

Out of the Mist: The Haiku of O Mabson Southard

by Paul Russell Miller

This year 2011 marks the centenary of the birth of O Mabson Southard, one of English-language haiku's pioneers of the 1960s and early 1970s.[1] For much of that period he was a regular contributor to two seminal U.S. magazines, *American Haiku* and *Haiku West* [2] and went on to feature prominently in the first edition of Cor van den Heuvel's ground-breaking *The Haiku Anthology*. [3]

Southard's strict adherence to a 5–7–5 syllable structure and the use he made of punctuation and Western poetic techniques meant that developing genre norms favoring shorter, more streamlined models moved steadily away from him through the 1970s. So much so, in fact, that a brief retrospective essay on Southard by Jeff Witkin, published in 1996, begins with the almost disclaimer-like announcement that the "haiku of O Mabson Southard was written twenty years ago, and looks and sounds its age." [4]

But despite its fall from currency and Southard's own withdrawal from the haiku scene in later years, the quality and depth of his work continues to draw attention. Facilitating this, substantial selections have been reprinted in each succeeding edition of *The Haiku Anthology*, [5] and in 2004 Brooks Books, collaborating with Southard's daughter Barbara, produced a fine 234-poem collection that makes a comprehensive survey of his output possible for the first time. [6] He is thus far one of the very few members of the older, founding generation of haiku poets to receive such posthumous treatment.

Aside from its qualified opening and its brevity, Witkin's remains among the more insightful of the handful of critical appraisals of Southard's work. In his conclusion he even admits that "Southard's success in fine-tuning his word choices and placements may ... raise questions about current norms, and suggest some techniques which might be integrated into current practice to good effect." [7] Fifteen years farther on and amidst the dramatic genre changes now being triggered by Japanese *gendai* haiku, [8] I'd like to use Witkin's remarks as a starting- point for examining several of Southard's individual poems in detail.

1

On a leaf, a leaf
casts a swaying green shadow—
and the tree frog sings! [9]

This poem, in its original version, was among the twenty by Southard published in 1963 in the inaugural issue of *American Haiku* magazine, the very first periodical outside Japan to be devoted solely to haiku. [10] Over the following eight years the poem was revised twice to arrive at its final form here, and, while outwardly slight, those changes reveal much about Southard's creativity and his continued engagement with the experience at a poem's source. Lines one and three, linked by the quick repetition of "leaf" and its cleverly concealed echo inside "tree frog," remain constant throughout the three versions. With these two leaves and a single frog Southard evokes an entire forest ecosystem, but one whose vigor will depend on how effectively the pivotal second line allows them to interact.

On one leaf, in the original 1963 poem, the other simply "is casting a green shadow—," and as most other sunlit leaves are presumably also doing so, this seems unlikely to give it any particular significance for the frog. When the poem next appears, in Southard's 1967 haiku collection *Marsh-grasses and Other Verses* [11] the leaf "casts a summer-green shadow —," increasing its seasonal relevance but again failing to imbue it with the individuality that a tree frog might respond to.

Writing to fellow haiku poet Helen S. Chenoweth in 1971, Southard candidly admits that "one's inner light is not always easy to see by; and that is why I persist in revision." [12] He then goes on to present the third and final rendering of "On a leaf," adding that "time has corrected" both earlier versions of the poem.

In fact what time has done, specifically, is to allow the merest hint of a breeze to enter the forest, a breeze of the kind that catches and causes an occasional leaf to oscillate while every neighboring leaf remains relatively still. The leaf's shadow, thus animated, can at last fully inspire and justify the tree frog's spontaneous outburst, bringing the rest of the forest vibrantly to life around it.

Along with repetition and buried rhyme to connect the poem's three figures, Southard's adept use of alliteration ("swaying—shadow—sings!") not only points up the actions of each but helps to thread these together, too, into a concerted event-experience.

