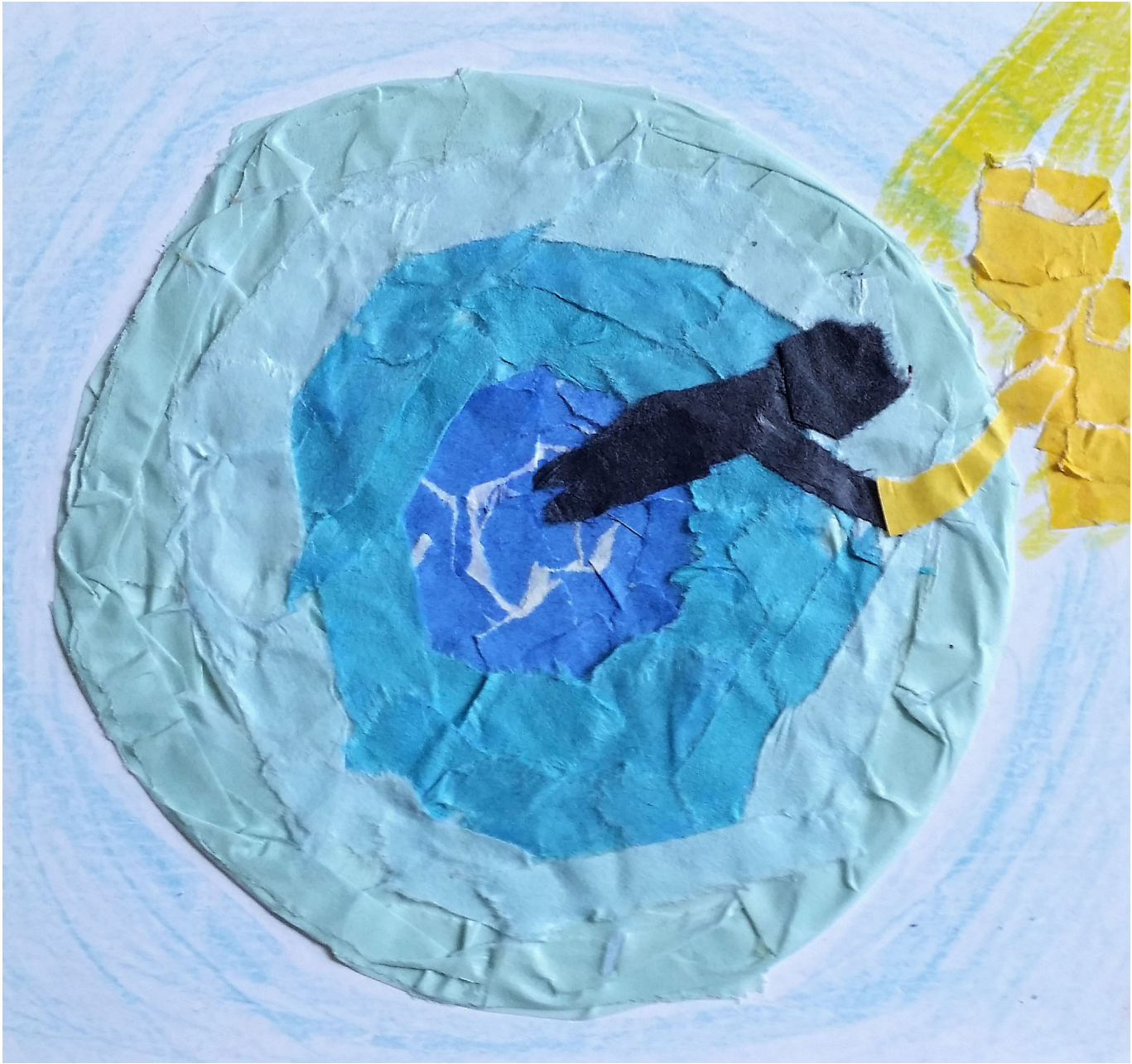




Collage by Japanese student, Honoka Hashimoto, gifted to the author. Photo courtesy of the author.



CROSS-CULTURAL COLLAGE: VISUALISING POETRY

Melinda Smith

This beautifully thoughtful response made me see
my own poem in a new way.

My object, a small collage created by Japanese student Honoka Hashimoto, testifies to the importance of small, personal moments of connection in the relationship between Australia and Japan. It is also an example of how a shared aesthetic experience—the bond created when we encounter a piece of art together—can be a wonderful and lasting way of building relationships across a cultural divide. It is part of a larger story of cross-cultural work in the field of poetry and translation currently being undertaken by Dr Rina Kikuchi of Shiga University, affiliated with The Australian National University and the University of Canberra.

