

Haiku Enlightenment

Haiku Enlightenment

By

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P U B L I S H I N G

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The bilingual haiku accompanying the photo-haiga are by the author - Gabriel Rosenstock.

Nár dhéana an leabhar seo dochar d'éinne
—May this book harm no one

‘Forgetting oneself is being enlightened by all things.’

—Dogen

‘Every day is a good day.’

—Ummon

Haiku: One-breath poetry, traditionally seventeen syllables (5-7-5), now increasingly practised outside Japan as a free-style form, usually in three lines. It owes its impact and inspiration to a meditative flash in which he/she who experiences the haiku moment merges suddenly with perceived phenomena.

Senryu: One-breath poetry, less nature-centred and lighter than haiku, often missing the above “flash” of insight, and frequently touching on human foibles.

(Author’s definitions)

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HAIKU ENLIGHTENMENT

The dynamic pause ... In haiku, we pause for a few concentrated seconds. Not to escape from the helter-skelter – or tedium – of existence but to allow ourselves to seep into the life of things. In a dynamic way. Haiku is a gentle way of coming to a stop. A full stop!

The haiku moment refreshes us, focuses and strengthens us, encouraging us to continue on a pathless path which reveals itself uniquely to us all:

Who goes there?

midstream halt –
the horseman looks up
at the falling stars
H F Noyes

Time has stopped for that horseman. Does he even know who he is anymore? An Indian sage, **Papaji**, says: ‘Enlightenment does not happen in time. It happens when time stops.’

We will see many instances of haiku as a time-stopping device in the course of this book. Keep a sharp look out! Get ready to stop. What we view may well be minute, or minuscule, but will contain a cosmos.

Opening the casements of perception ... These intimate haiku-pauses ground us in the mystery of being as we open ourselves, time and time again, to new vistas and to keener insights into the living, changing universe we inhabit. They allow us to be attuned to the rhythm, colour, sound, scent, movement and stillness of life, from season to season, whoever, whatever or wherever we are.

Haiku may be used as a technique which facilitates an instant flooding of the mind. No known side-effects. More about that – much more – as we go on.

Though we may not take to the roads as did many of the Old Masters, haiku reminds us that we are all wanderers, in time and space. But are our eyes – and ears – truly open? Are our hearts open? Haiku is there to enrich our experience of being alive, to unfold the tapestry of living – in a flash – to bring us down to earth, where we belong:

in my hut
mice and fireflies
getting along

Issa

(Version GR)

Touch and savour ... A haiku bids us to savour phenomena:

summer's end nears –
now the slow bee allows
stroking of fur

George Marsh

(*Salting the Air*, Waning Moon Press, 1997)

As it should be ... Autumn – slowing-down time for the bees! Sluggish bees can emerge in summer, too, as intoxicated as a bunch of Taoist poets. This, from **Bashō**:

this bee
 how loath to emerge from deep
 within the peony

(Version: GR)

In both of these haiku we are with the bee, fully with the bee, one with the ‘bee-havior’ of a bee at one particular time and also, with the nature of all bees. Where the bee sucks there suck I. And then the ‘I’ dissolves in sweetness.

Allow yourself to be sucked into the vortex of a haiku moment. It’s the only way. It is *we* who emerge from deep within the flower. Haiku is not some form of unfeeling, scientific observation. It is a vividly experienced exploration of a shared universe, whatever our mood!

What about the bee that totters on and makes it to see the winter? Does it not excite our compassion?

a winter bee
 staggering on
 for a place to die

Murakami Kijo

(Version: GR)

On your lips ... Many haikuists and editors of haiku journals like to read haiku aloud, remembering **Bashō**’s advice: ‘Repeat your verses a thousand times on your lips ...’ In other words, don’t be flat, be sparingly sonorous.

You may utter this one as slowly as you like:

5. 4. 3.
 2.1.0.
 nude tree

Takazawa Akiko

(Version: GR)

There's quite a modern feel to those bare numbers; it's a haiku that may have been influenced by concrete poetry. We will encounter many styles and many moods in the course of *Haiku Enlightenment*, the modern and the classic.

