**Q & A with Johanna Aitchison, author of *Miss Dust***

**It’s been eight years since your last collection, the acclaimed *A Long Girl Ago*, was published. Why has it taken such a long time, and how do you feel your poetry has changed over that time?**

I take a long time to compost ideas, and I see a long lead-in as an advantage in poetry collections. Also, as Grace Paley said, “Art is too long and life is too short”, so I’ve packed quite a bit into the last eight years, including making a small human, retraining as a teacher, buying a house, getting into tertiary teaching, and trying to survive.

**Miss Dust is a compelling and multi-faceted character in the Miss Dust sequence that begins the eponymous collection. Is she a heroine or an anti-hero? Can you talk about where she came from, and whether you intended to write so many poems about her?**

I would say that she’s an anti-hero, because she is contrary, rebellious and dark. She tells the truth and is playful and naughty. I explored the idea of personas or alter egos in ‘a long girl ago’ in the poem ‘miss red in japan’, and I continued along that line with this collection. Miss Dust is a coloniser in that she has co-opted a number of poems that belonged to previous alter egos, Banana and Ugly. She proved to be a force to be reckoned with, so I just went with it. I liked the idea of building a character, and also the constraint of having ‘Miss Dust’ in the title of every single Miss Dust poem.

**Both *Miss Dust* and *A Long Girl Ago* reference the time you spent in Japan, teaching English. What effect has that time had on you and your writing?**

My decision to go to Japan was the best decision of my life so far. It changed my finances – I went over there with a 20k student loan, paid it off in a year and saved forty thousnad dollars. That money allowed me to spend six months writing ‘a long girl ago’ on my return to New Zealand, and it also financed my retraining as a teacher…plus there was a little bit left over. Also my life in New Zealand has been an enormous struggle – it felt impossible at times – and Japan changed the way I looked at myself. People respect teachers in Japan, so I was was given an enormous confidence boost by that. I also fulfilled travel dreams – I hitch hiked around Japan, visited India, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. I also attained a black belt in Wado Ryu Karate and learned how to snowboard. So it was an experience of great richness and depth and I will always be grateful for it.

**You say that in your biographical note that you quit your job as a lawyer on a whim to become a writer. Had you been writing poetry before that, and why did you start?**

I didn’t remember writing poetry before that, but my law school friends later told me that I would sometimes say that I was going off to write a poem, so I must have had something bubbling underneath there. I started writing in November 1996. I was sitting on the floor of my half-house in St Claire, Dunedin, reading the Sunday paper, when I saw an article by a guy who’d written a novel –he said he’d learned how to write in Bill Manhire’s creative writing course. I remember thinking, “That’s what I want to do”. So I rang Bill and said “How do I become a writer?” and he said, “Read and write”, so I bought a desk and started racing down to the Dunedin library in my lunch time and pulling out all the poetry books I could find. I started writing a collection and applied for the Masters in Creative writing within a few weeks. I also quit my job as a solicitor, partly because I wanted to write, but also because it was a poor fit for me.

**You’re also a marathon runner. In our society, art and sport is often seen as being in opposition. Have you any thoughts about that? Does one influence the other in any way?**

I have always been physically active. I hate team sports, but I do like individual sports. The reason I decided to train for a marathon was that I was going through a relationship break up and I forecasted that it would be the most stressful experience of my life. Therefore, I decided to train for a marathon, with the idea that the race would be so horrible that it would make the break up seem not so horrible. I don’t know if running affects my writing, because I never write about running. I have written about snowboarding and karate in my previous collection though.

**At the end of August you’re travelling to Iowa in the United States to be a participant in their annual international writing workshop. Can you tell me more about that and how you came to be invited?**

The workshop has over thirty participants from countries ranging from Togo to South Korea. We live in a hotel and present papers, participate in panels and are also free to pursue our own writing projects. They take us travelling to New Orleans, New York, Washington DC, and also in the local area. My friend (and ex-teacher), Dora Malech, recommended me as a participant, and, after that, I was approached by the organisers. Dora was my teacher at the IIML and she was a huge influence on my work.