To understand this object's significance to me personally, we must back-track to the 1990s. At that time, I was a recent graduate of The ANU's Bachelor of Japanese Studies and had my sights set on an academic career, studying Japanese history. I was understandably ecstatic to be awarded a Cambridge Commonwealth Trust scholarship to study a PhD in Oriental Studies starting in 1996. However, due to a complicated set of circumstances, some personal and some external, I had to make the difficult decision to withdraw at the end of my first year. As a result, you might say Japan and I 'broke up'—not because of Japan, but because of my own feelings about seemingly squandering such a glittering opportunity. From that point, the path of my life changed dramatically, leading



Melinda shares her poetry with students at Hitoyoshi High School, Kumamoto prefecture.
Photo courtesy of the author.



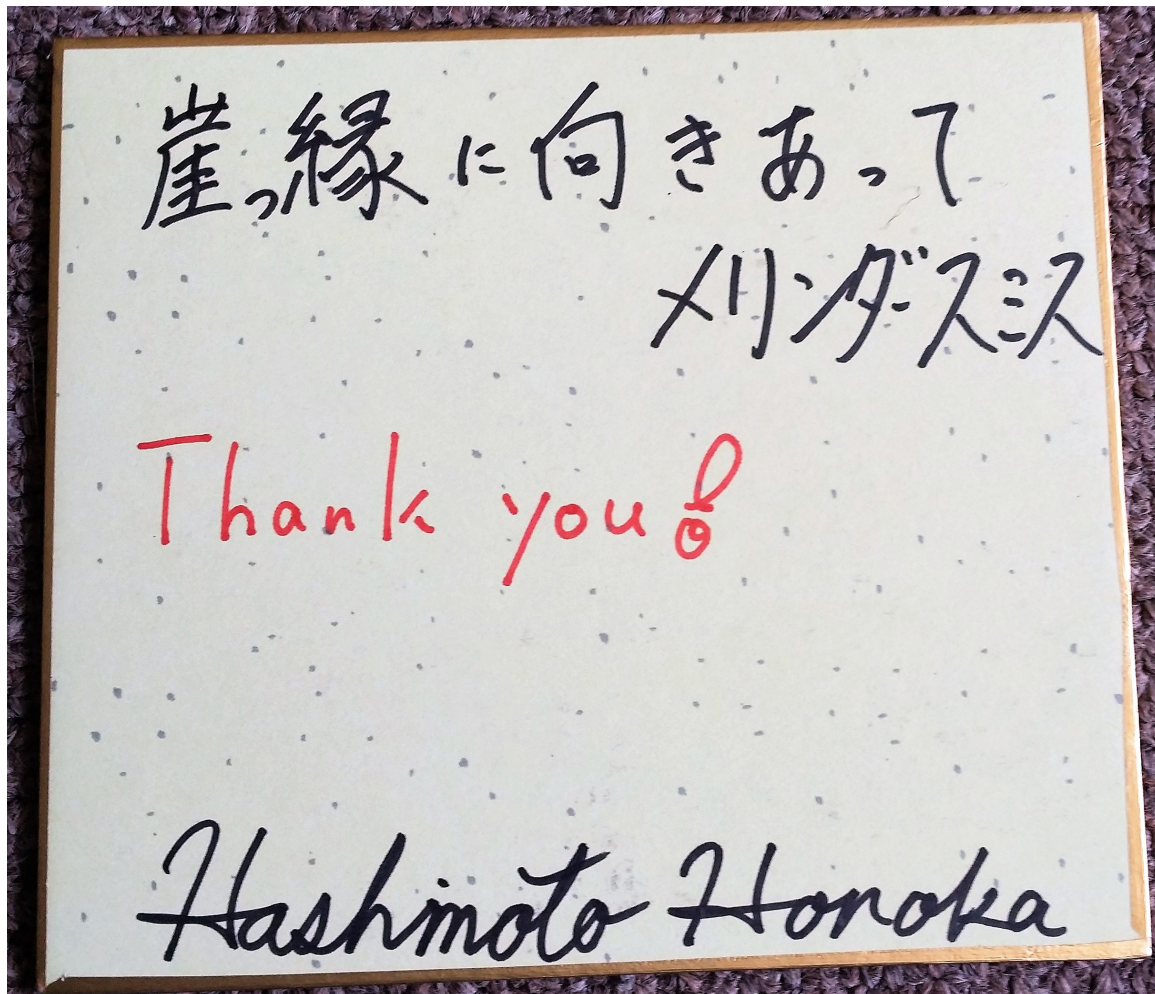
to work in law, the public service and the IT industry—with an increasing spare-time interest in poetry—and further and further away from Japan.

Fast-forward to July 2018. I was now an award-winning poet with six books to my name. Amazingly, it is poetry that landed me back in Japan, for the first time since 1995, and I am ‘on tour’ with a group of English-speaking poets. As part of the tour we visited Hitoyoshi High School in rural Kumamoto prefecture and shared some of our poems with the students, in both the original versions and in Japanese translations. In an activity organised by their teacher,

the students responded to our poems with small artworks of their own. My favourite of these is a collage by final year student Hashimoto Honoka responding to my poem ‘Contemplating the Gap’ from my collection *Goodbye, Cruel* (Pitt St Poetry, 2017).

