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**Ken's Corner - Part 1**

Dear Haibuner,

Several times a week it's "Hi, guys -- more grist!" from our ever-cheerful editor-in-chief Jim Kacian, with another e-mail of hopeful submissions. But sadly at least some three-quarters turn out to be just chaff, without sufficient nourishment in them to offer to our readers.

The purpose of this regular column is to reduce the percentage of declined submissions. It is frustrating to have to reject promising work which the writer might well be able to improve, given a clearer idea of what the editors are looking for, and given a bit of encouraging advice. And it's discouraging for you to have work rejected without being able to figure out why. When you have been enabled to do so you may decide that haibun writing is not really what you thought it was and is not for you. Or you may decide to get down to learning how to turn your experiences into haibun literature. You can do this by studying examples of good haibun and our editors' columns which will appear regularly.

The first question to ask yourself is whether you can write passable haiku, since these are the nuts and bolts of haibun. Do you find that all your freestanding haiku are being declined by the various editors of different reputable haiku magazines? If so, it may be time to join a haiku group, study books like Lee Gurga's recent *Haiku: a Poet's Guide*, remedy your weaknesses, and get yourself published. Then come back to having a go at haibun.

In about half the haibun we receive the "haiku" appear as little more than three lines of cut-up prose. The basic test is whether your haiku stand out distinctively from the prose. If the three lines can be folded back into line without making a ripple in the prose then that's where they belong. But try collapsing an authentic haiku back into the prose and it will still show up there as a different animal. Of course, there is much more to be said about the place of haiku in haibun, but let's first get the haiku into existence.

How about the haibun as a whole, with particular reference to the prose? You may be moved to report your holiday experiences in some exotic place, or tell the readers what happened to you on your way to work, or recount a family anecdote. These are all potential topics, but if they read as little different from the hundreds of holiday letters home, or passages from The National Geographic Magazine, or the thousands of after-dinner anecdotes that are told, then they really do not have anything special for our readers and we cannot accept them. What is being submitted in such cases is the raw material for a haibun that has yet to be crafted into literature. There's no literary nourishment in it. What does nourish is work which engages our feelings and which stirs our imagination. The writing is rich in striking and original imagery, as well as being concrete and economical. It enhances our experience of the world around us. It offers a little bit of heart-warming humanity and makes a modest contribution to sustaining and enriching our lives. Yes, this is serious stuff, and the more so in being undertaken in the haiku spirit of karumi, of lightness of touch.

## December 2005, vol 1 no 3

### Ken's Corner - Part 2

It sprawls over the ground, no doubt having toppled a hundred years or more ago, a giant, pewter-colored trunk of swollen, twisted branches whose bulging roots prowl amid the soft, muddy banks of the estuary. Surprisingly, a small cluster of bright green leaves on a few thin branches at the top drives this huge, slow and secret engine.

This is a third of Gary Lebel's haibun "Gravity." It's a description of a huge and ancient juniper. There is no thematic development, so the piece has to rely entirely on imagery. Please examine it carefully to discover how it achieves its powerful effect. This is the haiku-prose of haibun, where all the work is done by careful and feeling observation expressed in concrete imagery. As in haiku there is little that is superfluous and almost every word has work to do.

Look afresh at your experience, so that words appear and accumulate to give the readers, also, a reborn sense of their world. For example, the trunk above is "pewter colored", which momentarily stops us in our tracks. Much of the imagery achieves its effect through metaphoric resonance. That means that it enlarges our sensibilities by echoing something else. But, in the haiku tradition of *karumi*, of "lightness", it should do this no more than suggestively, avoiding heavy symbolism which robs the reader of imaginative space. So, in this example, in the bulging roots and the swollen branches, there is a hint of the tree being a living thing like us. And then there is the sudden startling and imaginative shift to the tree as a "huge, slow and secret engine".

To be published, write only when you are strongly moved, when there is some kindling of the imagination, when some intriguing theme appears which won't let you rest, when you have something extraordinary to share with others—even an ordinary thing seen in an extraordinary light, like Gary's juniper. This will give you the motive power to create literature, which is our business here. In many submissions I can sense some talent but it is hidden under a striving to write in some "literary" style". The result is commonly a stilted, contrived or overloaded prose. So often I say to myself, "if only these persons would stop driving with the brakes on and just let go a bit and be themselves!"

