

A Compendium of Glimpses



Steve Dolphy

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By Steve Dolphy

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Dedicated to my wife H

&

Our two daughters H and S

Table of Contents

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Preface](#)

[Part 1: Hanoi](#)

[Part 2: Hue](#)

[Part 3: United Kingdom](#)

[Part 4: Sanctuary](#)

[About the author](#)

[Reviews of “The Cry of the Duck Egg Seller”](#)

Acknowledgements

Whilst a few of the poems in this book are unpublished most of them first appeared in the following magazines, journals and anthologies:

Blithe Spirit (UK)
bottle rockets (USA)
Frogpond (USA)
Haiku Quarterly (UK)
Hermitage (Romania)
Hidden – BHS Anthology (UK)
Kokako (New Zealand)
Modern Haiku (USA)
Paper Wasp (Australia)
Presence (UK)
Raw Nervz (Canada)
Simply Haiku (USA)
Snapshots (UK)
Still (UK)
The Herons Nest (Canada)
Time Haiku (UK)

I would like to express my thanks to the editors of these publications.

Preface

The following poems are arranged into four parts. Parts 1, 2 and 4 consist of poems written between 1998 and 2008, and are mainly about people and places, in and around the cities of Hanoi and Hue in Vietnam. Hanoi, in the north of Vietnam is the modern capital city. This is where I lived and worked from 1997 to 2001.

Hue, a former capital, is the ancient imperial city of the Nguyen kings (the last royal dynasty to rule Vietnam). Hue lies in the centre of the country, about 90 kilometres south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) – the strip of land that separated the North from the South until 1975. Hue is also my wife's hometown.

The third part of the book consists of poems written about the United Kingdom, where I now live once again, working as a clinical psychologist in both the National Health Service (NHS) and in private practice.

The fourth and final part of the book consists of a haibun, titled "Sanctuary", which was written during my time in Hanoi.

I first went to Vietnam in 1995, and again in 1996, whilst travelling around Southeast Asia. I had long wanted to live overseas for a time and when I arrived in Vietnam I knew that it was just the place for me.

The Vietnamese people were so friendly, hard-working, always smiling, and full of curiosity. Then there was the history of Vietnam. There the past was not just tourist heritage, but actually something that was evoked in daily life. A certain view of recent history being offered on a political level, and the experience of several generations passed on at a family one.

The challenge of living in a culture typified by *collectivism* – where the individual has duties and obligations to an extended family and other groupings (in other words, loyalty to one's group) – was appealing. In contrast to this Western culture is characterized by *individualism* which emphasizes the right of the individual to pursue their own goals (even if this might be at odds with one's group).

Finally, there was the variety of religions followed: predominantly Buddhism (where I first encountered the concept of mindfulness), but also Catholicism, Taoism, and Cao Daism, amongst others. Of course, there were many other things of interest too: the food, climate, music, arts and handicrafts to name but a few. Hopefully, the following poems will reflect some of the many facets of my stay in Vietnam. I did not have a camera when I lived there so I consider these poems as my collection of "snapshots" or "mindful moments" recording my time in Vietnam, and also a period of my life upon returning to the UK in 2001.

After my second holiday in Vietnam, in 1996, I made arrangements regarding work and studies, and subsequently went to live in Hanoi, from August 1997 to March 2001. During my time there I studied Vietnamese language and culture at university; taught English to Vietnamese students and foreign expatriates; and worked as a clinical psychologist with English-speaking ex-pats.

I had been writing poetry for about three years before I went to Vietnam, but it was only in 1998, in Hanoi, that I discovered haiku, senryu and haibun, and started writing them for myself. The haiku, senryu and haibun are poem forms that originated in Japan, flourishing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The following are definitions of their English language equivalents devised by The Haiku Society of America (HSA), in 2004.

“A haiku is a short poem that uses imagistic language to convey the essence of an experience of nature or the season intuitively linked to the human condition.”

NB. Nature can be taken to include urban scenes too and seasons may or may not be explicitly referred to.

“A senryu is a poem, structurally similar to haiku, that highlights the foibles of human nature, usually in a humorous or satiric way.”

“A haibun is a terse, relatively short prose poem; usually including both lightly humorous and more serious elements. A haibun usually ends with a haiku.”

Here are a few more words about haiku in particular, from Martin Lucas, a former president of The British Haiku Society (BHS), from his book “Stepping Stones: A Way into Haiku” (2007).

“Haiku is not a descriptive poetry, it is a reflective poetry...a poetry of understatement and words approaching silence...focussing the mind on the thing.”

“The haiku poet does not seek to make connections; rather s/he draws attention to the interconnectedness of things.”