Not all of the haiku chosen here are going to work for you: some will only truly come alive when re-read later, when your transmitters and receivers are more finely tuned.

A haiku moves us because we move in its movement and are moved by its stillness:

a crust of bread
jumps with the sparrows
round the courtyard
(**Dina Franin**, *Zaklonjen mjesec/The Sheltered Moon*, Croatian Haiku Association, Samobore, 1999)

We can jump with haiku, crawl with haiku, soar with haiku, fall with haiku, and be still with haiku.

Soul-awakening ... The French say that we cannot know heaven if we haven't known earth.

In the autumn haiku, above, the shift of attention is to the bee. It is as if the bee slows down, for our sake, so that we can appreciate it – see it – in a new mood, a new light. Its summer of antics is all over. We are invited to experience and be part of another dynamic, one as real as that which went before and that which is yet to come. All of nature, and our own nature, comes alive.

The microscopic focus of the haiku reveals the inner order and beauty of existence, over and over again. All things come to life – including a crust of bread!

The microbiologist cannot fail to see a pattern, an underlying beauty – and endless variety – in the magnified specks he examines on the slide. So, too, with the patient, persistent haikuist – his perception of the life within and the life without becomes refined with practice, and attuned, whether the view is close-up or encompasses a panoramic vista.

We cannot tire of good haiku. It is a distillation of all that is real and pulsating in life. It is, as you will undoubtedly see, an elixir of enlightenment, always available, a grounding experience and a soul awakening.

awakened
 as ice bursts
 the water jar
 Bashō
 (Version: GR)

This can be read, simply, as a sound that wakes us from sleep but is it not also waking from everyday drowsy consciousness, the somnambulist state many of us are in? Haiku is a quickening of the inner life, in sympathetic correspondence to ordinary phenomena.

The naturalness of it all ... Our last pause will be death. For the haikuist, death is another perfectly natural phenomenon, not something divorced from life or signifying its end:

necklace of bone ...
 ants have finished
 with the snake
 Margaret Manson

‘Necklace’ is a lovely choice of word. But it is not an invention. It was what was seen and experienced at the time.

Many haikuists have written until their very last breath. Death-bed haiku of *haijin* (masters) – such as **Shiki** – are justly famous.

We can be in awe of anything, even our own demise. Everything is of cosmic magnitude, here and now. **F Scott Fitzgerald** ruminates in *The Great Gatsby*: ‘Life is much more successfully looked at from a single window ...’ The haikuist would not argue with that, even the haikuist who takes to the roads.

A forensic scientist examining the bodies of certain newly departed *haijin* might wonder at an odd gesture of the hand, the hand as a claw, almost: their last act was to count syllables.

There are all sorts of death. The death of a language, the death of a culture:

snowflakes fill
the eye of the eagle –
fallen totem pole

Winona Baker

(*Moss-Hung Trees*, Reflections Press, 1992)

Death has many faces. And life? Life exists in such mind-boggling diversity that it well behoves us to take it all in, in small doses – *beagán ar bheagán mar a itheann an cat an scadán*, as the Irish proverb has it, ‘little by little, as the cat eats the herring’:

the hills
release the summer clouds
one by one by one

John Wills

(*Reed Shadows*, Black Moss Press and BLP, Canada, 1987)

Ten thousand gifts ... ‘Release’ is a well-chosen verb. We receive all these words, these insights and illuminations as gifts, mediated by individuals, from the common pool of humanity’s experience. In an average day, about how many free gifts can we expect on the haiku path? A thousand? That may be a conservative estimate. After all, **Dogen** assures us, ‘When the self withdraws, the ten thousand things advance!’

On the haiku path, the constant intrusion of the self becomes less and less persistent – moments arise that flood us with their ‘itness’ before our cognitive, judgemental self is given a chance to, as it were, interfere. Mentation ceases, momentarily, and while you think it is a good thing to exercise your mind, it’s also a good thing to give it a rest.

The haiku path ... The use of ‘path’, above, must be qualified. **Wei Wu Wei**, a modern sage, says there is no highway or path to enlightenment: ‘There is no path to Satori. It cannot be attained ... all the Masters tell us that we cannot seize Reality: it is Reality that seizes us.’ True. (Whatever his father. High Sheriff of Armagh, might have made of it all!)

