

Between the heart-beats

a collection of haiku

Graham High

RAM PUBLICATIONS

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Acknowledgements

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For Barbara.
So much light from such
dark eyes

Preface

For Christmas 1998 a friend of mine, knowing me to be a life-long reader and writer of poetry, made me a present of the “The Iron Book of British Haiku”, 1998. I had of course come across haiku before and had had a rather “so what” reaction.

Haiku seemed to me a slight and peripheral activity on the edges of poetry writing, as I was concerned with it at that time. I was suspicious of its Japanese and Zen connections and was bothered that it might be supposed to mean something. I had had enough discussions on the Emperor’s new clothes in the context of the visual arts to discourage me from getting involved with another unknown area of creative activity.

Still, a present is a present, and my friend claimed to get great pleasure from reading such stuff, so I dutifully dipped into the book. After a few pages I was hooked. Reading a whole collection of haiku is a very different experience from coming across a few casually in the context of other forms of poetry. The wide variety of styles and approaches possible within the spare nature of the form became apparent, and what had seemed bland and open-ended now seemed the result of a certain kind of concentrated awareness. It was a poetry going nowhere because it was already there - in the moment - in the image.

Receiving that book was like being given a bunch of flowers. The question “so, what’s good about it” was irrelevant. If you like the flowers - you like them, if not – not. I read it a second time, and then a third. I found, moreover, that the three-line or 5-7-5 stressed rhythm and structure of haiku had somehow planted itself in my mind and

little ideas and images came to me, more or less unbidden, in a broadly haiku form. Intrigued, I started to pay more attention to what a haiku is. I read more, subscribed to some journals, joined the British Haiku Society, and even began to send a few efforts out to magazines. By Christmas 1999 I was writing a lot of haiku and made a New Year's resolution for the year 2000 to write a haiku a day. I almost made it with 339 during the year. Not that I would make any great claims for quality in most of them, (haiku are like that – not too much ego involved – you can afford to let them go) but some I liked, and so I decided to self-publish this small first collection.

Deciding which to include was difficult. In the end I limited my choice to those that had already received some endorsement by having already been published elsewhere, thereby not revealing too much the early inclinations of whatever may evolve in my taste and style.

In my view, haiku are undoubtedly poems, but I'm very aware of being in a different state of mind when producing haiku than when I'm engaged with my other poetry. Not all good poets write good haiku. In fact there is a widely held view that most poets of reputation don't quite get it when it comes to haiku. Perhaps they want too much from it and have too many verbal skills at their command to keep it simple.

It is easy to be seduced by metaphors, visual puns, paradoxes and conceptual conceits, as it is to be led astray by the urge to *say something*. I'm sure my fellow haikuists will find all these faults and more in this debut collection, but luckily, international haiku has developed into a very broad church in which to contain this very specific sensibility. I hope this little book shows at least that the heart is in the right place.

child and grandmother
silently doze: Two clocks tick
out of sync... together.

sounds from the shower –
I visualise you bathing
under my anglepoise.

drip-dripping tap –
water talks to the clock
in its own language.

contrails cross the sky.
The skiers' voices echo
in crisp mountain air.

journey's jet lag –
an evening flight of geese
disturbs my dawn.

morning after rain –
we walk the long way
around the puddles.

chasing minnows –
the boy's net gathers only
the scent of water mint.

sundown at the lake:
In the dusk a sound jumps
from a rising fish.

we squint at the sun,
the sugar-glints of sea
upon our strawberries.

beached jellyfish,
its desiccated print
staining the ammonite.

white spiral shells
sprinkled in the moonlit sand
under the galaxies.

darkening sea front –
the last two swimmers shelter
from the sudden rain.

dry-beached winkle shell;
little skull with vivid black eye
- the oystercatcher.

sea taut as a drum;
peaceful percussion
on the salty air.

ammonite relief:
In its hollow the sea swirls
over and over.

fly cleaning his legs:
I put down my knife and fork,
- such dexterity!

felled tree trunk;
a spider mapping out
the growth rings.

after the high winds,
fallen roof tile on the lawn
- spider's new shelter.

empty garden chair –
a spider inspects
abandoned crochet.

among damp compost
a bright yellow slug
couples with orange peel.

descending the corn stalk,
a wolf spider's silhouette,
- receding sunset.

pre-breakfast stroll –
headless stems of mushrooms
already gathered.

pub lunch: looking round,
a taste of taxidermy
in the grilled trout.

LOVE STORY:

A TWELVE HAIKU SEQUENCE

1

between the heart-beats,
the stepping-stones, - pink clouds
crossing the river.

2

a place to make love,
gorse pods bursting in the sun,
- splash of spilled seed.

16

3
the quiet gurgle
of the gas fire, louder
now we dim the light.

4
a broken necklace.
Pearls patter the bedroom floor
- echoing laughter.

5
two voices,
three candles
complex shadows.

6
how to feed our kids?
- deal with all our debts? Again
she smells a flower.

7
parting glance
up at the window. Slammed door
leaves curtains trembling.

8

a slow sinking sun
impales itself upon a tree
as you walk away.

9

found on the mirror
on my return, "I love you"
written in dust.

10

frosty night –
full moon ringed with colours,
an eye blurred with tears.

19

11

A lengthy divorce:

A white ring wreaths the finger,

- wraith of the gold.

12

you sent a bouquet –

memory's flower, the lilac,

falls before the rest.

layers of grey rain,
its constant shifting
on the scree slope.

steam mingling with mist:
chilled hands beyond the tent flap
hug the thermos flask.

over the river
mist meandering, long and deep,
slow as a river.

rain contains the room
the well fills; the gourd swells;
fingers drum the womb.

sun shining through skin –
an embryo of the moon
lights the scanner screen.

brief life of breath,
cloud on the jagged mirror,
red bloom in the hand.

sage-looking monkeys
in the ruined temple
posing like Gods.

they compare beauties,
both smiling, the picked flower
and the bloom not cut.

the ball is struck –
dressed in white, my dead father,
who taught me to bat.

waking up to snow;
white outside the window
darkens the skylight.

in summer's fullness
the rook finds a dead branch
- the best vantage point.

memorial bench –
just me and a carved name
under the beech tree.

in the raked gravel
of the Japanese garden –
fox's footprints.

alone in the sky
a lark twitters - as one
we fall silent.

tearing up weeds –
from under the cleared fence
a playful cat's paw.

jarring my teeth,
the lawn mower suddenly
bites a plum stone.

testing the wind,
the cat holds his tail aloft
- then faces into it.

sultry night –
caterwauling moggies
interrupt our row.

empty house at night,
its broken rafters
filled with stars.

milk on the doorstep,
the blue tit takes his breakfast
before me.

in the downpour
late chrysanthemums
lean on briar stems.

kicking yellow leaves
the traffic warden reveals
my parking offence.

on the old canal,
polystyrene beads jostled
by rain bubbles.

night lit feast of meat –
on the turning spit of sky
huge hills are rolling.

evening faces –
- the solitary moon,
- the boiling rice pan.

clouds at dusk
pass through the open belfry
- sunset strikes bronze.

listen –
the sound of silence ...
... still can't hear it.

Poetry publications by the same author

RAVENS OF UNRESTING THOUGHT
(Outposts, 1975)

ATTEMPTS TO LOVE
(Athenaeum Books, Hub Publications, 1977)

NO TURNING BACK
(Ram Publications, 1986)

WOLF ON THE THIRD FLOOR
(New Hope International Books, 2000)