Some of the poems in this book, principally in the two parts about Hanoi and Hue, were published in my debut collection “The Cry of the Duck Egg Seller” (Ram Publications, 2004) – a book which is no longer in print. Extracts from reviews of that book are shown on the last page of this one.

Steve Dolphy

22nd November 2014

Part 1: Hanoi

mountain border post
the wind
through the barrier

January morning
shivering bread-girls
hug warm loaves

fish market
two women haggling
lean closer

watermelon stall
the smile of the fruit seller
a slice taken out

long winter walk
picking up a stone
to accompany me

lingering rain
a street tannoy blasts out
moral messages

smeared blackboard
the teacher leaves behind
first impressions

bank night safe
an ant disappears
through the slot

darkening sky
across the lotus lake
dragonflies fly low

night class
a listening exercise
the frogs get louder

waning moon
letters on the keyboard
worn away

language lesson
a student explains
his bicycle ran late

rainy evening
the refuse collector's bell
fills the street

Sunday afternoon nap
the sound of chalk
tapping on a blackboard

old ceiling fan
rustling brochures
for air-conditioning

city heat
a thirsty florist
spraying her flowers

weekend alone
a show of hands
on the radio

dressmaker's shop
the new girl picks up
snippets of gossip

afternoon heat
folding a swan
out of postcards

sunset on the lake
the sound of sunlight
dripping from oars

temple rock pool
a tadpole swims
from dark to light

first light
shaking sleep lose
from her body

by the tiger's cage
a little boy starts crying
when he sees me

burial house
the fertility god's penis
spotted with fungi

revolution museum
a stream of ants
down the guillotine

seafood restaurant
the waiter pulls a hook
from a diner's throat

August cinema
a stray bird flutters
across the credits

army museum
the soldier's manifesto
tinged with red

first raindrops
the fisherman's float
and a lily pad tremble

wet afternoon
behind the teller's counter
a line of ants

middle of the night
rattling the pans
a rat in the kitchen

eye of the storm
a man walks his dog
riding a motorbike

children's ward
a little girl names
her artificial legs

pagoda prayers
I add another sapling
to the joss-stick forest

Lenin's statue in the park
his arm raised
the referee gives a penalty

amidst fluttering leaves
the deliberate footsteps
of a funeral procession

lotus lilies
around the upturned tail
of a B-52

botanical garden
cigarette women wait for
men without matches

on the dining table
a tiny china whale
chopsticks on its back

after the school play
reprising her role
for the absent parent

tightrope walker
even her smile
balanced

prison museum
a mass breakout
of umbrellas

uneasy with stepchildren
wishing he knew
a magic trick to do

city street 2am
a cyclist zigzagging
nothing else

airmail letter
after small talk
the page bends

Ho Chi Minh's tomb
the children
test a sentry's gaze

"National Day"
half a green grapefruit
becomes a helmet

fashion show
a succession of *ao dai*
taught with elegance

(ao dai is the Vietnamese National Costume for women)

weekly TV appeal
for men who went missing
thirty years ago

a kumquat tree
a forest of kumquat trees
on bicycles in the street

beside the sink
a cloth holding
the day's stains

night express
passengers jostle under
swivelling fans

salt lake evaporating birds

Part 2: Hue

almost midnight
the cry of the duck egg seller
written into her letter

serenity
three saffron monks
sipping green tea

pagoda sunset
in time to see
incense ash fall

tropical night
a mosquito eludes me
stubbornly

battle site museum
sign in a tunnel reads
Throw Live Grenades!

around the grave
hands and mimosa leaves
fold together

after the flood
the bottom of the river
on the top shelf

morning cramp
pressing my foot
against a cold wall

river at sunrise
a bathing monk ducks
the boatman's oars

train station
parting couples
don't kiss

old bike mender
hunched over
tightening spokes

riverbank shade
the whirr
of a sugarcane press

DMZ tour
sudden rain
divides us

even in darkness
your eyes
still catch light

late night snack
a gecko scampers
across the wall

the park photographer
coaxing her subjects
into natural positions

afternoon surf
behind the skimming pebble
holes open and close

here in the moonlight
heads inclined
only our breathing

tea stall at noon
a flea bitten dog
wriggling in the dirt

after green tea
visitors are invited to play
“hunt the trapdoor”