The chances of Reality seizing us, and sweeping away our pre-judgemental mind in the process, are increased by the dutiful practice of haiku:

hearing
 cockroach feet;
 the midnight snowfall

Michael McClintock
 (*Light Run*, Shiloh Press, Los Angeles, 1971)

Effortless attunement ... By working at haiku and by living haiku – through reading and composition and through acquiring the haiku instinct, or knack – effortless attunement is the natural and inevitable result. This ability then becomes the unfailing groundwork for sudden enlightenment. It can repeat itself, over days, over centuries. **David Burleigh** published this haiku in 1998:

trapped inside a pot
 at the bottom of the sea
 the octopus dreams

Bashō wrote the following in May, 1688:

octopus traps –
 dreams vanish under
 a summer moon
 (Version: GR)

This may be mere coincidence, or it may be evidence of the cosmic mind at work, or it could be an example of *honkadōri*, allusive variation.

Mr Burleigh kindly responded to an enquiry by stating that it did, in fact, allude to **Bashō**'s verse in the *Travel-Worn Satchel* but that his own haiku was inspired by the confined space of urban living.

Sudden breath of freedom ... Confined no more! Each successful haiku is a breath of freedom. The seventeen-syllable, traditional form was adjudged to be a breath span. And, just as **Keats** said that poetry should come as naturally as foliage to a tree, or not at all, so we say that haiku is an exhalation, a breath of freedom, of exultation, a sigh.

You may polish your haiku, once it has come to you, or come *through* you. Honing the shape, changing the line order, improving the choice of words, or the rhythm or punctuation – these are the wrapping on the gift. But there need be nothing laborious about the strange appearance of the first draft. 'Haiku should be written as swiftly as a woodcutter fells a tree or a swordsman leaps at a dangerous enemy.' So said **Bashō**, born into an impoverished samurai clan. This suddenness, indeed, is what allows for the possibility of enlightenment. No time to think!

T
H
I
N
K

They say that characters were engraved on the bathing tub of King Tching Thang to this effect: 'Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again.' I can understand that.

—Thoreau, *Walden*

A
B
O
U
T

I
T

It is a plunge ... On the way of haiku, we cannot possibly know what next will be revealed. We are not soothsayers. Nor do we dabble in magic. What will be the next haiku moment? Anticipation is foolish. Each moment is as unique as your fingerprints, your iris, each second as fleeting as your breath. And a haiku moment can happen at any time. But it will not happen without you. You must be there for it to happen. You must be there, before you disappear. It takes two to haiku, you and the witnessed phenomenon in a unifying embrace.

It can occur in such an intense, pure form that it appears to have happened without you. That brief, piercing insight, that moment of haiku enlightenment, strips you of the thousand and one items that are the jigsaw of your ego, the patchwork of your identity. Then we're simply jumbled back again into the duality of the world, its conflicts, routines and distractions. But we know that another pure surprise waits around the corner, whatever it may be. The wellsprings of the haiku moment are infinite, bottomless, inexhaustible.

The glimpse ... The haiku moment can occur in a glimpse. A glimpse of the beloved. The glowing, two-way, time-stopping intensity of that glimpse!

To put the words of a contemporary Western sage, **Gangaji**, to our own uses here: 'The glimpse and the surrender into that glimpse, the surrender of the mind into what is glimpsed, gives rise to everything we are seeking ...' (*Gangaji News*, June 11, 2003)

Rebirth in the pure self ... On the haiku path, you can dissolve and change into your purer self. Many haiku poets take a nom de plume or *haigo*. It's a bit like Saul becoming Paul, is it not? The avant-garde haikuist **Ban'ya Natsuishi** explains his new name, a name which he has carried for over quarter of a century. *Ban* is 'fit' and *ya* is 'arrow'. So, his identity is now shaped by the purpose and the skill of fitting an arrow to a bowstring. Cool! This coolness is balanced by the passion he has for haiku. *Natsu* means 'summer' and *ishi* means 'stone'. Hot!

