

Contemporary English-language Haiku and the Long View

an interview with Michael McClintock by Janice Bostok

It's really exciting to have you back in the movement. I know so many haiku writers who enjoy and admire your work. Michael, what I want is to get into your mind! It is really good to have you back. I'm particularly interested in what you think of haiku, tanka, and other Japanese forms after having been away from them for some time. I know you were quietly observing, but you didn't seek publication, or become involved.

My working life was all-consuming. Fortunately, it also involved the study of literature and the pursuit of many personal interests. The life and profession I embarked on did not leave me the time I felt was required to stay involved with haiku. I tend to work in "immersion." Reluctantly, I closed down *Seer Ox Press* and withdrew from publishing my work. The necessity saddened me, but I was also happy in my new direction and determined to give it "twenty years." Which is about how it worked out. I won't leave haiku in that way again. Now I can "re-immerse"!

Did you continue to write haiku and its related forms in those years?

I did. Haiku and tanka. They had both become habits of mind by the mid-1970s. Who I was as a person was the poet at night and on free weekends, and in the front seat of my car with the back of an envelope and a pencil while driving from one meeting or location to another. There were many very long days when I resented this, but it was after all entirely my choice. You do what you feel and think you have to do. And I have to say that going my own way with the haiku and tanka, in isolation like that, did in fact give me a sense of freedom that I relished. No one was looking over my shoulder. I was unencumbered by either approval or disapproval, or the need to explain or defend or advocate anything at all to anybody at all. But we write, finally, to communicate, don't we? I find that I do. So the sweetness of the freedom was mitigated by this lack of communication. And this lack, which I felt painfully at times, was always there to remind me of my eventual goal: to return and fully participate, free of the need to labor daily for a check and a livelihood. In my sorrier moments I likened myself to one of those Roman slaves who, through meritorious and even heroic service, eventually received citizenship and a pension. Utter nonsense, of course! Now I can laugh about it.

Did you find it hard to get back into the scene?

No, not at all. A wonderful thing about what we call "the haiku community" is its openness; the haiku magazines and journals were always that way and they remain so. No English-language haiku magazine is dominated by a particular "school" of haiku practice, unlike the case in Japan. As a whole, they are catholic in their interests and publish a broad range of

haiku writing styles and subject matter. Good work from a beginner, stranger, or new poet has as much chance of getting accepted as good work from an established poet. No rigid or jealously guarded hierarchies of influence exist in English-language haiku. There is no formal order of Master practitioner, anointed disciple, unanointed disciple, raw student, unwashed beginner, mad heretic. I like that. And the contents of the magazines reflect this eclecticism. Poems by beginners or new poets appear right alongside work by established poets, without distinction.

As always, editors vary in taste and skills, but generally they appear to seek and print the best poems they receive.

Why is there this apparent difference between haiku practice in the West and in Japan?

I think the all-inclusive approach I am describing reflects the democratic roots and traditions of the culture, the centrality of the individual and the high value placed on individual freedoms, the general skepticism toward superimposed or tradition-based authority structures. I am not speaking about political outlook necessarily, but rather about the social fabric, how individuals relate to other individuals, to groups, and to tradition and history. These attitudes are reflected in our literature, even in the way haiku are written and published.

What kinds of haiku are being written today in English?

Well, there are very few new haiku any more about scarecrows! Do you notice that? Do you remember all those haiku about scarecrows that appeared in the '60s and '70s? I think Leroy Kanterman had a lot to do with that. His anthology of haiku and senryu, *The Scare Crow* (Red Moon Press, 1999), seems to have been the last word on the subject. I enjoyed the book very much. It was a great relief to see!

Did the time away from involvement in the haiku scene give you a fresh look at it? What developments or changes do you notice—besides relating to scarecrows?

This may be one of those forest and trees questions that leave me wakeful at night. Generally, I think the “forest” is so much larger, healthier, and occupies more varied terrain, having greater diversity in its features. There is a more solid infrastructure of periodicals, publishers of collections and books, and a broader representation of tastes, critical thinking, and philosophy among editors, critics, reviewers, scholars, theorists, and the poets themselves.

The emergence of the urban and suburban setting is very evident, and that is a plus. Most haiku poets do not live on farms, in rural villages, or out in the wilderness. The contemporary domestic environment is present—the home or the apartment, the street, the familiar environments and occasions of twentieth and twenty-first century life in the developed world. I am pleased to see this. Haiku poets have discovered a beauty and meaning in human-made objects and structures, juxtaposed to the natural world.