The haiku watchwords SHOW, DON'T TELL apply equally to haibun. For example, instead of saying you're sad, use appropriate imagery to do so, arousing space for the reader to feel and share that sadness. And many a promising haibun is spoiled because the writer cannot resist pushing into the picture—"hey, look at me!" Get a good friend to point out any self-indulgent, self-regarding, opinionated and preachy passages, then delete them, and stand back to admire the improvement. That's happened to me so very often!

Again as with haiku, LESS IS MORE. As soon as you have something that looks polished well enough to fly, take the pruning shears to it. Cut out everything that is inessential to your purpose, to what the haibun is really all about. (If you yourself don't know, then the haibun is anyway likely to be a meandering, inconsequential thing which will soon lose the reader's interest). Cut out wordiness and duplication, and especially adjectives. Cumulative adjectives do sometimes work, as in Gary's "huge, slow and secret", but he need not have told us that the leaves were green, for example.

Within the above criteria many different kinds of prose style can successfully be employed in haibun. As an example, here is the opening of "Coiled Wire" by Jamie Edgecombe, which

recently landed on my desk.

only right arm active, copper twists devour the seconds hand's backward motion: another part to another radiator, ice-box, boiler; to be bought by another factory worker's by-the-hour accountable time. through single skylight in tin roof, direct rays of late summer march the line and land upon the lucky few.

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### Ken's Corner #3

Of the writing of haiku it has been said: "Seek them and you will not find; don't seek and neither will you find." Likewise the best haibun are written when something *moves* us to write. When we stop trying too hard and get out of our own light, inspiration flows of its own accord. We can, however, create favourable conditions for the Muse to appear. If we cultivate an alert vacancy and allow ourselves to fall into a meditative state of mind, then, in William Blake's words, we cleanse the windows of perception, and a poetical experience more readily surfaces.

It is strongly felt experience that moves us to write. It may be the vivid recollection of a long forgotten childhood episode. It may even be a dream, a myth, or an imagined story collaged from fragments of our own real life. Such experiences may feel more real, more *truthlike*, than anything in our mundane daily round. Many fine haibun are poetic fancies, inspired imaginings, and yet the imagery is so direct and fresh and vivid, our imagination is so awakened, our feelings so stirred, that we are drawn into and enriched by the poet's "reality". And particularly in such haibun, as in the best haiku, something mysterious takes place; nothing is quite what it seems; there is an allusiveness and ambiguity which stimulates and leaves space for the play of the reader's imagination. The work of Michael McClintock, William Ramsey, and David Cobb offers many such examples.

When a promising experience comes to mind, inquire what is it *really* all about? What is really moving me and stirring my imagination? The answer may find expression as haiku around which the prose can take shape. Writing the prose first and then trying to conjure up appropriate haiku is much more difficult.

There are a few first class haibun which achieve their whole effect through no more than the exceptional quality of their sustained imagery. For the most part, however, haibun need to have some feeling and imagination about them if they are to draw in the reader. And the writer has to translate that into imagery which conjures up that feeling and imagination in the reader. In haibun, as in haiku, we don't tell—*weshow*. If our experience is one of fear and menace, then our surroundings will manifest for us those emotions, and hence the imagery which we use to conjure up those surroundings for the reader.

When you have written up the first draft, ask yourself again what is this haibun truly and essentially *about*? If it takes the form of a walk, then what was special about that walk ?

What did it inspire in you? What were you seeking? What was the unifying experience? For a mere walk to make a haibun it needs to have some quality of *pilgrimage* which the reader is moved to share.

A reader's interest is attracted by some underlying theme or focus, and interest is sustained if the theme is skilfully unfolded, moving to a climax, perhaps in the final capping haiku, where matters might take an unexpected turn. Too often a haibun stops evolving half way through and begins to meander aimlessly here and there. The fact that this or that did in fact happen is of itself no reason to include it if it does not contribute to a satisfying and unified overall experience for the reader.

Like haiku, the simplest way to make a haibun more effective is to cut out the inessentials. This is where the critical comments of fellow haibuneers can be especially valuable. For they will not share our attachment to particular haiku which have taken our fancy, or turns of phrase of which we feel rather proud, even though they detract from the overall effect of the piece. In my experience three or four critics, accomplished haibuneers themselves, have wrought wonders in improving my work. I am less inclined to take notice where their comments cancel one another out, but where there is consensus about the need for some particular change then that really makes me sit up.

