Roy Miki (1942 – ) was born in Winnipeg but has lived most of his life in Vancouver. He is a professor emeritus at Simon Fraser University and has been very active in the Japanese-Canadian Redress and in significant social events such as “Writing Through Race” and “Truth and Reconciliation.” Besides several critical studies and being the founder and editor for many years of West Coast Line, he has published his own poetry since the late 70’s, his book Surrender (2001) winning the 2002 Governor General’s Award for poetry. He is a Member of the Order of Canada and the Order of British Columbia. His current creative practice combines writing and photography.

Poem for discussion:

“A Walk on Granville Island”
From: Mannequin Rising
New Star Books, 2011

1.

for Rita W

If you were to walk off this landmark pier and hold your pose for a sidelong glance What would it look like on the descent? Where are the trap
doors that snap
shots of the harbour
in its comely doldrum?

How to explain to the
kids feeding the pigeons
the etymological drift
of the Arterial Highway?

Look it up in the dream
almanac of memorabilia
in the lost causes that
bewitch the clichéd ambit

There’s the still born fancy
of one Jack Price (yes Price was
his name) who campaigned
on the slogan that ‘real progress’
would entail the removal of all
the waters under the bridges
and voila so much real estate
to boot for jack Price ‘False
Creek is nothing more than a filthy
ditch in the centre of the city’

We could all be skate
boarding on False Creek
and our civic parties
would be free of Dragon
Races and regattas of all
sorts wouldn’t ruin our
slumbering condo moment

That viscous wind blown
video of pliant asphalt
might have been a
seawall of the rapt mind

In any case do you remember
the lovely Mrs Percy Nye?
She Who in 1891 reported ‘False Creek was so quiet on a Sunday we could hear the Indians singing at their services on the reserve as far as our place on English Bay’ from our place on English Bay ‘we used to sit on the shore and listen’

So let’s rendezvous the appellation of muskrats, smelts salmon crabs clams, the glossary of eco-friendly in the chemical bath of this inlet

Or would you rather wash your hands of this stuff?

2.

for Ayumi K

Where would we be without the sea?

Likely, not here
Or like, not here

It was the sea carried George Van Couver into English Bay in June of 1792 exactly 300 years after Columbus’ historic voyage

English Bay lay in waiting for Couver and his sweet ship June who was descended from a
set of numbers, likely the code
for a lucky charm bracelet

Did Couver and Columbus then
meet on the seas in a virtual
space of mutual refinement?
Exactly 300 years is a dead give
away for the tags voyage and historic

The question why Couver was born
and why in Vancouver of all places
is a lacunae in the fold up tale

But listen, mariners charted
our globe for us

(Much gratitude

Remade our world
from flat to round

(More gratitude

Ushered in the centuries
that have given us today’s
‘global village.’

Now we’re getting fusion
with the centuries now we’re
getting baseball teams bowling
leagues real estate companies
the whole shebang all at once

We mean the sea trade has forged
the links that unite the earth’s
nations in a single marketplace.

Those mariners mapped
the seas that joined the nations
that sprouted from earth to market
POETRY CONNECTION

Roy Miki

to market to choose a transgenic pig

Sorry not today May of 2010
exactly 97 years after Snauq
villagers were uncharted
by Couverites on speed

Too much village is infectious
was the headline in the daily

For discussion:

1. On Wikipedia, look up the following things: George Vancouver in relation to Vancouver City; lacuna in manuscripts; transgenic; etymological drift (under semantic change); Snauq (Senakw); irony. How does this background information help you to understand Miki’s poems?

2. In what ways do both of these poems discuss people in love with and perhaps duped by propaganda?

3. Is Miki in favor of globalization? How does he create an ironic tone about it in both of these poems? Back up your view with as many lines as you can.


5. Miki includes two historical figures in "If you were to walk": Jack Price and Mrs. Percy Nye. How do they contrast in their attitudes? How does this contrast relate to the question at the end of the poem?

Writing prompts:

1. Choose a public issue that you are concerned about (it could be the plight of the environment, voter rights, the treatment of a minority, unfairness of public officials or whatever else interests you). Write a page or two of questions about this issue. Then cut up the page so you can experiment with putting the questions in various orders. Use this research to build a poem entirely out of questions.

2. Choose a historical narrative about a person or event in your region or neighbourhood. For instance, who were the people whose names got on your streets, highways and towns? Experiment with changing
certain elements of the story, as Miki has done in “Where would we be” (he changes names and blends George Vancouver's story with a nursery rhyme and other narratives). Retell your chosen story in a poem using the most interesting changes you discover.

3. Choose a piece of real estate or developer propaganda applying to your region or neighbourhood. Insert the following kinds of material between lines from this propaganda: sights, smells, sounds, tastes, touches, and memories from that area or neighbourhood that show what it means to you. Build a poem from this research.

4. Find out who and what was pushed off the land in your neighbourhood or region in order to make way for streets, houses, towns, mines, cities, factories, highways, etc. Build a poem that includes both what's present now and stories or voices of things that were destroyed, excluded or lost as a result of the current streets, towns, factories, etc.

5. Choose one of the following phrases from Miki’s poems: "a lacunae in the fold up tale," "etymological drift/ of the Arterial Highway," "slumbering condo moment," or "video of pliant asphalt." Rapidly jot down all the things you can think of that this phrase brings to mind. Write quickly, in fragments, paying no attention to grammar, collecting a page or two of ideas, images, memories, words, phrases, rhymes or stories which you associate with the phrase. Build a poem from this research.

(Notes prepared by Meredith Quartermain)