That is a big accomplishment during the past two decades. We are drawing away from our

dependence on Japanese models, and we are adding to the traditional subject matter of haiku literature. We have learned much more about Japanese haiku during the last two decades, but we appear also to have realized more about the resources of the English language, and that English-language haiku poets are not writing Japanese haiku. I think haiku in English today shows more awareness of English-language poetry as a whole, and the resources of our native culture, our own environment, our own lives. It still amazes me how many sit around writing Heian court poetry in the front room of a Los Angeles or New York City apartment. But there are many poets writing haiku and tanka about their own time in history, their own homes, their own ordinary lives. There has been a discovery that we do not need to mimic Japanese haiku, or borrow sentiments from Japanese culture.

So much for the forest. In the detail of the trees themselves, there are many things that have changed little, it seems to me. Notwithstanding what I've said about the forest, in among the trees there still seems to be some astonishing levels of imitation. I still find too much "happy talk" haiku, and a kind of artificial quietism, a strangely disconnected poetry that appears to be written in a stupor or emotional la-la land where every crow seems to be an old Taoist, every frog a Zen philosopher—these are cliché. Nature is too often depicted as a kind of toy, pet, or stage prop for some banal moment or human activity. Nature is distorted to become a kind of soft-headed uncle who looks benignly upon a whole catalogue of sentimentality and bad acting. There is a blindness to the spirituality being expressed, and a romanticized nature. It is unconvincing, and downright silly. On the other hand, that kind of work has never been on the leading edge of haiku in English; I merely point out that it still exists and is a prolific species among the forest trees. At its best, the ideology in contemporary English haiku is a kind of unpretentious, natural, thoughtful quietism. At its worst, it appears to be part of some consensual delusion.

Are there any new or younger writers whom you particularly admire? Who's work jumps off the page at you?

Quite a few. A useful discussion of newer poets in the United States is Cor van den Heuvel's article, "America's Haiku Future", in *Modern Haiku* (Vol.34:3, Autumn 2003). I agree generally with his survey, but the poets he mentions are only "new" in the sense of their relationship to the first and second generation of haiku poets in the US. They are all well-established. And none of them are particularly young. Of those he mentions, I especially enjoy the laconic humor and humanity of John Stevenson's haiku. Ebba Story's poems and the delicate, contemplative work of Christopher Herold always interest me. I love Tom Clausen's existential angst and Peggy Lyles' lyricism. Other fine poets whose work I always look for include Hilary Tan and Fay Aoyagi, for their directness and simplicity. William M. Ramsey's best work is pithy, memorable and very powerful, with a distinct post-modern voice—his work I am always aware of, as it seems to reach out and grab me by the throat. New Zealand's Ernest J. Berry is a master of surprise, many of his poems having an almost surreal beauty and poise, written somewhere on the edge between here and eternity. And many, many more. I think generally it might be wise to avoid too much reliance on lists; they can never be as complete as they should be, or as focused as they ought to be. It is a very rich period for haiku in English. In fact, you really need to go through the magazines carefully. There is often a very good or superb poem by someone whose name I have never seen—and may never see again.

Has your idea of tanka changed since the late 1960s, early 1970s? I really enjoyed your early tanka, and was influenced by them. (I remember I didn't seem to know the form was called 'tanka'! I used to think of it as 'extended haiku'.) I was amused a little while back to have an American 'expert' tell me that if I wanted to write tanka I should get in touch with Michael McClintock, as he has been writing it for years!

Tanka in English has a much larger range and depth than I imagined or appreciated when I wrote the tanka for *Thief: Diary Notes* (Haiku Magazine, Special Issue 5:4, 1972) and the collection, *Man With No Face* (Shelters Press, 1974). I think my early tanka show too much influence from Carl Sesar's translations of Takuboku in *Poems to Eat*, and the early translations by Sanford Goldstein of Takuboku and others. Tanka is certainly far more than 'extended haiku', though within its three-line component it may often read very like a haiku. It is the second component, or the additional two lines in a tanka, that make all the difference, and give it a range of subject matter, tone, mood, and the ability to introduce subjective material into the poem, involving personal thought and reflection, that are simply not possible in haiku, in which the poet's persona and voice maintain a cognitive distance. Like haiku, the tanka moment may also be keenly perceived—but with tanka it comes with comment or reflection from the poet, and is delivered with a combination of techniques quite different from what is found in haiku. It may also range into the past or future, whereas haiku stays in the present tense. More of a language's resources are at work in tanka, and a far larger vocabulary is possible. These are some of tanka's attractions to me.

Compared to haiku, moving to tanka is like moving from a tiny one-room flat to a tiny three-room apartment! That being said, both are enormous in their capacity; there is nothing "tiny" about either when written well. I find that much of the finest English-language poetry, the so-called "canon" of verse, both past and present, has at its center passages that are very akin to haiku and tanka in their brevity, compression, and control. Slowly, an ever-widening number of people are realizing this. We have haiku- and tanka-like constructions embedded in our literature. They are everywhere. There really is little about haiku or tanka, in their essence, that should be regarded as "exotic" or foreign.

