elder brother Hideyoshi—a sumo-sized advertising executive married to Japan's least famous soapie actress—girls for miles around wept in despair when Aiki entered the monastery. Apparently Aiki is awe-inspiringly handsome. Hideyoshi had belaboured his brother's 'beautiful handsomeness' as he drove me, in his yellow Mercedes, from the Tokyo airport to the family home. The Mercedes and its driver both reeked of some kind of citrus fragrance. No doubt expensive, but over-the-top nevertheless.

We were met at the door of the Matsuo family home by Sumiko, Hideyoshi's actress wife. As she showed me the facilities of the guest room, she told me that Aiki could have been an underwear model. This means, I think, that his body is as awe-inspiring as his face. I wondered, as she told me this, about the appropriateness of Hideyoshi's wife talking about his own brother in such a fashion, particularly given the undeniable hum of desire coming from her body at the time. I got the feeling that Hideyoshi might fare better in the bedroom, get lucky more often, if he included a shirtless photograph of his brother on the nightstand.

My overall impression of Sumiko is that she is a bit like one of those slimy salamanders that live in the mountain streams in Japan's isolated valleys; a slithery, seductive kind of creature whose skin oozes an addictive but toxic enzyme. If you

take them into your arms, thus absorbing the enzyme through your pores, you enter a realm of unimaginable bliss that results shortly thereafter in an agonizing death.

Sumiko moves with a deliberate slinkiness that is calculated to entice every man in the vicinity, young or old, to adore her. Her modest fame, though practically non-existent even in Japan, makes her immodestly pompous. The soap opera in which she stars is so awful that even the Japanese—who will watch a game show in which the contestants try to guess which of a group of models dressed as Playboy bunnies needs to go to the bathroom—can't bring themselves to watch it. Despite this, Sumiko sees herself as Japan's Angelina Jolie. This overestimation of herself, added to the fortune and power she married into when she got her slippery mits on Hideyoshi, a virtual imbecile, and the result is someone who expects special treatment at every turn.

But, back to Aiki Matsuo. When I asked Hideyoshi and Sumiko to tell me a little about Aiki, they claimed that at least one girl, possibly more, committed ritual harakiri, or *Seppuku* 切腹, when she heard the news that he had given his life, and much vaunted body, to the Buddha. Apparently she did it with her grandfather's sword. They also told me a rumour that was circulating about three girls of very good family who, grieving over Aiki's ordination, got dressed in their graduation kimonos—ornate frocks of woven gold silk—climbed to the top of a nearby suspension bridge and, holding hands, launched themselves into the waters below. They have become known as The Three Golden Cranes. A small cult has arisen around their legend. A religion of broken-hearted schoolgirls and middle-aged spinster virgins. Due to the fact that no bodies have ever been found, Sumiko and Hideyoshi have not been able to verify that the three girls ever really existed. But that hardly matters.

I got the impression from Hideyoshi that he was so pained, and shamed, by his brother's actions that he considered harakiri himself. If it weren't for the comforts of his six bedroom home, a palace by Japanese standards, his Mercedes, his Armani suits, and his faux celebrity wife he may well have done so. But, ever the pragmatist, Hideyoshi spared his family the further trauma of a self-disembowelment and continues living, with exaggerated reluctance, in the same decadent fashion to which he and his wife have become accustomed – unrestrainedly spending his father's millions.

I had hoped to make friends with Aiki's family. But the Matsuos treated me like a pale, hairless vermin that had mysteriously taken up residence in their spare room. Still, Mrs. Matsuo smiled and bowed. Hideyoshi and his beautiful wife—whose cleavage was surgically modified to resemble two perfect peaks, perhaps to appeal to mountaineers—regarded me, I believed, in the same way they might regard a backward and slightly retarded cousin of impure lineage. Nonetheless, they 'graciously' offered to drive me to the station to catch the train to Kyoto. Not because they liked me or were kind, but more to ensure that I was out of the house before any of Sumiko's social gatherings. They seemed to think me so uncouth that I might drool into the saki. By the time I left their residence for the monastery guesthouse, I was so on edge I had almost resumed bedwetting; an art I had forsaken when I was six and didn't want to take up again.