The poem to which Honoka’s collage responds is a piece about suicide. In the poem the speaker—a real person called Don Ritchie, whose day-job was in sales—describes how, living near the Gap on Sydney Harbour’s South Head, he would sometimes see people contemplating jumping from the cliff top, and would start conversations with them. He

Collage by Japanese student, Honoka Hashimoto, gifted to the author. Photo courtesy of the author.



compares each person's journey to the cliff top to the process of sliding down a funnel—all the starting points are different, but they have all converged on this one point of crisis.

The image of the funnel appeared in many of the student artworks, but Honoka's was the only one to depict it from above—from the point of view of the suicidal person. This allowed her to visually 'rhyme' the funnel with the suggestion of a whirlpool or vortex, which I particularly loved. Don Ritchie is surrounded by golden light, and his hand reaching out brings that light to the dark figure struggling in the vortex. This

beautifully thoughtful response made me see my own poem in a new way.

All of the poets involved agreed that that afternoon spent with the students of Hitoyoshi High school was one of the most meaningful experiences we had during our Japan tour. On a personal level, the experience was doubly meaningful as it represented a 'return' to Japan after more than twenty-five years of pursuing other interests after my Bachelor of Japanese Studies at The ANU.



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The Japan tour was set in motion in September 2017, when the University of Canberra's 'Poetry on the Move' Festival, run by its International Poetry Studies Institute, hosted five Japanese poets: Hiromi Itō, Harumi Kawaguchi, Takako Arai, Kayoko Yamasaki, and Keijirō Suga. This was largely thanks to the hard work of Dr Rina Kikuchi. For this festival Dr Kikuchi and Dr Jen Crawford co-edited a bilingual anthology of ten Japanese women poets translated by Australian poets, with native-speaker assistance, called *Poet To Poet* (Recent Work Press, 2017). My contribution was to translate, with Dr Kikuchi, five poems by Harumi Kawaguchi—my first Japanese translation endeavour since my 1994 honours thesis.

The anthology was launched at a bilingual reading during the festival, and *Poet to Poet* completely sold out. The experience was so positive that, encouraged by our new Japanese colleagues, several of the poets that were involved decided to visit Japan in 2018. I was nervous about returning after my painful 'break-up' all those years ago, but my wish

to deepen my contact with contemporary Japanese poetry and poets was stronger than my trepidation. Before the tour, Dr Kikuchi and Harumi Kawaguchi produced another bilingual anthology, *Pleasant Troubles* (Recent Work Press, 2018), so our poems could be performed in both languages in Japan. In addition to reading from this anthology that afternoon at Hitoyoshi High School, we performed twice more in Kumamoto, twice in Tokyo, and once in Nara. While in Tokyo we also workshopped further mutual translations with Japanese poet-partners.

The cross-cultural poetry conversation is continuing: our Tokyo workshops have produced several new poetry translations published through renowned poetry outlets in Japan, Australia and internationally. I also plan to publish several new Harumi Kawaguchi translations in my next collection. The mutual translation enterprise has been a resounding success. This experience has helped me find my way back to a closer relationship with Japan through poetry.

Contemplating the Gap

i.m. Don Ritchie

Every story stumbles
in its own way. All so far
from here and from each other.
The funnel has a wide mouth.
But one by one they slide down it to teeter
on the lip of this one exit,
staring at the heave of the sea, breath
beaten from them by the cliff wind.
You can't just sit there and watch
through your window. *Can I
help you in some way?*
A hundred and sixty times and I've never
lost one. Sometimes they come
for a cuppa afterwards. They
tell me things. They tell me
you feel the pull in your guts
and your giddy head, there is an urge
to laugh and an urge
to launch into the maw,
to make gravity finish all at once
the dirty dragging work it started the day
you were born. They tell me
you only feel vertigo
when you don't want to fall.
Can I help you in some way?
Most of them come back with No.
I'm a salesman though. No
is a beginning.



Melinda Smith is an Australian poet and the author of seven books, most recently *Goodbye, Cruel*. She won the 2014 Australian Prime Minister's Literary Award for *Drag down to unlock or place an emergency call*. Her work has been widely anthologised and translated into multiple languages including Japanese, and she has read her poetry at events and writers festivals across Australia and internationally. She holds a Bachelor of Japanese Studies (Hons) from The Australian National University and has recently begun to translate contemporary Japanese poetry into English. She is based in the ACT and is a former poetry editor of *The Canberra Times*. Her Japan tour was supported by the Neilma Sidney Literary Travel Fund, The Myer Foundation, and Writers Victoria.