lunchtime news
imagining famine
between mouthfuls

solitary swim
a stray dog sniffs
deflated clothes

shoeshine girls
demand
to polish my flip-flops

as each child hops aboard
the houseboat
a little lower in the water

funeral procession
on his shoulders
the uncle
who always carried him

noon sun
the only thing moving
a bead of sweat

woken by rain
below the balcony
the shish of bicycles

passing a school
the roar of motorbikes
drowned out by children

tomb ruin
the soft drink seller
unwraps a block of ice

sunlit lounge
the baby reaches
for her shadow

whole city in flood
a rescue helicopter dropping
packets of noodles

streetlights out
stood beside the cathedral
sensing it still there

shaking soil
from the longest roots
no words left

sleepless night
the whirring fan
turning and turning

old river ferry
everything vibrating
as we leave the jetty

sudden downpour
the crowded noodle stall
sells plastic macs

village in flood
children sit in boats
at their desks

secluded picnic
two abandoned spoons
swarming with ants

one thought
has me cornered
starry night

not far to home
rainbow swirls
in a puddle of petrol

feeling the warmth
of your hand
before it even touches

laughing
at my mismatched socks
the legless boy

wriggling free
from the castle ruins
the new goldfish

wedding day
a procession of *ao dai*
in the unpainted village

August evening
watching the street
being watched by the street

honeymoon night
a mother listens
to an empty room

dry soap caked
under his ring
the newly wed

taking all the pictures
the black sheep
at the family reunion

civil war cemetery
between soil and stone
the rake's teeth

long haul flight
another stranger
asleep in my ear

our songbird
head under its wing
we dress for sleep

counting galaxies
the swirl
on each fingertip

Part 3: United Kingdom

September afternoon
I read about ancestor worship
amongst toppled graves

rush hour tube
eavesdropping on
swaying commuters

on a park bench
the old couple
feeding separate pigeons

nothing left to read
the blind woman and I
twiddling our fingers

after long illness
a bird's nest
under the car bonnet

house viewing
the estate agent's aftershave
in every room

standing empty
the blank windows
of our new home

October morning
the new neighbour vacuums
the last leaf off his tree

children play marbles
only a gentle tick tick
fading hailstorm

boatyard in winter
the wind
rattling rigging

first night home
the huge sound
of baby breaths

park lake
a floating football
boys throw stones
to ripple it closer

December rain
the infant's eyes follow
a drop of milk

Christmas Eve
last minute decorations
in the tattoo parlour

maternity unit
an empty space among
snow covered cars

after hours
on the rungs of a ladder
softness of concrete

airport terminal
only the night breeze
clinking flagpoles

morning snow
hot water pipes
not rattling as usual

windswept beach
catching your voice
between waves

no more tapping
at the backdoor
tame blackbird gone

railway museum
steam rises
from our guide's cup

summer afternoon
the park paddling pool full
of bright broken glass

signing her birth certificate
my signature still
that of a sixteen year old

lying on the bottom
at the deep end
a locker room key

tomato glut
suddenly
I'm a good neighbour

long bank queue
ignoring the black & the red
children with crayons

houses undone
a lone bulldozer
heads for home

tired of tickling
the neighbour's cat
rolls over and out

outside casualty
car with a parking ticket
flapping in the wind

feeling his gaze
the younger sister
steps off her heels

fallen oak
the initials he carved
girlfriends ago

his hands
reading travel brochures
rarely visit her

as I hear the diagnosis
the knotholes
in the oncologist's desk

as dusk falls
the sound of oars
rippling the river

self defence class
afraid to reveal
the hole in his sock

deserted shore
seaweed fingers
point the way home

she rises
her warm spot
left behind

birthday's eve
the twelfth balloon
inflates my cheek

Sunday in the park
my daughter tugs on the reins
as we near a puddle

through the window
she watches the ballet class
on tiptoe

derelict kindergarten
climbing up the wall
height marks

swimming lesson
first timers shiver
hugging their knees

a crowd gathers
to stare at the leaf
said to hypnotize scorpions

back from the beach
explaining to my daughter
why sunlight comes off

anorexia clinic
the edge of a wall
down to bare stone

summer storm
the attic hatch
lifts a little

archaeological dig
the keys
to door less rooms

first time
in a baby gym
she reaches for the star

her smile
enters his mind
empties it

hide and seek
a field of wheat
all ears out

old railway cutting
still going
somewhere

reddening sky
the car park empties
gull by gull

rainy day
I wipe a thumbprint
from the fossil

Part 4: Sanctuary

HAIBUN: “Sanctuary”

I get off the motorcycle taxi at the entrance to the Sedona Suite luxury apartments, situated on the outskirts of Hanoi, and ask the driver to wait for me. He parks his motorcycle at a small cafe by the main gate, orders a cup of green tea, and starts chatting to the owner.

Cafe Memory
shoeshine boys spy
promising feet

I have come here to teach English to a Japanese expatriate, who is also a teacher. The security guard opens the gate and waves me in. His colleague, sitting in a corrugated-metal sentry box, looks up from a newspaper. All eyes are on me. They cannot understand why I don't want to ride through to the apartments on the motorcycle.