As the sun finally rises completely over the garden wall, in the *land of the rising sun* no less, and fills the pond with reflective light, I wonder what I'm doing here. I'm in Japan, apart from getting a whiff of the cherry blossoms, to have a break before starting my PhD. My discipline is creative writing. I like words. For me they're a lot like music. But, rather than doing what 'men like me' do while in Japan—that is,

hang out in Tokyo's *Shinjuku Ni-chōme* 新宿二丁目 district, which has the world's highest concentration of gay bars—I'm putting myself through an ethnologic ordeal. All to learn something about an obscure Japanese artform from a monk-courtesan I've never met who could easily be just as nuts as the rest of his family. This is no surprise to me, nor to my family, who have come to expect this kind of thing from me. I would never be happy just *travelling*. I have to learn, to understand. I'm obsessively curious. I've been told I'm impractical, maybe a little pedantic. Certainly, way too bookish.

As I begin to warm up, I recall that my mother is always telling me I need to have more fun. Easier said than done. She would have sent me straight to *Ni-chōme*. My father, however, says that I need to grow up and stop being a dreamer. Do a *real* course and get a *real* job. I don't know what that means really. I think it means that my father is an idiot.

Now that the garden isn't so dark and cold, I get up and walk around a bit. Try and warm up further. I head over to the Koi pond and watch the rainbow coloured fish smooch the air. One of them, a big fat guy with ruby splotches all over his back, lifts his head out of the pond and looks pleadingly into my eyes. I am amazed.

"Hey Fatso, what're you after?"

I bend down and extend my finger. He takes it into his mouth and starts nibbling. I laugh. He keeps nibbling. The sensation of a carp gumming your finger is a tad erotic. I feel like a bit of a pervert for liking it. I remember the monks saying that the Koi were once human, that they're broken-hearted lovers. I decide that Fatso must have been a big ol' queen in his last life and swiftly retrieve my finger. I'm not that way inclined. Many of my partners have been little better than apes, but none

have been fish. Without my digit to suckle, Fatso starts to kiss the air and plead for more. I tell him off. “Look here Fatso, take your greedy gums elsewhere. I aint interested.”

I give him a little poke on the head, push him away. He swims off with a decidedly dramatic swish to his tail.

“It is said that a man who talks to fish is either a sorcerer or has no friends.”

I spin around. Walking towards me is, even I must admit, a very handsome monk. His lips are curved in a wry smile. His head is shaved clean. He is wearing long black robes with a V neck. Because of the way he bears himself—with a definite sense of agility and strength—the robes make him look less a monk and more a Kung Fu fighter. In Japan though, it’s Karate 空手 not Kung Fu. I smile and extend my hand.

“I wasn’t talking to them exactly, just sort of... having words.”

“Ah, so you are not a sorcerer?”

“No, I’m just a lonely Australian.” He takes my hand into both of his and hangs onto it. His hands are warm and firm.

“I am Aiki Matsuo.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“I apologize for not seeing you when you arrived yesterday. I was in meditation. We are not allowed to break our meditation for anything. Not even for lonely Australians.”

He smiles, he’s very charming.

“That’s Ok. I went straight to bed anyway.”

“Did you slumber well?” Like many Japanese, Aiki’s English is close to perfect, but his word choice is just a bit quirky. This gives his sentences a kind of freshness that I like.

“Sort of. I was a bit cold.”

“Yes. It is spring but the coldness is still in the ground....” I am transfixed by the way he says things. The measured intent behind each word. “I trust you have enjoyed your visit with my family in Tokyo?”

I don't want to be rude so I don't say anything. I like this monk already and I don't want my opinion of his family to come between us. Besides, after the quiet of the monastery guesthouse I'm beginning to feel better about things. Maybe the Matsuos and I simply got off on the wrong foot. A bit of culture shock on both sides. In contrast, the monks here have been nothing but open and welcoming, the complete opposite to Aiki's family. In the monastery at least, the Japanese art of hospitality hasn't been forgotten. I look at the ground, then off at the avenue of cherry trees. I feel a bit uncomfortable in the silence.

Aiki starts to walk towards a small building, a kind of Japanese pavilion, at the other end of the garden. He motions for me to follow. I follow, noticing that I have to make an effort to walk as slowly, as deliberately, as Aiki; who moves *interminably* slowly. “My family treated you acceptably?”

“Yes, very well thanks.”

“In the monastery it is not appropriate to tell lies....” He smiles. “I have already received a note from my mother. I was able to read between the lines that you were not happy there.”

“No, it's not that I wasn't happy. It's a beautiful house....”