To illustrate some of the above points I have selected as my own contribution to this issue the haibun entitled "Such stuff as dreams are made of." This fantasy is collaged from a wide range of personal experiences. The setting is taken from a shooting lodge in the Scottish Highlands, and the doppel-ganger is drawn from a lifelong friend. That he is in fact my doppel-ganger is hinted gradually here and there. The theme opens as a lonely pilgrimage through the wild country of my native Wales, from the known to the unknown. It unfolds in the shifting mysteries of time, space, ageing and even of past lives. And yet throughout the imagery is down-to-earth, like a vivid dream (which in part it was). There is the wistfulness of old age, but a reassurance in the conclusion (as in the revelatory haiku at the start), before the melancholy ambiguity of the concluding haiku. Essentially it is the reverie of an old man, coming to terms with the mystery of life and death.

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#### **Ken's Corner #4**

At times when you are gifted by one or two haiku it may be worth quietly reflecting on the experience from whence they came. Sometimes they signal a bigger fish—a haibun—lurking down there. There'll be a sense of ripeness and flow, and the outlines of a theme may begin to emerge. The haiku will have appeared as the sharp end of an emergent haibun, which is how it should be. From the start you have distinctive poems which can stand on their own feet. The alternative of creating a haibun prose first is quite possible but more hazardous.

After you have drafted your haibun try the following three checks on the haiku.

First, does each play a distinctive role in the prose in which it is embedded? To find out, try folding it back into prose. If it reads just as well there, then leave it there; better strong prose than a “haiku” which is really no more than three chopped up bits of prose. On the other hand, if your haiku stands out as somehow different from the surrounding prose, then leave it as a haiku.

Second, you will only get your haibun published if you are able to write authentic haiku, which is not the case with many of the submissions we receive. If you can’t persuade the editor of any respectable haiku journal to publish any of your freestanding haiku, then it would be best to concentrate on improving their quality first before trying to write haibun.

Third, ensure that none of the haiku repeats something you wrote in the prose. On the other hand, the prose context can greatly enhance the versatility and power of a haiku than if it is just freestanding, not least because the reader has already been sensitised to a particular mood. The whole imaginative experience can be skilfully ratcheted up, with the haiku in turn powering up the prose. This is the distinctive and unique power of haibun as a literary genre.

Having determined that your haiku do play a role distinctive from the surrounding prose, it will be interesting to ask yourself how they are *distinctive*. And how do they *complement* the prose? Professor Nobuyuki Yuasa, in the introduction to his classic translation of Basho’s *Narrow Road*, maintains that “the interaction between haiku poetry and haiku prose is haibun’s greatest merit ... The relationship is like that between the moon and the earth: each makes the other more beautiful.” This relationship can take many possible forms. It may create diversity and a change of note, for example, as when the haiku mark an intensification of feeling, or perhaps a break in the rhythm, a different kind of music.

In the early days many haibun were written in a flat, deadpan prose (as some still are) and it could be said of the haiku that they stood out like “pearls in mud banks”. However, mud bank haibun can never claim to be noteworthy literature. But what happens to the haiku when the prose is a fine and distinctive “haiku prose”, as commended by authorities from Basho to Yuasa? It then becomes much more challenging to create haiku which can stand up to and interact with such prose in a distinctive and creative way. Even some of our finest contemporary haibun writers do not always succeed in doing so. There are at least two possible approaches here.

First, a haiku may give an ambiguous twist to an unfolding theme: suddenly a paradox, a bit of mystery, a half-said thing appears in the straightforward unfolding of the prose. For this to happen the haiku need to be more than imagistic if they are to excel the prose, and to provide that distinctive twist in the third line which jolts us out of our customary perceptions.

Second, and more challenging, is the use of *contrapuntal* (or *lateral*) haiku. The analogy here is with the counterpoint found in baroque music, in jazz, and in the music of many other cultures. Haruo Shirane, in *Beyond the Haiku Moment*, evidently had this analogy in mind when he referred to the contrasting shots found in classic cinema montage. The contrast is with linear haiku, which follow the unfolding line of the prose exposition. Contrapuntal haiku are not necessarily distinguished by any different placing on the page, but they speak with a different voice, like a Greek chorus in the wings. They have several possible uses. The simplest is to encapsulate a *metaphor* in an image which reinforces what is being more explicitly expressed in

the prose. For example, the haiku may present a violent image taken from nature which erupts in the course of a prose description of human violence. However, there are other and more challenging kinds of contrapuntal “comment”, which offer a different mood or perspective from the main line of the prose. For example in some haibun by Michael McClintock and by George Marsh the haiku act as reminders that ordinary life goes on alongside the drama of the prose—what I call “the fall of Icarus effect”, after Brueghel’s famous painting.

