

*The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is one of the most famous books of all Japanese literature, written in 1689, by Basho, the greatest of all haiku poets. It takes the form of a haibun, a nature journal that records a journey made by the poet in both prose and haiku. Basho's writing, exquisite and beautiful, is rightly regarded as one of the treasures of world literature.

My father was a Japanese prisoner of war. He was one of Dunlop's Thousand, a now near mythical group in Australian memory. They lived and died on the Death Railway in what was then Siam and is today Thailand. He was a survivor of that, of cholera, of the hellships that took POWs to Japan, of being a slave labourer in a coal mine under the Inland Sea, south of Hiroshima, at war's end. If Basho's *Narrow Road to the Deep North* is one of the high points of Japanese culture, my father and his mates' experience is one of its lowest.

For twelve years I had been trying to write a novel about that experience. I had known for a long time that this was the book I had to write if I was to keep on writing. Other novels came and went as I continued to fail to write this one.

I wrote five different versions of this book in order to find the final novel. I wrote it as a novel composed of linked haiku. I wrote it in the form of a haibun. I wrote it as a family epic, spanning a century. I wrote in the first person plural as an Australian *Odyssey*, of a group of men whose voyage never ends. And then I realised my father, now in his nineties, was growing frail and weak, and I had to somehow finish this book before he died.

For a year I visited and called with endless questions about daily life in the camp. What came first, tenko or breakfast? How does a rotting shin bone revealed by a blossoming tropical ulcer smell? What was it like having cholera?

And slowly a new, final form of the novel began to take shape.

My memories of my father when I was a child are of a sick man, debilitated by his war experience. We grew up with a man of often strange anxieties and deep compassion, whose stories of his POW experiences were often very funny while compounded of love and pity. But I did not want the book to be about him. As much as his experience and perspective would influence it, I did not want some fictionalised version of his life. As much as it was about my father and me, it had to escape us both.

I went to Thailand and walked up and down the Death Railway, found the site of the camp where Dunlop's Thousand lived and died, walked that bitter track through the jungle from that camp to what remains of the Death Railway, overgrown embankments and cuttings.

And picking up rocks and carrying them in the tropical heat to try and get some idea of what that labour was like, I realised that the novel had to be a love story. Why?

Because great love stories, seek to demonstrate the great truth about love: that we discover eternity in a moment that dies immediately after. War stories inevitably deal in rupture and death. War illuminates love; love redeems war. And I had long been taken by a story my father was fond of.

A Latvian man my parents knew, a post war refugee, caught up in the vast movements of lives that the Second World War had involved, had returned to his home village after the war, to find it razed to the ground and his wife, he was told, dead. He searched the wastelands of post war Europe for her for two years, and finally had to accept the truth: that she had perished. He immigrated to Australia, met another woman, married and had children.

In 1957 he visited Sydney. Walking down a crowded street he saw walking towards him his Latvian wife, alive, with a child on either hand. At that moment he had to decide whether he would acknowledge her or walk on by.

This very beautiful story had always moved me. I started my novel yet again, with this image at its heart. Now it was a love story, and its leading character a figure utterly unlike my father—a doctor who is the POW commander in one camp, and who after the war is celebrated as a war hero.

But the doctor is full of doubts and loathing; he understands his achievements may be slight and less real than they seem; he is equally ambivalent about the incomprehension that comes with fame. Above all he is haunted by a love affair he has had with the young wife of his uncle in 1941, a woman he later comes to believe, wrongly, has died in a hotel fire.

Towards the end of last year, the novel now taking its final form, I resolved to visit Japan. My father told me to meet with the Japanese people as they are now. He was glad I was writing a novel about the POW experience and was always interested in how the book was going. He worried people would forget what had happened, and he trusted me that I might write something that encouraged people to remember.

I felt, rather shamefully, that perhaps I wouldn't be able to finish it until he died, as though there was something in all this that held me back. But thankfully he didn't die. And if my father was very helpful with my endless questioning of minute detail, he never asked

me what the story was. He respected my choices, and allowed me the freedom to write as I have to write.

In Japan I met with several guards who had worked on the Death Railway. I met a man who had been a Japanese Army medical orderly who had been at my father's camp. It looked, he said, like a Buddhist hell. He recalled skeletons crawling around in the mud. The Australians were very bad with their hygiene he told me. I paid for his tea and taxi home.