“Yes. A very beautiful house, but not quite a home. Tell me the truth; my family did not make you feel welcome?”

“No, not exactly.”

“My family has forgotten the importance of kindness. Do not think that it is to do with you. I never felt at home there either.”

Once we reach the pavilion’s small door, Aiki slides it open. Inside is a traditional tea room with a modern twist. One whole wall is made of glass, providing an incredible view over the pond and cherry-blossom garden. Aiki removes his slippers and steps up into the room. I slip off my shoes and follow. Once inside, Aiki slides the door closed behind me. The room is small but has a sense of space. It’s also delightfully warm, heated by a ceramic fire pot, or Hibachi 火鉢. The Hibachi has a white glaze and is decorated with a blue cross-hatch design. It is filled with lit coal and emits a shimmering haze. In the heart of the room, positioned in the centre of a large Tatami 畳 mat is a small table, only high enough to sit beside while sitting on the floor. On the table is a steaming pot of tea and two cups. The teapot and cups are a brilliant mossy green. I am thrilled to bits. A hot cup of tea is exactly what I need.

Aiki indicates I should sit. I take a spot looking out over the Koi pond. The sun is now glinting off everything. For a second I think I see the swish of a silver fin. Probably Fatso, on the prowl for another finger. Aiki pours out the tea. It looks like a good brew; dark, aromatic. He offers one cup to me and I take it eagerly.

“Thanks!” I unceremoniously blow on the steaming cup and take a gulp. I notice Aiki slowly rolling the cup in his hands, transferring the heat from the perfectly formed ceramic vessel to his fingers. I suddenly feel clumsy. I sit back and take a second sip of tea in a less manic fashion. Aiki notices and smiles. Then, after a very precise and silent sip of his tea, he says something that utterly confuses me.

“Once you have warmed a little, I will remove my clothes.”

“Sorry, what?” I stammer.

“You are here to learn about Irezumi are you not?”

“Well, yes... but...”

“Some things have to be experienced directly. I will show you my tattoos. That way, when we discuss Irezumi it will be real for you, not just something abstract.”

“Oh, ok... But, isn't it a bit cold?”

“Thus the hibachi,” he says, nodding to the fire pot. “The room will be warm enough presently. But thank you for your worry.”

“You're welcome.” I'm not sure what else to say. The fact that I am in a small room with a monk who is about to remove his clothes makes me somewhat nervous. I don't know how to act. Should I appear nonchalant and disinterested, as though this sort of thing happens in my life all the time? If I do that, Aiki might think that I don't want to see his tattoos at all; and to be honest, I do. I really do. So, should I appear eager then, like a Leghorn enthusiast at a poultry show? If I do that, I risk looking like a pervert. I really don't want that. I really don't.

I decide to look at my cup of tea. I turn it in my hands, take another nervous sip. I keep my face as neutral as possible, avoid eye contact.

“Have you heard the story of Kukai, the founder of the *Shingon* sect of Buddhism?”

Aiki says as I, trying to be inconspicuous, stare conspicuously out the window.

“Not in detail,” I say, looking briefly into his eyes, “but I've heard that he was a poet and engineer, and that he brought tantric Buddhism to Japan from China.”

“That is accurate,” Aiki says in his fresh way, “but what is not widely known outside of certain circles is that Kukai is also attributed with bringing homosexuality to Japan.”

“Really?” I squeak with surprise.

“Yes. In Japan, there is a long tradition of fraternisation between Buddhist monks and homosexuals. It is a relationship that has had many benefits on both sides. It is an exchange where one side provides spiritual guidance and the other financial and other kinds of support.”

“But,” I begin rather timidly, “aren’t Buddhist monks supposed to be celibate?”

“I did not say that the exchange was necessarily a sexual one, though that must often have been the case,” Aiki answers. “Also, it is not widely known that in the Shingon sect monks can choose to be either celibate or not.”

“In English, the word ‘monk’ has quite distinct meanings, and it certainly doesn’t imply an active sex life.”

“Perhaps monk is an incorrect word then,” Aiki suggests. “Perhaps the word ‘priest’ is more proper.”

“Yes, or the word ‘minister’.”

“No, not that word,” Aiki says. “I do not care for it. It makes me think of unpleasant BBC programs and Jane Austen.”

“I like the BBC.”

“That is your prerogative. I myself find such programs lacking – too many costumes and horses and very minuscule heart.”