The first entry in *Haiku, This Other World*, by **Richard Wright**, reads as follows:

I am nobody:
A red sinking autumn sun
Took my name away

This is profoundly moving, coming as it does from a writer passionately concerned with questions of identity and negritude and for whom a harsh Mississippi boyhood could so easily have estranged him from the bountifulness and beauty of the earth.

Surprise of unity ... Everything about our existence seems fractured from the time our umbilical cord is cut. Haiku offers us a direct route towards unity. It is put well by **Jonathan Clemens** in *The Moon in the Pines* (Frances Lincoln Limited, 2000):

‘Haiku seeks, in a handful of words, to crystallise an instant in all its fullness, encouraging through the experience of the moment the union of the reader with all existence. The reader side-steps conventional perception, startled into a momentary but full understanding of the poet’s experience. By locking reader and poet into the same reality, haiku helps us perceive the ultimate unity of all realities...’

Alive alive-o! The aliveness of haiku is one of its most remarkable gifts. Did not **Thomas Traherne** say that you will not be able to enjoy the world as you should ‘until the sea itself floweth in your veins ...’:



*Dúloch —
á thomhas féin
i gcónaí*

*Dúloch —
a lake
still gauging its own depths*

whatever I pick up
is alive –
ebbing tide

Chiyo-ni

(Version: GR)

Yes, more and more free gifts! Good haiku fulfils the Emersonian dictum, every time: **Emerson** said that poetry must be as new as foam and as old as rock.

Newness and aliveness ... Haiku practice leads to a feeling of newness and aliveness. No, it's more than a feeling. It is an actual, existential discovery of newness. In all things. Haiku is a vehicle for regeneration.

Can one feel enlightenment? Let us be a little inscrutable about this and say that feelings may or may not be part of the experience. Sudden enlightenment is liberation – from feelings, from cognition. Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* lists enlightenment as 'the state of being in harmony with the laws of the universe' (Taoism) and also 'the realisation of ultimate universal truth' (Buddhism). Haiku practise is not at variance with these goals. Indeed, the haiku way is the goal itself, not a path to something else.

And here is a lovely Christian manifestation of haiku truth:

April snow-
the lightness of the Host
in my hand

Adele Kenny

(*Frogpond*, No. 3, 1998)

A metaphysical gift! This particular haikuist is a member of the Secular Franciscan order and believes that writing haiku 'means using words reverently to express the sacredness of God's universe – in moments of isolation, in moments of communion – alone and yet united with the Creator and with all creation...' (*ibid.*).

The mood of haiku changes, from moments of isolation to moments of intense communion. 'Achieve enlightenment, then return to this world of ordinary humanity...' Thus spoke **Bashō**. Indeed, seeing into the life of things seemed to be enough for **Bashō** as satori-seeking in itself may not be the most enlightening of pursuits:

how sublime!
 one who finds no enlightenment
 in the lightning flash
 (Version: GR)

And this creation, this created world that we speak of, is everything, not just mountains, rivers and deserts:

I sleep... I wake...
 the bed is vast
 with none to share
Chiyo

Creation is presence - and absence too ...

Autumn - looking at the moon
 no child
 on my knee
Onitsura
 (Version: GR)

the willow is felled –
kingfishers come
no more

Shiki

(Version: GR)

It is meeting, and parting ...

I've just got to know
the scarecrow
and now we part

Izen

(Version: GR)

It is music older than time ... It is not any one thing, but many things together in strange harmonic fusion which the haikuist intuit, 'the music of things that happen', as we read in classical Irish lore:

night vanishes
behind the peaks –
bellowing deer

Kyokusi

(Version: GR)

It is fierce ...

an autumn squall
topples the eagle
over the cliff edge

Ryota

(Version: GR)

It is gentle ...

mist among grasses,
 silent rain,
 evening calm

Buson

(Version: GR)

It is holy ...

his hands together -
 frog
 recites a poem

Sokan

(Version: GR)

It is empty and full:

This misty morning –

adrift on the high water

an empty canoe

*(Deep Shade, Flickering Sunlight: Selected Haiku of O Mabson
 Southard, 2004)*

It can be found everywhere ... We should note what **Mircea Eliade** says in his *Diary*:

‘In his book, *Zen in Japanese Art*, Hasumi noticed that art represents the way to the Absolute. Tea ceremony, as well as the other “ways” (dō) – painting, poetry, ikebana, calligraphy, archery – form a spiritual technique, as its aim is obtaining “the Nirvana experience” in everyday life.’

