

IHJ Artists' Forum

Musical Words—Two American Poets at IHJ

Christopher Blasdel

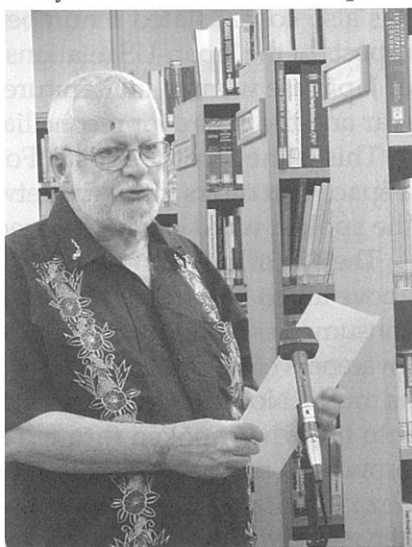
On May 17th, 2010, two outstanding American poets, Sam Hamill and Leza Lowitz, read their poetry at the International House of Japan Library, accompanied by the *shakuhachi* flute.

Sam Hamill was raised and lived mainly in the western United States, but his worldview was influenced by the great Chinese and Japanese masters. Hamill's poetry, like the works of the great twentieth-century poet Kenneth Rexroth (who had a significant influence on Hamill), draws heavily from Asian traditions and reflects an ascetic sense of humility and thankfulness. Hamill writes in a distinctive style of English that is both musically evocative and highly disciplined.

Hamill was a recipient of the Japan-US Creative Artists' Fellowship in 1988, and in the ensuing twenty-two years since his fellowship has become an extremely important voice in American poetry. His works have been translated into more than a dozen languages.

Hamill's creativity with words is matched with a heartfelt pacifism, social awareness and compassion to help the less fortunate. He has taught extensively in prisons and assisted battered women and children.

Hamill is not afraid of expressing his sincere, long-held beliefs as a pacifist in his works. He clearly states: "Poetry has always been political/social, from ancient



Greeks and Jews and Arabs to the *Shih Ching*, full of commentary about war and social injustice. And there has always been a political side to my poetry."

In 2003 Hamill refused an invitation to participate in a poetry seminar at the Bush White House due to his opposition to the Iraq war. He subsequently founded the group "Poets Against the War." The response to his efforts was overwhelming, and poets from around the world submitted antiwar poetry for inclusion in an anthology. The anthology, which is permanently housed at Ohio State University, presently contains more than 20,000 poems—the largest poetry anthology ever published.

He also cofounded the Copper Canyon Press, one of the most consistently vibrant of all poetry presses in the United States, and was chief editor from 1972 until 2004.

Leza Lowitz is an American expatriate writer residing in Japan for over ten years. Like Hamill, Lowitz's approach to poetry is deeply committed and sincere but, of course, strikes a different tone. Her writing is lyrical, often startlingly confessional, and reflects a lifelong study of Zen and yoga and an exploration of what it means to be human and live with an open heart.

Her long years in Japan have provided her with an objective view of the Japanese culture, herself, and herself in the culture. She has also co-translated a number of works that focus on personal aspects of the Japan-US relationship, for example, the changing role of Japanese women in literature, art and society and the effects of war and the desire for reconciliation in contemporary Japan.

This is the second Artists' Forum to be held in the IHJ Library, a space that offers intimacy between the poet and audience where the spoken word can be enjoyed.

The title of the Forum, *Musical Words*, implies that poetry is meant, above all, to be experienced as a kind of music rather than simply consumed as literature. Indeed, Sam Hamill's poetry contains a deep awareness of the innate sound of the words and how they fit together as music. Not only do the poems look nice on the page; they spring into life when spoken through his distinctive, gravelly voice that provides a natural cadence and multitextural timbre to the words. Leza Lowitz reads her poetry with a conviction disciplined from her many years of yoga practice. Her firm yet beautifully feminine

voice was in fine contrast to Hamill's distinctively masculine utterances.

These voices were accompanied on the *shakuhachi*. I have performed to the words of both these poets over the last two decades, and it was a great joy to be able to perform with them again at the I-House. I felt the role of the shakuhachi was to question, coax and cajole music from their words.

We are reprinting here, with permission, some of the poems the two poets read for the Artists' Forum.

(Christopher Blasdel, IHJ Artistic Director)

Sam Hamill:

The Orchid Flower

Just as I wonder
whether it's going to die,
the orchid blossoms

and I can't explain why it
moves my heart, why such pleasure

comes from one small bud
on a long spindly stem, one
blood red gold flower

opening at mid-summer,
tiny, perfect in its hour.

Even to a white-
haired craggy poet, it's
purely erotic,

pistil and stamen, pollen,
dew of the world, a spoonful

of earth, and water.

Erotic because there's death
at the heart of birth,

drama in those old sunrise
prisms in wet cedar boughs,

deepest mystery
in washing evening dishes
or teasing my wife,

who grows, yes, more beautiful
because one of us will die.

True Peace

Half broken on that smoky night,
hunched over *sake* in a serviceman's dive
somewhere in Naha, Okinawa,
nearly fifty years ago,

I read of the Saigon Buddhist monks
who stopped the traffic on a downtown thoroughfare
so their master, Thich Quang Đức, could take up
the lotus posture in the middle of the street.
And they baptized him there with gas
and kerosene, and he struck a match
and burst into flame.

That was June, nineteen-sixty-three,
and I was twenty, a U.S. Marine.

The master did not move, did not squirm,
he did not scream
in pain as his body was consumed.

Neither child nor yet a man,
I wondered to my Okinawan friend,

what can it possibly mean
to make such a sacrifice, to give one's life
with such horror, but with dignity and conviction.
How can any man endure such pain
and never cry and never blink.

And my friend said simply, "Thich Quang Đức
had achieved true peace."

And I knew that night true peace
for me would never come.
Not for me, Nirvana. This suffering world
is mine, mine to suffer in its grief.

Half a century later, I think
of Bô Tát Thich Quang Đức,
revered as a bodhisattva now—his lifetime
building temples, teaching peace,
and of his death and the statement that it made.

Like Shelley's, his heart refused to burn,
even when they burned his ashes once again
in the crematorium—his generous heart
turned magically to stone.

What is true peace, I cannot know.
A hundred wars have come and gone
as I've grown old. I bear their burdens in my bones.
Mine's the heart that burns
today, mine the thirst, the hunger in the soul.

Old master, old teacher,
what is it that I've learned?

(Note: Sam Hamill enrolled in the US Marines as a very young man and was sent to Okinawa in 1961. While there, he had an epiphany about the US involvement in the Vietnam War. His latent pacifism and previous interest in Zen Buddhism led him to the path of conscientious objection to war.)

Leza Lowitz:

On Modesty

He called himself the farmer of Katsushika,
and thirty other names, moving ninety-three times,
following the movement of seas, waterfalls, islands, the moon.
His father was a mirror polisher for the Shogun.
He captured Mt. Fuji from every perspective,
his eye like a fox, like a camera.
He wanted to live to ninety, but after making thirty thousand prints,
Hokusai died at eighty-nine, saying:
"If heaven gives me even five more years, I shall
surely become a great artist."

Be Like Water

Be like the river—
flowing.
Be like the lake—
calm.
Be like the ocean—
roar.
Be like the dam—
restrained.
Be like the waterfall—
tumbling.
Be like the rain—
pour.
Be like ice—
solid.
Be like water—
assuming
right form.

(Note: These poems and others by Leza Lowitz will be published in 2011 by Stone Bridge Press under the title *Yoga Heart: Lines on the Six Perfections.*)