“Maybe you have a point,” I smile, before asking a question that has been on the tip of my tongue since this conversation started. “If you don’t mind me asking, which word best describes *you*: priest or monk?” I’m being diplomatic and delicate. I’m really asking if he’s celibate or not.

“I have taken a vow of celibacy. It is not my intention to partner in this life.”

“But other Shingon priests can have partners?”

“Certainly, although with certain limits. The relationship must be one based on a wish to further the Buddhist teachings, and must always be secondary to one’s spiritual practice. Many Shingon monks are married. There are even some who have lovers of the same sex.”

“Why did you decide to become a monk? Didn’t you want to marry?”

“You have met my family. They are not a good recommendation for reproduction.”

He smirks, takes a final sip of his tea.

As I chuckle at this, he places his empty tea cup on the table and indicates that he is going to stand. Once he’s on his feet, I wonder what I should do. Should I stand also? Or stay seated? Before I can decide, Aiki begins to untie the bow that holds his robes together. Once untied, his robe falls open, revealing a solid chest covered in tattoos. From the waist down, he’s wearing a pair of close-fit black pants. He takes off the robe and places it gently on the table.

I feel really uncomfortable now. I don’t want to stare at him and make him feel like a stripper. At the same time, Aiki’s meditative way of undressing—and the riot of blues, reds and greens that are the tattoos—compel me to watch. I’m also still confused as to whether or not I should stand or stay on the floor.

With the robe removed, I see that his arms are also fully tattooed, from the wrist all the way to the shoulders. He takes off his socks, neatly folds them into a roll and places them on the floor just behind a table leg. It is a conscious and delicate performance that says volumes about the degree to which the Japanese have codified and *designed* even the smallest of actions. Then, in a completely unselfconscious way, Aiki takes off his trousers. I very self-consciously look away. Now, in just a pair of black briefs, he walks over to the glass window overlooking the pond and stands there, looking out. It is his way of allowing me to take in the artwork

on his body, to look at him in his near nakedness, without feeling embarrassed. The soft morning sun streams in the window and forms a halo around his body, illuminating the smooth lines of his torso and back and bringing a light to the tattoos that seems to be coming from within them rather than from the sun outside.

His body is a mosaic of designs that, on first glance, seem completely random. On further investigation they reveal themselves to be utterly ordered. His legs are covered with scenes of waves crashing on a shore with a snow tipped Mount Fuji in the background, and, on his calf muscles, pictures of bamboo forests on craggy hillsides. On one bicep, there is a pair of golden Koi, swimming upwards to a lotus pad floating over the arch of his shoulder. On the other arm, a tiger stalks a white crane at the edge of a pond. The crane has one foot in the water, but its wings are unfurling for flight.

On his muscular back are a series of scenes of monks: monks sitting by waterfalls, monks carrying begging bowls, monks reading scriptures. Interspersed with these scenes are saucer sized flower designs: a peony in full bloom, a half-opened lotus bud and the inevitable Sakura blossom. Across the yoke of Aiki's back is a golden dragon, looking over the monks with a protective eye.

On Aiki's chest are two tattoos, one on each pectoral, oval in shape. On the right is a tattoo of a Buddhist deity, in lotus position, hovering in the sky above two figures reclining in the shade of a cherry tree in full bloom. The figures are a black-robed monk and a shirtless youth. On the left pectoral is a large stylised chrysanthemum flower. The only bare space on his whole body is his stomach; perfectly adorned by a small, tight belly-button.

I am speechless. Aiki was right about this – to really get a sense of the power and importance of Irezumi, you have to see the tattoos *in* the flesh.

“I could tell you about each of these designs,” Aiki says quietly, turning to look at me, “and give you a history of the art of Irezumi. But that would be a bit like those BBC programs, lots of words and very little wisdom. After all, how can you understand the flavour of an apple without taking a bite? Words cannot convey taste or colour. Language cannot communicate what we call in Buddhism ‘*thusness*’ – the very particular experience of a thing. Instead, I will tell you a story, then you can ask me about one tattoo, the one that most demands your attention. In this way you should have something of the taste of Irezumi.”

“O.k.,” I say, almost in a whisper, the sound catching in my throat. I’m a bit over-awed by the intensity of this moment; the heat of the hibachi, the beauty of the young man before me, the early morning light streaming in through the window.