Yes, haiku is part of everyday life. Nothing, apart from a little notebook, distinguishes the haikuist from anybody else you may pass on the street. He or she may have had a Nirvana experience that morning – or is about to have one now, this instant! But no alarms or fireworks are going off; there is nothing untoward. Everything is normal.

Haiku highwayman ... he will stop us again and again on the road, take our clothes, our money, our watch, our identity papers, leaving us dumbfounded, looking around like a naked waif. He gives us time to wonder at our nakedness, at the universe, to look at the sky, at the moon, for the first time.

Then he throws everything back at us again, laughingly. And as we pick ourselves together, we know the world has changed. We smile. We, too, have changed.

Yes, it can be like that. Generally speaking, however, the Nirvana experience can be as perfectly ordinary as opening or closing one's umbrella, as undramatic as stepping over a snail on a footpath.

The Heraclitean truth ... 'You never step into the same river twice,' is a truth lived each day by the haikuist, one that is essential to the aesthetics of haiku consciousness:

autumn wind –
letters emerge one by one
on the wet tombstone

Yamazaki Hisao
(Version: GR)

On one level, any unexpected revelation, however ordinary, can be the stuff of enlightenment. On another level, our readiness to absorb the revelation, our ability to be struck by some 'epiphany' (as **James Joyce** used the word) becomes the real stuff of enlightenment.

There are no steps to enlightenment. Steps lead to further steps and so on. There is only the laughing plunge, the sober awakening. No ashram or yoga needed here, no prayer or mediation. The garden is your ashram, the public park, the highway – and the haiku is your prayer, your meditation.

You can make the plunge any hour of the day or night. You won't hear the splash, but the ripples are real. They will change you and the world.

Instant enlightenment ... Many haikuists, but not all, are familiar with Zen which got its first mention in the West from **Madame Blavatsky** and its first exposition in 1927 by **D. T. Suzuki**. 'Familiar' is not the best word, as part of the Zen thing is the shock of the familiar seen in unfamiliar light, and vice versa. **Caroline Gourlay**, one-time editor of *Blyth Spirit*, Journal of the British Haiku Society, recalls how deeply impressed she was with these lines found in *The World of Zen*, an anthology edited by **Nancy Wilson Ross**:

‘The wild geese do not intend to cast their reflection.
The water has no mind to receive their image...’

Haiku happens in this world of daily miracles and is a perfect prism through which Nature herself enlightens us. But, instant enlightenment? Surely not! How many people have spent their lives – many lives – in such a quest! This book is a plea to lower your sights, somewhat, to focus your vision. Thousands set themselves such an impossible task that they inevitably lose sight of their goal, blaming themselves needlessly.

This little book, containing haiku by practitioners from all over the world, ancient and new – and the new are as ancient as the ancient are new – this book will open up a universal path which you may have been walking already, as it happens, without knowing it! Page after page, you will notice what little adjustment is needed – if any – to our antenna in order to receive frequent sprinklings of enlightenment, leading to an acquired receptivity which allows us to be sprinkled and purified more and more – until nothing is left in the world which is not truly, in itself, a vehicle for liberation.

Freedom now ... One is reminded, in this regard, of the students of Ayurveda in ancient India. Three of them were instructed to go out into the forest and return with something of no medicinal value whatsoever. Two returned with what they thought to be seemingly useless objects; the third was slow to return and when he did he was empty-handed for he had searched high and low and failed to find any blessed thing that did not contain some medicinal value.

The haikuist is that blessed third student – always looking, not with bleary-eyed concentration, not merely looking but intuiting the molecules of liberating grace.

Our tendency towards self-aggrandisement will diminish the more delicately we respond to the spirit of haiku, until it is with a smile of recognition that we realise why **Yataro Kobayashi** changed his name to **Issa**, meaning a single bubble in a teacup – gone before you have raised the cup to your lips.