2

From deep in the spring
clear reflections rise to meet
falling plum petals [13]

Undoubtedly among Southard's most beautiful and evocative poems, this haiku has somehow eluded commentary since its initial publication in the July 1972 issue of *Haiku West* magazine. [14] There it took its place in one of his haiku "sequences," experimental suites of six or occasionally twelve poems for which, in part, he went on to receive a Haiku Society of America Award in 1974.

A keen student of Oriental philosophy, art, and literature, Southard will have been well aware of the special place plum holds in traditional Chinese and Japanese culture. As the first tree to flower after winter and frequently inundated by further falls of snow, its seemingly paradoxical qualities of resilience and fragility make it a richly symbolic presence in the early spring landscape. With regard to his own poetry, however, the use of symbolism held neither appeal nor relevance for Southard. Nature and the direct human experience of nature were the central subjects of his work and if a symbolic interpretation was imposed upon it, he believed, then "the subtle inner light that a verse may throw is surely lost." [15] So while the influence of those other traditions and even of individual poems and paintings may be felt here, what rises to the surface are just the "clear reflections" of the plum petals themselves. [16]

In keeping with such limpid imagery, Southard's restrained word choice and arrangement creates an open space through which the reflected petals can drift. And while doing so they, too, remain non-specific and unnamed, coming fully into focus only as they converge with the actual petals at the spring's surface. Assonance ("deep ... meet"), rhyme ("spring ... falling") and alliteration ("reflections rise") combine lightly to indicate movement and direction, allowing the firmer alliterative force of "plum petals" to finally identify and give them form.

Reflections occur regularly in Southard's haiku, offering a deepened or expanded perspective of something often by visually dislocating it a little. The effect of plum petals issuing upward and from the depths of a spring, moreover, is to give vivid, celebratory emphasis to their regenerative role.

3

One breaker crashes ...
As the next draws up, a lull—
and sandpiper-cries [17]

Along with consonant and vowel repetition, Southard made consummate use of both meter and punctuation when composing his haiku. These two techniques, in particular, enabled him to not only

recall an experience but reconstruct it sequentially so that it unfolds again for the reader. Many of his poems, like this one, achieve a remarkable balance between the process and texture of an event and the physical figures which inhabit it.

"One breaker," or "sandpiper-cries" as Southard referred to it, was again originally published in *American Haiku* Number 1 in 1963.[18]

Tellingly, his single later amendment to that first version was to its punctuation: exchanging the earlier semicolon for an ellipsis in line one and so promoting the lower case letter "a" of line two into a capital.[19] A semicolon, he clearly felt, brought too abrupt a halt to the big wave's momentum, whereas the continuity implied by an ellipsis provides the time and space for its full foamy sweep along the shore, coexistent with what follows.

The haiku, needless to say, is far too brief a poetic form for any consistent metrical patterns to be employed. But the conscious coordination of stressed and unstressed syllables, which are the rhythmic components of every English-language poem, after all, can be highly effective even within its limited boundaries. The repeated stress-unstress combination in "breaker crashes...", for example, throws added impetus behind the onomatopoeia, while line two's monosyllables increase in both stress and duration as the next wave rises to its peak at "up."

This is not the apex of the poem, however, which arrives instead on the other side of the comma with Southard's superbly chosen pivot word, "lull." Its softly stressed single syllable resonates out through the connecting em-dash, creating a tiny interlude of calm before the second wave also comes crashing ashore. And already present in that quiet, where their plaintive ebb and flow is an ancient counterpoint to the sea's, are the "sandpiper-cries." [20]

4

So my eyes may rest—
my comet-watching sister
lets me comb her hair [21]

From 1971 until his final submissions to the magazine in 1973, Southard's *Haiku West* sequences included a growing number of poems exploring his close childhood bond with his sister.[22] So starkly different are these in terms of their intimate, directly human content, that to one poet-critic, Tom Tico, the sister "he speaks of doesn't appear to be a flesh and blood relative but rather a creature of his imagination. In Jungian terms she is the anima, the feminine manifestation of the poet's inner self ... or possibly the personification of nature." [23] More bluntly, and going to an opposite speculative extreme, Pamela Miller Ness sees in the poems the "remembrances of a physical (seemingly incestuous) relationship." [24]

What we certainly can conclude from reading them is that this was a deeply formative period in Southard's life, likely to influence his later social and philosophical beliefs as well as the direction of his writing. The poems have an almost paradisaal or golden age quality about them, and it may be instructive in this respect that Southard chose not to corral them into a self-contained series but placed them one by one, instead, out in his wider haiku landscape.