More structurally ambitious is three-decker counterpoint, where two parallel but interrelated themes, topics, treatments or narratives are pursued in the prose, one perhaps being italicised. There have also been experiments with public readings for two or three voices to musical accompaniment. The interaction of prose and haiku in haibun is an exciting area which repays exploration and experiment.

Below is a splendid example—a masterpiece which repays close attention, both in its overall conception and the crafted detail. Note the several interwoven strands. The sculptures provide a metaphoric commentary, in the form of contrapuntal haiku, which keep the discursive prose well grounded. The two quotations from the Venetian traveller give a broader *English* context to the central theme of love and childhood, which is unfolded in the poignant autobiographical heart of this haibun. The treatment throughout is wonderfully subtle and elliptical. I would very much like American readers to write in about what they make of it (for *Ken’s Corner* – 5), please. For I believe that some of the best haibun are written out of a particular culture, whether national or regional. To enter into them requires some effort from outsiders, but the result can be rewarding in broadening our empathy and understanding. In my own case, scrutinising several American haibun each week has given me a more subtle—and fond—awareness of contemporary American culture than I had before Jim signed me up for the job. Similarly, even some English, let alone American, readers apparently find my Welsh haibun collection *Stallion’s Crag* quite challenging!

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## THE ANGEL'S WOUND

George Marsh

I'm in Kew Gardens where there seems to be a temporary sculpture exhibition amongst the barberry shrubs, under full-leaved summer trees. I pick up a leaflet: Emily Young, sculptress, descended from the singing pirate, Admiral Sir George Young, and the widow of Captain Scott of the Antarctic, has made this Spangle Stone Fool Boy who looks at me with an idiot's lack of reserve. I can make a relationship with this head. I know him, and he is easy with me.

My older son was difficult to read at breakfast, with a give-nothing shrug and so-so eyebrow. He's no idiot. He learned refusal - it toughened him - during the Rejection, twenty five years ago. His mother left him, and rejection came down to her through her mother, who talked to blot out listening, and her father, a non-singing pirate who ransacked Borneo's rainforest. And it came to them from who knows what damage, how much further back...

sculpture park -

fossilised snail shells  
polished to a warrior's head

I'm a product of the long English tradition of stony childhood.

tourists pass -  
gold flecked onyx streams  
from the angel's wound

I once read a Venetian traveller's account of England he wrote in 1500. "The want of affection in the English is strongly manifested towards their children; for having kept them at home till they arrive at the age of seven or nine years at the utmost, they put them out, both males and females, to hard service in the houses of other people..." The astonished Venetian relates that the children, "never return, for the girls are settled by their patrons, and the boys make the best marriages they can, and, assisted by their patrons, not by their fathers, they strive diligently to make some fortune for themselves." As my favourite cockney mystic put it, three centuries later:

The Angel that presided o'er my birth  
Said, "Little creature, form'd of Joy and Mirth,  
Go love without the help of any Thing on Earth."

I took on history and reversed the culture. I loved my babies, changed nappies, sang them to sleep, and hugged them.

But you don't buck the dread English family that easily. To love your children won't be enough. No no no no. You also need to create a sweet understanding with the mother. Out of nothing, make joy, like a vaudeville conjurer pulling a spreading rosebush from his dusty sleeve. So the boys got rejected anyway. She abandoned her infants.

four thousand million years  
of yellow quartzite deposits  
roughly shape a woman

My younger son and I now understand one another, nevertheless, more or less. We swap guarded exchanges over the crossword, and coded commentary on football and cricket.

peering from thick foliage  
a Pleistocene rock  
with a gleaming eye

The shrewd Italian writes that, "Although their dispositions are somewhat licentious, I never have noticed anyone, either at court or amongst the lower orders, to be in love; whence one must necessarily conclude either that the English are the most discreet lovers in the world or that they are incapable of love."

moonlight caresses  
the black surface  
of the marble girl

I don't regret that I was never indiscreet. If you're English, you should know, without all that. I feel admiration for ex-lovers and I delight in other women friends too, I do, really, and I will, unless, and until

marble man, still shrub -  
in the heart of one of them  
a squeaking wren

Note: Passages in quotation are from *A Relation of the Island of England* c.1500, published in *The Portable Renaissance Reader* ed. Ross and McLaughlin, Penguin. The “cockney poet” is William Blake.