I take the long view. Both haiku and tanka have a secure future in English-language poetry. We have only to keep writing our poems and making our case. The strength that these two forms have is gathering; the corpus of the work available even now is huge. The impact of haiku and tanka on the English short poem and lyric will be as lasting as their full recognition has been long in coming. I see haiku poems written by "obscure" haiku poets forty years ago still getting reprinted today. I cannot say the same for many hundreds, even thousands, of "well-known, mainstream" poets whose work came and went with a pop and a flash. That is partly because the haiku community maintains its own memory, and is self-reliant in that respect.

Are you still as interested, or involved, in Zen as you appeared to have been in the early years?

Zen will always be important to me. Not as an end in itself, but as a gateway through which I can pass and have a means of approaching and understanding all the subjects that interest me. Its touchstones are always present and part of my toolkit.

How do you see haiku, tanka, and Japanese forms as fitting into your life today?

They are my daily occupation. I have some twenty years of haiku and tanka to gather into collections, as well as new work. I am happy to have such freedom, to be able to use my time as I wish, but it's now or never. The early collections, *Light Run* (Shiloh Press, 1971), *Man With No Face* (Shelters Press, 1974), and *Maya: Poems 1968-1975* (Seer Ox, 1975), are out-of-print.

What about haibun? You seem to have written a great many of them. Where do they fit?

The haibun are especially important to me. Absolutely central. I use both haiku and tanka in these prose-poems. I am convinced that haibun provide a means for haiku literature to broaden the haiku poem's dialogue with the world, to sharpen, concentrate, explore, and widen its experience and understanding of the world and ourselves. I think haibun in English can be a means of moving both haiku and tanka into an expanded treatment of human experience, that what haibun evoke can take a broader and deeper measure of the realities of contemporary life, and provide a kind of platform for moving haiku much further into the subjective realities that underlie whatever haiku has already taught us about objective reality and experience. Haibun work toward a synthesis of these opposites, in my opinion. At least, that is what I want to pursue.

Do you think the new, or younger, writers have it easier than we did in the early years? For example, there seems to be so much more information at hand, so many more workshops and websites where one can 'instantly' learn to write haiku. Many of the early pioneers were struggling in isolation.

Easier? No, I don't think that. Abundant resources exist, certainly. But there is dark side. There are ants on the picnic table, you might say.

Metaphors aside, the welter of information can be overwhelming, stultifying. It can also be misleading or plain bad. Trying to bring aboard too much workshop or other "training" at an early stage, attempting to adapt or conform to it all, can so homogenize the thinking of a person who is interested in poetry that he or she often loses any originality or authentic impulse they might have possessed—those qualities that led their interest in the first place. Natural talents, if any, can be co-opted or shorn away very quickly. The results of wrong influence, misleading information, and superficial, glib "training", can do long-term damage and be hard to shake-off.

For all the workshops and information available, about haiku and all other poetry, my guess is that most poets are still "struggling in isolation", or they had better be. That seems to be the nature of the craft, coupled with a lot of independent study of a wide range of books they themselves have sought out and selected, according to their own interests and tastes. And if they have no interests, and have developed no tastes? Well, that is a problem, isn't it? I don't think a "how-to" book or workshop on writing poetry" is going to remedy that problem, do you? Poetry needs substance and content; it is not just a scaffolding of forms and techniques.

How does a poet get started? How does one begin?

How has any poet ever begun? How has any poet ever gotten started? The point is, there is no programmed formula that answers these questions. Not for poets or painters or musicians. And there is no reason, on the other hand, to be grim about this fact, or feel any special despair. There is no secret “key” to find or magical source of study to apply for. The possibilities are not limited by these kinds of things, but are limitless.

If a person is interested in going to a workshop on “how to write haiku” or “how to write poetry”, then by all means they should go and satisfy their curiosity. Certainly seminars and discussion groups or lectures on some aspect of poetry or a poet’s work can be stimulating, can get the gears moving, and expose us to new or surprising ideas. It’s the ideas and concepts these activities awaken that can be especially valuable, rather than any clear answers or “how-to-do-it” paint-by-numbers approach. I’m skeptical about most workshops that promise to teach how to write poetry for \$50 and a catered lunch on a Saturday afternoon.

Can we learn from other poets?

Poets learn from one another, of course. More informal associations and friendships between poets have been fruitful and these can be built at any level a person happens to be at. Overall, though, do you notice how very few collaborations there have been in literary history? There’s a reason for that. Poets eventually learn how to stay out of each other’s way and appreciate each other’s work while keeping themselves and their own work at a creative distance. Coleridge and Wordsworth, for all their closeness, were two very different poets, for example. The most fruitful kind of association seems to be among poets who for a relatively brief period of time discover and develop upon some “discovery” or idea about poetry that they make or arrive at, at about the same time, in about the same place—so many “movements” or styles of poetry began like that. Without exception, however, the poets involved distinguished themselves and their work primarily as individuals and artists, not as ideologues belonging to some group.