Tenmon meaning "astronomical phenomena," is a long-established season-word category in Japanese haiku, where a close antecedent to Southard's poem can be found in Bashô's "Clouds, now and again — / just the thing to rest the eyes / of the moon-viewer !" (*kumo ori-ori hito o yasumeru tsukimi kana*). [25] But while Bashô's haiku pokes gentle fun at the urgent yet often limited nature of our view of things, Southard's seems all about expansiveness and interconnection.

The personal pronouns that occur on every line of the poem are in each case actually engaged in a

liberative sharing and/or letting go of self. The lines themselves are open-ended and outward-looking to facilitate this, with even the passiveness of "rest" quietly activated and made significant by its em-dash. Across the line endings, consonance and assonance ("rest—sister—hair") form a continuous link, suggesting again a commonality of purpose or outcome to the different activities. And alliteration ("comet-comb") draws our comparative attention to the two main agents of movement in the poem.

The result is a wonderfully poised, richly visual haiku in which brother and sister sit inseparably absorbed, one by the night sky and the other, now, by the endless lights and darks of his sister's hair. We need only to remind ourselves that we are each, quite literally, made from the stuff of the universe, of course, to realize that the poet's gaze hasn't in fact shifted at all.

5

The old rooster crows ...
Out of the mist come the rocks
and the twisted pine [26]

Topping the awards page of the fifth issue of *American Haiku* in 1965, [27] this has without question gone on to become Southard's best-known, most frequently reprinted and critically-acclaimed poem. In spite of its prize-winning status, he again quickly chose to make a single but crucial change to the original version, once more deciding that an ellipsis was the appropriate punctuation for line one.[28] Released by this from the cause-and-effect relationship that the former em-dash had suggested, all of the poem's figures can now fully co-arise through what Robert Spiess has memorably termed its "creative unity." [29]

Spiess also points out that "the adjective 'old' is integral and necessary to the haiku." [30] Not only does it directly ally the bird with the ancient rocks and tree, but its sound contributes to the first line's onomatopoeic overtones and their reverberation in the assonance, consonance and alliteration which follow. Age, then, is definitely an active element here, perhaps indicating that the mist is one of deep time as well as of dawn.

Commentators have had a tendency to reach for Far Eastern references when discussing this poem, catching the scent of Zen or Taoism in its primal atmosphere.[31] Pictorially, too, its placement of isolated figures within a highly charged void has echoes of both Japanese *sumi-e* and Sung Chinese landscape painting. Their traditional medium, "ink and slight color," describes the poem's process beautifully, as its rocks' lichens and pine's needles begin slowly to tint the gray. An encompassing spirit may indeed lie at the heart of this haiku, but it is being celebrated in large part through venerable individuality.

I chose the title of this piece as a tribute to the above poem, but also to allude to the rather remote way many current poets appear to view Southard and his work. In 2004, from the perspective of what she calls her "contemporary haiku sensibility," for example, Pamela Miller Ness wonders "how differently his haiku would read had he freed himself of the rigid syllabic form and eliminated unnecessary adverbs, adjectives and prepositions." [32] Her 2006 essay on prosody provides an emphatic reply, citing numerous examples by other poets which fail, I believe, because they are simply too short to use its devices with subtlety.[33] Closing that essay, Ness asks the clearly rhetorical question, "do we want to intentionally write longer haiku ... [in order to] allow more room for music....?" [34] But are we then willing, going to the contrary, to effectively hamstring much of our poetic vocabulary for the sake of a few less syllables? In Japan today, even the most liberated of *gendai haijin* have a full poetic toolbox to work from, and do so standing squarely on the shoulders of hundreds of years of predecessors. We are each of us still wreathed in early morning mist by comparison, and it's as a highly-skilled peer, not an ancestor, that I'd like to encourage our reappraisal of Southard.