Five minutes before meeting with another guard who had been on the Death Railway, I realised he was the one who had been the Ivan the Terrible of my father's camp, the man the Australians called the Lizard. The meeting was to be in the offices of a taxi company owned by his son, located in outer suburban Tokyo.

The Lizard had been sentenced to death for war crimes after the war. Later he had his death sentence commuted to life imprisonment, and then was released in a general amnesty in 1956. He is the only man I have ever heard my father—a gentle, peaceful man—talk of with violent intent.

Lee Hak Rae, as he is now, was a dignified, gentle and generous old man. Near the end of our meeting, I asked him to slap me. Violent face slapping—known as *binta*—was the immediate form of punishment in the camps, doled out frequently and viciously. It was a curious request, and the old man took some persuasion. Finally we stood up, facing each other. I asked him to slap me as hard as he could.

Waiting for that first slap, I felt a terrible vertigo. It was—as best I can describe it—at once a helpless terror and an indescribable sadness. Of his slaps, I recall only how clean, dry and papery the skin of his aged hand was as it struck me. On the third blow, in one of those coincidences in which reality delights but fiction—for fear of being unrealistic—is not permitted, a 7.3 Richter scale earthquake hit Tokyo.

For half a minute the taxi office we were in tossed violently, like a dinghy in a wild sea. I saw the Lizard frightened. I saw too that wherever evil is, it wasn't in that room with that old man and me.

I went south to where my father was a slave labourer, and the mayor of Sanyo Onoda City met me in front of TV cameras to apologise to my father, my family and me. I met villagers who remembered Australians arriving in that terrible winter of late 1944, skeletons in shorts. I met more guards. I was photographed by local media with one guard at the site of the camp where my father thought he would die in the spring of 1945.

It was a bitterly cold day. We put our arms around one another. A tiny, frail man, Mr Sato then curled into me in the manner children do when seeking forgiveness. Or perhaps he was just cold. Below us where once stood the minehead the POWs would run a gauntlet of sadistic guards to enter, there now stood a love hotel.

That night I ended up drinking in a Japanese hostess bar with Kenji Yasuhige, the Sanyo Onoda City Council's International Relations and Equal Opportunities Officer. As Kenji crooned a karaoke ballad to the largely empty bar, one of the hostesses looked up at me and, smiling, asked why I was visiting Sanyo Onoda City. My father was a slave labourer here during the war, I said. Really, she said, continuing to look at me with her dreamy, anime eyes. What is slave labourer?

There is strangeness in the world beyond any words.

On my return, my father, who wasn't a man for such things, rang within a few hours of my returning home. He wanted to know what had happened to me in Japan. He was 98, frail, but his mind was still good, his recall phenomenal. I told him how the people had been unfailingly kind and generous, and how, amazingly, I had met with some guards who had been at his camps, including the Lizard.

And what did they say? he asked. I thought of the earthquake. I thought of Mr Sato curling inwards. I said that they talked in detail about all of their lives except the camps where details seemed to elude them, but that I felt nevertheless that they carried shame, and how each one had expressed their sorrow and apologies for what had happened.

This news seemed to overwhelm my father. He stopped talking. He said he had to go, and hung up.

Later that day, my father lost all memory of his time in the POW camps. And yet his pre-war memory remained strong. He knew he had been in the camps, as you know you have been in the womb, but have no memory of it. It was as if he were finally free.

For the next four months I lived mostly by myself on Bruny Island, and I rewrote the novel from beginning to end. I wrote about death, friendship and family, the questions of what are good and evil, of who are good and evil, about the many forms and tragedies of love. I poured into it everything I had learnt from writing my five previous novels. It was as if I had written all those books in order to know how to write this one book.

I emailed the final draft of my novel to my publisher on the Monday before Anzac Day. My father was ill, and I was with him early

that morning. How's the book going? he asked. I told him it was finally done.

My father died that night.

In truth, the novel wasn't quite done. There was some intensive rewriting, as is my way, when publication looms perilously close. I see now what I couldn't see then, that hanging over it all, shaping everything, were his looming death and the question of love.

Perhaps, I think now, particularly the question of love, of love and its enigmas, though you only discover such things—and then only imperfectly—long after you have written the last word.

One thing though didn't change: the dedication '*To prisoner san byaku san jū go*'.

It was my father's Japanese prison number, 335.

He had taught it to me as I was growing up as his child—a child of the narrow road to the deep north.