The best teachers of poetry are the poems themselves. They often teach something different to each person who spends time with them. I’m not sure that another person can always tell you what you may need to know about what a poem teaches. You have to discover that for yourself. Another can tell you what they feel they learned from it, but there is something secondhand and not fully satisfying in that. People learn and acquire skills and knowledge differently, and with different results. Finding one’s own best route can in itself be a long struggle, a process of trial and error, of finding the “Yellow Brick Road” and losing it again, or vice versa.

Let me be specific. As far as haiku is concerned, an alternative to web site and workshop “training” is spending an afternoon with one of R. H. Blyth’s volumes of *A History of Haiku*. I think you might learn more from that than from any workshop I have ever heard of. And come closer to your goal of writing a haiku, and being able to write the one after that. Blyth’s translations are fluid, successful English poems in themselves, more than adequate to their purpose in illuminating how haiku works as poetry, and his commentaries about the poems he

translates are indispensable, delightful, brilliant. None of the newly written guides to haiku replace Blyth, but there are some outstanding ones if for some reason you can't lay hands on a copy of his work. Henderson's *An Introduction to Haiku* is very good; after reading that, you can spend some time with William J. Higginson's *The Haiku Handbook*.

Guides are good, even necessary, here and there, but one finally has to take his or her own direction, or the journey never begins. I think that is how a poet must finally, always work; that is how words are eventually put on the page. Poet, pen, and blank sheet of paper: that is the ultimate encounter. Poetry is made on a very bare stage. I could rave on here, but I don't think I need to. I think many younger poets find these things out for themselves; they in time agree with the point of view I've expressed here.

In your opinion does haiku have a better reputation as a literary form these days? Many of us used to find it downgraded as a literary form, and being a 'haiku writer' was not the same as being a 'real' poet! I know it's more popular, and is probably the most widely read and written form of poetry today.

Ever hear the sound of one hand clapping?

The insularity of haiku relative to the rest of the poetry world has in some ways been a blessing. It has helped to create some of the infrastructure I have already alluded to. Haiku is a permanent feature of English-language poetry, but has yet to enjoy unqualified acceptance. After fifty years, haiku has matured well beyond being a movement or offshoot of the Beat renaissance. It is here to stay, and it is probably more of a "people's poetry" than any other I can think of. Haiku in English is a product of over fifty years; it has little or nothing to do with the changing currents and fashions of "mainstream" poetry or literature generally, with personality hype, or with the endless manufacture of intellectual trends and artistic commodities that are created, bought, and sold in Western literature and the arts. Ironically, that is its strength, the reason for its staying power, and these are shared by English-language tanka. Both will thrive and grow out of their own resources, apart from the "industry" of mainstream poetry and elitist culture.

I am not that familiar with the situations in Australia or New Zealand, but in North America, and to a similar degree in the United Kingdom, most of the poetry written today is read by other poets—or by English literature students who are made to survey poetry for their degree requirements. Poetry's profile and presence in the general reading population is practically non-existent, very small, almost weightless. In the public forum, it has little reputation or respect. The last public poet in the United States was Allen Ginsberg, and he got mixed and spotty reviews. Before him were Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg—both relatively popular, and read by people who were not themselves poets or trying to become poets. There are many reasons for this, and one of them is the fact that during much of the twentieth century a poetry establishment worked very hard to create a poetry that was unreadable, irrelevant, and outside the common discourse of society. They were very successful in their efforts, and we are living with the results today. We will be doing so for quite some time to come. Meanwhile, "mainstream" poetry has fragmented into thousands of small tribes of poets who write for one another, for other tribal members, and for a few related tribes with whom they are at—at least temporarily—poetic peace.

Among poets, there appears to be growing respect for haiku, if not broad acclaim for the English-language haiku poets themselves. Sam Hamill's book *The Essential Basho*, and Robert Hass' *The Essential Haiku*, as well as a continuing stream of new translations of haiku, are witness to a growing respect and interest. A new book in the Everyman Library series, simply titled *Haiku*, includes not only a selection of Blyth's translations from the haiku masters of Japan but also a rather good selection of haiku by contemporary American haiku poets. Czeslaw Milosz, the Nobel Laureate, has translated and praised many of the haiku that appeared in van den Heuvel's *The Haiku Anthology*, even a couple of my own poems. So yes, I think the reputation of haiku poets in English is incrementally improving.

I'm as optimistic as circumstances permit me to be and still remain a reasonable man.

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