Notes:

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1. Southard's poems appeared under several different names over the years, ranging from O.M.B. Southard and O Southard through Mabelsson Norway to O Mabson Southard. Editors and fellow poets seem often to have been amused by the changes, but presumably without knowing about the social and political solidarity which lay behind them. See Barbara Southard's introduction to *Deep Shade Flickering Sunlight* for details.
2. In publication from 1963 to 1968 and 1967 to 1975 respectively.
3. Cor van den Heuvel, ed. *The Haiku Anthology English-language Haiku by Contemporary American and Canadian Poets* (New York: Anchor Books, 1974), 102–21.
4. Jeff Witkin. "A Touch of Moonlight: The Haiku of O. Mabson Southard." *South by Southeast* 3:3 (autumn 1996), 18–22.
5. Second Edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 212–23; Third Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 188–95.
6. O Mabson Southard. *Deep Shade Flickering Sunlight: Selected Haiku of O Mabson Southard*. Ed. Barbara Southard, Randy M. Brooks, and Brock Peoples (Decatur, Ill.: Brooks Books, 2004).
7. Witkin 22.
8. See Richard Gilbert. *Poems of Consciousness Contemporary Japanese and English-language Haiku in Cross-cultural Perspective* (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2008).
9. *Deep Shade* 73.
10. *American Haiku* 1 (1963), 49.
11. O Southard. *Marsh-grasses and Other Verses* (Platteville, Wis.: American Haiku Press, 1967), 13.
12. "To HS Chenoweth, from the Author of Marsh-grasses." *Haiku West* 5:1 (July 1971), 6–7.
13. *Deep Shade* 91.
14. "Sequence XXXIII." *Haiku West* 6:1 (July 1972), 22–23.
15. "To HS Chenoweth" 7.
16. See Tom Tico. "The Peach-Blossom Spring." *Modern Haiku* 14.3 (autumn 1983), 18–19, for his reading of a Southard poem that shows more direct Chinese inspiration.
17. *Deep Shade* 16.
18. *American Haiku* 1 (1963), 50.
19. *Marsh-grasses* 5.
20. See Robert Spiess. "Rhythm in Haiku." *American Haiku* 3:2 (1965), 11–14, for his own detailed

analysis of the poem.

21. *Deep Shade* 65.

22. Between those years the poems run to some 27 in total, with this particular haiku forming part of "Sequence XIX," the very last to be published, in *Haiku West* 7:1 (July 1973), 26–27.

23. Tom Tico. "Fantasy and Sexual Symbolism: A Reading of O Southard." *Modern Haiku* 17.3 (autumn 1986), 13–17.

24. Pamela Miller Ness. "Book Review: Deep Shade Flickering Sunlight Selected Haiku of O Mabson Southard." *Modern Haiku* 35.3 (autumn 2004), 111–12.

25. My translation.

26. *Deep Shade* 76.

27. *American Haiku* 3:1 (1965), 8.

28. *Marsh-grasses* 52.

29. Robert Spiess. "Creative Unity in Haiku." *Haiku West* 4:2 (January 1971), 36–38.

30. Robert Spiess. "Natural Magic: The Haiku of O. Southard." *Haiku West* 5:1 (July 1971), 17–19.

31. See, for example, Tom Tico, "Shivers of Moonlight: A Reading of O Southard" in *Modern Haiku* 22.2 (summer 1991), 20–23; and H.F. Noyes, "The old rooster crows ... " in *Favorite Haiku Volume I* (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press / Pond Frog Editions, 2009), 24.

32. Review of *Deep Shade* 112.

33. Pamela Miller Ness. "The Poet's Toolbox: Prosody in Haiku." *Big Sky: The Red Moon Anthology of English-language Haiku 2006* (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2007), 159–78. The essay was originally published in *Modern Haiku* 37.2 (summer 2006).

34. Ibid.