Grandeur in little things ...

old pear tree
now laden only with
raindrops

Philip D. Noble

This haiku (from the 1998 Mainichi Haiku Contest) is not concerned with some grand, amorphous or Romantic concept of Nature. In Haiku, we discover, see and breathe, for a moment, those interstices, those fleeting moments of reality which are as substantial or as insubstantial as a rock, as ourselves.

The haiku bears witness to the non-judgemental aspect of our humanity, that instinct for self-expression which drove the ancients to illuminate their caves with spectacular representations of those animals with which they shared this earth, long before philosophy, theology and economics became possible. An instinct to share in the life of things, partake in the life of things – their simple grandeur – and be blessed by them, an instinct there since the dawn of consciousness.

Primitive enlightenment ... Yes, haiku enlightenment is a primitive form of enlightenment, tempered by a sensitivity that comes with practising the form. And history shows us that sensitivity is not a recent acquirement. The Chauvet cave in France was painted 31,000 years ago! **Freud**, in *The Ego and the Id* (1927), reminds us that thinking in pictures is immensely older than thinking in words:

wintry river in spate –
 a dog's forsaken
 carcass

Buson

(Version: GR)

Many in the West – and, now, increasingly elsewhere – live in a cosseted, sanitized, cosmeticized environment. Haiku allows us to experience the shock of primal experience so that something flows within us again, by virtue of haiku-seeing:

winter stars
 a wild goose tucks its head
 under a wing

Kirsty Karkow

Haiku-seeing can also be a different way of seeing the world:

broken sky
 a single pony
 keeps the field from straying

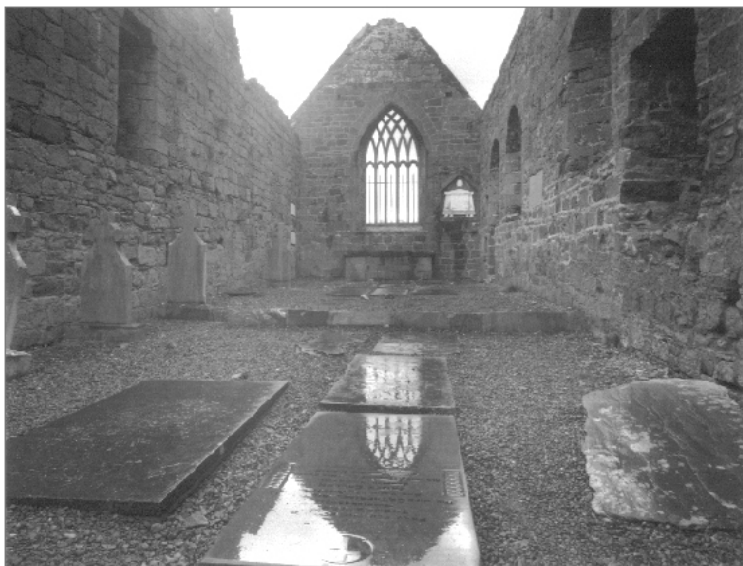
John W. Sexton

(*Shadows Bloom*, Doghouse 2004)

There is magic here! Haiku that lack magic and mystery are not really haiku at all. They may conform to the structure and appearance of haiku but that is not enough. They must be capable of transforming writer and reader alike.

The above haiku is almost a prayer. Sexton is in awe of nature. Not in the sense of an open-mouthed village idiot frightened by the workings of nature. On the contrary. There is a sensitivity and intelligence at work here which is engaged in a sacramental embrace of natural phenomena. Written in Kerry, in the south of Ireland, some places seem to be blessed with full haiku potential. Kerry is where you will find the Paps of Danu, two breast-like mountains which, when kissed by sunlight, can induce ecstasy in the beholder and in the goddess herself.

There are those who say, 'Nature? Irrelevant!' We reply in the words of **Reiner Kunze**: 'Nature is what is forever valid, and also retains validity in the poetic image, elevating it to universality.' (*In Time of Need*, *A Conversation about Poetry, Resistance & Exile*, **Reiner Kunze**, **Mireille Gansel**, Libris, 2006)



*cuireadh púca
fadó, anseo i Murrisk —
go maithe Dia dhóibh é!*

*they buried a pooka
long ago, here in Murrisk —
God forgive them!*