

Research Note: Revising Haiku—A Case Study

Charles Trumbull

This past winter, while I was working in the papers of Elizabeth Searle Lamb, I came across a yellowed newspaper clipping [Karen Peterson. “Spider Fears Spin Web of Phone Calls,” *Albuquerque Journal* (North Edition), Oct. 3, 1992, 1 and 3.] that described the alarm of the population of Santa Fe, N.M., about an infestation of spiders whose webs seemed to be springing up everywhere. The article explained that these were a nonpoisonous, beneficial species called clown or cat-faced spiders, a type of orb-weaver. Their appearance in profusion was linked to an abundance of insects—spider food—caused by an unusually wet winter and spring.

One evening at this same time Elizabeth Lamb’s neighbor’s cat went AWOL. Elizabeth took up a flashlight and joined in the nighttime cat-hunt. This was a situation replete with haiku possibilities, and Lamb, one of the founders of American haiku and thirty-year veteran haikuist at the time, did not pass up the opportunity. She quickly jotted down some notes about the strange apparition of the night trees covered in spider webs. Her compositional technique was always to capture ideas quickly and play with them until a haiku finally could be teased out. Thanks to her careful recordkeeping and preservation of her work, it is possible to reconstruct her compositional choices and revision of a single haiku. In this case we have the newspaper article, excerpts from the rejection letter of a journal editor, and the recollections of Lamb’s daughter and son-in-law, Carolyn Lamb and Steve Reed, to help fill out the story.

Lamb’s first notation was this:

a dark night
a sudden flash shows a tree
filled orb weavers webs

This proto-haiku was scribbled on a 4” × 6” sheet of paper and hand-dated 10.3.92—the same date as the newspaper article. (The word “with” and the apostrophe after “weavers” in line three are missing in the original.) It seems likely that reading the newspaper reporter’s explanation for the surprising appearance of spider webs throughout the area catalyzed the idea for a haiku in Lamb’s mind. This is not a full-blown haiku but rather a sketch of the poet’s observations. For example, “dark night” and “flash” need not both appear in the haiku, and the nature of the flash here is too ambiguous: a flashlight? a passing car? lightning?

On the same sheet of paper, typewritten, these variants appear:

the flashlight catches
a hundred orb-weavers
in this one tree

the whole tree
festooned with intricate webs

this whole tree
filled with orb weavers—
webs catching moonlight

Here we see more details of Lamb's observations being introduced: now we know it was a flashlight that caused the light—though the more romantic notion of "moonlight" is also being considered—and we begin to get the idea that there was an unusual number of spider webs in this one tree. The first version is not entirely accurate in that the poet could not have seen the spiders themselves—certainly not clearly enough to provide us with a count of them! This is poetic license (how much of that do we want to allow in our haiku?). Lamb noodles with some more fancy poetical language in the second variant, "festooned" and "intricate." Neither of these words seems apt for the haiku moment, however, and they are quickly discarded. After "moonlight" in the third of these variations Lamb added in longhand "the moon." The subsequent version, typed on a clean half-sheet of paper, incorporates that amendment:

this whole tree
filled with orb weavers—
webs catching the moon

This abandons the magical imagery of "moonlight" in favor of the more concrete "moon," but in the process introduces the poetical conceit of the moon becoming entangled in spider webs and even suggests that the spider herself caught the moon. The new half-sheet of paper also contains Lamb's name and address and is presented in the format she usually used for submissions to journals. There is no indication, however, where, if anywhere, she sent this version.

Also in the stapled sheaf of papers relating to this haiku are two 2" x 3" sheets of notebook paper, decorated with butterflies, that contain four additional versions. A new element—the lost cat—is introduced. This draft appears on one sheet:

the flashlight beam!
apple tree netted with web
but no lost cat

and these three, under a title, on the other:

HUNTING THE CAT

my flashlight beam
spotlights a tree-ful of webs
but no cat

orb weavers
have webbed the apple tree

the old apple tree
webbed by orb-weavers
and morning mist

This suggests a completely different haiku from the one Lamb was working on earlier—was this her intention? The first line in the first of these version is a little lame, especially with the exclamation point, and there seems to be a misleading suggestion that the webs appeared where the cat was expected to be. The second version is weakened by the sequence of redundant words “flashlight beam spotlights,” while “tree-ful” seems similarly contrived. It is hard to determine what the sequence of these tries might have been. The fourth of these drafts is marked with a handwritten bracket, as if it had been selected by the poet for further development.

All this work on the text took place over about one month. The following is the version that Lamb sent to *Modern Haiku*, together with other submissions, sometime in early November 1992:

this whole tree
filled with orb-weavers —
webs catching the moon

Editor Robert Spiess accepted one other of Lamb’s submissions and wrote back to her on November 17 the following about the orb-weaver haiku:

I like the concept of “this whole tree” but feel that it could be a bit more evocative if “tree” were changed from the “generic” to a specific tree—to perhaps make the image a somewhat sharper and clearer one. Also (as I have a bit of antipathy toward the moon being caught by so many things in haiku: trees, branches, nets, clouds, etc.) it might be better to have the webs silvered or reflecting ... or ...

Lamb’s files show the following text, apparently the final revision and clearly responding to Spiess’s suggestions.

this old apple tree —
a hundred orb-weaver spiders
their webs in moonlight

I am not sure I would find “this old apple tree”—imaginative but clichéd—to be an improvement, and a construction such as “spiders / their webs” has always seemed to me a weak one for haiku.³ (I call it the “my brother he” construction in honor of my fourth-grade teacher who told us that sentences with double subjects, such as “my brother he went to the store,” show poor grammar!) In any event, this haiku is typed on a half-sheet with Lamb’s name and address in the upper-left corner, just as she had done with the earlier formal submission, but this version apparently was never submitted or published. It is interesting to note that by now the syllable count has been padded up to almost the “traditional” haiku form (actually 5–8–5 syllables here) by the inclusion of the unnecessary words “this old,” “spiders,” and “their.” This suggests that Lamb may have been intending to submit it to a non-haiku journal or newspaper, where she often placed her haiku. I have found no evidence that this haiku ever appeared in print.