

The Hanging Man at Kunitachi

TOKYO 2009

I finally made it to Kunitachi, in Tokyo, to see this famous action I had heard the Yanaka dancers I knew rave about. Takusan, an older man, had been hanging himself by the neck every night for ten years, giving public showings a couple of times a week. I met with a couple of the dancers and we made our way there, each had seen the work numerous times. It was a bit of a walk from the station, down a modest lane with an unassuming lantern hanging at the entrance to an older style dark, wooden house. There was a box with money in it, ¥1000 admission. We sat in Takusan's small yard on homemade wooden benches, after picking up a cut piece of styrofoam to provide comfort, and a tiny bit of warmth. Very cold that night. He was inside his wooden house, I could see shadows of him through the glass, and hear beautiful Japanese music playing. He came out dressed in red trousers, a red polo neck shirt with a white blouse over the top, and began his gentle silent movements through the garden area. This consisted of a few straggly bushes and trees, one tall thin bamboo, and a shrub that had gone brown and died. The dark brown earth ground had been well compacted and a few paving stones hinted at a path. The fences were lined with blue tarps, old ones, very frayed with some parts spray-painted with silver.

Takusan

His presence was so sincere and delicate, minimal but exploratory. I had met him once before, where he had a metal thing, like a cigarette holder, with a block of herbs smoking out one end, and he had taken my hands and pressed them and smoked them, my friends explained that it was 'cauterisation'. He had accurately pinpointed sources of trouble and pain on my hands, and they felt warmed afterwards.

I felt the wind in the air and watched him react.

Action, reaction, honouring time, moving slowly and

carefully, knowing every centimeter of the ground he was covering. He moved through the space for nearly half an hour, in a gentle and magnetic way. He seemed to pay special heed to the dried shrub, taking its energy and giving it back. Near this shrub was a square hole, not very deep, dug into the earth. At its edge stood an iron anvil, and over this was a beam, with hooks. There were lights positioned on the house to illuminate the space and we could hear the outside world operating, sirens and occasional footsteps penetrating the silence. Otherwise it was completely quiet bar the wind in the trees.

Takusan explored the space, and then he climbed back into the house, tentatively I noticed...almost as though he was uncertain about it. Perhaps, a justifiable reluctance. He came back with a woven rope, red, with a hook on one end. It was at this point that I remembered that this was what he was renowned for.

Let me say I was worried about seeing this seminal part, but also curious, as the Yanaka group had raved so much about him, and after meeting him, I was interested but still a bit scared. He stepped on to the anvil, hung the rope, and then he hung himself, under his jaw, by the neck. He hung for something like 5 minutes, maybe 10. Such tremendous strength and such power his profound agility communicating something from deep within, not limp and dead, but alive and beautiful, such unbelievable beauty. I was moved beyond. He mainly faced away from us, but swung around at one point. I felt like he was dancing throughout, using his body's muscle to retain his own life.

I felt shame at my own physical discomfort as it was so very cold, sitting so still, hugging my shawl closer around myself, and snuggling into my scarves. I watched his pain, but also his strength. Such an older man, so thin, with these worn red trousers, sewn tightly at the back in order to keep them from falling down, hanging by his neck, in a residential neighbourhood, every day for ten years. Rain, snow, sleet... He had been doing it for more than 40 years actually, I was told, but

only ten years so devotedly.

This is his concept to "bring him to paradise".

His weakness after hanging was apparent, and he fortified himself with slow movement, energy gradually returning. To sit in such a humble yard and to see something so profound, it felt very great and momentous.

After his actions, we all went inside and sat around a heated table, a *kotatsu*, to warm our legs, and drank shochu with tea and ate lovely things made by his partner, Mika Kurosawa, the greatest dancer in Japan. My eyes were full of appreciation for the surrounds, but I didn't want to take photos. We discussed his work, while drinking eating, and smoking. After more than an hour Takusan said, let us make a gift for Sarah!

Then they sang for me! Old Japanese songs ringing out like a clear bell of beauty.

"Correspondence", the wise man said, in English. He knew. He said *strength* was what life was about. "The most important thing is to be strong".

I said I thought he was dancing to the tune of the wind, and he said he was. I asked if the neighbors knew what went on behind the fence, that there was such a great thing going on, each night, such a powerful thing, such a thing that was so private, yet public...they said shush, don't tell them!

We came home on the train full of bliss and gratitude. I loved it there. The contrasts and the fortitude, I chanced to happen on, in the outskirts of Tokyo. It gives me hope.

Sarah Goffman

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EXHIBITION

Fatty and Slender: The Hanging Man's House

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