A five minute walk at most, this is the only place in Hanoi where I can walk freely without being hassled by street-vendors or constantly having to avoid motorbikes, bicycles or cars. I stop momentarily to listen to the silence.

To the right I can see the West Lake. A fisherman is squatting silently on the shore and another is in a boat he is rowing with his feet. On the far shore is the city skyline – mostly the glistening white homes of the nouveau riche.

luxury villa
from the lake mud
lotus lilies

To my right is the first of the four-storey block of apartments. The buildings are named after trees with names like Dittany and Mimosa. Here in the shadow of these buildings I enjoy their coolness. I pass another security guard with a walkie-talkie and realize they have been observing and reporting to each other about me. I nod my greeting to him. A Honda Dream motorcycle glides past me. This make of motorbike has become an iconic symbol of what modern Vietnam aspires to.

girl on a motorcycle
on pillion bubble-wrapped
a bust of Uncle Ho

I arrive at Balsam block, where my student lives, and take the lift to her apartment on the second floor. Standing outside her door, I unlace my shoes, and ring the bell. My student opens the door and invites me in.

in her dictionary

the day's new word
already circled

About the author

Steve Dolphy was born in Southampton, in the United Kingdom, in 1961. He worked in the business and financial sectors until finally settling upon clinical psychology as a career. He has travelled widely, especially in South-East Asia, over the past twenty-five years. Whilst living in Vietnam from 1997 to 2001, he studied Vietnamese Language and Culture at the Hanoi National University; provided psychological therapy to expatriates in Hanoi; and taught English as a Foreign Language. Steve now once again works in the United Kingdom as a clinical psychologist working both in the National Health Service (NHS) and in private practice.

Steve started writing haiku in 1998 and has had over two hundred haiku, senryu, and haibun published to date. His poems have appeared in the following magazines: Blithe Spirit (UK), bottle rockets (USA), Frogpond (USA), Haiku Quarterly (UK), Hermitage (Romania), Kokako (New Zealand), Modern Haiku (US), Paper Wasp (Australia), Presence (UK), Raw Nervz (Canada), Simply Haiku (USA), Snapshots (UK), Still (UK), The Heron's Nest (Canada) and Time Haiku (UK).

Some of Steve's work has been anthologized. For example, "The Acorn Book of Contemporary Haiku" (Acorn Press, UK, 2000), "The New Haiku" (Snapshots Press, UK, 2002), "Haiku for Lovers" (MQ Publications, UK, 2003), "Stepping Stones: a way into haiku" (BHS Publications, UK, 2007), and "Kamesan's World Haiku Anthology on War, Violence and Human Rights Violations" (CreateSpace Publishing, 2013). A number of Steve's poems have also appeared in "The Red Moon Anthology of English Language Haiku" series which each year assembles what are judged to be the finest haiku and related forms published around the world into a single volume.

Steve's debut poetry collection, "The Cry of the Duck Egg Seller" (Ram Publications, UK) was published in 2004 and consisted of haiku and senryu poems written during his stay in Vietnam.

Reviews of “The Cry of the Duck Egg Seller”

“The themes in this book are both ambitious and abstract, focussing on a life where transition, however large or small, has occurred. It takes an experienced poet to carry out a project of this scope, and Dolphy is equal to the task.” *Patricia Prime, Stylus Poetry Journal (Australia)*

“An uncontrived and thoroughly evocative collection: one which offers new surprises on each re-reading.” *Jane Sutherland, Presence (UK)*

“There is a lot of humour in Steve Dolphy’s haiku, it moves from dark to light, and is a key element in his collection.” *Alan Summers, Hermitage (Romania)*

“With every poem, almost without exception, something happens to evoke a feeling that this ordinary event has become something extraordinary, noteworthy, or just different from what you had been anticipating.” *Colin Blundell, Blithe Spirit (UK)*

“Steve Dolphy is able to compress a host of images and juxtapositions into his handful of words: some excellent work here.” *Alan Hardy, New Hope International Review (UK)*

“These are poems of unassuming dignity. The book’s exquisite last poem shows that Dolphy brought a lightness of touch home with him.” *John Martone, Modern Haiku (USA)*

“I recommend Steve Dolphy’s book without reservation. His is an original voice: a voice that readers will want to hear from again.” *Robert Wilson, Simply Haiku (USA)*

Recommended Further Reading:

“The Haiku Anthology” edited by Cor Van Den Heuvel (1999)

“Stepping Stones: A Way into Haiku” by Martin Lucas (2007)

“Where the River Goes: The Nature Tradition in Haiku” edited by Allan Burns (2014)