“The story relates to the tattoo on the right side of my chest. The deity above this scene is Kannon, the Bodhisattva, or wisdom being, of compassion; the giver of love and also of abundance. There is a story told here in Japan about a very ascetic monk. After many years of austerities the monk lost faith, he felt that he had made the greatest effort but had no result. He was so full of despair that he contemplated suicide. At the moment before he cast himself into the raging waters of a swollen river, a very handsome youth approached him and offered to serve the monk and ease his pain. The monk agreed, but mainly because he couldn’t bring himself to upset the youth by making him witness a suicide.

“Soon, the youth’s devoted service and kind heart eased the monk’s sadness and the monk began to feel love blossoming in his heart once more. The monk and the youth stayed together three wonderful years, in which the monk finally felt that perhaps life was worth living. Then, the youth suddenly fell ill and died. The monk was paralysed with grief. However, as the grief lifted, the monk started to understand

the impermanence of everything, including the love he'd felt for his youthful companion. According to tradition at that time, the monk opened the youth's coffin after a full cycle of the moon, in order to complete the prayers for the dead. There in the coffin was not the youth but Kannon, the great deity. Kannon revealed that, in tasting the reality of impermanence, the monk had been set on a journey that would inexorably lead to full enlightenment. Kannon also told the monk that he would be reunited with Kannon in just a few years, in the form of the youth, on a lotus petal in the ultimate heaven.... The lotus petal, of course, is the symbol of sexual union...."

"It's a beautiful story," I whisper. "I can see why you got the tattoo."

"Now, you may ask me to explain one of the others."

I don't need to think about it too hard before making a decision. The minute Aiki had undone his robe, my eyes had been drawn to the tattoo on the left of his chest, the stylised chrysanthemum. It is of brilliant yellow, with shadings of gold and a dusty rose, and is aligned on Aiki's chest so that his nipple is the heart of the flower.

"The chrysanthemum," I say, more sheepishly than I would have liked.

"I hoped you would choose that one," Aiki smiles. "It is the emblem of my greatest sponsor, a man whose generosity has kept this monastery open. He sponsored the building of this very pavilion. This is why it is over my heart. It shows that my heart belongs to him, even though I wear the emblems of other sponsors on other places of my body."

"So, he's your..."

"He is the one I love, though we are never to be together. He is an associate of my father's. He is what you in the West call 'closeted'. His social standing made it impossible for him to be in a relationship with me. It was because we could not ever

be together—and because my sister-in-law suspected that he had some feeling for me, and threatened to expose him—that I entered the monastery.”

‘So, you’re here to protect him?’

“Yes, but I had always toyed with the idea of a cloistered life. I am not a modern man. I prefer the old things. The quiet ways. Also, there is the other matter....”

“What other matter?”

“I am dying. I will be dead before the first snow of next winter. A rare form of leukaemia.”

I think I actually gasp. He smiles, relaxes, leans against the window, the tattoo of the monk and the divine youth pressed against the glass. I can taste in my gut the grief that led to that tattoo, and the yearning hope.

“Does he know, your sponsor?”

“Oh no, I could not give him such bad news. He is too dear to me. But, like the monk and Kannon, I hope that our separation will be brief.”

“So, you believe in heaven?”

“How could I not,” he sighs, motioning to the garden beyond, “living in a place such as this?”

I follow his glance through the window. In the sunshine outside, a light wind rises. It encircles a group of Sakura at the edge of the pond in an invisible eddy; causing pink blossoms to shiver like silk jellyfish. In an instant that feels like a very long time, a cluster of blossoms fall, with a barely perceptible fluttering motion, and land silently on the surface of the water. A small, but momentous, impact. The silence gently shockwaves through me and I think I understand, just slightly, the twin notions of thusness and impermanence. Beauty and death. Joy precisely balanced with despair.

Author Bio

Dallas Angguish is a writer based in Australia. He has been published in a number of journals including *Lodestar Quarterly*, *Retort Magazine* and *Polari Journal*. His work has also appeared in a number of anthologies such as *Bend, Don't Shatter* (2004), and *Dumped* (2000 and US edition 2002). A collection of Dallas Angguish's short works, *Anywhere But Here* was published in 2006 and received very positive reviews. More recently, Angguish has completed a play, *The Tree*, and his novel *The Last Poem of 1984* is being released in digital form by Gay eBooks in early 2011.

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